

NEOTROPICAL BIRDING 5

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Capital Birding: Mexico City

Richard G. Wilson and Hector Gómez de Silva

With a population of nearly 20 million, Mexico City is the largest metropolitan area in the Western hemisphere and the third largest in the world by population. But it is also a great place for birding—as two resident birders demonstrate.



Aztec Thrush is a rare and retiring endemic, apparently resident around Huitzilac although only occasionally seen (Pete Morris/Birdquest)



Mexico City is located in the Valley of Mexico (or Anáhuac), in the high plateau of central Mexico, at an altitude of 2,240 m. Mexico City is the northernmost capital in the area covered by the Neotropical Bird Club. This fact alone renders it rather special in terms of urban birding. Of 350 species definitely recorded in Mexico City fewer than 30 are Neotropical in origin, with the remainder having ties to the north. North of the city the land is arid and has an avifauna more typical of the south-western USA. In contrast, one hour's drive south of Mexico City lies the city of Cuernavaca in the state of Morelos. Here the tropical dry forest hosts a typically Neotropical avifauna and a tropical climate to match. To the south, east and west of Mexico City is the Transverse Volcanic Belt, a range of mountains cloaked in pine, fir and oak forests. The prospect of a large day list is high: the single 'Big Day' attempt we know of in this area produced 160 species on 11 May 1991. You have a good chance of seeing many Mexican endemics: we mark these with an asterisk (*) at first mention.

In this article we describe the best birding sites covering these varied habitats, all within 120 km of the city. All locations bar one are described in two books covering birding in Mexico^{1,2}. For the two sites within the city, public transport or a taxi may be used, but for the others a private vehicle is essential (a saloon car is adequate). The transit times that we give are for Sunday traffic conditions; on weekdays, times could be half as long again. Hotels are available in the south of the city (on the *Periférico* and Avenida Insurgentes in Tlalpan) for those wanting to avoid the hassle of weekday traffic in the centre. There are also many hotels in Cuernavaca and a Holiday Inn on the highway c.4 km before the final turn to Almoloaya.

Universidad Nacional de Mexico Botanical Garden

(12 km or 20–30 minutes from the city centre)

The botanical garden lies south of the city centre, in the south-west corner of the university campus. The entrance and car park are 1 km south of the university stadium, c.500 m west of Avenida Insurgentes. The garden is officially open from

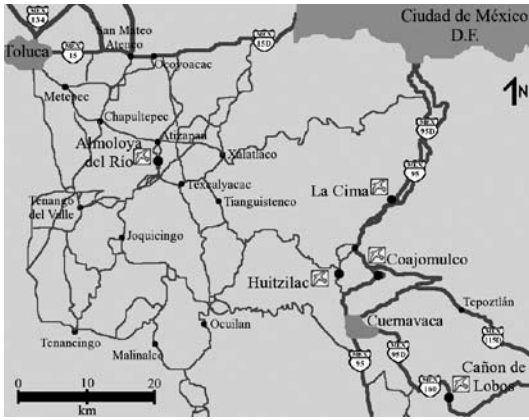
Above, top to bottom:

Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercer *Diglossa baritula* is a fairly common resident in larger suburban gardens and wooded clearings with flowers (Richard Wilson)

Broad-tailed Hummingbird *Selasphorus platycercus* (Pete Morris/Birdquest)

The endemic Hooded Yellowthroat *Geothlypis nelsoni* (inset) is easily found when singing in the university botanical garden (Manuel Grosselet and Georgita Ruiz; www.tierradeaves.com)

Curve-billed Thrasher *Toxostoma curvirostre* is a common suburban resident (Hadoram Shirihai/*The photographic handbook to taxonomy of the birds of the world*)



Map of Mexico City and environs, showing the location of sites covered in the text

09h00–17h00, but, in practice, you can normally enter at 07h00. The site is closed during university holidays (second half of December, Easter week and most of July) and you must walk the last 500 m on foot on Saturday afternoon and Sunday when university roads are closed to traffic.

Just beyond the entrance (but also visible from outside) is an *Erythrina* coral tree that, typically from December–early March, has beautiful red blooms. The flowers attract orioles such as Black-backed *Icterus abeillei**, Bullock's *I. bullocki* and Scott's *I. parisorum*, as well as Berylline Hummingbird *Amazilia beryllina* and Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercer *Diglossa baritula*. To the left, a large cactus garden has many flowering agaves *Agave* that are great for hummingbirds. Berylline, Magnificent *Eugenes fulgens*, White-eared *Hylocharis leucotis* and Broad-billed Hummingbirds *Cyananthus latirostris* are common most of the year, and Lucifer Hummingbird *Calothorax lucifer* is a rare summer visitor.

