Los Tarrales, Lago Atitlan and Cerro Tecpan, Guatemala

11-14 June 2009



View of Lago Atitlan

Björn Anderson

General

This was an extended weekend trip with the main purpose to nail down two very localized species that I had wanted to see for a very long time. Horned Guan and Azure-rumped Tanager has always had a mythical pull since I first started to read about birding in Chiapas many many years ago. Nowadays, they are both comparatively easy to find during one day of birding at Volcan Atitlan. In order to have some spare time in case of initial failure, I allowed some extra time, which would also enable me to pick up a series of other goodies of the area. During 2009 I had visited Guatemala three times previously, so my target list was rather selective. The trip was excellently set up and guided by Knut Eisermann at Cayaya Birding.

Highlights

Highlight of the trip was no doubt the almost instant success with having lengthy views of Horned Guan after a hard predawn climb. Truly awesome experience! We were also treated to good looks at several Azure-rumped Tanagers, including one fully grown young at its nest. Other trip highlights were two Tody Motmots, White-faced Quail-Dove (spooked and heard only), Black-and-white Owl, Fulvous Owl (heard only), Black-throated Jay, White-bellied Chachalaca, Spotted Nightingale-Thrush, Blue-crowned Chlorophonia and Amethyst-throated Hummingbird.

On top of this, Guatemala offers some of the finest scenery in Central America. Classic volcanoes, even steaming such, and the huge crater Lake Atitlan, makes for a great trip.

Itinerary

11/6

Knut picked me up in central Guatemala City in the late afternoon and after having navigated the rush hour traffic it took us more than 3 hours to reach Los Tarrales. We passed through Antigua, where we met up with the police escort.

12/6

After a very short nights sleep at Los Tarrales, we were up at 2.30 and left at 3.00 for a 40 minutes drive up to Vesubio. There we were met by the local man Lalo that was leading us up the trail to the cloud-forest. The first 200 altitudinal meter were through plantation and hacked habitat, but at 1600 masl we abruptly entered primary forest. The trail was narrow and steep and there was basically no time to rest, as we wanted to be at 2000 masl at dawn to increase our chances of Horned Guan. At 2250 masl, Lalo went to check out a fruiting tree and minutes later the positive response came through the radio. We slowly approached and saw a pair of guans, of which one bird performed excellently and for a long time, wow!! Happy with the success, we retreated to the main trail and had some sandwiches, until we were interrupted by the calls of the wanted Black-throated Jay. We climbed a bit higher and could eventually enjoy good views of this restricted range Jay.

We then spent some more time at this altitude before descending along the trail. We picked up good birds like Spotted Nightingale-Thrush, Blue-crowned Chlorophonia and eventually Knut picked up the high-pitched calls of the sought-after Azure-rumped Tanager. It took us a while until we had them nailed down as they initially stayed high in the canopy, but finally they gave stunning views. Lower down we flushed a Dove from the trail, which turned out to be a White-faced Quail-Dove one it started to call. Unfortunately it made the choice to stay off-trail, so that was the end of that story. Once we came back down from the closed forest we found another showy pair of Azure-rumped Tanagers.



Vesubio, from where the long hike to the Horned Guan starts. The hummingbird feeders at this place are very good.

Back at the car we said good-bye to Lalo and drove back down towards the Finca. However, another target bird called for a stop along the way, and it did not take us long to pitch in a splendid Tody Motmot in the dark bamboo patch. Now it was time for a drink in the backyard of the Finca. The lemonade tasted especially good in the company of some well-visited bird-feeders.

Later in the afternoon we visited a nest of Azure-rumped Tanager and saw the fully grown young bird filling up the nest completely. We spent the remaining few hours of the day wandering a trail behind the Finca and picked up the wanted White-bellied Chachalaca and Rufous-breasted Spinetail.

