

Visit to Mexico, Yucatan Peninsula

April 20th to May 4th 2011

Val and Alan Greggains

Regular readers may recall the trip of [Brian and Isabel Eady](#) in January of this year. We receive a couple of honourable mentions in that excellent report as Val and Alan. Our guide on the trip they kindly allowed us to share with them was Luis Kú Quiñones motmotbird@hotmail.com and we racked up 95 species in an admittedly long half day (5 a.m. to 2 p.m.). Luis is terrific: patient, polite and extremely knowledgeable. Our only disappointment was that so many birds were just glimpsed briefly and we were far from certain that we could have identified them on our own. We rapidly made the decision to return, armed with a suitable camera. Being recently retired and always impatient we decided not to worry that most of the winter migrants had left and returned to Mexico just three months after we left. Prior to our departure we contacted Luis and arranged another trip, which would be the highlight of our holiday.

The resort

Playacar is a gated community on the beach south of Playa del Carmen on the Yucatan peninsula about an hour south of Cancun. It consists of private housing, a couple of small shopping areas and maybe twenty large hotels, mostly circling a golf course. It is about 15-20 years old. The circular walk on public roads around the very private golf course is 4-5 miles with good birding pretty much everywhere. We had no difficulty on the fringes of the course by just keeping off the greens and fairways and visiting early in the morning. If you are challenged, just leave quietly. We saw one local family letting the kids play on a green and they were most indignant to be shooed off. Of the hotels, six are in the [RIU](#) chain. In January we stayed in the Riu Tequila but this trip we obtained a much better deal in the Riu Yucatan (just across the road). Our dilemma now is which to stay in next time. The managers, Sabrina at the Tequila, and Joseba and Tiziana at the Yucatan were very helpful and friendly and run top class hotels. Treating the golf course as a clock, both the Riu Tequila and Riu Yucatan are at three o'clock, the Riu Playacar is at two o'clock and the Riu Palace Riviera Maya is at one o'clock. All but the Tequila are on the beach. From the side of the latter hotel there is a half hourly shuttle bus to the Riu Lupita at nine o'clock. The Riu Lupita has the best views of the lakes on the golf course and is the least expensive but farthest from the beach. Our all inclusive package permitted us to breakfast, drink, lunch and shuttle at any of the above hotels with the exception of the Palace. The net result was constant proximity to free food, drink and toilet facilities. If this sounds like an advert we don't care. Get a late deal at [Thomson](#) for a very good price!

Money

The local currency is the peso and there are about 11.5 to the US Dollar. Historically, US currency has been welcome in Mexico, but in autumn 2010 the government decided that all transactions should be in pesos. Tour companies have since advised travellers accordingly. However, the dollar is so popular that the ruling has been relaxed and dollars are again welcome. For better or worse, hotel staff and drivers are poorly paid and depend heavily on tips to make a living wage. We found that taking fifty dollars in one dollar bills produced a lot of happy serving staff for very little outlay. Taxis in the resort charge a flat rate of seventy pesos or seven dollars anywhere within Playacar or Playa del Carmen. This means that if you plan to use taxis a lot get a bit of local currency (probably the best rate will be from a local cashpoint).

The books

We took three.

[Collins Birds of Mexico and Central America](#) by Ber van Perlo

[The Birds of Costa Rica](#) by Garrigues, R. and R. Dean

[A Field Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Adjacent Areas](#) by Ernest Preston Edwards

We also acquired locally *Aves communes de la Peninsula de Yucatan* by Eduardo Llamosa Neumann which is great for the hundred or so common local birds. They are named in Spanish, Mayan, Latin and English. So, Momoto cejiturquesa, Toh, Eumomota superciliosa and Turquoise-browed motmot.

We found the illustrations best in the Costa Rica guide but often found we needed to consult all four. Is there anybody out there that can publish a guide of the undersides of birds high in the canopy?

The camera

Our requirements here were quite simple. We wanted a cheap, point and click job capable of taking professional shots at extreme range without a tripod. We asked a few birders here in the UK and struck gold with a member of the [Teemouth Bird Club](#) who introduced us to the Panasonic FZ38. A little more research led us to the latest in the range, the [Panasonic FZ100](#). Our more serious objective was to get good enough shots for an ID with a camera light enough to carry around and cheap enough not to be the end of the world if lost, damaged or stolen. It exceeded all our expectations. For better or worse every shot in this report was taken with this camera without the aid of a tripod.

The diary

Day 1 Wednesday April 20

We arrived at the Riu Yucatan late afternoon after an eleven hour flight from Manchester and an hour and half on the bus. We noted *Great-tailed Grackle*, *Turkey Vulture*, *Black Vulture* and *Tropical Mocking Bird* along the way. A few drinks, dinner and an early night to recover from the trip completed a long day.

Day 2 Thursday April 21



The day started early with a *Black-bellied Whistling Duck* on a thatched seat canopy outside our window. It stayed put until I found the camera, unpacked it, focussed – and left before I got the shot.



