

**Mayan Birding and Culture Tour, Yucatan Peninsula, Mexico  
25 January - 7 February 2016**

Led by Gabor Orban and Andrea Katona  
from Ecotours Kondor Ecolodge & Worldwide Travel

**During this tour we were looking for BIRDS**



**MAMMALS**

**BUTTERFLIES**



**MAYAN PRESENT DAILY LIFE & ANCIENT CULTURAL HERITAGE**



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This tour was put together by **Andrea & Gabor** for the participants: David & Claire Farmiloe and Phil & Dorothy Blatcher. Andrea and Gabor live, organize and lead tours between generally November and April each year since 2006. Gabor is a birder and zoologist guide while Andrea is mainly specialized in Mayan Culture, but both know a lot about each others field. They believe that Nature & Culture depend on each other, actually matching each other, like them so they led the tour according to their slogan: Nature and Culture hands in hands. This is surely a winning combination! :) We have learnt a lot about local nature, especially birds and about ancient & actual culture of local people, habits, history and legends. This is surely a fascinating tour for those who enjoy more than just find birds.



### Monday 25th January

Andrea and Gabor collected Claire, David, Dorothy and Phil from Cancun airport on a warm day. We watched **Great-tailed Grackles** at the airport. We drove to Hotel Hacienda Morelos in Puerto Morelos, well-situated on the seafront, with its own beach. As dusk fell we saw **Brown Pelicans** diving and **Magnificent Frigatebirds** wheeling high over the sea. We enjoyed a Mexican meal in the hotel restaurant.

**Black and Turkey Vultures, Golden-fronted Woodpeckers and Tropical Kingbirds, Social Flycatchers & Tropical Mockingbirds** were seen virtually every day.

### Tuesday 26th January Puerto Morelos and Surrounds

From the hotel and seafront we watched **Brown Pelican, Great-tailed Grackle, Laughing Gull, Royal Tern and Neotropic Cormorant**. There were several Grey Plover on the beach. We drove along the Cenote\* Road from Puerto Morelos through mangroves and tropical forest where we found an amazing number of birds. The straight young Ceiba trees, sacred to the Mayans, have sharp prickles but the beautiful older trees lose these.

\* Cenotes are natural wells deep in the limestone.

Early on we were delighted to find a photogenic **Gartered Trogon** (split from Violaceous) sitting on power lines. In all we saw three of these beautiful birds.

We saw our first endemic birds: **Yucatan Jay, Orange Oriole and Rose-throated Tanager**. Our list grew rapidly with **Green and Brown Jays, Bronzed Cowbird, Hooded Oriole, Smooth-billed Ani, Mangrove and Yellow-throated Vireos, Grey-collared Becard, Black-throated Green Warbler, Black-and-White Warbler, Aztec (Olive-throated) Parakeets, Red-throated Ant-Tanager, Great Kiskadee, musical Melodious Blackbird, Yellow-bellied and Social Flycatcher** and a swift glimpse of a **Squirrel Cuckoo**. We also saw what turned out to be our only **Grey-crowned Yellowthroat** of the trip. Looking up, we had brief views of a **Zone-tailed Hawk**. Hummingbirds were feasting on flowers: **White-bellied Emerald, Cinnamon and Buff-bellied Hummingbirds, Wedge-tailed Sabrewing, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird and Canivet's (fork-tailed) Emerald**. We heard a **Collared Forest-Falcon** but were unable to find it. We did see a **Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl** (3 more were heard) and **Roadside Hawks**.

Other birds active in the morning were **Spot-bellied Wren, Long-billed Gnatwren, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Northern Parula, Plain Chachalaca** and a **Barred Antshrike** with its distinctive cadence.

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**Chichen Itza ruins through fish-eyes by Andrea**

We lunched at a convenient cafe, then continued wildlife watching. We were pleased to find another special bird - **Olive-backed Sparrow**, plus a **Lesser Greenlet**, **Magnolia Warbler**, **Scrub** and **Yellow-throated Euphonias**, **Yellow-backed Oriole**, **Rose-throated Becard**, a **Yellow-faced Grassquit**, bright **Summer Tanager**, an obliging **Dusky-capped Flycatcher** and two **Cave Swallows**.

We always have a **Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl** with us whose repetitive call summons birds! The butterflies were beautiful and included a large **Blue Morpho**, **Confusing Sister**, **Julia Heliconian** (deep orange), **Erato Heliconian**, **Zebra Heliconian**, **Mexican Cicadia**, **White Peacock**, stunning. **Purple Washed Eyemark** and a camouflaged Cracker. (**Grey Cracker?**) David and Claire had a brief glimpse of a **coati** crossing the track. We had an enjoyable meal on the hotel terrace by the sea.

### **Wednesday January 27th Chichén Itzá**



**Phil & Dorothy at Chichen by Andrea    The group in the shade by Phil**

A World Heritage Site meaning 'at the rim of the well where the Water Wizards live'

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**Some of the 1000 Columns © Chichen main pyramid with hammock shop in front**

On their pre breakfast stroll along the beach, Dorothy and Phil saw **Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, 35 Turnstones** and a **Yellow-throated Warbler**.

We made our way to Chichén Itzá, passing many cenotes en route. We had a lovely sunny day for exploring this most famous Mayan ruin complex, which gave us a perfect mix of nature and culture. Most of the tourists stick to the main buildings, such as the majestic El Castillo or the Observatorio, but we entered the site via some quiet trails which produced great birding at various dry thorn and humid forest habitats among ruins. New birds were a fine **Ocellated Turkey** (endemic), 2 **White-fronted Parrots**, bright yellow-orange **Altamira Oriole** and **Ruddy Ground-Doves**. We had good views of **Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl** (2), a **Turquoise-browed Motmot**, 10 or more **Golden-fronted Woodpeckers**, 5+ **Clay-coloured Thrushes**, a **Blue-Grey Gnatcatcher**, a **Black-crowned Tityra**, about 4 **Masked Tityra**, a few blue **Yucatan Jays**, some 6 **Green Jays** and raucous **Brown Jays**. We heard, searched for and found 3 **Rufous-browed Peppershrikes**. We also sighted a **Black-headed Saltator** and a bright **Summer Tanager**. There were many motionless iguanas on the ancient stones.

First we visited the older part of the site, founded 435 AD, which was quiet and very impressive. We first looked down into a sacred Cenote, a huge natural well. At the 'Nun's House', so called because it reminded the Spaniards of Nun's cells, we particularly admired the carvings of Chac (Rain God) masks on the East Annex. The well preserved Observatory is accompanied by the platform of Venus with reliefs of the planet. The Itzaes arrived about 900 AD and added the more severe Mayan-Toltec style. The site was dominated by the 79 foot high El Castillo pyramid dedicated to Kukulcan (meaning Feathered Serpent God) where Kukulcan 'descends' on the equinoxes in a natural phenomenon of light and shade. The base of the Temple of the Warriors, part of a group of many columns, is decorated with eagles, warriors and jaguars devouring human hearts. The ball court was huge, with annexed temples and stone rings. It seems that the captain of the winning team was sacrificed, so they went straight to heaven, although it can also be interpreted that the losing team lost their lives. The Tzompantli platform, surrounded by carved skulls, is evidence of human sacrifice practised from the 11th to 13th centuries.



