

Airport birding in Latin America and the Caribbean

Daniel J. Lebbin

Airports are often the first and last places visited as part of a trip, and therefore offer travellers their first and last chances to observe birds. This article explores making the most of birding opportunities in these suboptimal and challenging settings.

For birders travelling to Neotropical countries for work, vacations or even specifically for birding, time is often spent inside and around airports. If given the choice, birding in a more natural or outdoor setting will almost certainly be more productive, but this is not the choice travellers have. Given visitors are passing through airports anyway, the choice is whether to bird airports at all or not. I have made it a little birding game for myself to generate eBird checklists while travelling through or waiting at airports when opportunity permits, and found it can be rewarding.

Airports are challenging environments for birding. At larger ones, it is mainly a visual activity, as it is impossible to hear birds vocalising on the other side of thick windows over the din of crowds inside or jet engines outside. Good windows from which to scan for birds may be limited. Birds seen are often distantly across vast expanses of hardtop runways. If birding from an airport where making a connection flight, one might not even have an appropriate field guide for identification handy.

Generally, expect common birds and low diversity – ten species is good. Typical species include soaring raptors like vultures and whatever hawks are locally common. Birds accustomed to urban settings, like grackles and House Sparrows *Passer domesticus*, can often be seen on concrete and paved surfaces at airports too. Local doves and the cosmopolitan Rock Pigeon *Columba livia* can often be seen as flyovers or perched. Likewise, aerial insectivores, including swifts, swallows, and tyrant flycatchers can often be seen foraging in the skies or perching on ledges from airport windows. Finally, many airports are located near coasts or water, and offer opportunities to see waterbirds and/or grassland species.

Why bird airports?

Airport birding during connecting flights can provide unique opportunities to bird in a country you previously have not visited. My only opportunities to bird El Salvador to date have come from spending time at the country's international airport while making connecting flights to and from destinations in South America in March 2014, October 2015 and March 2019. At this airport's gate 12, often right where I needed to wait half an hour or more between flights, there is a large window overlooking grassy areas and a nearby hedgerow with trees that obscures a drainage ditch with water where birds come to drink.

My four checklists from this site total 25 species, but individually maxed at 16, and often were less than ten. Species I observed here included soaring raptors: Black Vulture *Coragyps atratus*, Turkey Vulture *Cathartes aura*, Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*, Roadside Hawk *Rupornis magnirostris*, Crested Caracara *Caracara plancus*, and my unexpected bonus – a Zone-tailed Hawk *Buteo albonotatus*. Doves added diversity with Red-billed Pigeon *Patagioenas flavirostris*, Inca Dove *Columbina inca*, Ruddy Ground Dove *Columbina talpacoti* and White-winged Dove *Zenaida asiatica*. Aerialists and flycatchers included the three species of swallows (Mangrove *Tachycineta albilinea*, Barn *Hirundo rustica* and Cave *Petrochelidon fulva*) and the widespread Great Kiskadee *Pitangus sulphuratus*, Social Flycatcher *Myiozetetes similis* and Tropical Kingbird *Tyrannus melancholicus*, as well as a flyover (migrating?) Scissor-tailed Flycatcher *T. forficatus*. Open country and urban birds included Groove-billed Ani *Crotophaga sulcirostris*, Tropical Mockingbird *Mimus gilvus*, Clay-coloured Thrush *Turdus grayi*, Melodious Blackbird *Dives dives* and Great-tailed Grackle *Quiscalus mexicanus*. What really sets this airport