We had no such problem with this hotel resident. A very friendly male coatimundi.

The rest of the day was spent quietly around the hotel getting some practice with the camera. The power of the 24X optical zoom is really amazing.



This sculpture of a horse was taken with the standard 50mm setting. The central image shows a *Tropical Mocking Bird* perched on the mane at 24X zoom whilst the rightmost image is a digital enlargement.



This *White-winged Dove* and the *Melodious Blackbird* gathering nesting material were both shot from the hotel balcony.

Day 3 Friday April 22

At this time of year the temperature gets up to the high thirties and we adopted a fairly standard approach to each day. Birding pretty much from seven to ten in the morning. Swimming and sunning from ten to twelve. Keeping to the room until three and then either birding or swimming until six.

On this day we walked a mile or so north from the hotel and picked up *Altamira Oriole*, *Yellow Warbler*, *Yucatan Jay* and *Ruby-throated Hummingbird* in addition to the common species noted earlier. As expected there were far fewer birds in evidence than in January.

Day 4 Saturday April 23

This marked our first visit of the holiday to the golf course by the Riu Lupita.



There was a good deal of activity with *Great Kiskadee*, *American Coot*, *Black-bellied Whistling Duck*, *Blue-winged Teal*, *Spotted Sandpiper*, *Neotropic Cormorant*, *Tri-colored Heron*, *Grey Plover*, *Brown Jay*, *Least Grebe*, *Black-necked Stilts* and even *Barn Swallows* and a *Collared Dove*.

As we were leaving a final treat was a *Squirrel Cuckoo*.



Advantages of being a little later in the year were views of *Black-bellied Whistling ducklings* and the *Spotted Sandpiper* in summer plumage shown above.

Day 5 Sunday April 24



After a quick snap of another hotel resident, the agouti, we added *Plain Chachalaca* to our hotel list before heading off to spend the rest of the morning at the beach. There were regular fly-pasts of *Magnificent Frigatebirds*, *Brown Pelicans* and *Royal Terns*.

How soon we took them for granted! Not so the *Osprey*, a splendid sight gliding along the shoreline.



The other residents of the beach were *Ruddy Turnstone*, *Laughing Gull* and *Sanderling* which were all highly tolerant of the holidaymakers.

Day 6 Monday April 25

The day of the big trip. Luis picked us up at the hotel in the morning at about quarter past five. It being Easter week we had elected to stay away from tourist areas and try somewhere different. We let Luis know that our major priority was to get some decent photographs and he set the itinerary accordingly. We went back up the coast towards Cancun as far as Puerto Morelos and then headed away from the coast due west for about 10 miles. We turned right at a sign for Central Vallarta and stopped about a mile along the road. The area was semi-rural, with some gardens and houses well into the middle class bracket.

From our first photograph at seven fifteen through to our morning break at nine thirty it was non-stop action. We felt like asking each bird to stop and take a turn. We saw *Turkey Vulture*, *Plain Chachalaca*, *Red-billed Pigeon*, *Olive-throated Parakeet*, *White-fronted Parrot*, *Vaux's Swift*, *Wedge-tailed Sabrewing*, *White-bellied Emerald*, *Black-headed Trogon*, *Violaceous Trogon*, *Turquoise-browed Motmot*, *Yucatan Woodpecker*, *Golden-fronted Woodpecker*, *Barred Antshrike*, *Social Flycatcher*, *Couch's Kingbird*, *Yellow-olive Flycatcher*, *Ridgway's Rough-*

winged Swallow, Barn Swallow, Yucatan Jay, Green Jay, Brown Jay, Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Lesser Greenlet, Yucatan Vireo, Clay-colored Thrush, Yellow Warbler, Magnolia Warbler, Black-throated Green Warbler, American Redstart, Rose-throated Tanager, Black-headed Saltator, Northern Cardinal, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Melodious blackbird, Great-tailed Grackle, Black-cowled Oriole, Orange Oriole, Hooded Oriole, Altamira Oriole, Yellow-billed Caticue, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Piratic Flycatcher, Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, Streaked Flycatcher, Yellow-green Vireo, Red-legged Honeycreeper, Green-backed Sparrow, Bronzed Cowbird and Yellow Tailed Oriole.



Val and Luis, *Turquoise-browed Motmot.*



Violaceous Trogon, Barred Antshrike.



Rufous-browed Peppershrike, White-fronted Parrot.



Black-headed Trogon, Black-throated Green Warbler.



Black-cowled Oriole and a well earned breakfast break for Alan, Luis and Val – complete with a selection of breads, bananas and fresh juice.

Back on the road after the break we returned to the main road and turned away from Puerto Morelos for a couple of miles and stopped at Boca del Puma. This is a somewhat faded tourist attraction with out-of-service zip lines and kayaking along an open cenote. The Yucatan peninsula is mostly limestone with a network of underground caves and rivers. The river surfaces in open cenotes. Closed cenotes are the ones still underground. Being denser undergrowth this area did not offer great picture opportunities but still yielded ***Olivaceous Woodcreeper, White-bellied Wren, Spot-breasted Wren, Tropical Gnatcatcher*** and ***Scrub Euphonia***.