About 250 m beyond the entrance a path bears left then curves behind the cactus garden, reaching natural lava bed vegetation. Look for Hooded Yellowthroat *Geothlypis nelsoni**, the only member of its genus here, and Black-chinned Sparrow *Spizella atrogularis*. Both are easiest to find when singing in spring and summer. Flocks of noisy Grey Silky-flycatchers *Ptilonotus cinereus* cavort in the tallest fruiting trees and Rufous-backed Robin *Turdus rufopalliatu*s* is often seen in the more wooded areas. Hook-billed Kite *Chondrohierax uncinatus* is an occasional visitor, mainly in autumn and winter. In the latter season, a good variety of Nearctic migrant passerines occurs, including Cassin's Vireo *Vireo cassini*

and other vireos, kinglets and gnatcatchers such as Blue-gray *Polioptila caerulea*. Many warblers include a lovely quintet: Nashville *Vermivora ruficapilla*, Orange-crowned *V. celata*, Hermit *Dendroica occidentalis*, Townsend's *D. townsendi* and Black-throated Gray *D. nigrescens*.

Parque Ecológico Xochimilco

(24 km or 30–45 minutes from the city centre)

This small reserve of c.230 ha was created from cornfields 20 years ago. It comprises a 70-ha shallow lake, rough grassland, tree-lined canals and ponds. The reserve is located in the south-east of the city adjacent to the *Periférico*, 11 km east of its intersection with Avenida Insurgentes. The car park is 100 m beyond the main entrance. The reserve is open from 09h30–17h00 and the entrance fee is 20 pesos (c.US\$1.50).

In recent years more than 100 (mostly Nearctic) species have been regularly recorded. Six species of heron are present most of the year. In winter, the lake hosts varying numbers of northern waders, ducks and a small population of American White Pelican *Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*. Other species of wader occur on spring and autumn passage, notably Baird's Sandpiper *Calidris bairdii* and Wilson's Phalarope *Phalaropus tricolor*. Resident passerines include Black Phoebe *Sayornis nigricans*, Cassin's Kingbird *Tyrannus vociferans*, Vermilion Flycatcher *Pyrocephalus rubinus*, Curve-billed Thrasher *Toxostoma curvirostre*, Loggerhead Shrike *Lanius ludovicianus*, Yellow Warbler *Dendroica petechia*, Common Yellowthroat *Geothlypis trichas*, Song Sparrow *Melospiza melodia* and Canyon Towhee *Pipilo fuscus*. Sedge Wren *Cistothorus platensis* is particularly common in the long-grass fields in the south of the reserve and Marsh Wren *C. palustris* occurs in rushes along the canals. Look for Buff-breasted Flycatcher *Empidonax fulvifrons* in grassy areas with scattered trees.

Between Mexico City and Cuernavaca

(45 km or 75 minutes from the city centre to La Cima, 65 km or 90 minutes to Huitzilac)

Roughly equidistant between Mexico City and Cuernavaca is an area of relatively undisturbed forest and grassland that contains several good birding sites. From the capital, take the federal (not the toll) highway to Cuernavaca (signed 'Cuernavaca libre'). About 25 km

south of the *Periférico* you pass under a bridge, passing a small hill to your right. About 1.4 km beyond the bridge, head right down a dirt track, immediately south of the hill.

This is La Cima, the best place to find Sierra Madre Sparrow *Xenospiza baileyi** (Endangered), which now occurs at just two sites in its tiny range of 42 km². There have been rare cases of assault here at weekends so we recommend that you do not wander alone far from the track. Drive 30–200 m and park at a convenient point. Scan the edges of the ploughed fields to the left of the track: the sparrows can be on the ground, near the top of tall grass or on lava boulders. If necessary, walk the edges of the fields near the track or the bunch-grass beyond. Beware that Striped Sparrow *Oriturus superciliosus** is noisy and conspicuous as it roams the grassland in family groups.

