

Cerro de Alux, Cerro Tecpan & El Pilar (Antigua), Guatemala

7-8 March 2009



Typical view of Antigua

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General

This was a short weekend trip out of Guatemala City. With the excellent guiding by Knut Eisermann from Cayaya Birding Tours, I managed to see almost all my target birds in the visited areas. The highlands of Guatemala is more or less an endemic bird area with several key species only shared with southern Mexico. Highlights that stand out from the crowd were Blue-throated Motmot, Pink-headed Warbler, Crescent-chested Warbler, Chestnut-sided Shrike-Vireo, Singing Quail, Emerald Toucanet, Bar-winged and Black-vented Orioles and Gray Silky-Flycatcher, as well as the buzzing hummer feeders at El Pilar (5 lifer hummers!).



Blue-throated Motmot, one of the true highlights of the trip

Itinerary

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We started at 6.00 from my hotel in central Guatemala City. After a quick brecky-stop at an Americanized 24/7 shop, we arrived at nearby Cerro de Alux shortly after dawn. In the morning sun, the park-like forest came alive with lots of birds and the lifers came thick and fast. Initially we spent the time in a clearing where we had smashing views of Blue-throated Motmot, Gray Silky-Flycatcher, Rufous-browed Wren et al. We also ventured into the forest and eventually came across a group of Singing Quails.

By late morning we moved on towards Tecpan, which was a bit over an hour drive away. Roads were in good conditions and the only snag was the traffic through one of the towns along the way. At Cerro Tecpan we had an excellent lunch at a roadside restaurant, before starting the afternoon birding session right behind the restaurant. It did not take long to pick up Crescent-chested Warbler and seconds later the target Pink-headed ditto was bagged. Both species provided truly awesome views. We slowly walked through the pine forest adding birds like Mountain Trogon and Greater Pewee, albeit the hoped for, but rare, Black-capped Siskin and Amethyst-throated Hummingbird eluded us in spite of spending the rest of the day in suitable habbo.

Very happy with the birding, we drove for about an hour to the old town of Antigua. Antigua Old City is a world heritage site and sometimes voted the most picturesque town in the world, in the same league as Luang Prabang, Cusco, La Habana, etc. The old city was the capital of Guatemala until a major earthquake in 1773 ruined it and the government moved to Guatemala City. It consists of one-storey colonial houses and cobbled streets, with a breath-taking view of several dormant and active volcanoes as a backdrop. After checking in at the colonial style hotel, we had dinner in a courtyard restaurant that served splendid traditional food.

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At 6.00 we left the hotel and tried to get breakfast at one of the cafes. As it turned out they were all closed at this hour, so instead we went straight for the birding at nearby Finca El Pilar. This is an old coffee plantation with splendid forest up through a valley. One additional feature is the hummingbird feeders that attract a good selection of high quality hummers, notably Rufous and Violet Sabrewing, Blue-tailed, Berylline, Magnificent, White-eared and Azure-crowned Hummingbirds with the additional Green-throated Mountain-gem in the forest. While walking along the trail we heard two calling Highland Guans, but in spite of waiting for them we only managed to hearing it display.

By late morning it was time to leave and we stopped in the old city for a quick brunch sandwich before setting off for a one hour drive to the airport.

Weather

The weather was absolutely brilliant with clear skies and pleasant temperatures. In the early morning, the fleece jacket proved nice.

Logistics

The entire trip was arranged by Knut Eisermann at Cayaya Tours, www.cayaya-birding.com, info@cayaya-birding.com. I would highly recommend using Knut. Not only was he a very nice and knowledgeable person with thorough skills in Guatemalan birding, but also having up-to-date information of security issues in the country. Guatemala is a country that has very high and increasing crime rate, so local knowledge must be regarded as essential. Having said that, with the right knowledge, it is a truly amazing birding destination that should be high on the want-to-go-list. I cannot wait to go back later this spring for Tikal respectively Atitlan for the Horned Guan and Azure-rumped Tanager.



Knut having brunch in Antigua

Site descriptions

Cerro de Alux

Cerro de Alux is a nature park in the outskirts of Guatemala City. In the weekends it is a frequently visited spot for picnics, but before 10.00 it was completely empty of people and full of quality birds. It is at 2000 masl and mostly consists of dry mixed oak forest.

Cerro Tecpan

Cerro Tecpan is a rather limited mountain area an hours drive from Cerro de Alux at the altitude of 2500 masl. There is still a good forest on the mountain and it even supports a small population of Horned Guan. The key species is Pink-headed Warbler that is easy in a patch of forest just by the Panamerican Highway. The forest is mostly dry pine forest, with broadleaf in the lower valleys.

