

Mexico: birth of a bird book and beyond

Steve N. G. Howell

From sleeping rough under bridges to rediscovering long-lost species, one of the Neotropics' greatest birders of all time offers a highly personal, thrilling, and varied account of forty years spent exploring Mexico and its birdlife.



1 The epicentre for New World jays and crows, Mexico is home to nine of the 11 genera and over half of all species. Depending on taxonomy, anywhere from 8–13 or more species are endemic to Mexico, including the spectacular Black-throated Magpie-Jay *Calocitta colliei* (La Palma, Nayarit, Mexico, 9 March 2013; Steve N. G. Howell).

Imagine a time before the internet (the net that inters us all?), before digital cameras; a time of writing by hand – on paper; a time of maps that folded out on tables; an age of birding discovery. Such a scenario must be almost impossible to picture for today's young birders, but computers of any kind were all but unknown when I first visited Mexico, and phones? They were attached to walls and only used for, well, making phone calls! From 1981 to 1986, I roamed North and Central America as a bird bum, hitch-hiking and taking buses; sleeping under highway bridges and out in the woods (dengue fever four times, anyone?); working seasonal jobs picking fruit, painting houses, processing fish; often surviving on 20 dollars a week, and simply living day to day, with no real plans. Good times. But a series of random events changed all that, and Mexico became my focus. As most of us learn sooner or later, people and experiences flavour birding, not simply birds, and here are some tales from forty years of birding and travel in a truly magical region.