

Mexico city - Colima - San Blas – Mazatlan

UPDATE INFORMATION FOR TRAVELLING BIRDERS

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In November 2004, I had a two week birdwatching vacation in West-Central Mexico, excluding Puerto Vallarta. Starting from Mexico City, about 4500km was driven in the search of a personal year record and a few new species. A total of 372 species were recorded on the way, the main 'dip out' being the San Blas Jay which proved to be too difficult in San Blas (should have visited Puerto Vallarta, after all).

A full species list could not be produced due to time restrictions, but many of the better ones are included in the following comments. The idea is to provide some up-to-date information on the sites visited, regarding key bird species, access, accommodation and other practical matters, especially in reference to Steve Howell's *A Bird-Finding Guide to Mexico (1999)*. Many of the comments in the text can only be understood in relation to this guidebook, which still today is the main reference to birdwatching in Mexico. Most of the information in Howell was discovered to be accurate, five years after the publication.

My trip was a serious birding challenge with no lunch breaks or bars in the evenings, and some nocturnal driving. What is more, I already had considerable former experience with both Central and North American species, their calls and other identification features. A more relaxed itinerary would probably have produced around 300 species, and more cultural and social experiences.

Room rates refer to single occupancy, unless stated otherwise. In November, the majority of accommodations were empty or had very few customers. Consequently, special rates were available in some locations. There was little difficulty in finding the rooms, although only the first night in Mexico City (Hotel Aeropuerto) was reserved beforehand. I had two weeks of calm days and sunshine, and temperatures between -1...+30°C, depending on the altitude. The hottest place was San Blas, and the coldest Volcan Toluca.

Few words regarding car rental: Hertz wanted to serve a foreign customer well, and rented me a brand new Dodge Neon instead of the Nissan I was expecting. The comments on roads are based on driving this car, which was clearly unsuitable for Mexican roads. It had too low clearance especially in the front. Additionally, the front tires tended to get flat after every few hundred speed bumps (topes). My advice is: Make sure you get a vehicle with high clearance. Nissan Tsuru would have been just great, with twice as much clearance as my Dodge had. On the other hand, a 4WD is not really necessary to visit the places listed in this report. I did not damage my car.

Please notice that everything in this report refers to the situation in November 2004. I have recorded how things appeared to me during fleeting single (in some cases two to four) visits in the these locations. Things do change and even when they do not, individual perceptions

may be quite variable. There is no guarantee on the birds species. Be patient with my English, as well. The language has not been checked by a native speaker, and it shows.

Mexico City Airport

In case you need a proper rest after arrival, before renting a car, Hotel Aeropuerto (next to the airport) charges only 400 pesos and provides clean and comfortable standard rooms. Unfortunately, one has to pay 170 pesos for the short but unavoidable taxi (prepaid sitio) ride to the place. Returning to the airport, the hotel will call a (supposedly secure; at least mine was) VW Beetle taxi with a license, with a much reduced charge (50 pesos).

Driving in Mexico City is not for the faint-hearted. On the other hand, Mexican traffic culture is much like the Mediterranean (Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece) one, and therefore not that exceptional for a European visitor. Actually, Mexican drivers do blow their horns only occasionally, drive slowly (no Maseratis overtaking you over 200km/h) and behave in a less aggressive way than many Mediterranean drivers do. Quite a few drivers are polite and accommodating. A local customer at Hertz kindly told me a fast and easy to follow route from the airport to the Queretaro cuota: Circuito Interior – Calz. Vallejo (small but clear sign to the right just past the Insurgentes Norte crossing) – a bridge across Periferico – just follow the signs to Queretaro. Leaving the city was a piece of cake.

Returning to the airport, on the other hand, was a nightmare of three hours of constant battle including a U-turn across 8 lanes full of traffic. Coming from the South (Volcan Ajusco road), turn right to the periferico, then left to the Calz. de Tlalpan (coming from Cuernava, you will go under the periferico and continue along this main street), right to the Circuito Interior and towards the airport. Dismiss the Terminal 2 junction (to the right) just before the correct one. In case you miss the Tlalpan crossing on the Periferico (must turn to the service road), just continue all the way to the Eje 3y4 (Rio Frio) crossing, turn left (to the right and left under the periferico) and continue this one way street past last sports park on the right, turn right to Avenida Rio Churubusco (not the earlier Calz. Rio Churubusco) just before Eje 3y4 goes under the Avenida, and continue towards the airport, noting the Terminal 2 crossing just (500m) before the correct (badly signed) junction to the Airport service road, with the rental agencies in the other end.