13/6

This morning we made a pre-dawn start in order to look for owls along the road up to Vesubio. Initially a pair of Mottled Owls responded to our Black-and-white Owl recording, but finally the wanted Owl reacted and put on a great show. We then continued up to Vesubio where we spent some time at the Hummingbird feeders. Good show, but not the desired Emerald-chinned Hummingbird, so we decided to take a more active approach and went along a trail leading down a side-valley in search for it. It took us quite some time, but eventually there it was, a female coming in to some flowers that we staked out. We also heard a White-faced Quail-Dove, but unfortunately it was just too inaccessible down the steep valley.

By the late morning we returned to the Finca for a quick breakfast before taking off towards Lake Atitlan. Our police escort turned up duly and we were soon on our way. Our intention of picking up the Sparklingtailed Hummingbird at a road-side stop at Finca de Santa Victoria was crushed, as there were basically no flowers blossoming. Sadly we had to give up on that one and continue to Panajachel, where we were swiftly transported by a small boat along the lake-shore to Laguna Lodge. This luxurious lodge was finished a few months ago and sits beautifully on the steep lake-side with a breath-taking vista across the lake. For us there was no time to rest as we wanted to climb the trail behind the lodge in search for the Belted Flycatcher. We spent the entire afternoon, but finally had to throw in the towel on this one as well. Some compensation came in the shape of a Rusty Sparrow, before we had to take the boat back before darkness.

The drive back to Los Tarrales took significantly longer than expected, as there was heavy fog much of the way with almost zero visibility. Everything went well and we arrived safely back.



Laguna Lodge, splendidly situated at teh lake shore



One of the places where the Atitlan Grebe was breeding when the water level was 20 feet higher

14/6

Our police escort was not to arrive until mid-morning, so we spent the first hour or so birding along the trail just above the Finca. Nothing particularly exciting was found and after breakfast we left Los Tarrales aiming for Cerro Tecpan. It took us a couple of hours to reach the road-side restaurant that I had been visiting in April (good site for Pink-headed Warbler!). At that time there were no Amethyst-throated Hummingbird around, so a repeat stop was called for. This time I had not even shut the door, before I saw the target hummer at the flowers. After some photo-session, we decided to continue to a higher altitude site at Cero Tecpan in search for the two species of siskins. We then ended up having extremely poor views of both species after having spent considerable time staking out two patches of Alder trees. By late afternoon it was time to return to Guatemala City.

Weather

The weather was fantastic most of the time. It rained a couple of evenings and was extremely foggy while we drove from Panajachel to Los Tarrales one night. Temperatures were pleasant and the only time I brought out the fleece jacket was at Cerro Tecpan at 2500 masl.

Logistics

The trip was arranged by Knut Eisermann and Claudia Avendaño, who runs Cayaya Birding: <u>info@cayaya-birding.com</u>, <u>www.cayaya-birding.com</u>. They know the areas very well and can be highly recommended.



Knut and Lalo after having seen the Horned Guans

The safety situation in Guatemala is unfortunately not very good and does not seem to improve at all. Bandits are frequently roaming the roads and it is not a good idea to drive without police escort. The good thing is that this is easily arranged if booking through a tour company.

We had a 4WD in order to negotiate the last miles at Volcan Atitlan and at Cerro Tecpan. At Panajachel (or nicknamed Gringotenango) we arranged a boat to take us across to Laguna Lodge to look for Belted Flycatcher (dip!).



Boat-ramp at Lago Atitlan

Site descriptions

Los Tarrales at Volcan Atitlan

Los Tarrales (tarrales means bamboo) is an old coffee finca. During a recent low coffee price period, the owners realized the value of complementing the business with a nature lodge. The owner is nowadays a keen birder! The area holds excellent humid forests and cloud forests and most importantly provides relatively easy access to Volcan Atitlan. The lodge is situated at 700 masl and via a rough jeep track it is possible to drive up to Vesubio at 1400 masl. This is the end of the road where some of the workers are living. From Vesubio there is a trail that leads all the way to the top of the volcanoe at 3400 masl. For Horned Guan it is necessary to make a predawn walk up to at least 2000, often 2500, masl. We scored at 2250 masl already in the morning thanks to the local guide Lalo, who knows the area like his own pocket.

