

**Visit to Mexico, Yucatan Peninsular, Quintana Roo, January 13th to January 28th 2011.
Brian & Isabel Eady.**

It is always interesting when decisions need to be made on future holidays, and trawling the Internet for ideas and information, always feels that the holiday is almost starting. Our research pinpointed the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico, and with a few reports we found on the Travelling Birder website, it looked quite promising. After downloading a Clements "Yucatan Peninsular" checklist from "Avibase", it became apparent that quite a few of the 546 bird species would not be new sightings for us, having previously visited Trinidad, Tobago and Costa Rica where we had picked up a total 261 of them. However it still left us with a sizeable number of species which could be available for us to swell our life list, and of course re-familiarise us with species we had seen before.

On reflection, the small resort of Playacar, to the south of Playa del Carmen, seemed to be a good choice, and had a number of good hotels in the area. We decided that hotel RIU Lupita seemed to be a good option, as it seemed to be right in the middle of an 18 hole golf course. Reports indicated that the areas all around the golf course were very birdy, which would suit us perfectly. We usually take our main holidays in January, so before any hotel booking was done, we decided to contact a local bird guide, Luis Ku Quinores motmotbird@hotmail.com for information regarding the best month for birding. His reply was prompt, and as he said that January was the best month, we were soon at the travel agents to successfully book our holiday.

Our first steps were to purchase a field guide, and it was clearly apparent that most of the birders visiting Mexico used [A Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America](#) Steve N G Howell and Sophie Webb, so that was our choice. When it arrived in double quick time, our hearts dropped. It was huge and very heavy and clearly not what we were expecting, and as we had no intention of taking a wheel-barrow on holiday with us, it was time to think again. As the [Collins Birds of Mexico and Central America](#) by Ber van Perlo had not received rave reviews in the various reports we had downloaded, we opted for [Mexican Birds](#) by Roger Tory Peterson/Edward L Chalif. When it arrived it seemed ideal, small, and easy to carry around in the field.

Further investigations on the two books we had purchased uncovered information which I hope will be useful to anyone who is intending to visit the Yucatan in the future.

1. The Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America had illustrations of only 57% of the species to be found in the Yucatan.
2. The Mexican Birds by Peterson had illustrations covering just 46% of the species.

Luckily, as we had visited Costa Rica in 2009, we had used the excellent [The Birds of Costa Rica](#) by Garrigues, R. and R. Dean, and similar investigations showed that 80% of the Yucatan birds were fully illustrated within.

By combining the Costa Rica guide and the Peterson guide, 87% of the total birds were covered by illustrations. Examining the reports which we downloaded, showed that of the total species covered in the Yucatan checklist, we had a chance of seeing only about 210 species, which included birding around Playacar, and two trips which we pre-arranged with Luis. Looking at which illustrations were not available using both field guides, we were able to compliment the few missing birds illustrations with photographs downloaded from - (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia).

Much of what I have written above may be of no interest at all to some people, but, if it helps one or two birders visiting Mexico then it is all worthwhile. Please note:- I have not looked at the [Collins Birds of Mexico and Central America](#) by Ber van Perlo, so whether or not that guide is better, I have no idea.

A summer trip to the Minsmere Bird Reserve by chance gave us [Where to Watch Birds in Mexico](#) by S.N.G Howell, was an unbelievable bargain at just £10.

Our research into five reports which we downloaded from the internet, gave us an indication of what birds we might find, but as they were not covering the January period, we could not be sure how many of the species would be present at this time of the year. Based on the research, I estimated that we could see about 150 species of which 50 would be life birds for us, so it would be interesting to see how close we would be to our targets.

Following the awful weather in November and December of 2010, where airports were closed and flights cancelled or seriously delayed, it was with fingers crossed as we waited to see what January would have in store for us. No need to worry, as after a night in a hotel near Gatwick airport (it's cheaper than a car park) we were soon boarding, and on our way to Mexico.

Day 1 Thursday 13th January.

We arrived at Cancun Airport after a flight of some eleven and a half hours, and we soon found ourselves at our selected hotel – the “Rui Lupita” in Playacar, just south of Playa Del Carmen. As we had a bit of light before sunset, we decided to have a look around the area. A walk out to the golf club pools gave us an insight of the landscape; it was quite beautiful, with the two pools just 300 yards from our accommodation and plenty of greenery around for us to explore. Looking over the large lake we could see plenty of **American Coot**, as well as large numbers of **Blue-winged Teal**. **Black-necked Stilts** foraged around the pool edges, and we could see in the distance a single



Black-bellied Whistling Duck, a **Double-crested Cormorant**, and a **Great White Egret**. There were a number of very vocal **Great-tailed Grackles**, **Great Kiskadees** and **Tropical Mocking Birds** searching for an evening feed on the grassy golf tees, and in one of the nearby palm trees we spotted our first **Altamira Oriole**, a new one for us. We had seen numerous different Orioles but we decided to leave the identifications to another day. On the smaller of the pools we noticed a couple of **Least Grebe**, identifiable from the other grebe species by its bright yellow eye. Feeling quite tired we called it a day, and retired to our accommodation until it was ready for our evening meal.



Day 2 Friday 14th January.