San Juan de los Lagos

There are several nice & peaceful side roads to ranches between San Juan de los Lagos and the intersection of 45D and 80, between Leon and Aguascalientes, if you happen to drive that way. Dry thornbush habitat and ponds with a plenitude of birds (e.g. Solitary Sandpiper, Vesper Sparrow, Yellow-fronted Woodpecker, Southern Curve-billed Thrasher, Say's Phoebe, Wagler's Oriole). Unfortunately, the cuota charges between San Juan de los Lagos and Guadalajara are high (around 250 pesos; road construction going on).

Laguna Los Cañales

The new, partly improved road between Tepic and Mazatlan passes close to Laguna Los Cañales (next to Esquinapa de Hidalgo), a section of a vast chain of lagunas and man-made

reservoirs along the coast. As you approach from Tepic, go slower as soon as a wide view across the wetland opens on the left, there is a pull-over (again, on the left) on the highest point of the road, from where it is easy to scan the area with a scope. There were numerous waders, ducks, herons and egrets, pelicans, gulls, terns etc. around, including few Pectoral Sandpipers in November 2004. It is a nice spot to make a stop on the long drive between San Blas and Mazatlan. (There is another interesting marsh worth a stop about 20km west from Guadalajara, on the cuota to Tepic; e.g. Northern Jacanas).

Mazatlan

Not the best place for birding, the waterfront being occupied by hotels, restaurants and tourists (and a Least Tern, among others). Peaceful birding along the waste water treatment road, a signed dirt road to the right (by a glorieta) couple of kilometers before the end of Avenida Saballo Corritos (to the north along the coast), with grebes, ducks and coastal thornbush species. Convenient accommodation in Hotel Mazatlan along the Calz. R. Buelna (standard motel room with cable, secure parking and 24 hour service for 305 pesos), on the right after a Gigante hypermarket as you approach the coast. Gigante is excellent for field provisions with free, guarded parking. Calz. R. Buelna provides a fast and easy to follow access to the highway early in the morning (La Noria road, Durango highway).

La Noria Road

The information in Howell remains accurate. As Howell promises, both Black-throated Magpie-Jays and Purplish-backed Jays could be observed between km 2 and 3 in the morning, by the main road. The first dirt tracks were not very productive, I actually saw more birds along the main road further on (e.g. Elegant Quails). My advice: Drive slowly and stop in places with bird activity; beware of guard dogs.

Panuco Road

Appeared to be quite safe with nice, welcoming people. The road does not require a 4WD at its present state, although some eroded curves in the beginning may require careful driving. Further on, the surface is ok. There was some local traffic. Contrary to Howell, in November the site was more productive on the late afternoon, when the sunny slopes attracted many birds, than in the early morning (late morning appeared more birdy than the first hour, when the road is still under the cool shadow of the mountain, +5°C at sunrise). On the other hand, Military Macaws (6, close views) were seen only in the morning.

Panuco Road had both Flammulated Flycatcher and Redbreasted Chat in November (Howell recommends the main road), but these skulking species may not be easy to spot in the lush hillside vegetation. Plenty of other birds, such as Calliope Hummingbird, Blue Mockingbird, Blackheaded Vireo, Greenstriped Brush-Finch and Rustycrowned Ground-Sparrow. I also had wonderful views of a male Mexican Woodnymph and an unexpected Greybreasted Wood-Wren. My advice: Stop when you see movement in the roadside bushes, but do not leave the car at first. That is how I had great views of the Redbreasted Chat and Wood-Wren.

Barranca Rancho Liebre

I did not see the kilometer signs 201 and 200 but the bend to the left and the pullout (with a caterpillar) were easy enough to identify. The house along the main road appears to be a private one, at the moment (not a restaurant; cf. Howell) There was plenty of space to park in front of the building. Howell's trail map is reliable with one exception: the trail crosses a stream twice, not just once, before arriving to the clearing ('orchard') and the barranca. The first crossing is where the water pipeline ends, and that is also where the first Golden-browed Warblers and Russet Nightingale-Thrushes were. Just follow the main trail and do not turn right before the easy to identify 'overgrown orchard' clearing on the edge of the barranca, in-between pines.