The walk is pretty tough, as it is almost a 1 km vertical climb on a constantly steep trail with no single level area, not even a zigzag path. The trail follows a ridge and sometimes provides spectacular views of the active Volcan Fuego. At Vesubio there is also a trail that leads down a valley, which was rather productive during the second morning. Around the lodge and main buildings, there are also a few more trails and dirt tracks for lower altitude birds. Azure-rumped Tanager is another key bird and is seemingly widespread in the mid altitudes, both above and below Vesubio.

Santa Victoria at Panajachel

Santa Victoria is a private finca outside Panajachel where we looked for Sparkling-tailed Hummingbird. Unfortunately the flowers were not yet out and we dipped.

Laguna Lodge at Lake Atitlan

This is a newly opened luxury lodge situated on the shore of Lake Atitlan with magnificent views of the lake and the surrounding volcanos. A boat must be arranged and leaves from Panajachel. We visited to look for Belted Flycatcher, but made another sore dip.

Cerro Tecpan

Cerro Tecpan is a high mountain that holds lots of high altitude pine forest within very accessible reach. In March I visited an area where Pink-headed Warbler was easy, but as I then dipped on Amethyst-throated Hummingbird, a return trip was called for. It is also one of the few places where Black-capped Siskin is regular. The hummer was bagged before I had time to close the car door, but the siskin only provided flight views.

Birds

Snowy Egret, Egretta thula One at Los Tarrales. Western Cattle Egret, Bubulcus ibis Many at Los Tarrales. Black Vulture, Coragyps atratus Many seen at all places. Turkey Vulture, Cathartes aura Many seen at all places, but less common than previous species. Short-tailed Hawk, Buteo brachyurus One dark phase at Vesubio at Los Tarrales. Red-tailed Hawk, Buteo jamaicensis One at Laguna Lodge at Lake Atitlan and one at Cerro Tecpan. Black Hawk-Eagle, Spizaetus tyrannus One at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest). Ornate Hawk-Eagle, Spizaetus ornatus One at Vesubio at Los Tarrales.



Ornate Hawk-Eagle

Laughing Falcon, Herpetotheres cachinnans One heard at dawn at Los Tarrales.

White-bellied Chachalaca, Ortalis leucogastra Four near the lagoon at Los Tarrales.



White-bellied Chachalaca

Crested Guan, Penelope purpurascens One heard above Vesubio at Los Tarrales. Highland Guan, Penelopina nigra One heard and one seen at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest). Horned Guan, Oreophasis derbianus Two at 2200 masl at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest).



Horned Guan – the master piece of a birding trip to Guatemala

Spotted Wood-Quail, Odontophorus guttatus
Heard near Vesubio at Los Tarrales.
Singing Quail, Dactylortyx thoracicus
One heard at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest) and one heard at Laguna Lodge at Lake Atitlan.
Band-tailed Pigeon, Patagioenas fascista
Several seen flying at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest).
Red-billed Pigeon, Patagioenas flavirostris
Two seen scoped up at Los Tarrales.
White-tipped Dove, Leptotila verreauxi
One at Vesubio at Los Tarrales, one at Los Tarrales and one at Laguna Lodge at Lake Atitlan.
White-faced Quail-Dove, Geotrygon albifacies
One flushed from the trail at 1600 masl and then heard calling afterwards. Another was heard down a gully below
Vesubio at Los Tarrales.
Pacific Parakeet, Aratinga strenua
Flocks of up to 20-30 regularly seen around Los Tarrales and Vesubio at Los Tarrales.
Barred Parakeet, Bolborhynchus lineola
Briefly heard at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest).
Orange-chinned Parakeet, Brotogeris jugularis
Heard at Los Tarrales.
Squirrel Cuckoo, Piaya cayana
One heard at Laguna Lodge at Lake Atitlan.