**Rio Lagartos from boat**



**Mexican Sheartail nests on a fence**

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**Caribbean Flamingoes, White Pelicans, Reddish Egret & Royal Terns by Phil Blatcher**

We then continued our Yucatan journey to **Rio Lagartos**, telling stories en route about mishaps with cars and keys. Andrea spotted a family of **Coatimundis** scrambling about a large tree, golden brown tails waving, which we watched happily for some time. On roadside pools south of Rio Lagartos we saw a **Sora**, **Purple Gallinule**, **Northern Jacana**, **Common Moorhen**, **Snowy Egret** and a **Common Yellowthroat**.

We stayed at the Hotel Pescadores, where our rooms had balconies looking over the lagoon. We enjoyed an excellent fish dinner and the art at an artist's fish restaurant, Macumba, which opened especially for us.

#### **Thursday 28th January Rio Lagartos/Las Coloradas**

This is the northernmost national park on the Yucatan peninsula. Birding alongside the coastal desert-like scrub and thorn forest was productive. Before breakfast we had very rewarding birding along a track by the Don Pedro Rancho. Highlights were three endemics (or near endemics): **Mexican Sheartail**, **Yucatan Wren**, and **(Yucatan) Black-throated Bobwhite**. As well as the commoner birds we had seen the previous day, we spotted in quick succession: a **Blue Grosbeak**, **Least Flycatcher**, **Aztec Parakeet**, **White-winged Dove**, **White-bellied Emerald**, **Cinnamon Hummingbird**, **Green-Breasted Mango**, **Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl**, **Vermillion Flycatcher**, a **White-collared Seedeater**, **Blue-black Grassquit**, **Rose-breasted Grosbeak**, **Common Yellowthroat**, **Ruddy** and **Common Ground-Doves**, **Blue-grey Gnatcatcher**, **Mangrove Vireo**, **Smooth-billed Ani**, **Northern Cardinal**, **Magnolia** and **Yellow-throated warblers**, **Northern Parula** and **White-fronted Parrot**!



**Common Black Hawk**



**Willetts & Long-billed Curlew**

After a filling breakfast we enjoyed **a great boat tour**, with Santiago, a boatman who knew his birds, on the mangrove-fringed lagoon-estuary of the Rio Lagartos. The weather was cloudy with some sunshine and ideal for the trip as it was not too hot. Highlights were: colourful **Caribbean Flamingos**, a well-hidden **Boat-billed Heron**, **9 Ospreys**, **Mangrove Warbler** (a split from yellow warbler), **Marbled Godwit**, **Common Black-Hawk**, **Long-billed Curlew**, **Yellow-headed Vulture**, three **Wood Storks** and three **Roseate Spoonbills**, which we at first thought were Flamingos! As well as the usual **Brown Pelicans** we saw about 200 **American White Pelicans**. Some of us had brief views of **Belted** and **Green Kingfishers**. We stopped to admire about 150 beautiful flame coloured **Caribbean Flamingoes**, **40 Black-tailed Skimmers** and some 60 **White Ibis**. Other **Hérons** tucked in at the edges of the mangroves were **Great** and **Little Blue**, **Tricoloured** and **Green**. We looked for, but didn't find, the Bare-throated Tiger-heron. We had excellent views of a **Reddish Egret**, rushing to and from, a view that was repeated at the salt pans in the afternoon. Smaller birds included: **Common Yellowthroat**, **Yellow Warbler**, **Northern Waterthrush** and **Indigo Bunting**. There were many **Laughing Gulls**, **Willetts**, **Spotted Sandpipers**, **Neotropic Cormorants**, **Sandwich Terns**, **Great Egrets**, **Royal** and **Caspian Terns**, a few **Grey Plover** and **Blue-Winged Teal**. A **Crested Caracara** flew ahead. We also found a **Morelet's Crocodile**. Just after we found the **Boat-billed Heron**, it started to rain and became windy so we raced back for a cafe lunch.

It was still raining, so we birded from the vehicle on the road to the salt pans at Colorados. We spotted 50 **Blue-winged Teal** (male) and a **Reddish Egret**. It was very windy at the pink and buff coloured waters of the salt pans but we found a large number of waders sheltering: **Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs**, **Western Sandpiper (c.400)**, **Semi-palmated Sandpipers** and, after much searching, **Least Sandpiper**, one **Stilt Sandpiper**, 2 **Sanderling**, **Semi-palmated Plover**, **Snowy** (split from Kentish) **Plover** and a group of **Black-necked Stilts**. There were 6 **Mangrove Swallows** on a wire, about 100 distant **American Herring Gulls**, plus one **Gull-billed Tern**. We laughed as the wind blew white foam over us like snow from the pink waters and retreated quickly to the vehicle.

We had a lovely meal at the Artist's fish restaurant again. Overnight at Villa Pescadores.



Daily life in Izamal



Artistic meal at Macumba Phil Blatcher

### Friday 29 January From Rio Lagartos through Izamal to Uxmal

While eating a fruit then scrambled egg breakfast we spotted some **Forster's Terns**, **Ospreys** fishing, a large group of **Caribbean Flamingos**, a **Turnstone** and the three **Roseate Spoonbills** we had seen in the rain the previous day. On our way to Uxmal we saw a **Crested Caracara**, then stopped at a track by Ranchos Don Pedro and Santa Cruz, where we had visited the previous day. We had an amazing time in sunshine. First we spotted a **Crane Hawk** which flew off showing the two white bands on its tail and its long yellow legs. Next we had good close views of a **Ladder-backed Woodpecker**. A **Mexican Sheartail** was on a tiny nest and we watched the pair of Sheartails buzzing from flower to flower. We had fleeting glimpses of our first **Southern House Wren** and heard a **Yucatan Wren**. We also saw many

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**Blue-black Grassquits, a Blue-grey Gnatcatcher and a Common Yellowthroat, a female Vermilion Flycatcher and Ruddy and Common Ground-Dove.**



**Lesser Roadrunner**

**Yucatan Bobwhite by David Farmiloe**

As we drove out we were very pleased to come across a covey of 7-8 **Black-throated Bobwhites**, then not one but two **Lesser Roadrunners**, the blue on their heads shining, one on the road and one in scrub by the Bobwhites. Brilliant! A **Squirrel Cuckoo** and **Rufous-browed Peppershrikes** were heard. We visited the roadside pools that we had scanned the day we arrived and saw all the species noted then. The highlight was a **Dickcissel** as well as a **Mangrove Vireo, Black-throated Green Warbler** and vivid orangey-yellow **Altamira Oriole**. We had our first good view of an **American Kestrel**. While driving, we saw a **Wood Stork** and **White Ibis, Ospreys** and the usual **Black** and **Turkey Vultures**.