The first Crested Jays were seen along the main road (Durango highway) just before sunrise. After seeing two Steller's Jays and hearing more, I stopped the car and checked the jay party: Seven Tufted Jays and very close (less than 5 m) views of some of these magnificent birds as they hopped around, inspecting the curiously motionless human being with binoculars. Another party of five Tufted Jays was seen about 15 km towards Durango (from BRL), in the late afternoon, again along the main road. In the BRL itself, only distant calls were heard from the valley below. My advice: keep your eyes and ears open along the main road. The call of Tufted Jay is a distinctive one, once learned.

Howell may have missed Thick-billed Parrot and Eared Quetzal on 9 trips to Barranca Rancho Liebre, but that does mean everybody had to be as unlucky. In November 2004, there was a flock of 142 Thick-billed Parrots roosting in pines on the highest ridge of the barranca, visible from the 'orchard', up on the right, and also a male Eared Quetzal calling on the left hand ridge (by the edge of the barranca), along the trail which goes left and deep down to the valley.

All in all, the end of the trail provided the best birding during the two weeks in Mexico. A huge mixed flock went around clearing soon after my arrival; I just had to give up because of exhaustion after two hours of constant sorting out of bird species and numbers, including Hooded Grosbeaks, the only Fantail Warbler of the trip under the bushes, Rusty Sparrow, Blue Mockingbird, Grey-collared Becard, Red Warblers, warblers, tits, woodpeckers etc.

Bird activity remained high throughout the day (max +8°C despite clear skies and sunshine). In addition to the 'overgrown orchard', there were lots of birds at the beginning of the Barranca Rancho Liebre trail (by the highway, around houses) at sunrise (e.g. one Aztec Thrush, Rusty-crowned Ground-Sparrow), and a few interesting ones by the first stream crossing, but less so along the rest of the trail (Mountain Trogons, Pine Flycatchers, tits, nuthatches, treecreepers, warblers).

Hotel Villa Blanca (cf. Howell) was nice, peaceful and inexpensive (around 150 pesos). Meals were adequate (filling) and somewhat amusing – something like the 19th century coach station menus in the 'Wild West' as I imagine them; beans with smoked ham and sauerkraut being one of the three varieties available. Nights can be cold up here in November; I was happy to have a sleeping bag. (A single Magnolia Warbler by the hotel; quite high up for a wintering bird).

La Petaca Road

At Potrerillos, turn right towards La Petaca. The first two kilometers are already tarmac, and the rest is soon going to be (road construction going on). Nice flowerbeds (small red flowers) and hummingbirds by the road at the place where the road climbs over a ridge with open grassy slopes and pines on top, before the end of the tarmac. In November 2004, the few hummingbirds present included a Sparklingtailed and a Bumblebee Hummingbird. Hundreds of Vaux's Swifts over Potrerillos.

San Blas

A more economical alternative to Hotel Garza Canela is the close-by Posada del Rey (cf. the Internet), which has nice rooms for 300 pesos, a swimming pool, safe street parking, great service and a nightwatchman who opens the gate for you early in the morning. I stayed for three nights and was quite happy with the place. In the town center, restaurant La Familia had great food and reasonable rates, plus a small supermercado under the same roof.

The Shrimp Ponds Road had plenty of disturbing traffic, including many trucks, and little space for parking. A good variety of waders at the second ponds on the left (it is possible to drive along the embankments), especially in the evenings. Nice birding but again too much traffic along the dusty side road to Chacalilla, which proved to be productive: e.g. Mangrove Vireo at km 2,5, just after the 'shrimp factory' crossing, and many birds of prey & kingfishers.

Matanchen Bay

Had a Rufous-Necked Wood-Rail by the small 'dock' on the left, just after crossing the small bridge to Matanchen. Had to make four visits before finally making it. I guess this is the site where Phoebe Snetzinger saw the Wood-Rail as her lifer number 8000. On one occasion, there was a Bare-throated Tiger Heron at the pond on the opposite side of the road early in the morning. Doing the boat trip is not absolutely necessary to see these species, although it undoubtedly is the best choice, time permitting.

The road to Las Islitas (very few birds; except Bluefooted Boobies, Whimbrels etc.) had a promising pond in the beginning, but four visits failed to produce the Wood-Rail. Continuing to the left (off the main track, towards the beach), you can park your car by the first beach restaurant and walk further to the left. Nice lagunas and an estuary with birds (incl. Reddish Egrets) hide in-between the mangroves. Unfortunately, there were quite a few biting insects here, as well. Saw my only Grayson's Thrush along the Las Islitas road.