After a good night's sleep, we awoke to a bright sunny morning, so after a hearty breakfast we were soon donning our bins and searching for new birds. The pool in front of the seventeenth green of the golf course was separated from the road by a nice grassy bank which was at least 50 yards from the green. No sooner had we started scanning the pond we were approached by a security guard on a golf buggy who advised us that this piece of grass was private property and we should leave. We could not believe it, we were not interfering with golfers and were well away from any chance of being hit by a ball, but he was adamant, so we had to retire to the road. We wandered and soon found a female **American Redstart** in some nearby bushes, and a number of **Black-bellied Plovers** were walking about on the golf course. High in the sky we could see **Turkey Vultures** circling, and the occasional **Black Vulture** put in an appearance. We had not realised but **Black Vultures** could be identified from the **Turkey Vultures** by white primaries at the end of each wing. A number of **Snowy Egrets** were present on the large lake, and we could see other ducks, too far away for us to identify clearly. We returned to the hotel gardens and relaxed by the quiet swimming pool for the remainder of the morning. From our sun beds we spotted **Melodious Blackbird**, an ever present **Golden-fronted Woodpecker**, and outside the front of our room we found a number of **Indigo Buntings**, the males just starting to change into their bright blue breeding plumage. After lunch we decided to catch the courtesy bus to the beach where we could relax for a couple of hours. At the beach we soon added **Laughing Gulls** to our list, and a few

Royal Terns which were passing by. **Magnificent Frigatebirds** graced the skies looking for some other seabird to assault before stealing their catch.

On our return from the beach, we once again ventured out to the golf course area expecting to see the security guards on patrol, but we were lucky, they were nowhere to be seen, leaving us the opportunity to scan the lakes unhindered. A few yards up the eighteenth fairway we were more than surprised to spot a group of five **Greater White-fronted Geese**, probably wintering before they flew off to their breeding grounds. Alongside the edge of the smaller pool we noted a group of tiny waders identified as **Least Sandpipers** busily feeding. On the other side of the pool was a single **Spotted Sandpiper** similarly searching for its evening top up. A



Green Heron flew from the rocks on one side of the larger lake to the rocky outcrop of the other. We ventured a bit closer to the large lake, and noticed the duck species we had seen the previous evening. Both species looked similar to our own Tufted Duck, one with an entirely black, and the other with a grey back. The black backed male species had a noticeable white ring around its bill, which pointed to **Ring-necked Duck**, (Illustrated) whereas the other, a much more plentiful species with a grey back, turned out to be a **Lesser Scaup**. The females of the Scaup showed a good deal of white at the base of the bill, separating them nicely from the other duck species on show. On the far bank we could see a number of

Neotropic Cormorants standing motionless by the waters edge. Another look on the smaller pool gave us a **Northern Waterthrush**. As the sun became lower in the sky, birds started to come down for a drink, the most common of which was the **Yellow-rumped Warbler**, and it became more apparent as the holiday progressed that it was a very easy species to find, but unfortunately, the bright yellow, grey, and black plumage does not materialise until later in the year. One of the big drawbacks of having a holiday in January is of course not seeing the pristine breeding plumaged birds, but hey, you can't have everything. We were surprised to find a dove which visited the water's edge was our own **Eurasian Collared Dove**, an introduced species which is spreading fast in Mexico. Another of the Oriole species flew into a nearby palm tree, much smaller and duller than those we had seen earlier. It was the **Orchard Oriole**, the colouration of the adult male being a deep brick red with all-black head, back, and tail. Whilst admiring a Great Kiskadee a small bird appeared in the bins, it turned out to be a **Bananaquit**, and as a matter of fact it was the only one we would see on the entire holiday. Before we retired back to our room we noted a bird which would frustrate us for the whole of the holiday, a **Yellow-throated Warbler**. We enjoy filming birds whilst away on holiday, but as we would find, this one just wouldn't stay still. It is a handsome little bird with a bright yellow throat and chest, a grey and black back and wings. So far we had a total of **35** birds for our Mexican list, including **8** life birds, so for the first full day we were more than satisfied, although there were numerous birds which we had been unable to identify.

Day 3 Saturday 15th January.

It was apparent that there had been some rain overnight, so we were interested to see how it affected the bird species, but what we were about to find was truly amazing. There were numerous birds in the bushes near to our accommodation, and we quickly started to add a few more to our Mexican list. **Clay-coloured Thrush** was the first to take our eye, and there were a number of Orioles feeding in a brightly flowering tree just a few yards away. We soon sorted out **Hooded Oriole** from the rest, having just a single white bar on its black wing. A large fruiting tree on the right before reaching the golf course was swarming with birds. There were large numbers of ones we had already identified, but one we had not had before was readily apparent; it was the **Tropical Parula**. Most of the birds in this particular tree were rapid movers, so photography was out of the question. Bushes on the left hand side held **Yellow Warbler** and **Common Yellowthroat**, and a **Greenish Elaenia** was also added. As we scanned the surrounding area from the road, we noticed a beautiful **Scissor-tailed Flycatcher**, sitting on the seventeenth green. We could not understand why, as they should not be here according to all the literature we have read, and in fact are very rare in the Yucatan Peninsular. Isabel pointed out a couple of **Caribbean Flamingos** flying over high in the sky. We had just stepped on the grass of the golf course when, yes you got it, the "Gestapo" as we had named them arrived. Surprisingly, both of them, obviously the master

and his apprentice, were quite amicable as we chatted, and they seemed quite happy when we told them we would not interfere with the course, or the golfers, and they drove away. The younger of the two then turned his buggy around, drove straight towards us, and told us to get of the course it was private property. It was quite unbelievable, only a few seconds ago there was no problem; they must have been waiting in hiding somewhere close by. As we returned back to the hotel a bird with a large yellow bill flashed past us; it could only have been a **Keel-billed Toucan**, but none of the other reports I had looked at had seen one - strange. We spent the remainder of the morning around the pool. We could still bird whist lying back on the sun bed, quite luxurious in fact. It was interesting - there were large numbers of hirundines putting in an appearance in the sky, but they, appeared only in batches. We decided that identification was almost impossible, because, depending on the migration patterns, there was no way of identifying the species, not knowing what should be there at this time of the year. "Peterson" suggests that one species has a slightly darker mark above the eye, what a joke, considering the speed they were travelling at, by the time you had found the bird, focussed the bins, they had disappeared. We decided to leave the hirundines identification to "Luis" who would be our guide in a couple of days. We identified **Tropical Kingbird** quite easily; it seemed to have a favourite perch which it seemed to share with a **Tropical**