The dirt track continues a short distance to the old railway station. After crossing the old railtracks (now a cycle path), take a very rough dirt track to bird the open pine forest. Here, look for Strickland's Woodpecker *Picoides stricklandi*, Steller's Jay *Cyanositta stelleri*, Pygmy Nuthatch *Sitta pygmaea*, Mexican Chickadee *Poecile sclateri*, Olive Warbler *Peucedramus taeniatus*, Red Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra* and Pine Siskin *Carduelis pinus*.

Just before the station there is a paved track doubling back up the hill to the right that immediately enters humid pine-oak forest. Among the resident species here are Long-tailed Wood Partridge *Dendrortyx macroura** (often heard but rarely seen), Strickland's Woodpecker (rare), Greater Pewee *Contopus pertinax*, Tufted Flycatcher *Mitrephanes phaeocercus*, Mexican Jay *Aphelocoma ultramarina*, Gray-barred Wren *Campylorhynchus megalopterus**, the brown-throated race of House Wren *Troglodytes aedon brunneicollis* (often treated as a distinct species, Brown-throated Wren), Golden-crowned Kinglet *Regulus satrapa*, Golden-browed Warbler *Basileuterus belli*, Red Warbler *Ergaticus ruber**, Slate-throated Redstart *Myioborus miniatus*, Elegant Euphonia *Euphonia elegantissima*, the olive-backed race of Spotted Towhee *Pipilo maculatus macronyx*, Green-striped Brush Finch *Arremon virenticeps** and Yellow-eyed Junco *Junco phaeonotus*. In winter, numerous northern migrants include Hammond's Flycatcher *Empidonax hammondii*, Summer Tanager *Piranga rubra*, and both Townsend's and Hermit Warblers. At the top of the hill, look for Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercer, Blue-throated Hummingbird *Lampornis clemenciae*, White-eared Hummingbird and Broad-tailed

Hummingbird *Selasphorus platycercus* around the flowerbeds at the forest-fire viewpoint.

Returning to the Mexico–Cuernavaca highway, head south for c.8.5 km to the small town of Tres Mariás (sometimes called Tres Cumbres). Turn right at the only crossroads, signed 'Toluca' or 'Lagunas de Zempoala'. After 4.3 km you reach a junction at the centre of the small town of Huitzilac. Continue straight on towards Lagunas de Zempoala until the road enters humid oak woodland with many epiphytes and much dense undergrowth. One of the best stretches is 2.5–4.0 km from the Huitzilac road junction. After 2.8 km, a few hundred metres beyond a post marked 'km 7'; walk left down an inconspicuous but fairly wide track into the forest. This is a good area for pine-oak species such as White-tipped Dove *Leptotila verreauxi*, Mountain Trogon *Trogon mexicanus*, White-striped Woodcreeper *Lepidocolaptes leucogaster**, Dusky-capped Flycatcher *Myiarchus tuberculifer*, Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush *Catharus aurantiirostris*, Brown-backed Solitaire *Myadestes occidentalis*, Blue Mockingbird *Melanotis caerulescens**, Rufous-capped Brush Finch *Atlapetes pileatus** and Hooded Grosbeak *Coccothraustes abeillei*. Both Bumblebee Hummingbird *Atthis heloisa** and Amethyst-throated Hummingbird *Lampornis amethystinus* are often conspicuous, but the apparently resident Aztec Thrush *Ridgwayia pinicola** is difficult to find.

Alternatively, instead of turning right in Tres Mariás, continue towards Cuernavaca for c.5 km. After a turning to the left (probably signed

ORGANIZING YOUR TIME IN MEXICO CITY

Half-day available (with car): leave very early and visit the Cuernavaca area; on the way back, stop briefly at Huitzilac or La Cima. Expect many endemics. Alternatively, spend the half-day in Almoloya del Río.

Half-day or full day available (without car): go early to the Botanical Garden for some endemic or near-endemic landbirds, and then to Parque Ecológico Xochimilco, mainly for waterbirds.

One full day available (with car): spend the whole morning in the Cuernavaca area and the afternoon at La Cima and either Huitzilac or Coajomulco.

One-and-a-half or two days available (with car): spend the first morning in the Cuernavaca area and at Huitzilac, visiting Almoloya del Río in the late afternoon. Next day visit Cuajomulco and La Cima.