Finca El Pilar and Antigua

About 200 years ago, lots of coffee fincas were established all around Guatemala. El Pilar is one of those and situated only ten minutes drive from the old city of Antigua. The forest is mature cloud-forest, although rather dry such. The elevation is around 1500 masl. From Guatemala City it takes about an hour to reach.

Birds

Western Cattle Egret, *Bubulcus ibis ibis*

Two between Tecpan and Antigua.

Black Vulture, *Coragyps atratus brasiliensis*

Many between Guatemala City and Tecpan, and around Antigua.

Turkey Vulture, *Cathartes aura aura*

Many between Guatemala City and Tecpan.

Red-tailed Hawk, *Buteo jamaicensis kemsiesi*

One at Cerro Tecpan.

Highland Guan, *Penelopina nigra*

Two were heard calling at Finca El Pilar, but they were up a ridge and out of view/access. Twice we also heard the display flight with the wing-burr.

Singing Quail, *Dactylortyx thoracicus calophonus*

A group of four adults were seen exceptionally well at Cerro de Alux. Initially we heard one singing rather close, but it took us about an hour of patient waiting until we stumbled upon the group close to the trail. Also heard at Finca El Pilar.



Singing Quail

Band-tailed Pigeon, *Patagioenas fasciata fasciata*

One at Cerro Tecpan.

White-winged Dove, *Zenaida asiatica asiatica*

One in Antigua.

Inca Dove, *Columbina inca*

One near Finca El Pilar.

White-tipped Dove, *Leptotila verreauxi bangsi*

A few at Cerro de Alux, Cerro Tecpan and Finca El Pilar.

Pacific Parakeet, *Aratinga strenua*

One heard in the early morning at Cerro de Alux.

White-collared Swift, *Streptoprocne zonaris mexicana*

3-4 at Cerro Tecpan.

Vaux's Swift, *Chaetura vauxi* ssp

One at Cerro de Alux together with the Black-capped Swallows.

Rufous Sabrewing, *Campylopterus rufus*

At least two at the feeders at Finca El Pilar.



Rufous Sabrewing, an endemic of the region

Violet Sabrewing, *Campylopterus hemileucurus hemileucurus*

One female type at the feeders at Finca El Pilar.



Violet Sabrewing

White-eared Hummingbird, *Hylocharis leucotis leucotis*

Several seen at both Cerro de Alux and Cerro Tecpan. The most commonly seen hummer at these two sites. One at the feeders at Finca El Pilar.

Azure-crowned Hummingbird, *Agyrtria cyanocephala cyanocephala*

A few at the feeders at Finca El Pilar.



Azure-crowned Hummingbird

Blue-tailed Hummingbird, *Saucerottia cyanura guatemalae*

A few at the feeders at Finca El Pilar. One may have been a hybrid between this and the next species.



Blue-tailed Hummingbird

Berylline Hummingbird, *Saucerottia beryllina devillei*

Two at Finca El Pilar, one at the feeders and one in the forest.



Berylline Hummingbird

Green-throated Mountain-gem, *Lampornis viridipallens viridipallens*

Three or four in the forest at Finca El Pilar, mostly feeding on the bushes with yellow flowers.

Magnificent Hummingbird, *Eugenes fulgens fulgens*

One at Cerro de Alux, two at Cerro Tecpan and a few at the feeders at Finca El Pilar.



Magnificent Hummingbird

Mountain Trogon, *Trogon mexicanus mexicanus*

Five heard and seen, both males and females seen.



Mountain Trogon

Blue-throated Motmot, *Aspatha gularis*

One of the highlights of the trip was the exceptional views of one bird at Cerro de Alux. We also saw another at Cerro de Alux and heard one at Cerro Tecpan, as well as one heard at Finca El Pilar.



Blue-throated Motmot – a very localized species that can be hard to find

Emerald Toucanet, *Aulacorhynchus prasinus stenorhabdus*

One heard at Cerro de Alux, and three heard at Finca El Pilar of which one was scoped nicely.

Acorn Woodpecker, *Melanerpes formicivorus lineatus*

A few heard and seen at Cerro de Alux and Cerro Tecpan.

Golden-fronted Woodpecker, *Melanerpes aurifrons santacruzi*

Three at Finca El Pilar.

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, *Sphyrapicus varius*

At least two at Cerro Tecpan.