Mockingbird, depending on which one got there first. A couple of **Brown Jays** flew into the fruiting tree just outside our room, and we amused ourselves trying to identify the various birdsongs which emitted from the trees, Parrots, Parrots and more Parrots - no way. In fact most of the sounds were being made by the **Great-tailed Grackles**, (Illustrated) what a repertoire they had - amazing, even mimicking mobile telephones. At about 4:00pm we ventured back to the golf club pools and it was all "quiet on the western front." We scanned around and saw a most amazing sight way up the eighteenth fairway. There must have been 60 or 70 **Scissor-tailed Flycatchers** hawking just above the fairway obviously catching insects. In fact everywhere we looked there were these Scissor-tails; there must have been hundreds, and if you consider the size of the golf course, probably thousands. They must have been forced down by the overnight rain during migration, what a spectacle. We met another couple of British birders, Alan & Val from the North of England, and during conversation made them aware of our plans with Luis. They asked if they could join us on the trip to the **Sian Kaan Biosphere Reserve**, and being no problem, suggested they contact Luis to make sure it would be OK. We pointed out the flycatchers up the fairway, and although a long way away it appeared that there were a number of **Killdeer** also on the grass, yet to be identified positively. A **White-winged Dove** came down for a drink in the waterfall area of the small pond, and we were both surprised to see a female **Northern Shoveller** over on the far side. On the way back to our room we identified a **Palm-Warbler** in the bushes near to the Hotel Rui Lupita entry sign. Our total had now reached 49 species of which 14 were life birds, so the ratio was still in the region of what was expected.

Day 4 Sunday 16th January.

We decided to have a lazy day today as Monday was scheduled to be an early start with Luis who would be collecting us at 5:00am. We decided to visit the beach in the morning purposely to avoid the "Gestapo" who appeared to go missing later on in the day. We settled down to enjoy the peace and quiet of the beach and were soon adding more birds to our Mexico list. We watched **Sandwich Terns** diving into the sea looking for their breakfast. A single **Caspian Tern** passed by easily identified by the bright red bill, and the sheer size of the bird. During the morning, occasional parties of **Brown Pelicans** passed over right to left. We had a relaxing morning, and similarly had a relaxing afternoon by the poolside. Three more birds were identified during the afternoon. In the bushes in front of our room we found yet another lifer for us, a **Hooded Warbler**, (Illustrated) a very attractive small greenish yellow bird with a black face and a bright yellow mask, unmistakable. A bird flew over the swimming pool and looked like



a species of Thrush. We followed the route of the bird, and found it hiding by the massage parlour. It turned out to be a **Wood Thrush**, not a new one because we had seen it in Costa Rica two years ago. What I had said earlier in the report that we could catch up with some birds we had seen before was quite true. Some of the sightings we were getting were far superior to some of the views we had had on previous trips. An Oriole flew into the fruiting tree. It was yellow with a black face and bib, with black wings which had no sign of white in them. We ascertained that we had found a **Yellow-backed Oriole** another lifer for us.

Day 5 Monday 17th January.

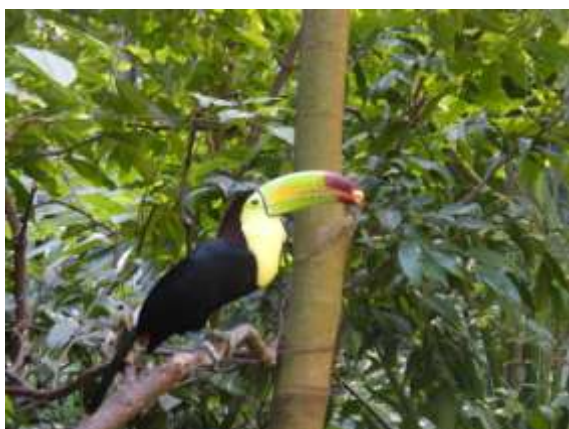
As promised Luis picked us up spot on time at 5:00am, and we were pleased to see Alan and Val had been able to contact him as they had already been picked up. The drive down to The Sian Kaan Reserve took us about one and a half hours, and the sun was just starting to rise as we reached a large lake at the small village of Muhil a site of ancient Mayan Ruins. The atmosphere was incredible. Luis pointed out four **Grey-necked Wood Rails** (Illustrated below) as they sauntered past nonchalantly just a few yards from us quite unperturbed by our presence. We could hear the call of **Ruddy Crake** but although very close, could not locate it. A **White Ibis** gave us a flypast and Luis identified some of the hirundines



swooping low over the lake, namely **Mangrove Swallow, Barn Swallow, Purple Martin** and **Vaux's Swift**, much smaller than the Common Swift we see at home. I enquired about the Grey-breasted Martin, but Luis informed us that at this time of the year, it is not found in the Yucatan. A **Little Blue Heron** put in an appearance as it flew into some nearby reeds on the edge of the lake and a **Belted Kingfisher** followed it into the same reed bed. On the lake Luis spotted a couple of **Pied-billed Grebe**, and on the shoreline we had both the **Louisiana** and **Northern Waterthrushes**. We then started the walk to the village, birding on the way. There were birds everywhere, the first of which was a group of noisy **Plain Chacalatas** feeding on berries in the hedgerow. Of course we would be finding many of the species which we had already caught up with, but with bird watching, that didn't really matter. In the undergrowth Luis spotted an **Ovenbird** foraging in the leaf litter, walking, not hopping like the thrushes we normally encounter. The Ovenbird is quite unmistakable, a rusty brown bird with a partially cocked up tail. **Black Catbird** and **Grey Catbird** followed soon afterwards, as they too are foragers. We were quite surprised that the Grey Catbird was not as grey as expected. In fact it was a paler shade of black, with a darker stripe of black on its head. We had seen one in Playacar, but discounted it as the Black variety. A noisy over fly of **Parrots** gave us the **White-fronted** species, and a dove sitting on a bare tree was the **White-tipped Dove**. Birds were now coming at us thick and fast, and we soon added **Least Flycatcher, Lesser Greenlet, Mangrove Vireo** and **Mangrove Warbler** to our ever increasing list. We reached the village and crossed the road, and what we thought of birds coming thick and fast was no comparison to what followed. There seemed to be birds wherever we looked. One of the first was the **Greyish Saltator**, soon followed by a group of **Yellow-faced Grassquits** hunting in the grass at the edge of the track. Both of these species we saw in Costa Rica, but not views as good as this. **Blue-black Grassquits** were also found nearby, and another screeching sound overhead added **Yucatan Parrot** to the list. Luis also spotted a beautiful **Keel-billed Toucan** (Illustrated) perched high in a nearby tree. The **Yucatan** or **Yellow-lored Parrot** is an endemic to the peninsular, and was the first endemic of the