Fulvous Owl, Strix fulvescens

One heard predawn at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest) while walking to the Horned Guans.

Mottled Owl, Ciccaba virgata

Two or three heard predawn at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest) and a pair heard at 800 masl at Los Tarrales. Black-and-white Owl, Ciccaba nigrolineata

One scoped nicely when heard and seen predawn at 800 masl at Los Tarrales.



Black-and-white Owl

Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, Glaucidium brasilianum One heard at 800 masl at Los Tarrales.

Pauraque, Nyctidromus albicollis

At least two birds each morning between Los Tarrales and Vesubio at Los Tarrales.

Chestnut-collared Swift, Streptoprocne rutila

Several at Los Tarrales late one afternoon and a few at Cerro Tecpan.

White-collared Swift, Streptoprocne zonaris

Frequently seen at Los Tarrales, sometimes in large flocks.

Vaux's Swift, Chaetura vauxi

A few at Los Tarrales.

White-throated Swift, Aeronautes saxatalis

Many at Laguna Lodge at Lake Atitlan.

Rufous Sabrewing, Campylopterus rufus

About five at the feeders at Vesubio at Los Tarrales and one at Laguna Lodge at Lake Atitlan.



Rufous Sabrewing Violet Sabrewing, Campylopterus hemileucurus More than five at the feeders at Vesubio at Los Tarrales.



Violet Sabrewing

Green Violet-ear, Colibri thalassinus

One at Cerro Tecpan.

Emerald-chinned Hummingbird, Abeillia abeillei

After several frustratingly heard birds at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest) and Vesubio at Los Tarrales, we finally caught up with a perched female below Vesubio at Los Tarrales.

White-eared Hummingbird, Hylocharis leucotis

One female at Laguna Lodge at Lake Atitlan.

Cinnamon Hummingbird, Amazilia rutila

At least one in the garden at Los Tarrales.



Cinnamon Hummingbird

Blue-tailed Hummingbird, Saucerottia cyanura

A few around Vesubio at Los Tarrales, e.g. at the feeders.



Blue-tailed Hummingbird

Berylline Hummingbird, Saucerottia beryllina

One at the feeders at Vesubio at Los Tarrales.

Amethyst-throated Hummingbird, Lampornis amethystinus

One male at the restaurant at Cerro Tecpan, at the exact spot where I was looking for it in March...



Amethyst-throated Hummingbird

Green-throated Mountain-gem, Lampornis viridipallens Several at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest).



Green-throated Mountain-gem

Magnificent Hummingbird, Eugenes fulgens At least two at the feeders at Vesubio at Los Tarrales.
Northern Violaceous Trogon, Trogon caligatus A few at Los Tarrales and Vesubio at Los Tarrales.
Mountain Trogon, Trogon mexicanus Two at Cerro Tecpan.
Collared Trogon, Trogon collaris At least two near Vesubio at Los Tarrales.
Resplendent Quetzal, Pharomachrus mocinno One heard at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest).
Green Kingfisher, Chloroceryle Americana One in the lagoon at Los Tarrales.
Tadu Metmet Hubergen memorale

Tody Motmot, Hylomanes momotula

Eventually this much wanted bird made it. One seen nicely at 800 masl at Los Tarrales and another seen at 890 masl at Los Tarrales.



Tody Motmot

Blue-throated Motmot, Aspatha gularis

Two seen at several heard at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest) and two heard at Laguna Lodge at Lake Atitlan. Blue-crowned Motmot, Momotus momota

A few at Los Tarrales.

Emerald Toucanet, Aulacorhynchus prasinus

One seen and a couple heard at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest).