On the way to **Izamal, one of the most important Mayan towns**, we spotted two graceful **Grey Hawks** who were calling. On the road were a dead opossum and snake. Izamal was named after Itzamna, the Creator and Healing God. It is called the Yellow Town because the colonial buildings are smartly painted yellow and outlined in white. The temples, 11 - 12 pyramids and written records were destroyed by the Spanish. The Spanish forced the Mayans to build a huge monastery in place of their temple to the sun god, using stones from the temple, but they couldn't force a change of the religion they felt in their hearts. Andrea showed us around the imposing Spanish monastery complex. Pilgrimages are made to the Black Christ and to the (dressed) statue of the Virgin Mary. We had a tasty nacho and chaya lunch. (Spinach-like leaves from the Chaya tree with lime or pineapple juice)



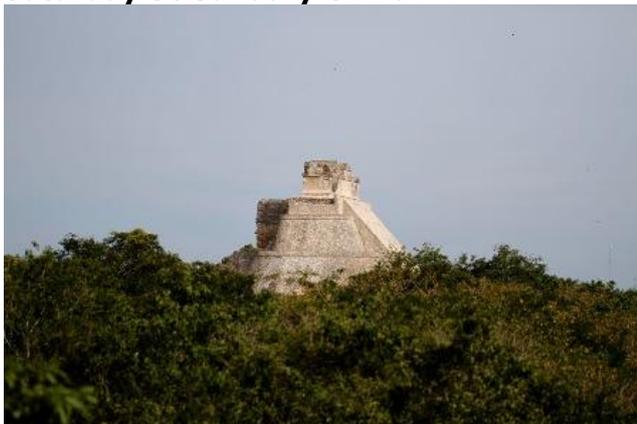
**Izamal: Mayan lady in everyday's folklore & horses dressed for tourists**

At our beautifully appointed and situated Uxmal Hotel, the Hacienda Uxmal, we had good looks over the grounds at a **Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Orange Oriole, Clay-coloured Thrush, Yellow-throated warbler, Blue-grey Gnatcatcher, and Blue-grey Tanager, Social Flycatcher** and **Vermilion Flycatcher**. **White-fronted**

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**Parrots** flew by. Phil heard nighthawks (Lesser Nighthawk?) as dusk fell. Hacienda Uxmal claims to be the world's oldest hotel hacienda. We swam in the pool, surrounded by gardens and palm trees. Lastly, we enjoyed a buffet dinner on the outside terrace, under the trees.

### **Saturday 30 January Uxmal**



#### **Magician's Pyramid surrounded by jungle at Uxmal; Black Iguana warming up**

On an initially cold then lovely sunny day, we took a short walk to beautiful **Uxmal Mayan ruins** in the middle of the thorn forest and were rewarded with a good variety of Yucatan species. Statuesque iguanas sunned themselves on the hot stones, looking like stones themselves. We explored the site, including tracks into the forest around the archeological area, where we saw, and all climbed, one of the less excavated ruins for the views. The Xiu tribe founded Uxmal in the Puuc region. Between 800BC and 200 AD it was a village. From then until 1000AD it became a residence for rulers, a ceremonial centre and dominant city, with over 20,000 residents. The Xiu, a Toltec group, arrived and introduced new styles at the beginning of the 10th century. Archaeological highlights included the magnificent so-called Magician's Palace, with temples on top of the rounded pyramid structure, Nun's quadrangle, phalluses (symbolic for fertility and water) the Grand pyramidal palace (which Phil & Dorothy climbed) and massive Governor's palace faced by a platform with a carving of an iconic double jaguar which faced two ways, and the 'Dovecote' with its perforated, triangular, stepped arches. There were many carvings of Chac, the rain God and of serpents, eagles, parrots and important people with feathered headdresses: the Puuc style of carving. We admired typical Mayan arches e.g. at the entrance to the Nun's Quadrangle.

We started hearing a **Collared Forest-Falcon**. About 80 cave swallows flew gracefully overhead. We saw many birds in quick succession: **Hooded** and **Altamira Orioles**, a stunning **Turquoise-browed Motmot**, two **Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls**, **Yucatan** and **Green Jays**, the ubiquitous **Golden-fronted Woodpecker**, **White-winged** and **White-tipped Doves**, a **Black-headed Saltator**, **Greyish Saltator**, **White-eyed** and **Yellow-throated Vireos**, **Yellow-bellied Elaenia**, **Plain Chachalaca**, **Aztec Parakeet**, four **Red-throated Ant-Tanagers** and a **Clay-coloured Thrush**.



**Turquoise-browed Motmot**

**&**

**Uxmal Ball Court by Phil Blatcher**

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**The Pyramid of the Magician & Parrot Carving by Phil Blatcher**

New birds, 'lifers' for some, were **Royal Flycatcher** (only two saw this), **Boat-billed Flycatcher**, **Yellow-olive Flycatcher** and an elusive and very rare **Cape May Warbler**, which was a first for these trips. Other warblers included **Black-throated Green** (the most common) **Magnolia** and **Yellow-throated**.

Gabor showed us a **Variable Crackle** butterfly, which crackles! David and Andrea found a beautiful **Mexican Bluewing**, regal **Pavon Emperor** and smart **Black Crescent** butterflies.

We rested after lunch at a cafe at the archaeological site, watched a **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker**, then had a late afternoon walk along a nearby track. Birds were slow to appear but we found a **White-browed Wren**, another **Turquoise-browed Motmot**, an **American Redstart** and a **Grey Squirrel**! Gabor pointed out a **Grey-throated Chat** but we only managed a fleeting glimpse. Another new bird for the trip was a **Hooded Warbler**, which showed well. We went out for dinner to 'The Pickled Onion' and had an excellent Mayan influenced meal on a veranda in a beautiful garden. Overnight at the Hacienda Uxmal.



**Chac carvings & Main Pyramid at Uxmal by Phil Blatcher**

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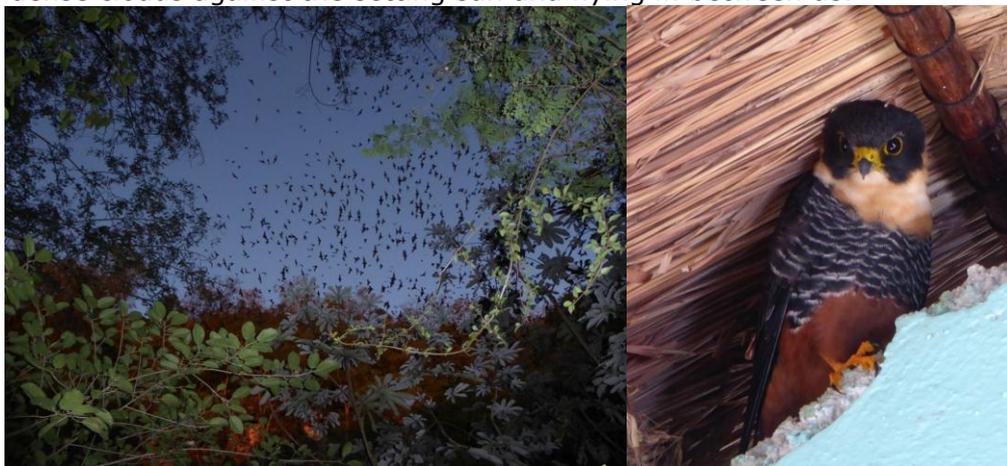
**ZEBRA HELICONIA by David Farmiloe**

**Sunday 31 January To Calakmul**

We had a pre-breakfast bird watch as the sun rose, in the hotel grounds and, apart from innumerable **Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, Orioles** and other frequently seen birds, we were rewarded with splendid close views of two **Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls**, perched **White-fronted Parrots, a Masked Tityra, Blue-grey Gnatcatcher, Clay-coloured Thrush, Cinnamon Hummingbird, Yellow-bellied Elaenia** and **Rose-throated Grosbeak**.