swooping low over the lake, namely **Mangrove Swallow, Barn Swallow, Purple Martin** and **Vaux's Swift**, much smaller than the Common Swift we see at home. I enquired about the Grey-breasted Martin, but Luis informed us that at this time of the year, it is not found in the Yucatan. A **Little Blue Heron** put in an appearance as it flew into some nearby reeds on the edge of the lake and a **Belted Kingfisher** followed it into the same reed bed. On the lake Luis spotted a couple of **Pied-billed Grebe**, and on the shoreline we had both the **Louisiana** and **Northern Waterthrushes**. We then started the walk to the village, birding on the way. There were birds everywhere, the first of which was a group of noisy **Plain Chacalatas** feeding on berries in the hedgerow. Of course we would be finding many of the species which we had already caught up with, but with bird watching, that didn't really matter. In the undergrowth Luis spotted an **Ovenbird** foraging in the leaf litter, walking, not hopping like the thrushes we normally encounter. The Ovenbird is quite unmistakable, a rusty brown bird with a partially cocked up tail. **Black Catbird** and **Grey Catbird** followed soon afterwards, as they too are foragers. We were quite surprised that the Grey Catbird was not as grey as expected. In fact it was a paler shade of black, with a darker stripe of black on its head. We had seen one in Playacar, but discounted it as the Black variety. A noisy over fly of **Parrots** gave us the **White-fronted** species, and a dove sitting on a bare tree was the **White-tipped Dove**. Birds were now coming at us thick and fast, and we soon added **Least Flycatcher, Lesser Greenlet, Mangrove Vireo** and **Mangrove Warbler** to our ever increasing list. We reached the village and crossed the road, and what we thought of birds coming thick and fast was no comparison to what followed. There seemed to be birds wherever we looked. One of the first was the **Greyish Saltator**, soon followed by a group of **Yellow-faced Grassquits** hunting in the grass at the edge of the track. Both of these species we saw in Costa Rica, but not views as good as this. **Blue-black Grassquits** were also found nearby, and another screeching sound overhead added **Yucatan Parrot** to the list. Luis also spotted a beautiful **Keel-billed Toucan** (Illustrated) perched high in a nearby tree. The **Yucatan** or **Yellow-lored Parrot** is an endemic to the peninsular, and was the first endemic of the



swooping low over the lake, namely **Mangrove Swallow, Barn Swallow, Purple Martin** and **Vaux's Swift**, much smaller than the Common Swift we see at home. I enquired about the Grey-breasted Martin, but Luis informed us that at this time of the year, it is not found in the Yucatan. A **Little Blue Heron** put in an appearance as it flew into some nearby reeds on the edge of the lake and a **Belted Kingfisher** followed it into the same reed bed. On the lake Luis spotted a couple of **Pied-billed Grebe**, and on the shoreline we had both the **Louisiana** and **Northern Waterthrushes**. We then started the walk to the village, birding on the way. There were birds everywhere, the first of which was a group of noisy **Plain Chacalatas** feeding on berries in the hedgerow. Of course we would be finding many of the species which we had already caught up with, but with bird watching, that didn't really matter. In the undergrowth Luis spotted an **Ovenbird** foraging in the leaf litter, walking, not hopping like the thrushes we normally encounter. The Ovenbird is quite unmistakable, a rusty brown bird with a partially cocked up tail. **Black Catbird** and **Grey Catbird** followed soon afterwards, as they too are foragers. We were quite surprised that the Grey Catbird was not as grey as expected. In fact it was a paler shade of black, with a darker stripe of black on its head. We had seen one in Playacar, but discounted it as the Black variety. A noisy over fly of **Parrots** gave us the **White-fronted** species, and a dove sitting on a bare tree was the **White-tipped Dove**. Birds were now coming at us thick and fast, and we soon added **Least Flycatcher, Lesser Greenlet, Mangrove Vireo** and **Mangrove Warbler** to our ever increasing list. We reached the village and crossed the road, and what we thought of birds coming thick and fast was no comparison to what followed. There seemed to be birds wherever we looked. One of the first was the **Greyish Saltator**, soon followed by a group of **Yellow-faced Grassquits** hunting in the grass at the edge of the track. Both of these species we saw in Costa Rica, but not views as good as this. **Blue-black Grassquits** were also found nearby, and another screeching sound overhead added **Yucatan Parrot** to the list. Luis also spotted a beautiful **Keel-billed Toucan** (Illustrated) perched high in a nearby tree. The **Yucatan** or **Yellow-lored Parrot** is an endemic to the peninsular, and was the first endemic of the