Emerald Toucanet

Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Melanerpes aurifrons A few at Los Tarrales. Northern Flicker, Colaptes auratus Two at Cerro Tecpan. Lineated Woodpecker, Dryocopus lineatus One at Los Tarrales. Rufous-breasted Spinetail, Synallaxis erythrothorax One seen well when skulking near the lagoon at Los Tarrales. Scaly-throated Foliage-gleaner, Anabacerthia variegaticeps One heard and one seen at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest). Ruddy Foliage-gleaner, Automolus rubiginosus One seen below Vesubio at Los Tarrales. Tawny-throated Leaftosser, Sclerurus mexicanus One seen briefly at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest). Ivory-billed Woodcreeper, Xiphorhynchus flavigaster Two heard near Vesubio at Los Tarrales, and two at Los Tarrales. Barred Antshrike, Thamnophilus doliatus One heard at Los Tarrales. Long-tailed Manakin, Chiroxiphia linearis One heard at 800 masl at Los Tarrales. Paltry Tyrannulet, Zimmerius vilissimus Two at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest). Common Tody-Flycatcher, Todirostrum cinereum Three, and an active nest, at Los Tarrales. Tufted Flycatcher, Mitrephanes phaeocercus One at Cerro Tecpan. Greater Pewee, Contopus pertinax Two at Santa Victoria. Tropical Pewee, Contopus cinereus One at Los Tarrales. Yellowish Flycatcher, Empidonax flavescens Two at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest). Buff-breasted Flycatcher, Empidonax fulvifrons One at Laguna Lodge at Lake Atitlan. Boat-billed Flycatcher, Megarynchus pitangua One pair at Los Tarrales. Social Flycatcher, Myiozetetes similis One at Los Tarrales. Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, Myiodynastes luteiventris A few at Los Tarrales. Rose-throated Becard, Pachyramphus aglaiae One near the lagoon at Los Tarrales and a pair at the nest at Cerro Tecpan. Masked Tityra, Tityra semifasciata

A few at Los Tarrales.

Black-capped Swallow, Notiochelidon pileata

A few at Cerro Tecpan.

Northern Rough-winged Swallow, Stelgidopteryx serripennis

Several at Laguna Lodge at Lake Atitlan.

Band-backed Wren, Campylorhynchus zonatus

Two near Vesubio at Los Tarrales, three at Santa Victoria and a few at Cerro Tecpan.

Rufous-naped Wren, Campylorhynchus rufinucha

Many around Los Tarrales.



Rufous-naped Wren

Spot-breasted Wren, Thryothorus maculipectus Two heard at Los Tarrales. Rufous-and-white Wren, Thryothorus rufalbus A few heard at Vesubio at Los Tarrales and at Los Tarrales. Plain Wren, Thryothorus modestus At least a few near Vesubio at Los Tarrales. House Wren, Troglodytes aedon Several at Los Tarrales. Rufous-browed Wren, Troglodytes rufociliatus One heard at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest). White-breasted Wood-Wren, Henicorhina leucosticte One heard at Vesubio at Los Tarrales. Gray-breasted Wood-Wren, Henicorhina leucophrys Several heard at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest). Tropical Mockingbird, Mimus gilvus One at Laguna Lodge at Lake Atitlan. Blue-and-white Mockingbird, Melanotis hypoleucus One at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest) and one at Laguna Lodge at Lake Atitlan. Brown-backed Solitaire, Myadestes occidentalis Many heard at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest). Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush, Catharus aurantiirostris At least two at Laguna Lodge at Lake Atitlan. Ruddy-capped Nightingale-Thrush, Catharus frantzii Heard at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest). Spotted Nightingale-Thrush, Catharus dryas Several heard and two seen at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest), below previous species. Black Robin, Turdus infuscatus Two at 2200 masl at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest). Clay-colored Robin, Turdus gravi Very commonly seen at Los Tarrales. White-throated Thrush, Turdus assimilis Two below Vesubio at Los Tarrales and one at Los Tarrales. Bushtit, Psaltriparus minimus Two at Laguna Lodge at Lake Atitlan and five at Cerro Tecpan. Steller's Jay, Cyanocitta stelleri Many at Cerro Tecpan. Bushy-crested Jay, Cyanocorax melanocyaneus One near Antigua.