We set off on our long journey to Calakmul, crossing the Puuc hills to the Gulf of Mexico, South of Campeche. We stopped briefly to admire the Mayan Archaeological site at **Kabah**. Claire saw a possible **Tayra** crossing the road, then we all saw a small **White-tailed Deer**. We wended our way along country roads of variable quality, past Mayan style thatched houses, sugar cane and vegetables in fertile fields, and small herds of cows, in contrast to the limestone geology and dry forest in the Puerto Morelos area.

From our vehicle, Phil identified an **Eastern Meadowlark**. At a roadside stop we spotted great new birds - **King Vultures**(4) soaring, three hummers - **White-bellied Emerald, Canivet's and Buff-bellied**, also a male and four female **White-collared Seedeaters** and a male **Indigo Bunting**. We heard but couldn't find a **Grey Catbird** and a **Yellow-billed Cacique**. We lunched in a pleasant breeze in shade by the extensive Laguna Sylvituk. Lagoon watching produced four new species: a flock of **Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, a Kildeer, Muscovy Duck** and a group of about 15 **Snail Kites**, which looked at first like Northern Harriers, as they had ringtails. There were also a **Tricoloured Heron, Northern Rough-winged Swallows, Mangrove Swallows** and a **Forster's Tern**. Driving on, we saw a **White-tailed Kite**, the only one of the trip. We reached our forest hotel in the **Calakmul Biosphere Reserve**, where each couple had a small thatched cottage, all well-equipped. We heard a **Thicket Tinamou** and found a **Wood Thrush, Swainson's Thrush, an American Redstart** and an **Agouti**. At last we found and had good views of the elusive endemic **Yucatan Parrot**, identified by the black patch behind its eye, eating a leaf high up in a tree. We heard calls of **Howler Monkeys**. Then a treat - in the late afternoon we drove to nearby bat caves and were amazed by the sight of some four million **Mexican Free-tailed Bats** coming out of the cave, swirling in dense clouds against the setting sun and flying in between us.



**Mexican Free-tailed Bats emerging & a Bat Falcon is waiting by Phil Blatcher**

Even better, we finally saw a Collared **Forest-Falcon** swoop twice on some bats and perch in a tree for a few moments before it flew off. Wonderful!

We all caught sight of **Agoutis** by our accommodation. Overnight at the Hotel Puerto de Calakmul, where we enjoyed a special chicken dish for dinner.

### Monday 1st February Calakmul



wild Orchid

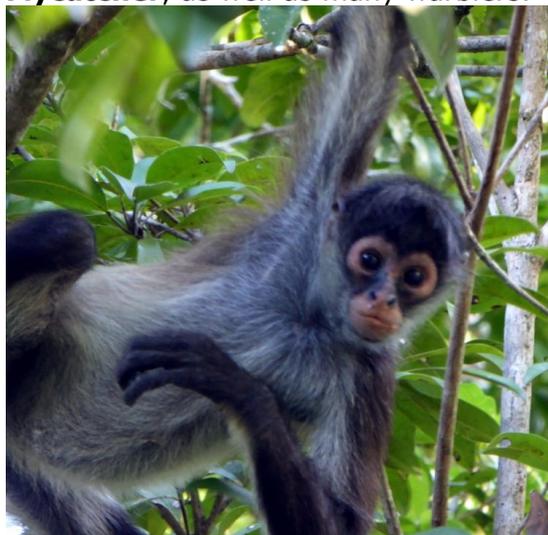


Pale-banded Crescent

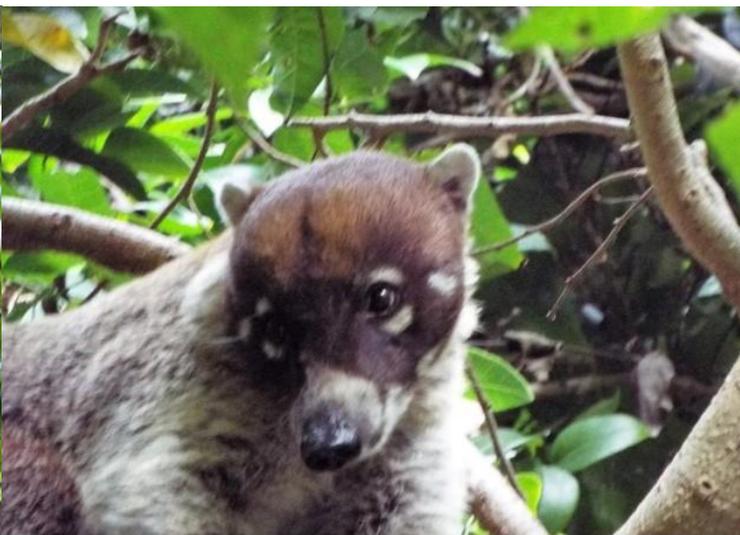
**Calakmul**, named by the botanist Cyrus Lundell in Mayan 'two adjacent mounds' in reference to the pair of then unexcavated pyramids.

We had a pre-breakfast walk at dawn in the forest and at a quarry in the hotel grounds. Highlights were a **Grey Catbird**, a **Yucatan Woodpecker**, an **Ovenbird**, a **Veery** and a female **Blue Bunting**, all new for the trip. Three **Aztec Parakeets** flew overhead. Tantalisingly we heard a **Mottled Owl** and a **Thicket Tinamou** but couldn't see them. Other notable birds were an **Olive Sparrow**, **Yellow-olive Flycatcher**, **Yellow-throated Vireo** and 2 probable **Couch's Kingbirds**.

We collected our generous picnic lunches and set off in sunshine to the famous Mayan Archeological site of Calakmul, first along the hotel track, then along a 20km forested road where we saw a **Tawny-winged Woodcreeper** (new), a **Gartered Trogon**, **Yucatan Jay**, three **Red-crowned Ant-Tanagers** (1m, 2f) and a **Yellow-throated Euphonia**. We continued through a barrier along the 40 km very good wildlife watching road to Calakmul through continuous neo-tropical forest. We stopped at a lake beautifully fringed by fruiting Jicara or Calabash trees which overhung the water. There we found three **Least Grebes** (new) a **Green Heron** and possibly heard a **bittern** booming and a **Northern Water-Thrush**. Also active were a **Great-crested Flycatcher**, **Mangrove Vireo** and **Dusky-capped Flycatcher**, as well as many warblers.