holiday. Luis pointed out **Couch's Kingbird**, but to be quite honest there was very little difference from that to the more abundant **Tropical Kingbird**, with the exception of a slightly heavier bill. In the same area we had **Collared Aracari**, a male **Barred Antshrike**, **Groove-billed Ani**, **White-collared Seedeater**, and **Black-cowled Oriole**. The end of the track on which we were walking, gave us, without doubt, the most stunning memories of the day. Firstly a number of beautiful red plumaged **Northern Cardinals** were found feeding in the bushes alongside a group of fabulous **Blue Buntings**, and to top that a superb male **Painted Bunting** was located sitting on a horizontal branch just a few yards away. These three species have to be seen to be believed, each of them a lifer for us, quite incredible. We were also lucky to add **Green Jay** and the endemic **Yucatan Jay**, both superbly coloured specimens. Three of the hummer species were added, namely **White-bellied Emerald**, **Carnivet's Emerald** and **Cinnamon Hummingbird**. These hummers were certainly not as spectacular as those we have seen before in Costa Rica and Trinidad and Tobago, in fact they looked quite drab and uninteresting. We turned the corner at the end of the track and went to the left. There was still an abundance of birds to see. We added a number of flycatchers species including, **Yellow-olive Flycatcher**, **Tropical Pewee**, **Social Flycatcher**, a similar looking bird to the Great Kiskadee, but much smaller. As we walked a number of doves were disturbed by something up ahead. They flew into a bare tree and were identified as **Ruddy Ground Dove** and **Common Ground Dove**. We left the area we had been birding, and after a short while pulled into an open space near to some ruins. After a short walk we were soon adding more birds to our increasing list. Luis pointed out a superb **Orange Oriole**, another endemic, foraging in a fruiting tree, **Black-throated Green Warbler**, and a **White-eyed Vireo** close by. Closer to the ruins we found both **Ivory-billed** and **Olivaceous Woodcreepers**. A party of **Yellow-billed Caciques** were squabbling nearby. We eventually returned to where the carrier had been parked, and had a light breakfast supplied by Luis. It seemed as we had been going for hours, but it was only just after 9:00 am in the morning. As we sat there resting for a while, Luis pointed out a **Turquoise-browed Motmot** exhibiting its racquets on the end of featherless shafts, just a short distance away, and another of the hummers, a **Wedge-tailed Sabrewing** perched on a thin twig. We have now reached well over 100 species for our Mexican list and still have the rest of this birding trip left to go. After breakfast we left for the start of our journey back to Playacar. It was Luis intention to catch up with some water birds at another of the nearby lakes, but on arrival we found the entrance securely locked. We tried another lake with which Luis was familiar, but the same outcome ensued. Luis suggested that on the way back we call in at Xel Ha, a Water Park visited by thousands, but we would only be visiting the surrounding area which would be quite quiet. Whilst on the road we spotted a couple of Raptors sitting on the roadside wires, namely the common **Roadside Hawk**, and the **Laughing Falcon** and a sudden shout from Luis gave us the chance to see an **Ocellated Turkey** plunge into the roadside grass. Further along the road Luis pointed out an **Osprey** sitting by a nest on top of a telegraph pole. We reached Xel Ha, and Luis obviously had to gain permission to enter the track which ran alongside the theme park. Permission granted, we were soon on our way once again, searching the bushes either side of the track to see what else we could discover. One of the first new discoveries was a **Yucatan Vireo**, an insignificant looking bird, which could easily be overlooked. A busy **Black and White Warbler** was found in the shrubbery, an altogether different handsome little chap. Hirundines in the sky were identified as **Ridgeway's Rough-winged Swallows**, probably one of the more common species found in the Yucatan. On the left we had a couple of quite close **Squirrel Cuckoos**, a bright cinnamon cuckoo with a grey belly and a long tail, quite unmistakable; far better views than we had had in Costa Rica. A couple of **Olive-throated (Aztec) Parakeets** gave us a brief glimpse as they made a rapid flypast, but still had to be additions to our Mexican list, although better views were expected later in the holiday. We also added **Black-crowned Tityra**, **Black-headed Saltator** and nearby a **Black-headed Trogon**. We were fortunate to come across another endemic, a Rose-throated Tanager and a **Red-crowned Ant Tanager**. A **Boat-billed Flycatcher** popped up next, very similar to a Great Kiskadee, but with a much wider bill and the broad white superciliaries not quite meeting at the nape of the neck. There were many more birds seen that we had encountered during the earlier part of the day, but it is only sensible to mention the new ones. Another more spectacular hummer was added and was the **Fawn-breasted Hummingbird**, a larger green bird with a glittering green throat and sporting a red bill. Three more species concluded the addition of new birds for us; a beautiful **Masked Tityra**, a **Rose-breasted Grosbeak** and finally a flypast **Red-billed Pigeon**. Luis searched for a very vocal **Rufous-browed Peppershrike**, but although it was close by, it remained unseen. It had been a long day with a very early start, and what we had read in earlier reports that birding with Luis was "no picnic in the park" was quite true, however, if you want to see the birds, and work with an enthusiastic guide, then Luis is definitely the man. The journey back to Playacar was about one and a half hours, arriving back at the hotel just past

13:30pm giving us plenty of time for lunch. The Mexican roads are so straight and uneventful, with the turn offs all at right angles to the main road. The speed limits that we saw did not exceed 100 KPH, and most of the time the limit was just 80 KPH, which is quite pedestrian compared with the UK. A count up during the afternoon showed that in total we had 96 species for the trip, quite exceptional. Our Mexican list had now swelled to 127 species of which 47 were life birds for us, meaning that our original predictions of 150/50 should be easily achievable.

Day 6 Tuesday 18th January.