Lower Singayta Road

As a result of a community-based ecotourism project, there is a signed parking lot (with shades) in the Singayta village now. Consequently, you should pay a (voluntary) 20 peso entrance fee, payable at the crossing, if the office happens to be occupied. I made three visits and paid once. Many would like to drive further than the parking lot (the place suggested by Howell), which is understandable (I did this, as well, on the first visit, just like other visiting

birders I saw in the site) because of the distance (the first 500m appears not to be very productive), hot climate and short mornings. I suspect, however, that the villagers do not appreciate this, despite being in general very welcoming. They have, after all, made an effort to provide proper parking. Many wintering warblers, woodpeckers (e.g. Palebilled, Goldencheeked), Citreoline Trogons, Blue Buntings, Golden Vireos, Happy Wrens, many Mexican Parrotlets, hundreds of Rufous-backed Thrushes on the first morning etc. the lot listed by Howell).

Upper Singayta Road

I tried several side tracks in this area around noon and in the late afternoon. The area did not appear very productive in general, but had some nice mixed flocks & good views of Blackthroated Magpie-Jays. There were some well-forested slopes I would have liked to visit, but could not due to low clearance (on those roads, you need a 4WD after rainy season because of deep ruts). Met some ranchers who were, once again, very positive towards a visiting birder, who tried his best to be polite in Spanish.

Mirador del Aquila

A noisy, rather unpleasant site with plenty of trucks, traffic etc. but fortunately with a spacious and well-leveled pullout, as well. Had to make two visits and stay for three hours in order to see a (single) Military Macaw, which kept calling straight below to the viewpoint but unfortunately remained stationary. Magpie-Jays, White-tailed Buzzard, Attila.

La Bajada

There are new, improved roads in La Palma; forget the advice by Howell and simply follow the tarmac through the village, continuing towards La Bajada.

Parking place: I am not sure if I understood Howell correctly. There was a circular brick wall on the left, with parking space, just before the village proper. I nevertheless continued through the village, along the steepish cobbled main street, until the end of the street and the edge of banana plantation. There was plenty of room to park in the end. I continued on foot along the grassy cobbled track. Many hummingbirds (including Sparkling-tailed) and mixed flocks of warblers etc. about 1km uphill. A (vagrant?) Strong-billed Treecreeper was a nice find, a giant in comparison with Ivory-billed Treecreepers in the same trees. The only Godman's Euphonia of my trip was also seen here & Yellow Grosbeaks, Citreoline and Elegant Trogons, Whitethroated Thrushes, great views of several Rufousbellied Chachalacas, and many others. A scope proved to be useful in scanning the flocks on the steep slopes. This site requires plenty of time to be fully explored, with its many side tracks.

Laguna Sayula

Use the periferico in Guadalajara to get on the Colima road. After a while, you will arrive in a large flat valley with huge lagunas and the cuota becomes a long, straight causeway. There is a succession of lagunas and marshes with plenty to see (esp. towards the other end),

oftentimes wide shoulders and in general great observation conditions if you have a scope. Thousands and thousands of waders and wildfowl, Snow Geese and Bicolored Blackbirds. The cuota between Guadalajara and Ciudad Guzman is straight, fast and relatively inexpensive.

A word of caution: Road 110 from Ciudad Guzman towards Zamora and Morelia is not really a shortcut. Slow trucks, narrow lanes and numerous topes produce an average speed of 40km/h and plenty of unpleasant traffic situations, and there is not much to see on the way. Going towards Mexico City, it is a better idea to take the longer cuota to Guadajara periferico and onwards. You are able to drive 100km/h and make two and half times more distance in the same time, with the additional bonus of easy traffic and zero potholes and topes, not to mention the lagunas teeming with birds.

Ciudad Guzman

I stayed two nights at Motel Colon, the place recommended by Howell. At first they tried to charge me 750 pesos for a suite. After some negotiations, I got a very nice standard room (huge by European standards, with double kingsize bed, cable and everything else you need) for a comfortable 400 pesos. The restaurant was closed; there was a taco bar instead. The gate and reception were open 24 hours.

Driving in Ciudad Guzman may be somewhat confusing especially after dark, because of the one-way streets. Normally, the periferico provides an easy access between the northern and southern ends of the town. In November 2004, the northern part of periferico was closed due to floods around Laguna Zapotlan. The Laguna itself did not have many birds, although some of the large flocks of Yellowheaded Blackbirds were impressive. By the southern Pemex station (cf. Howell) along libre 54, just across the street, there is a nice mall with Gigante; a great place to buy food and drinks (the supermercados next to Motel Colon had a rather limited selection of products, to say the least). You have to pay for parking: Collect your ticket at the automatic entrance gate, keep the ticket with you when going in, get it stamped by the cashier, and give it to the guy at the gate as you leave the lot (the fee is 2 pesos for a regular shopping visit).