Spider Monkey by David Farmiloe



White-nosed Coati by David Farmiloe

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We moved on to a roadside trail. Andrea, Claire and David saw three possible **Crested Guans** at the top of a tree. A busy endemic **Yucatan Flycatcher**, an **Ivory-billed Woodcreeper** and an **Olivaceous Woodcreeper** all increased our trip list. We also watched a **Scrub Euphonia**, a **male Blue Bunting** and **Boat-billed Flycatcher**. Before the entrance to the park Claire saw a black mammal, possibly a **Tayra** again, climbing down a tree.

A kilometre or two into the park, Gabor spotted a black cat shape which had just crossed the road and climbed up onto the bank, and subsequently also a beige cat shape. Two others saw beige and two saw black. Yes! **A pair of Jaguarundis!** Wonderful. We were still talking excitedly about this sighting when another mammal, this time tail-less, crossed the road, the consensus eventually being that it was an agouti.

At the Reserva de la Biósfera Calakmul visitor centre there were two **Bat Falcons** in the eaves, looking down at us with their bright eyes. The Museum was an interesting mix of fossils, wildlife identification and explanation of the Mayan sites at Calakmul. There were helpful representations of the stelae with recognisable figures, some identification of the hieroglyphic writing and pictures of preparing a feast and gifting. The reserve claims that 5 out of the 6 wild cats found in Mexico inhabit the reserve: Jaguars, Jaguarundis, Pumas, Ocelots and Margays.

The remains of this leading Mayan city from AD250-695 cover 72 square km. Most of the city's approximately 7,200 remains lie covered in jungle, the ruins surrounded by rain forest with cedar, mahogany, sapodilla and rubber trees. The cleared area of Calakmul holds 120+ carved stelae. We explored the pyramid temple buildings around the two 'agoras'. Claire and I climbed the steps of the most famous, Estructura 11, south of the Gran Plaza, which has an additional temple at the top. We had a good view over the agora to the pyramid opposite and extensive forest. At each level there were dwellings. A stele half way up honoured a female ruler. There was also one celebrating joint rulers, male and female. The trail took us to the Gran Acropolis, a residential area with a ceremonial centre containing a ball court. The atmosphere differed from Uxmal and Chichén Itzá as we encountered few people. The site is part of thousands of acres of forest and far from any towns and it is a silent and moving reminder of the skilled and organised peoples who lived here. There are domestic dwellings as well as royal palaces. The site is now inhabited by **Geoffrey's Spider Monkeys**.

Hummingbirds for the day: **White-bellied Emerald, Fork-tailed Emerald, Buff-bellied Hummingbird and Wedge-tailed Sabrewing.**



In the reserve we were very pleased with new birds: a **Lineated Woodpecker, Pale-billed Woodpecker, Black-headed Trogon** twice, at least two **Keel-billed Toucans, Grey-throated Chat (left), Bright-rumped Attila, Ruddy Woodcreeper, Tawny-winged, Olivaceous and Ivory-billed Woodcreepers, a Black-crowned Tityra, Tropical Gnatcatcher** and a **Northern Bentbill**. Among the array of birds we saw well were: **Spot-breasted and White-browed Wren, Black- and-White Warbler, and Red-crowned Ant-Tanager.**

Gabor found some young **Geoffrey's Spider Monkeys** playing, hanging from each others' tails. We were all delighted to see the spider monkeys (c.20) chasing each other. One was showing off, hanging by one arm. They have cute faces with big eyes. We had some good photographic opportunities. We also heard **Howler Monkeys** but didn't see them. We spied a **long-legged spider, a toad and some bats.**

Near dusk we saw at least three **Great Curassow** (lifers again!) and then **White-fronted Parrots** flew over. On the way back to the vehicle, Dorothy spotted a dark coloured, long, short legged, sizeable cat trotting across the track - most probably a **Jaguarundi!** Unfortunately it disappeared before anyone else could see it. It scared off two **Chachalacas**.

We drove back as the light was fading and had the most amazing views. It all started with some **Ocellated Turkeys**, eyes picked out by the headlights, turning this way and that, undecided where to go, until at last they had the bright idea of flying up into the trees. We

then spied a strange shape in the middle of the road. Some big mammal?? It then separated into three more turkeys, just as indecisive as the first ones.

As it grew darker, we all then had a brief glimpse of what may have been a young **Puma** at the left side of the road. (After considerable discussion later over dinner and some research by Andrea, we decided that it was indeed a young puma.) Our headlights next picked out the red eyes of a bigger Puma, on the right side of the road, which turned, stopped and looked back at us for a few minutes. Another pair of red eyes then appeared from the left, a **Grey Fox**, which stopped, looked at our vehicle, then spotted the Puma and headed rapidly back into the forest! After that we saw several more foxes.

At dinner in the evening there were more big cats - six Cheshire cats celebrating an amazing day with refreshing beer or refrescos. Overnight at the Hotel Puerto de Calakmul.

In the night we heard howler monkeys. Geckos chattered happily.

## Tuesday 2nd February To Felipe Carillo Puerto via Chicanna & Bacalar.



**Banded Peacock**



**Painted White**

Before breakfast we walked up the path to the mirador and came across one, two, three graceful and frisky **Grey Foxes** and an **Ovenbird**. A squirrel chattered. A new bird for the trip was **Yucatan Vireo**. After breakfast at the quarry we saw two **Canivet's Emeralds**. We continued our way towards the East, stopping alongside the road at great forested areas. At **Chicanna** in the sunshine we watched flighty butterflies in the breeze: an **Erato & a Zebra Heliconian**, deep orange **Julia Heliconian** and **Banded Peacock**. Gabor and Phil meanwhile spotted a male **Blue Bunting** as well as birds we had seen frequently, such as mewing **Catbirds** and tail flashing **American Redstarts**.

Back on the road, we stopped when Phil spotted a 'lifer', a soaring raptor - a **Black Hawk-Eagle**. 99% sure! And another first for the trip, we saw a group of **Cattle Egrets**, also **Snowy Egrets**, so we headed down the side road where they were.



Next we saw **Northern Rough-winged Swallows** on wires, a **Collared Seedeater** and a squawk of **Black-headed Saltators**. Happily, Phil spotted a **Laughing Falcon** on top of a pole, another first for this group. Then a **Roadside Hawk** appeared on a further post and,

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later, a **Short-tailed Hawk** flew past, again a first sighting and, later still, an **American Kestrel**. A **Belted Kingfisher** belted past.

We lunched at Aluxes by a turquoise lagoon at Bacalar on the Caribbean Coast. The Ladies toilet had a statue of a man sitting in an open cubicle! Oops! A **Royal Tern** flew by.