Following our long tiring day yesterday, and bearing in mind that new species would become increasingly difficult to find, we had decided that once more we would have a relaxing day. We caught an early courtesy bus to the beach, found us a nice shady spot under some Palm trees, and watched the world pass by. However, surprisingly enough, we did find another couple of species we had not seen in Mexico. Amongst the **Laughing Gulls** we could see a number of **Ruddy Turnstones**, and a few **Sanderlings** hurrying along the beach looking for scraps left by the patrons the previous day. The afternoon was spent around the quiet swimming pool until later in the day when we once again ventured out to the golf club pools. There were still many **Scissor-tailed Flycatchers** on the golf course, although the numbers were slowly diminishing as days passed by. Once again we spotted the **Keel-billed Toucan**, which had now become a daily occurrence. As we relaxed on the grassy bank completely untroubled by those "buggy guys", we were surprised how many people were actually walking on the course. Joggers were constant, women with prams, children on bicycles and pedestrians taking a short cut, were all causing more of a hazard than we were, but maybe because they were locals it made a difference. The only other bird we managed to find that evening was another of the wintering North American migrants, a

Prothonotary Warbler, a bird with a golden yellow breast and head and greyish wings. In the evening, as I sat outside quietly watching the world go by, I was joined by a large party of **Coatimundi (Ring-tailed Coati)** I counted at least eighteen of them very close by searching for tit bits left during the day by guests using the swimming pool area. Coatimundi are a member of the raccoon family, sharing the ringed tail and the inquisitive nature. However, the raccoon is nocturnal and the Coatimundi is not. Males can become almost twice as large as females and have large, sharp canine teeth, and can, I am told be quite vicious. They can be seen at anytime during the day and are normally found in groups scavenging with their ringed tails held in an upright position. The occasional Agouti, an almost tailless rodent walked by not worried by the antics of the other visitors.



Day 7 Wednesday 19th January.

Another day of relaxation was required as on the following day we were to take a trip to Chichen Itza, a "must visit" site if you go to Mexico. Once again we were met with confrontation from "Buggy Bullies" so we moved away quite quickly and birded the bushy areas close by, before retiring to the swimming pool area where we spent a relaxing morning and afternoon. We had now achieved a more than satisfactory count of birds both with and without Luis, so with another trip scheduled with Luis in six days time, the possibility of finding new birds by ourselves was probably remote. In the late afternoon we decided to do the impossible and when we had the opportunity, we ventured up the eighteenth fairway to try to locate the Scissortails and also to establish the identity of the small wader which looked like a **Kildeer**. There were still some Scissortails remaining, but they had thinned out considerably. We were now much closer and able to observe them much better and in fact get one on film. Adult birds have pale gray



heads and upper parts, light underparts, salmon-pink flanks, and dark gray wings. Their extremely long, forked tails, which are black on top and white on the underside, are characteristic and unmistakable. Through the fence and onto the practice ground we did solve the mystery of the small wader which was identified as a **Kildeer**. One of the most diagnostic features of the Kildeer is the double black bands around the chest, other than that it is larger in size and colour to our own Ringed Plover. We also has good close veivs of a pair of **Plain Chacalatas** (Illustrated) in the hedgerow. It was now almost dark, so we wandered back to the hotel unchallenged and undiscovered.

Day 8 Thursday 20th January.

As we waited at reception for the transport to Chichen Itza, we noticed a Woodpecker fly into a nearby tree. We had our bins with us, and both realised that it was not the common species we had seen before around the gardens. It was about the same size as the Golden fronted species but has white face markings, Red crown and throat, and a white wing patch. Not having the field guide with us, we could only think of the **Lineated Woodpecker**, but it couldn't be, it was not big enough. So, that one would be puzzling us for the whole of the day. A beautiful **Summer Tanager** joined it in the same tree as the transport arrived to take us on our day trip. We had taken our bins with us but realised very quickly that we would not be doing much birding today.

The sacred city of the Itza, called Chichen-Itza is an archaeological site is rated among the most important of the Maya culture and covers an area of approximately six square miles where hundreds of buildings once stood. Now most are mounds, but about thirty may still be seen by tourists. It is said that the site was built between the 7th and 10th centuries A.D., at which time the city became a prominent ceremonial centre. The guide we had was well versed, and obviously did the tour on most days of the week. Although the excursion was very interesting it was also extremely tiring and was a very full day. Chichen Itza is now rated one of the new seven wonders of the modern world, which includes amongst



others The Great Wall of China, and The Taj Mahal in India.

As expected birding was zero throughout the day, and considering the throngs of people around the Mayan ruins there were no birds about at all. On arrival back at our accommodation we both went for the books. There was nothing in the Peterson guide to give us any clue as to the bird we had found, and it was not to be found amongst the Woodpeckers in the Costa Rica book, so for the present it was left as a mystery. On most holidays we have had mystery birds but in the end we have always come up with an answer, let's hope this

one does not remain unidentified.

Day 9 Friday 21st January.

We had decided that the next three days would be relaxation days, and birding would be put on the back burner until we went on our second trip with Luis down to Coba and Punta Laguna. We would still do our morning and evening walks, but we would use those days to try to get some decent filming done. The morning was once again bright and sunny, as we made our way along the road to the golf course small pool. There seemed to be something different on the far bank of the small pool so I stepped onto the grassy bank, just a few feet, for a better view. Here we go again; the "Gestapo" were there within seconds, and as before they made us aware we were trespassing. My usual calmness was now tested to the limit, and unfortunately I let rip at them, telling them not to be so pathetic. Heated exchanges took place and resulted in them threatening to call the police to have me removed. I was furious, and decided to take

the initiative and turn the table on them instead. I invited them to call the police, and asked them who had given them the authority to drive their buggies on the public thoroughfare. Throughout the golf club complex, the golf course was intersected by public roads, so anyone playing or marshalling the course had to drive on the roads to get from one hole on the course to another. I asked them what would happen if they, or the golfers, caused a serious accident,