Volcan Nieve (Nevado de Colima)

Nevado de Colima has been neglected by Howell, but it has recently become quite popular among visiting birders, not least because of the easy access and oftentimes good gravel roads.

David Ferry is an expert of the roads around the Nevado. He recommends the so called 'microondas road' as the best choice. The road has an excellent high altitude meadow with lots of birds. It can be found by driving from Ciudad Guzman towards El Grullo and Autlan, first under the cuota and along the old libre to Colima, then to the right and past the signposted entrance road to the Nevado, and something like (rough estimate) 10km across the undulating lower slopes to the highest point of the road, indicated by the first really steep downhill grade. Just before the correct place, there is a lonely restaurant on the left, in forest by a left bend. At this point you should have already seen the transmitter tower high up on the left (you need to drive past it to find the correct junction). Going uphill, there is a place with simple shelters by the road, and just when are about to start going down, a small dirt goes

left, with a steel 'bridge' (two pieces of steel to allow crossing a ditch). This is the 'microondas road'. Further on, there were some signs referring to the telecom company and an increasingly steep road through dense fir forest.

Unfortunately, the road was not passable by a 2WD in mid-November. It had eroded a lot during the rains and had not been improved yet. To my disappointment, I had to turn around at km 3, after much effort. One should therefore be flexible and check the current road conditions as they may be different at different times of the year. Sometimes the Atenquique road (or Volcan de Fuego road, cf. Howell, which I did not check this time) may be the best choice to get up the volcano, the next time it could be the Nevado access road, and then again the microondas road, or one of the smaller roads on the northeastern slope of the Nevado.

At the end of the day, I saw all my target species by trying one of the farm roads going up the slope. After the signed entrance road to Nevado, close to Ciudad Guzman, the road to El Grullo and Autlan ascends a hill. On top of the hill, a farm track goes to the left. For many, this appears to be a 4WD track but it was nevertheless passable for a 2WD (slow, careful driving) in November 2004. In the end, after couple of km of following the road higher and higher through fenced pastures, there is a large overgrown pasture and an orchard with scattered pines and bushes along the ridge. The site was great in the morning, with most of the species I was looking for (e.g. Singing Quail, Amethyst-throated Hummingbird, Collared Towhee, Grey-barred Wren, Dwarf Vireo, Colima Warbler, Rufous-capped Warbler). On my way down, I met the land-owner who warmly welcomed birders to visit his place.

In the afternoon and evening I did the Nevado access road, which was in great condition all the way up, although a bit closed by trees and vegetation and therefore not as birdy as one might hope. A Lesser Roadrunner was located in the beginning of the road, where many others have also seen it. Chestnut-Sided Shrike-Vireo, Rusty-crowned Ground-Sparrow and hundreds of other birds were seen by the edge of the tall forest, late in the afternoon. No less than 11 Longtailed Partridges were walking on the road up, in parties of 1 to 4, mostly between km 8 and 12. On top (after km 12) there were several clearings with plenty of hummingbirds, including Bumblebees, and other birds (e.g. Flowerpiercer, Virginia's Warblers). At night, there were Ridgway's Pygmy-Owls and an Eared Poorwill and a Mexican Whip-poor-will along the road. The nearby Volcan Colima (Volcan de Fuego) was pretty active towards the end of my visit, making rumbling sounds and emitting smoke from a wide area around the top.

Colima & Barranca de Agua (La Maria Road)

The city has expanded since 1998, and there is a new periferico in Colima today. Also the bypass has been replaced by a modern cuota with many exits and access roads. Today, the following instructions take you to Comala and La Maria Road: leave the cuota and take the libre to Colima center (first access), turn right at the glorieta next to the new Fiesta Inn (negotiable rate around 1000 pesos per night, single occupancy), continue for 5km to another glorieta, turn right towards Comala (well-signed) and follow the instructions by Howell. The Motel Los Candiles (overpriced but convenient) is still there, two blocks straight forward past the Fiesta Inn (506 pesos; with four star prices and two star rooms and very high topes (beware!) by the backyard parking lot).