'Coajomulco'), park on the right after 100 m and walk down into the fairly humid pine-oak woodland at 2,600 m altitude. As at Huitzilac there is a Neotropical element to the avifauna here. Among the more interesting breeding species are White-striped Woodcreeper, Greenish Elaenia *Myiopagis viridicata*, Dusky-capped and Tufted Flycatchers, Rose-throated Becard *Pachyramphus aglaiae*, Gray-breasted Jay *Aphelocoma ultramarina*, Russet Nightingale-Thrush *Catharus occidentalis**, White-throated Thrush *Turdus assimilis*, Brown-backed Solitaire, Chestnut-sided Shrike-Vireo *Vireolanius melitophrys* (which responds well to playback), Green-striped Brush Finch, Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercer and Black-headed Siskin *Carduelis notata*. In winter look for Colima Warbler *Vermivora crissalis* amongst the mixed flocks.

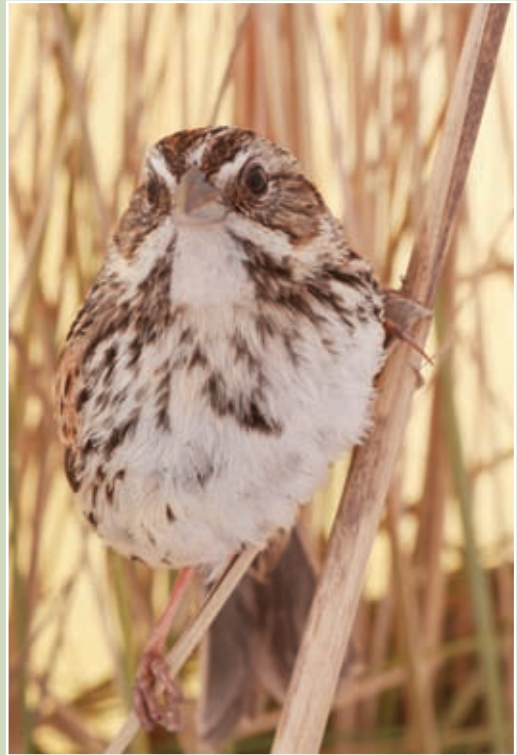
Cuernavaca area

(distance from the city centre: 110 km; time, 2 hours to Cañón de Lobos)

A short distance east of Cuernavaca you can bird tropical dry forest at Cañón de Lobos. It is important to arrive early because the day warms up quickly with a correspondingly sharp drop in bird activity. Birds are easiest to see in the dry season, when foliage is sparse. From Mexico City, head along the toll road to Cuernavaca and Acapulco; take the fourth exit (east) in Cuernavaca marked Highway 138, following signs for 'CIVAC', 'Cuautla' and 'Yautepec'. If you come from La Cima or Huitzilac on the federal (free) highway, transfer to the toll road and turn onto Highway 138. Some 13.7 km from the toll road, c.1 km beyond the urban sprawl, park by the roadside at the bottom of a very long hill. Use the very short and narrow lay-by immediately before a metal security barrier; if possible, have someone stay with the car.

Start birding here, walking along the field edge. This area is always very 'birdy', with a long list of Pacific-coast endemics and specialties including West Mexican Chachalaca *Ortalis poliocephala**, Dusky Hummingbird *Cynanthus sordidus**, Beautiful Hummingbird *Calothorax pulcher**, Russet-crowned Motmot *Momotus mexicanus*, Golden Vireo *Vireo hypochryseus**, Happy Wren *Thryothorus felix**, Yellow Grosbeak *Pheucticus chrysopleus*, Rusty-crowned Ground Sparrow *Melospiza kieneri** and Black-chested Sparrow *Aimophila humeralis**. Even better, but much rarer, are Balsas Screech-Owl *Megascops seductus** (Near Threatened), Pileated Flycatcher *Xenotriccus mexicanus** (Near Threatened) and





Top, left: The distinctive House (Brown-throated) Wren *Troglodytes aedon brunneicollis* is common in woodland, particularly pine-oak forest, with adequate understorey vegetation (Pete Morris/Birdquest)

Top, centre: At La Cima, look for the stunning Red Warbler *Ergaticus ruber* in humid pine-oak forest (Hadoram Shirihai/*The photographic handbook to taxonomy of the birds of the world*)

Top, right: Sierra Madre Sparrow *Xenospiza baileyi* is Endangered and endemic, but fairly easy to see at La Cima (Manuel Grosselet and Georgita Ruiz; www.tierradeaves.com)

Middle, left: A great songster and mimic, Blue Mockingbird *Melanotis caerulescens* is fairly common in humid oak and mixed woodland but is usually fairly shy and skulking (Hadoram Shirihai/*The photographic handbook to taxonomy of the birds of the world*)

Middle, right: Golden-browed Warbler *Basileuterus belli* is a fairly common resident of humid woodland with dense undergrowth (Manuel Grosselet and Georgita Ruiz; www.tierradeaves.com)



Bottom: An Endangered endemic, Black-pollled Yellowthroat *Geothlypis speciosa* (left, male; right, female) is fairly easy to find at Almoloya del Rio (Hadoram Shirihai/*The photographic handbook to taxonomy of the birds of the world*)

the distinctive endemic Mexican race of Blue Seedeater *Amaurospiza concolor relictata*.