and suggested they were causing a greater threat to the public than we were to the golfers. Their mood suddenly changed, as he put his phone into his pocket and drove away. It was strange, for the record, we were not challenged again for the rest of the holiday. Maybe I hit a nerve, or did they not like to be challenged. We both fully accept that the golf course is private property, but there was no need to be so obnoxious in view of where we had encroached. Having watched some of the golfers playing the course, we would have been quite safe in the middle of the fairway, as most of them did not know where that was. We walked a few hundred yards from the larger roundabout and found a road which led to some very nice

properties. The road crossed the golf course and continued to a wooded area, right on the edge of the course. There were quite a few birds in the trees, and birds walking about on the grassy fairways. We were alerted by a largish bird which flew up into a tree just a few yards away, and were delighted to find a very obliging **Black-headed Trogon** (Illustrated), the first one for the Playacar area. We managed to get a bit of filming done, and then retired to the pool area for the rest of the morning and early afternoon. After a relaxing day we walked out to the pools for a look around and noticed that Alan and Val were there. We had a brief chat during which they told us that they had just seen a **Ferruginous Pygmy Owl** in the Rui Lupita Gardens. An Oriole flew up into a nearby palm tree, and after locating it, realised it was another new one for Mexico. It was a bright shade of orange with a fully black head and neck, but no black bib. It was identified as a **Baltimore Oriole**, and although we had seen the bird in Costa Rica, it was a good find for Mexico. The only other Mexican addition was a **Western Sandpiper** feeding around the edge of the small pool. Strangely enough, the party of **Least Sandpipers** which had been present every day of the first part of our holiday seemed to have disappeared. Over the past few days the **Keel-billed Toucan** we had glimpsed early in the holiday seemed to be ever present, and each evening it could be seen flying to roost in nearby trees. On one occasion we met an American guy who came down to Mexico from the States each year for three months to escape the cold at home, and he informed us that one evening he had **seven** Toucans roosting in a tree just outside his flat. We retired to the garden to have a look for the **Pygmy Owl**, but alas it was not there.

Day 10 Saturday 22nd January.

We decided that today we would do something different. We had been made aware that if we got off the courtesy beach bus at the first stop there was an "Aviario" in which there were a variety of birds that we might be able to get closer views of. The "Xaman Ha Aviary" is located in the south of Playa del Carmen, in the Playacar complex. The aviary features 45 different species of birds, and over 200 animals. In addition to all the diverse species of birds and other fauna, the aviary features many species of exotic native plants. The entrance fee to the "Aviario" was in the region of £12 each, which we considered quite expensive. Yes, there were some very nice birds on show, but on reflection, it was not worth the entrance fee. However, it did give us the opportunity to view some of the species at close quarters, but for the birdwatching beginner, there was no information regarding the identification of any of the birds. Although some areas of the Aviario were not caged, none of the birds could be counted on a list, even though they had the freedom to come and go as they pleased.

Day 11 Sunday 23rd January

No birding today, just relaxing on the beach and around the pool, getting ready for our second trip with Luis. However, we were treated to a close up **Rufous-browed Peppershrike** foraging in the fruiting tree just outside our room before we went to breakfast, a good find since we missed out on the one down at Xel Ha.

Day 12 Monday 24th January.

As arranged, Luis was there at 5:00am to pick us up for our trip to Coba and Punta Laguna. The journey was of similar duration to our previous trip down to Muhil a week ago, and much of the journey was on the same road until we turned off. We reached the small town of Coba, a site of archaeological remains of a large ruined city of the Pre-Columbian Maya civilization, and it is one of the oldest Mayan settlements on the Yucatan Peninsular.

Coba is located around two lagoons, and was a thriving city from around A.D.600, but is in a poor state of preservation, and much of it is still unexcavated, unlike Chichen Itza the destination of our previous excursion. After parking up we started our birding in the town itself, and were soon finding more birds for our Mexican list. Of course there would be many that had been seen before, but hopefully new ones as well. One of the first finds was a **Blue-grey Tanager** sitting high up in a nearby tree. A **Bronzed Cowbird** was pointed out by Luis, and a **Keel-billed Toucan** gave us good filming opportunities. We could not believe how common the **Toucan** actually was, as it now seemed to be a regular amongst our daily sightings. There were masses of **Ruddy** and **Common Ground Doves** both on the ground and up in the trees, but unfortunately as we somehow had picked up a couple of stray dogs, they got up before we had the opportunity to get them on camera. Three lifers were then seen in double quick time, the first of which was a very busy **Blue-grey Gnatcatcher** moving about in a bare tree. This was followed by a superb **Yellow-winged Tanager** which gave us crippling views of its plumage patternation. A flyover large woodpecker was identified as a **Lineated Woodpecker**, and a **Yucatan Woodpecker**, an endemic and lifer for us followed soon afterwards. High in a bare tree Luis pointed out a couple of **Olive-throated (Aztec) Parakeets** which were further additions to our Mexican list, and it was nice to be able to observe the birds at rest rather than in overhead flight. We also were able to feast our eyes on a number of the beautiful **Northern Cardinals** at close quarters, and catch up on the attractive **Green-backed Sparrow** we were unable to get on at Muhil. A short distance further on we found our first **Violaceous Trogon**, not a new bird for us, but a new one for Mexico. We found ourselves down by one of the large lakes, and hoped that we may be able to add a few water-birds to our list. It seemed quite quiet, but we soon found **Neotropic Cormorant**, and the **Double-crested Cormorant** to add to our day-trip list, although we had seen both at Playacar. In the distance Luis pointed out an **Anhinga** drying his wings, and a **Great Blue Heron**, our first for Mexico, could be seen flying low across the lake. One of the best spots of the day was one made by Isabel. Down by the waters edge she excitedly pointed



out a **Boat-billed Heron** (Illustrated) sitting motionless in the reeds. We had seen the species in Costa Rica in 2009, but from a boat and it was obscured by branches, but this view was something else, absolutely brilliant. We had numerous other water-birds on the lakes, but nothing new for us, not even a Jacana. Overlooking what seemed to be an old quarry, we found both species of **Grassquits**, and added two more lifers for us, a couple of wrens, firstly a **Spot-breasted Wren** quickly followed by a **White-bellied Wren**, both giving us excellent close up views. Two more new ones for Mexico were added, namely **Yellow-bellied Elaenia**, and **Yellow-throated Euphonia**. Other notable sightings