Yellow-bellied Sapsucker

- Hairy Woodpecker, *Picoides villosus sanctorum*
One at Cerro Tecpan, one heard at Cerro de Alux and two or three at Finca El Pilar.
- Northern Flicker, *Colaptes auratus mexicanoides*
A few at both Cerro de Alux and Cerro Tecpan, and one at Finca El Pilar.
- Ruddy Foliage-gleaner, *Automolus rubiginosus umbrinus*
Initially heard a couple of times at Finca El Pilar and eventually we got a response from one bird that showed nicely in the understory.
- Spotted Woodcreeper, *Xiphorhynchus erythropygius parvus*
A pair at Cerro Tecpan.
- Spot-crowned Woodcreeper, *Lepidocolaptes affinis affinis*
One at Cerro Tecpan and three at Finca El Pilar.
- Tufted Flycatcher, *Mitrephanes phaeocercus phaeocercus*
One heard and another seen at Cerro Tecpan, and one at Finca El Pilar.
- Greater Pewee, *Contopus pertinax pertinax*
One at Cerro Tecpan.
- Hammond's Flycatcher, *Empidonax hammondii*
Two at Cerro de Alux.
- Yellowish Flycatcher, *Empidonax flavescens salvini*
Three at Finca El Pilar.
- Dusky-capped Flycatcher, *Myiarchus tuberculifer connectens*
One heard at Finca El Pilar.
- Black-capped Swallow, *Notiochelidon pileata*
At least five at Cerro de Alux and about ten at Finca El Pilar.
- Gray Silky-flycatcher, *Ptilogonys cinereus molybdophanes*
Several at Cerro de Alux and at Cerro Tecpan.
- Band-backed Wren, *Campylorhynchus zonatus restrictus*
Heard at Cerro de Alux, about five seen together at Cerro Tecpan and two at Finca El Pilar.
- Rufous-and-white Wren, *Thryothorus rufalbus rufalbus*
Two heard at Finca El Pilar.
- Rufous-browed Wren, *Troglodytes rufociliatus rufociliatus*
One seen nicely at Cerro de Alux and another heard at Cerro Tecpan, and one seen at Finca El Pilar.
- Gray-breasted Wood-Wren, *Henicorhina leucophrys capitalis*
One at Cerro de Alux and one at Finca El Pilar.
- Blue-and-white Mockingbird, *Melanotis hypoleucus*
One at Cerro de Alux and two at Cerro Tecpan.
- Eastern Bluebird, *Sialia sialis ssp*
Two at Cerro de Alux and two at Cerro Tecpan.
- Brown-backed Solitaire, *Myadestes occidentalis oberholseri*
Four at Cerro de Alux, three at Cerro Tecpan and two at Finca El Pilar. This bird has a most extraordinary song.
- Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush, *Catharus aurantiirostris bangsi*
One heard at Finca El Pilar.
- Ruddy-capped Nightingale-Thrush, *Catharus frantzii juancitonis*
One at Cerro Tecpan.
- Swainson's Thrush, *Catharus ustulatus ssp*
One at Cerro de Alux and two at Finca El Pilar.
- Wood Thrush, *Hylocichla mustelina*
One at Finca El Pilar.
- Clay-colored Robin, *Turdus grayi megas*
One at Cerro de Alux and several at Finca El Pilar.
- Rufous-collared Robin, *Turdus rufitorques*
Rather common at Cerro de Alux and a few at Cerro Tecpan.



Rufous-collared Thrush, yet another regional endemic

Bushtit, *Psaltriparus minimus melanotis*

Several at Cerro Tecpan.

Brown Creeper, *Certhia Americana pernigra*

One at Cerro Tecpan.

Steller's Jay, *Cyanocitta stelleri ridgwayi*

About ten at Cerro de Alux and a few at Cerro Tecpan.

Bushy-crested Jay, *Cyanocorax melanocyaneus melanocyaneus*

One at Cerro de Alux was performing excellently and many seen at Finca El Pilar and in the outskirts of Antigua.



Bushy-crested Jay – the floppy crest being hard to see sometimes

House Sparrow, *Passer domesticus ssp*

A few in the villages.

Blue-headed Vireo, *Vireo solitarius solitarius*

One at Cerro de Alux and one at Cerro Tecpan.

Hutton's Vireo, *Vireo huttoni vulcani*

A few at Cerro de Alux and at Cerro Tecpan.

Chestnut-sided Shrike-Vireo, *Vireolanius melitophrys melitophrys*

One at Cerro de Alux and one at Cerro Tecpan. Good views of this fat colourful bird.