Black-throated Jay, Cyanolyca pumilo Two at 2250 masl at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest). House Sparrow, Passer domesticus Seen in villages. Chestnut-sided Shrike-Vireo, Vireolanius melitophrys One heard at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest). Green Shrike-Vireo, Vireolanius pulchellus One heard below Vesubio at Los Tarrales. Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Cyclarhis gujanensis One heard below Vesubio at Los Tarrales. Black-capped Siskin, Carduelis atriceps Two at Cerro Tecpan were seen by Knut and then only in flight by me. Black-headed Siskin, Carduelis notata One at Cerro Tecpan were heard singing and then the pair was seen flying away. Lesser Goldfinch, Carduelis psaltria One at Vesubio at Los Tarrales. Hooded Grosbeak, Coccothraustes abeillei Two at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest) and three at Cerro Tecpan. Olive Warbler, Peucedramus taeniatus A few seen at Cerro Tecpan. Slate-throated Redstart, Myioborus miniatus Many at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest). Golden-crowned Warbler, Basileuterus culicivorus One at Los Tarrales. Rufous-capped Warbler, Basileuterus rufifrons A few below Vesubio at Los Tarrales. Golden-browed Warbler, Basileuterus belli Many at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest). Common Bush-Tanager, Chlorospingus ophthalmicus Many at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest). Flame-colored Tanager, Piranga bidentata Three at Santa Victoria. Blue-gray Tanager, Thraupis episcopus A few at Los Tarrales. Yellow-winged Tanager, Thraupis abbas Several at Los Tarrales. Yellow-throated Euphonia, Euphonia hirundinacea Three at Los Tarrales. Elegant Euphonia, Euphonia elegantísima One heard at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest). Blue-crowned Chlorophonia, Chlorophonia occipitalis A pair seen very nicely at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest) and several heard there as well.

Azure-rumped Tanager, Tangara cabanisi

At least one pair at Volcan Atitlan (cloud-forest), one pair above Vesubio at Los Tarrales, a fully grown young at nest at 890 masl and four below Vesubio at Los Tarrales.



Azure-rumped Tanager

Red-legged Honeycreeper, Cyanerpes cyaneus A few at Los Tarrales. White-collared Seedeater, Sporophila torqueola A few at Vesubio at Los Tarrales, Los Tarrales and Santa Victoria. Chestnut-capped Brush-Finch, Buarremon brunneinucha A few near Vesubio at Los Tarrales. White-eared Ground-Sparrow, Melozone leucotis Three below Vesubio at Los Tarrales. Spotted Towhee, Pipilo maculates One at Laguna Lodge at Lake Atitlan and one at Cerro Tecpan. Rusty Sparrow, Aimophila rufescens Three heard and eventually one seen at Laguna Lodge at Lake Atitlan. Rufous-collared Sparrow, Zonotrichia capensis A few at Cerro Tecpan. Yellow-eyed Junco, Junco phaeonotus About ten at Cerro Tecpan.



Yellow-eyed Junco

Black-headed Saltator, Saltator atriceps Two near Los Tarrales.



Black-headed Saltator

Melodious Blackbird, Dives dives Many at Los Tarrales.
Great-tailed Grackle, Quiscalus mexicanus Many seen around habitation.
Bronzed Cowbird, Molothrus aeneus Several at Los Tarrales and Laguna Lodge at Lake Atitlan and many at Cerro Tecpan.
Spot-breasted Oriole, Icterus pectoralis One at the feeders at Los Tarrales.
Altamira Oriole, Icterus gularis Several at Los Tarrales.
Black-vented Oriole, Icterus wagleri One at Santa Victoria.
Yellow-billed Cacique, Amblycercus holosericeus Two at Los Tarrales.