seen during our walk around Coba were **Turquoise-browed Motmot, Squirrel Cuckoo, Belted Kingfisher, both Grey and Black Catbirds, Blue Bunting, Cinnamon Hummingbird, Common Yellowthroat, Couch's Kingbird, Groove billed Ani, Hooded Oriole, Least Flycatcher, Mangrove Vireo, Masked Tityra, Orange Oriole, Painted Bunting, White-bellied Emerald, Wedge-tailed Sabrewing, White-collared Seedeater, and Social Flycatcher**. Back in the transport we Head north from Coba towards Tres Reyes. After about 15 minutes or so, we saw a hand painted sign that read "Punta Laguna. Punta Laguna is part of a 5000-hectare nature reserve called Ma'ax Yetel Kooh ("House of the spider monkey and the jaguar" in Mayan language). Our walk down the approach road gave us many birds, but unfortunately every one had been already caught up with earlier in the holiday. One feature on the way down was a spot where we watched a feeding party of **Yellow-billed Caciques** at very close quarters. At the bottom of the approach road we came to a lake. Once again there were no water-birds, but Luis pointed to a bird climbing up a branch of a tree. We recognised it immediately as the same species of bird we had spotted whilst waiting for our

transport to Chichen Itza. It was a **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker**, quite a rare bird for the Yucatan. He told us that this very same bird seemed to arrive every year to the same spot during migration. We were pleased to solve the problem we had earlier, and as I said, most time those sorts of identification problems eventually get solved.

We moved onto the trails through the forest, and for once there was not much about. We were now in the heat of the day, so most birds were probably having a siesta. Rounding a corner Luis beckoned us forward indicating to us to be extremely quiet. There, walking about in the leaf litter, he showed us a **Mexican (Black-faced) Antthrush**, a highly sought after bird in Mexico. Of course it was a lifer for us, giving us plenty of time to study the characteristics of the bird which included cocked-up tail and pale blue around the eye. The only other bird we found which we had not seen before was a **Long-billed Gnatwren**, a small bird with a very long straight bill. Unfortunately the Spider Monkeys were not at home so they remained unseen. We made our way back to our transport and started off back to the hotel in Playacar. It seemed a very short journey for me as I must have nodded off quite quickly and only came to when we reached the Playacar roundabout. Checking on what we had seen during the Coba trip, gave us a total of 76 species for the day.

Our two excursions with Luis were most enjoyable and helped us to see some amazing birds. He is a very likeable guy, and finds the birds with great ease. He obviously has his favourite places, and knows the birds he expects there. Luis is an excellent bird guide and knows all the English names, although maybe his understanding of English may be slightly suspect. But hey we can't understand any Spanish, and of course we all have regional dialects. I would recommend Luis to anyone who wants to see birds in the Yucatan; he is based in Cancun and uses an eight seated mini bus with a driver. His prices when we were there were 300 US Dollars for each trip for the two of us, so in round figures, about £200 per day, very comparable to anything we have paid in other countries.

Days 13&14 Tuesday 25th January & Wednesday 26th January

The last two days of the holiday were spent similarly to some of the other days we have spent here, morning and evening walks, and relaxation for the other parts of the day. We had a superb **Masked Tityra** fly into the fruiting tree near to our room whilst sitting around the pool. Throughout the holiday we had seen groups of parrots pass by overhead, but such was their speed, there was never time to focus on them. We also had quite a few raptors which had to remain unidentified. We never did find the **Ferruginous Pygmy Owl** and left most of the hirundines seen overhead a mystery, with the exception of **Vaux's Swift**. The final afternoon was spent by Isabel getting our possessions together and into the cases ready for the pick up



for our flight back to England which we were informed would be at mid day on Thursday. Everything was now packed and during a final stroll on Wednesday afternoon, believe it or not, we located a great piece of waste ground. As we walked around the waste ground on the road we were surprised to find a large party of **Yucatan Jays** (Illustrated), the first we had come across in the Playacar complex. We also had excellent views of the ever present **Keel-billed Toucan**, and noted a number of Parrots roosting in the trees, but alas it was into the sun, so identification was impossible as the birds were just in silhouette. We arrived back in our room ready for our evening

meal when the telephone rang. It was the Thompson's rep informing us that there was a 24 hour flight delay, but we would be treated to another day on a fully inclusive basis staying in our room. The only cost to us would be an extra day in the car park at Gatwick which would cost us an extra £6, but if anyone had offered us an extra day in Mexico for £3 each, we would have bitten their hand off.

Conclusions.

A great holiday, plenty of warm sunshine, our bird count exceeded our expectation with 154 species for Mexico, which included 56 life birds. The trips with Luis, a superb guide, were excellent. The hotel was ideally situated for bird watching. On the downside the Peterson guide

was more or less useless, and looking through the Howell & Webb guide on our return, it would not have been any better. Thank goodness we took the Costa Rica guide with us. Nowhere in any of the guides was the migration patterns mentioned, so knowing what could be seen in January was extremely difficult. Birds were not in full breeding plumage, which did not help with identification, but in general we coped very well. The only thing that marred the holiday was the pettiness of the "buggy boys" just outside the hotel. In the evening we found that they had gone home, so were not bothered by them.

We were pleasantly surprised by our flight home because of 170 MPH tail wind, the flight home was a mere 8 hours and 50 minutes whereas the outward journey was 11 and a half hours because of the head wind.

If anyone wishes to contact me, please feel free.

Brian & Isabel Eady

E Mail address b.eady1@sky.com Tel 01787 375738