We arrived at our hotel Turquesa Maya at Felipe Carrillo Puerto, and realised that we all had chigger bites, probably from the early morning walk. We went out again along the beginning of the unmade up Vigia Chico Road. We found three new birds, a 'lifer' - a tiny **White-bellied Wren**, **Pale-vented Pigeon** and a **Collared Acaçari**. Other notable birds were a **Rose-throated Becard**, a **Lineated Woodpecker**, **White-fronted Parrots**, **Dusky-capped Flycatcher**, **Summer Tanager** and **Red-throated Ant-Tanager** with its rasping call. We watched for nightjars as dusk fell, without success, but did see many bats. We went out for dinner. Overnight Hotel Turquesa Maya

### Wednesday 3rd February Sian Káan Biosphere Reserve.



After a slow Mexican/American breakfast, we spent the whole day in the **Sian Káan Biosphere Reserve**. Sian Káan Biosphere Reserve is a huge protected area including tropical semi-deciduous forests, mangrove habitats, lagoons and sandy beaches. However, most of the area cannot be visited or is extremely hard to reach. The Mayans have left their mark with Cenotes and stone lined wells.

We started the day with watching Parakeets. We heard a Thicket Tinamou. (not seen) Claire found a **Black-Headed Trogon** and a **Keel-billed Toucan** appeared. Later we all had a brief view of a **Gartered Trogon** flying away. We heard a **Northern Beardless Tyrannulet** but it didn't show itself. We also heard a **Yucatan Woodpecker**. A **Pale-billed Woodpecker** was seen. At a forest lake we were pleased to find a new bird for our list - a juvenile male **Lesser Scaup**. We watched a close **Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl**. Then two German birdwatchers pointed out three rare **White-necked Puffbirds** on a tree above the track. Amazing! The first time our guides had seen these in Mexico and a lifer for the visitors. Claire found a pretty red squirrel. A **Northern Water-Thrush** was seen. There were many **Blue Buntings** zipping across the track.



**White-necked Puffbird by Phil Blatcher**

Phil spotted an attractive **Grey Fox** which he photographed. Four **Wood Storks** flew overhead, then a **Roadside Hawk** flew across the road, the first of several.

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There were many flowering plants and butterflies we identified were: a **Blue Morpho, Julia and Zebra Heliconian and Erato** as well. There were various yellow butterflies and a **White-bellied Emerald hummingbird**.

We saw **Dusky-capped and Yellow-olive Flycatchers, a Tropical Gnatcatcher, Red-throated Ant-Tanager and Summer Tanager**. There were **White-collared Seedeaters** and a **Yellow-faced Grassquit** on the road.

After a delicious picnic lunch of tuna, guacamole, tomatoes, ripe avocados and mangos, followed by cake, which we ate at the closed and unmanned gates to the reserve, we had a bumpy and narrow drive until we stopped to admire a **Belted Kingfisher**. A **Great Egret** and **Little Blue Heron** flew past. The road became narrower and more overgrown and Gabor wove our way through wetlands or dry forest on either side. There were prickly bushes, thin dry trees and mangrove. Two **Plain Chachalacas** crossed the road and an **Ovenbird** pecked at the side. We looked and looked, but sadly saw no Jaguars. Andrea and Gabor had seen a pair of Jaguars in that reserve before.



**Confusing Sister by Phil Blatcher**



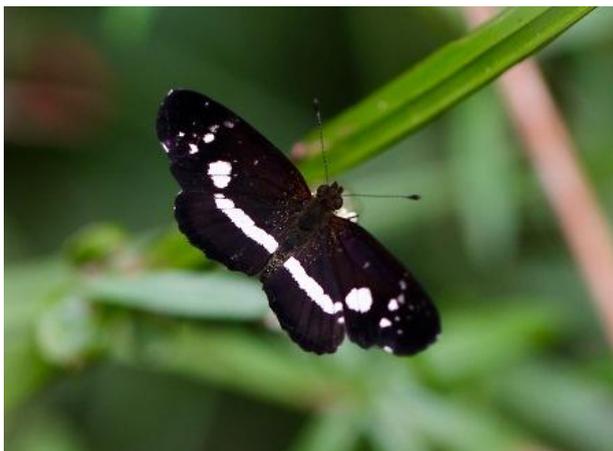
**Bluet by Andrea**

We turned into a better track and we were all just getting out to explore side tracks when Andrea called '**coati**'! We had good views as it crossed the track. David found a **snake**. We heard **Stub-tailed Spadebills** on two occasions and Gabor and Phil had fleeting glimpses.

About 5pm birds started appearing and singing again: **Melodious Blackbirds, Spot-breasted Wren, Sociable Flycatcher, Grey Catbirds, Vireos, various warblers, Orioles and a Greyish Saltator**. A group of six **Yucatan Jays** lined up on a branch.

After 60km, mas o menos, of forest road we turned back onto the main road, where the final highlight was a splendid view of two pretty perched **White-fronted Parrots**.

Overnight Hotel Turquesa Maya at Felipe Carillo Puerto, where we dined.



**Mayan Crescent**



**Orange-spotted Skipper**

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## Thursday 4th February Coba Mayan Archeological site

After a 7am breakfast we saw an **Orchard Oriole** on a fruiting tree across from the hotel, a new bird, plus a **Blue-grey Tanager**. We revisited the start of the Vigia Chico Road and had excellent views of some perched **White-fronted Parrots**, followed later by about 8 perched **Aztec Parakeets**. Dorothy spotted a new bird: a **Black Catbird** and Phil found a **Yucatan Woodpecker**, much smaller than the adjacent **Golden-fronted Spot-bellied Wrens** made a sound like running a finger along the teeth of a comb. Two **Olive Sparrows**, **Grey-collared Becard**, **Ovenbird** and a **Black-headed Trogon** were also seen.

We drove further North towards Tulum, where we headed inland to Coba. By the lake at the edge of Coba we stopped to take a picture of a **Morelet's Crocodile** on the jetty. We also saw two firsts for the trip there: **Pied-billed Grebe**, **Purple Gallinule** and a **Limpkin** catching, striking and eating a snail. Then we had better views of an **Anhinga** than previously.



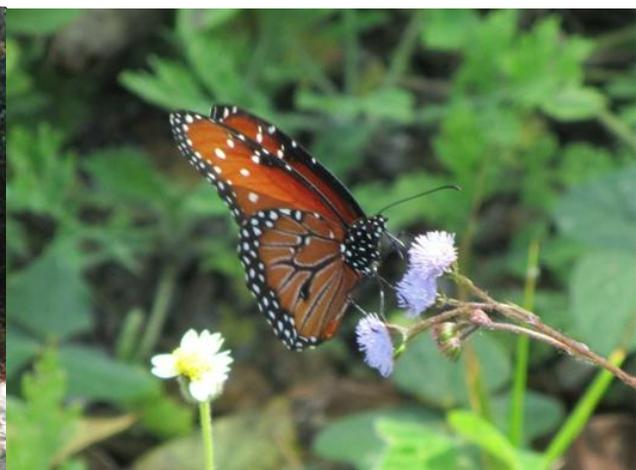
**Purple Gallinule & Limpkin by Phil Blatcher**

We explored an interesting area near Coba where we passed a couple of small, traditional, Mayan villages. We stopped in a quiet treed lane by a farm with a Cenote, with a decaying traditional thatched dwelling opposite. Here, in warm sunshine, we watched butterflies, including deep orange ones with black and white spots, **Queens** of the Monarch family. We watched a colourful **Collared Araçari** high in a tree.