Rufous-browed Peppershrike, *Cyclarhis gujanensis nicaraguae*

One at Cerro de Alux and two at Cerro Tecpan.

Lesser Goldfinch, *Carduelis psaltria columbianus*

Seven at Cerro Tecpan.

Hooded Grosbeak, *Coccothraustes abeillei cobanensis*

2-3 at Cerro de Alux.

Olive Warbler, *Peucedramus taeniatus taeniatus*

One at Cerro Tecpan.



Olive Warbler, the only species in its family

Tennessee Warbler, *Vermivora peregrine*

Three at Cerro de Alux and one at Finca El Pilar.

Nashville Warbler, *Vermivora ruficapilla ruficapilla*

Two at Cerro Tecpan and one at Finca El Pilar.

Crescent-chested Warbler, *Parula superciliosa superciliosa*

One or two heard at Cerro de Alux and at least five seen well at Cerro Tecpan.



Crescent-chested Warbler

Black-throated Green Warbler, *Dendroica virens*

One at Cerro de Alux.

Townsend's Warbler, *Dendroica townsendi*

Many at both Cerro de Alux and Cerro Tecpan, and a few at Finca El Pilar.

Hermit Warbler, *Dendroica occidentalis*

Two at Cerro Tecpan.

Black-and-white Warbler, *Mniotilta varia*

One at Cerro de Alux and one at Cerro Tecpan.

Worm-eating Warbler, *Helmitheros vermivorus*

One at Cerro de Alux.

Ovenbird, *Seiurus aurocapilla* ssp

Two at Cerro de Alux.

MacGillivray's Warbler, *Oporornis tolmiei*

One at Cerro de Alux was a long-awaited US bird.

Wilson's Warbler, *Wilsonia pusilla* ssp

A few at Cerro de Alux and several at Cerro Tecpan and at Finca El Pilar.

Pink-headed Warbler, *Ergaticus versicolor*

6-8 seen exceedingly well at Cerro Tecpan. One of the key highlights of the weekend.



Pink-headed Warbler – a forest gem with a gorgeous pink necklace

Slate-throated Redstart, *Myioborus miniatus hellmayri*

A few at Cerro de Alux, Cerro Tecpan and Finca El Pilar. The local form has rather cinnamon underparts.

Golden-browed Warbler, *Basileuterus belli scitulus*

Three at Cerro de Alux, two at Cerro Tecpan and one at Finca El Pilar.



Golden-browed Warbler – one of the best looking Basileuterus

Summer Tanager, *Piranga rubra rubra*

One male at Cerro Tecpan and one male at Finca El Pilar.

Western Tanager, *Piranga ludoviciana*

Two females at Cerro Tecpan and one female at Finca El Pilar.

Yellow-winged Tanager, *Thraupis abbas*

One at Finca El Pilar.

Elegant Euphonia, *Euphonia elegantissima elegantissima*

Four at Cerro Tecpan and one at Finca El Pilar.



Elegant Euphonia – with its sky-blue cap

Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercer, *Diglossa baritula montana*

One at Cerro de Alux and one at Cerro Tecpan.



Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercer

White-naped Brush-Finch, *Atlapetes albinucha griseipectus*

Three at Cerro de Alux.

Chestnut-capped Brush-Finch, *Buarremon brunneinucha macrourus*

One at Cerro de Alux and one at Finca El Pilar.

White-eared Ground-Sparrow, *Melospiza leucotis occipitalis*

Two heard at Finca El Pilar.

Spotted Towhee, *Pipilo maculatus repetens*
One heard at Cerro Tecpan.

Rufous-collared Sparrow, *Zonotrichia capensis septentrionalis*
Two at Cerro de Alux.

Black-headed Saltator, *Saltator atriceps ssp*
Four at Finca El Pilar.

Rose-breasted Grosbeak, *Pheucticus ludovicianus*
One at Cerro de Alux, five at Cerro Tecpan and ten at Finca El Pilar.

Indigo Bunting, *Passerina cyanea*
One at Cerro de Alux and one at Finca El Pilar.

Great-tailed Grackle, *Quiscalus mexicanus mexicanus*
Common in the countryside and in towns.

Bronzed Cowbird, *Molothrus aeneus aeneus*
One at Cerro de Alux.

Baltimore Oriole, *Icterus galbula*
One at Finca El Pilar.

Black-vented Oriole, *Icterus wagleri wagleri*
About five at Finca El Pilar.

Bar-winged Oriole, *Icterus maculialatus*
2-4 at Finca El Pilar.



Pink-headed Warbler – a trip highlight, Guatemala is by far the best place to find it