To return to Mexico City, continue driving toward Yautepec for c.2.5 km, then take the first opportunity to make a U-turn (*retorno*). Once back in the urban sprawl, you can make one further birding stop before heading back to the capital. Keep your eyes peeled for a pedestrian bridge with a large sign to 'Balneario El Texcal' or just 'El Texcal'; you must exit onto a slip road c.100 m before the bridge. Turn right and drive through an apartment complex and pass an open gate into an area of tropical dry forest with huge cacti. This area has some of the same species as Cañón de Lobos, with the important addition of Gray-breasted Woodpecker *Melanerpes hypopolius**. You can arrange a wildlife guide for this area through a budding local guide programme (tel: + 52 (01) 777 3 21 40 45).

Almoloya del Río

(60 km and c.1 hour from the city centre)

Almoloya del Río is a small town south of the highway from Mexico City to Toluca. On the Mexico City–Toluca toll road, 9 km after the toll booths take the exit to Chalma and Malinalco and loop back over the highway. Head south along this road following any signs to Tenango but ignoring turns to Chalma and Malinalco. Continue past the first exit to Almoloya del Río after 25.7 km; instead, turn right at the following crossroads, 27.5 km from the toll road (also signed to 'Almoloya'). You will see the town of Almoloya del Río ahead up a slight incline. Nine hundred metres beyond the crossroads (and before the town), turn left down an inconspicuous paved road (signed to 'Unidad Deportiva' and 'Centro de Salud') and continue for 600 m, where you will see a causeway extending into the lake on the left. From here a drivable dirt track doubles back around the lake. The best spots seem to be 1.5–3.0 km from the causeway where the track borders dense reedbeds. In winter and early spring, water levels are low and reeds are dead so you will have to look for the damper spots.

An alternative route to Almoloya is to continue west from the birding site at Huitzilac. After c.22 km you reach a T-junction in the village of Santa Martha. Turn right and continue c.11 km; about 1 km beyond the village of San Nicolás Coatepec, turn left towards Tianguistengo. After 6.5 km pass under a bridge and immediately curve up onto the southbound highway mentioned in the previous paragraph; follow this for c.3.5 km south to the Amoloya crossroads.

King Rail *Rallus longirostris tenuirostris*, Virginia Rail *R. limicola*, Sora *Porzana carolina* and Black-poll'd Yellowthroat *Geothlypis speciosa** (Endangered) can frequently be observed from the marsh edge—but note that Common Yellowthroat is abundant. Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*, Marsh Wren, Song Sparrow, Red-winged Blackbird *Agelaius phoeniceus* are common. In winter, Yellow-headed Blackbird *Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus* and Northern Harrier *Circus cyaneus* are frequent. Any time of day can be good. In winter the ploughed fields and other open areas around the lake hold large mixed flocks of sparrows: look for Striped, Chipping *Spizella passerina*, Clay-coloured *S. pallida*, Vesper *Poocetes gramineus*, Lark *Chondestes grammacus* and Savannah Sparrows *Ammodramus sandwichensis*.

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RICHARD G. WILSON

Depto. de Matemáticas, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Unidad Iztapalapa, 09340 México D.F. Mexico. E-mail: rgw@xanum.uam.mx

HECTOR GÓMEZ DE SILVA

Xola 314-E, 03100 México, D.F. Mexico. E-mail: hector.gomezdesilva@gmail.com



PHOTO REQUEST: SHRIKE-TYRANTS AGRIORNIS

Juan Ignacio Areta and colleagues are preparing an identification article on shrike-tyrants *Agriornis* for *Neotropical Birding*. To aid their research and for potential publication, please e-mail your photographs of this genus to neotropical.birding@neotropicalbirdclub.org. Please label your images with the species, location, date and your name.