We then enjoyed a tasty Mayan buffet lunch at the shore of Lake Coba. Gabor and Phil watched several **Snail Kites**, especially one splendid close male.



**looking for birds**



**Queen by Phil Blatcher**

After lunch we visited and enjoyed the shade in the **Coba Mayan Archeological site**. It is a densely forested area with well-maintained paths connecting different Mayan ruins including altars, temples and the largest pyramid in the Mexican Yucatan. We all heard the trill of a **Ruddy Crake**. Gabor and Phil took a birding route while Andrea led an Archaeological tour. It

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was very busy with tourists and the sun was hot so we decided not to climb Nohoch Mul, the tallest pyramid in Yucatan at 138feet. Sites of especial interest were the well preserved observatory, the palace, two ball courts with carvings showing how the players were dressed, the temple of painted frescoes with shrines in front and temple of the descending god. The raised white Mayan roadways were impressive. There are some 6,500 buildings, only about a tenth of which have been excavated. Gabor and Phil were pleased to find an **Eye-ringed Flatbill** and a **Grey-headed Tanager**, two new birds for the trip, a female **Rose-throated Tanager**, two **Olivaceous Woodcreepers**, two **White-browed Wrens**, **White-eyed** and **Yellow-throated Vireos**, several **Ocellated Turkeys** and a **Northern Bentbill**. Andrea's group saw a **Black-headed Trogon**. We left for Playa del Carmen and our hotel, Hotel Posada Sian Ka'an. The hotel has gardens, a Cenote and a pool. We had a good meal in a German run restaurant. There was heavy rain in the night.

### Friday 5th February Cozumel Island

On a showery, windy, cloudy day we took the ferry and had a lively crossing to **Cozumel Island**. This 45km x 15km island has a very attractive avifauna with four endemics (Cozumel Emerald, Wren, Vireo and Thrasher - extinct?) and more than a dozen endemic subspecies.

Gabor hired transport and drove to the North of the Island where there was the infrastructure for an abandoned resort. The beach was covered in seaweed. Some **Ruddy Turnstones** and **Grey Plover** flew by. We had difficulty finding any birds in the wind but the star mammal of the day was a **Collared Peccary** which trotted across the roadway. We also found a **Grey Squirrel**. A **Cozumel Emerald** hummingbird buzzed around us and we eventually saw the head and tail of the **Cozumel Vireo**. An elusive wren skipped in and out of sight, which was a mystery first, but turned out to be the **Cozumel Wren** later on. Both **Yellow-crowned and Boat-billed Heron** were seen. An **Anhinga** and a **White Ibis** flew overhead.

We moved back to a golf clubhouse for lunch, set in forested grounds, approved by the Audubon Society. We had a tasty lunch there, overlooking the golf course and hibiscus and other flowering plants. We then strolled along the golf course road and looked over the lake where there were **Black-necked Stilts**. We were pleased to find new birds for the list, a **Yellow-rumped Warbler**, **Bananaquit** and **American Coots!** After sighting a **Black Catbird**, we moved on to the entrance of the San Gervasio archaeological site in the middle of the island and were allowed to walk in. Birds were still very quiet, but Phil and Gabor identified the call of a **Caribbean Dove**. There was a fine small Mayan Cenote.

Called Ah-Cuzamil-Peten (Swallow Island) by its earliest inhabitants, Mayas settled here from AD300. Mayan women were expected to make a pilgrimage to the (lost) temple of Ixchel, the goddess of fertility and the moon. Smallpox and genocidal attacks wiped out the Maya but in 1848 indigenous people fleeing the war of the castes resettled Cozumel. After 1961 Jacques Cousteau's famous documentary brought tourists to snorkel and dive. Unfortunately the conditions weren't right for snorkelling today.

We returned the vehicle and caught the return ferry, which tossed across the sea back to Playa del Carmen. We enjoyed another fine meal at the German-run restaurant, entertained by a keyboard singer who played some Cat Stevens songs. Overnight Hotel Playa del Carmen.

### Saturday 6th February Playa del Carmen



White-spotted Tanmark female



Malachite

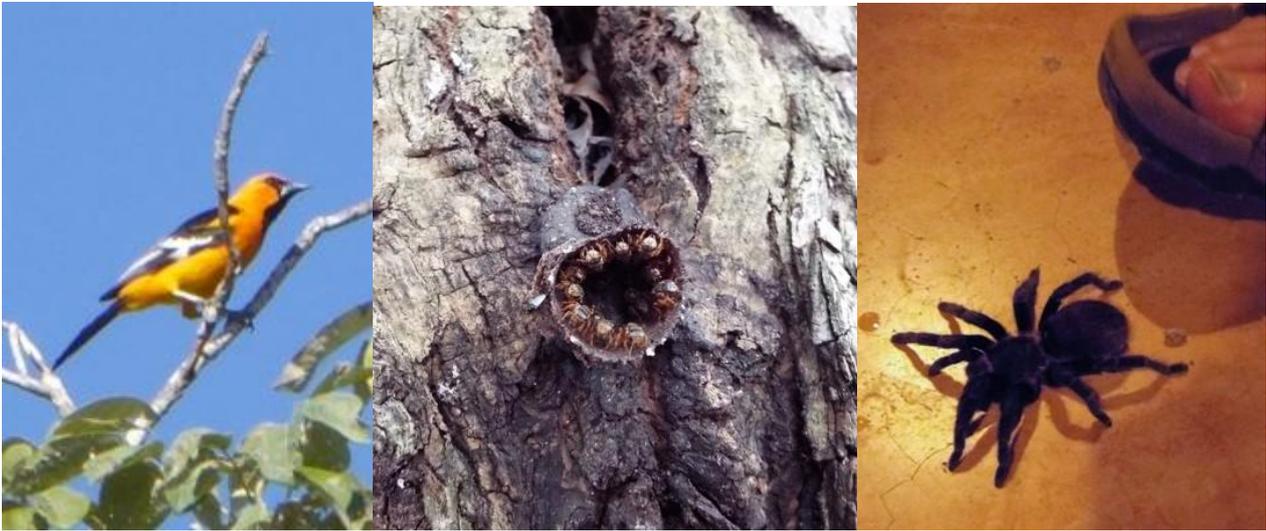
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**Altamira Oriole/Phil Blatcher    Mayan Bees & Tarantul by David Farmiloe**

Today the weather improved, with a gentle breeze and a pleasant temperature. We discovered the green area of Playa del Carmen, a green corridor with forest, Mayan ruins and villas, many with pretty gardens. We found numerous **Agoutis** and a **Grey Squirrel** and then we were very pleased to come across a group of 20+ **White-nosed Coatis**, including juveniles, scrambling in the trees. We had excellent views. A **Great-tailed Grackle** disturbed a **large fruit-eating bat**. David found **Mayan bees** which are small and stingless. They were nesting in a tree through a small pipe-like entrance.