Our final site for day was an area damaged by Hurricane Wilma in 2005. A mangrove regeneration project is now underway. The best views are on the east side of the zone but this frontage is within a gated community. Luis obtained permission for us to drive through but the security guards took exception to photography and escorted us from the area.



Apart from the *White Ibis* and *American Coot* illustrated we spotted *Neotropic Cormorant*, *Green Heron*, *Snowy Egret*, *Little Blue Heron*, *Great White Egret*, *Black-necked Stilt*, *Laughing Gull*, *Tri-colored Heron*, *Moorhen*, *Great Blue Heron*, *Anhinga*, *Northern Jacana*, *Roseate Spoonbill*, *Yellow-headed Vulture* and *Semipalmated Plover*. All in all an amazing day.

Day 7 Tuesday April 26



Pretty much a day off from birding but we couldn't resist the *Yucatan Jays* helping themselves from the breakfast tables at the Riu Tequila.

Day 8 Wednesday April 27



Another day on the beach. It was so windy more than just the *Magnificent frigatebirds* were flying! In the background is a flock of northwards flying unidentified birds.

Day 9 Thursday April 28

For the first time this holiday we took a standard trip out. This was to the Sian Ka'an biosphere reserve a couple of hours south. We were collected at six forty five by a normal holiday coach which transferred us in Tulum at nine o'clock to the odd looking truck illustrated and after two more hours of rough track to the small boats.



From the boats we had good views of loggerhead turtles and bottle-nosed dolphins before eventually reaching the village of Punta Allen at about lunchtime.



This was a wonderfully isolated, laid back spot with iguana the size of a table top.



We also managed a couple of shots of *Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture* and *Double-crested Cormorant*.



The day finished on a high with great views of *Bare-throated Tiger-heron*



In all a very long day but worth the effort.

Day 10 Friday April 29

No birding today. Val watching BBC coverage of some wedding or another back in the UK.

Day 11 Saturday April 30

Another day around Playacar where we added *Eastern Kingbird* and *Black Catbird* to our list. The latter definitely skulks.



Day 12 Sunday May 1

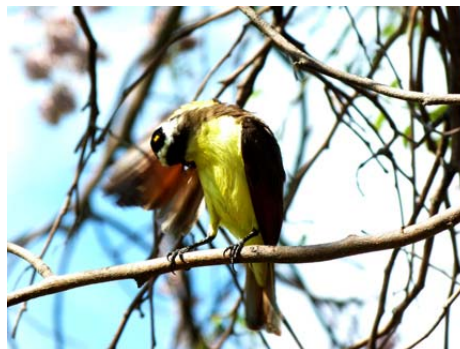
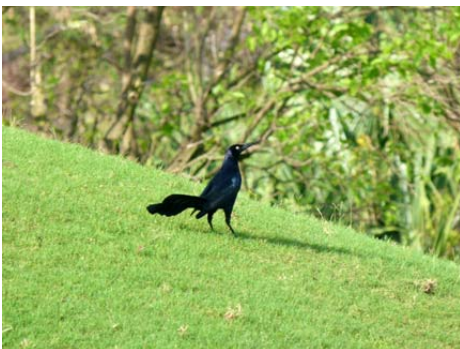
Getting towards the end of the trip now and we decided to walk a little further southwards along the beach. We came across a colony of *Least Terns* starting to nest. The sea front walk is naturally popular with visitors and we fervently hope the birds are not unduly disturbed.



Cattle Egrets flying offshore were the only other addition to the holiday list.

Day 13 Monday May 2

Back round to the golf course to get some of the commoner birds. The *Great-tailed Grackle* is likely to be the first and last bird seen on any visit to Mexico and would perhaps be more appreciated if rarer. It was also nice to confirm that the *Great Kiskadee* does indeed have a yellow spot on the top of its head.



Day 14 Tuesday May 3

Our final day yielded perhaps the worst and best shots of the holiday. We have a blurred Black Hawk rapidly departing the scene of the crime (the photograph) and a cinnamon hummingbird showing us how far its wings can move in 1/160th of a sec whilst its body remains perfectly still.



Conclusions

Comparing the trip with January we saw 106 species rather than 126 but a quarter of them were new to us. More importantly we had more time to identify and appreciate them. To those of you who regularly photograph birds the following comments will be obvious but were a pleasant surprise to us. Many of the old problems of identification have gone away. In the past we would see a new bird and try to identify it later, only to be confronted with several candidates differing only in some small but crucial detail.

A classic example was this *Solitary Sandpiper* made easy when we read that eye ring is diagnostic.



Of course there were birds too far away, or too fast moving, or appearing when we didn't have the camera. We'll try to get those next time.

For any further information on the trip or Mexico in general feel free to contact me on alan@greggains.net.