We saw a flock of new birds: Vaux **Swifts**. Butterflies included **Red Rim** and a curiously shaped **Beggarwing**. A **Couch's Kingbird** was identified by song, then seen. We saw the usual warblers and orioles. **Melodious Blackbirds** sang. Two **Aztec Parakeets** showed well. At the seafront we saw **Magnificent Frigatebirds** and **Brown Pelicans**.

We collected our things from the hotel and stopped for lunch at a restaurant overlooking a lake at Puerto Aventura, a golf complex and marina, where we watched people swimming with Bottle-nosed Dolphins. An **Osprey** flew over and a **Green Heron** perched in the tree above us.

We travelled on to **Aktunchen**, a Cenote and underground river activity centre in forest. We walked along the entrance road and track. We had excellent views of a **Mexican Cycadian** green and chocolate butterfly. Hummingbirds: **Wedge-tailed Sabrewing**, **Rufous-tailed**, **Buff-bellied** and **White-bellied Emerald**.

Later we travelled back to our last hotel, Hotel Amarte, between Playa del Carmen and Puerto Morelos and saw **Yucatan Woodpecker** and a **Grey Hawk** en route. The hotel has lovely gardens and a pool. We dined at the adjacent burger bar.



**Julian Heliconian**

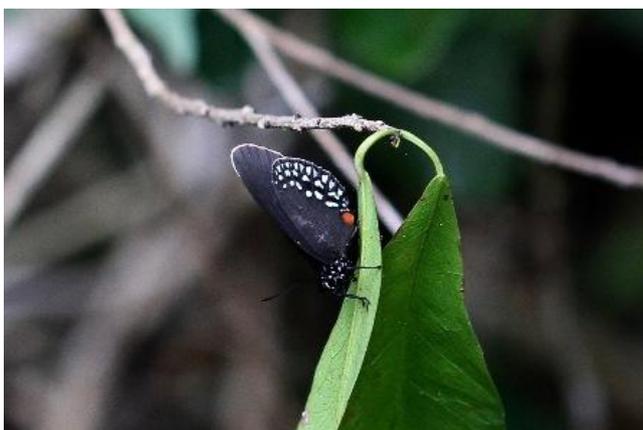


**Purple-washed Eyemark**

## Sunday 7th February

Gabor and Andrea collected us for some last birding at the Ruta de Los Cenotes. We parked at the entrance to Rancho Elpepén. There was a chorus of birds at the start of the forest track with **Melodious Blackbirds, Yucatan, White-eyed and Mangrove Vireos, Black-throated Green and Black-and-White and Hooded Warblers and Lesser Greenlet** plus the ubiquitous flighty **American Redstart and Golden-fronted Woodpecker**.

Four **White-fronted Parrots** flew over and we heard the distinctive extended trill and chirpy call of the **Spot-breasted Wren. Altamira Orioles** were bright in the sunshine against a blue sky, as were **Yucatan Jays**. Other finds included a **Canivet's Emerald, Scrub Euphonia, Blue Bunting** and two **Olive Sparrows**.



**Mexican Cycadian Eumaeus toxea**



**Cloudless sulphur Phoebis sennae**

Andrea spotted three **Common Black-Hawks** circling and a **Roadside Hawk**. Butterflies included the **Zebra Heliconia** and **Erato**. A star of the morning was a fine **Grey Fox**. Andrea and Gabor took us to their favourite small taco cafe in Puerto Morelos, where we said our thank you and goodbyes, then had delicious seafood tacos. We had a walk by the beach, looked at the shops and then returned to the Hotel Amarte.

THE END

Ps Phil and Dorothy were delighted to see a family of **coatis** crossing in front of their accommodation the following morning!

Total number of bird species seen on trip = 229

**Report compiled by Dorothy Blatcher** with input from Gabor, Andrea, Phil, Claire & David  
Pictures without name were made by either Andrea Katona or Gabor Orban during the tour.



**Common Mestra**



**Giant Swallowtail**

**ECOTOURS – Worldwide Travel Services ; EASTERN EUROPE & LATIN AMERICA Specialist**  
Eastern European Office: Kondor Ecolodge - Balazspuszta 90 Szabadszallas, HUNGARY 6080  
Email: [ecotours@t-online.hu](mailto:ecotours@t-online.hu) Tours: [www.ecotours.hu](http://www.ecotours.hu) Lodge: [www.kondorecolodge.hu](http://www.kondorecolodge.hu)  
Ph:+36-306459318 FB: [www.facebook.com/ECOTOURSKONDORCOLODGE](https://www.facebook.com/ECOTOURSKONDORCOLODGE)  
Latin American Office seasonally from each Nov till April: Puerto Morelos-Cancun, Riviera Maya, MEXICO  
Phone:+52-998 1263073 E-mail: [cancuninfo@gmail.com](mailto:cancuninfo@gmail.com) Web: [www.ecotours-worldwide.com](http://www.ecotours-worldwide.com)

### **Notes on the Mayan World from 'An Archaeological Guide' (Dante)**

The Maya were influenced by Meso-American peoples, in particular the Olmecs, from whom they inherited sculpture, religion and the cults of the serpent and the jaguar, two highly symbolic animals. The ancient Maya inhabited a vast region that today includes the SE of Mexico, Belize, Honduras and part of El Salvador. During the classical period, 600-1100 AD they constructed buildings whose monumentality and beauty still amaze us today in cities such as Chichén Itzá and Tulum. The culture collapsed in the 11th century, attributed to warfare (e.g between Calakmul and Tikal -ed.) natural disasters and overpopulation. By the 15th Century the great cities with their pyramids, temples and palaces lay forgotten in the jungle and descendants of their inhabitants lived in small villages.

### **Notes on endemic and near-endemic birds**

Seen on this trip: Black-throated Bobwhite, Ocellated Turkey, Yucatan Parrot, Mexican Sheartail, Yucatan Woodpecker, Yucatan Flycatcher, Yucatan Jay, Yucatan Wren, Black Catbird, Rose-throated Tanager, Orange Oriole, Cozumel Wren, Cozumel Emerald and Cozumel Vireo. To see on a future trip! Yucatan Nightjar and Yucatan Poorwill.

**YUCATAN PENINSULA ENDEMICS** (Source: Diego Nuñez) 14 endemic species are found throughout the region: Ocellated Turkey, Yellow-lored (Yucatan) Parrot, Yucatan Poorwill, Yucatan Nightjar, Red-vented (Yucatan) Woodpecker, Yucatan Flycatcher, Yucatan Jay, Yucatan Wren, Black Catbird, Rose-throated Tanager and Orange Oriole, Cozumel Emerald, Cozumel Vireo and the Cozumel Wren. The Cozumel Thrasher is probably extinct. The Black-throated (Yucatan) Bobwhite could also be considered an endemic except for a few disjunct populations, including one in Honduras. Another such species is the Mexican Sheartail which, apart from the north coast of the peninsula, is only found in central Veracruz.

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