I made two visits to Barranca de Aqua, birding along the road both in the afternoon and early in the morning. As Howell advises, you can park at km 19,6, but there is also another small pullout on the uphill end of the barranca, on the right (coming from Comala), where one car can be safely parked off road. Barranca de Aqua was by far the best place to observe Greycrowned Woodpeckers; there were also two Costa's Hummingbirds and my only Great Swallow-tailed Swift (single bird passing by with other Swifts and Swallows) & a single Slaty Vireo (skulking by the stream at the upper pullout), one of the most difficult species to locate on this trip. Great views of West Mexican Chachalacas, Elegant Trogons, Green Jays, White-throated Thrushes and many others at the valley before Barranca de Aqua (km 15,5; cf. Howell).

Microondas La Cumbre

From the Hotel Candiles, go left in the first intersection right past the hotel and towards the city center, and turn right to cuota as the street reaches the new highway. Continuing towards the coast, dismiss the first intersections and take the ramp signed (if I remember correctly) to Jiquilpan, and go across the cuota. Follow Howell's advice to Piscila junction and the microondas La Cumbre access road. As already mentioned, the bypass in the Howell's map has been replaced by the new cuota. One can not rely on Howell's road map anymore.

At first I thought that the microondas access road was closed, as there were many cars parked outside the entrance gate by the highway. More people arrived, parked their cars, and started to walk uphill. I was already about to give up, but fortunately decided to try my limited Spanish with the next visitor approaching the gate and got an explanation. There are many health-conscious people in Mexico and some of them prefer to do the 6.4 km up and down after a long working day in an office. It was ok to drive up; the cobbled road was narrow but in good shape. I waited well after sunset before a slow return. A Colima Pygmy-Owl called on the top, and a Balsas Screech-Owl down by the gate. Two Buff-collared Nighthawks and a Pauraque sat on the track. I guess the few bats roosting in the huge Virgin statue are Mexican Freetails?

The road to Piscila had a few local youngsters with somewhat bad attitude, but also plenty of birds especially around a cattle pen on the left, about two km from the road 110, late in the afternoon: Banded Quails, Orange-breasted Buntings, Stripeheaded Sparrows etc.

Laguna Cuitzeo

Large numbers of wildfowl etc. concentrate on the parts of the lake with difficult access and therefore low human presence, e.g. the bay W of Carrillo on the south shore and the eastern end of the lake. These areas are difficult to observe from the cuota due to distance and lack of parking space. Best access to these bays and some extensive reedbeds (in the east) apparently is along the local roads from the south and the east. The easy to access causeway across the laguna and the road from Cuitzeo to Mariano had only few birds and plenty of disturbance, e.g. hunting (Clark's Grebes etc; Botteri's Sparrows along the latter one).

I managed to see the Black-poll Yellowthroat (and several Common Yellowthroats & White-collared Seedfinches) by making a somewhat daring series of stops on the narrow shoulder of the cuota on the last bridge in the east (going towards Mexico city), and

observing the marsh with scattered bushes from my car, early in the morning. Doing this may attract police attention although passers-by did not seem to mind (good visibility and wide lanes).

Convenient accommodation can be found along the main road from Cuota to Morelia. Motel Boulevard is on the right about two kilometers before entering the city proper and provides easy access to the lake (causeway), Cuota & local roads, nearby gas stations, security and adequate rooms for a mere 170-200 pesos (1-2 persons). The walls of the rooms are thick but not necessarily thick enough to filter the loudest sounds of passionate love-making the next door. Special measures have been taken to guarantee privacy in this love nest and a porn channel on the motel tv provides inspiration to the visiting couples. Nevertheless, I had a restful sleep and considered this a good option.

Valle de Bravo

Convenient base for Temascaltepec, Volcan Toluca and other nearby sites. Excellent roads around the small town, although driving through the popular resort may be slow on the weekends, when the place gets full. A hidden gem of accommodation was discovered along the road between Valle de Bravo and Temascaltepec/Toluca (the southern access). Soon after you leave Valle de Bravo, the excellent tarmac road climbs through pine forest. On the right, there are large signs for Cabanas Canada. 50 meters before this more expensive place, a gravel road goes to the right. After hundred meters or so, there is a small sign Refugio del Salto in the open gate to the right. You have arrived in a cluster of hillside cabanas. A spacious two-and-half-store stone cottage with veranda, plenty of room, fireplace (cold nights), plenitude of hot water and clean, comfortable beds in peaceful surroundings could be rented for 360 pesos in November 2004 (single occupancy, 60 pesos for the firewood).

Temascaltepec

The village has expanded during the past five years, and there is less good habitat for birds. Also the swift lookouts recommended by Howell have either disappeared or become gated. You need to look around and follow the swifts. In November 2004 (late afternoon), a great place to check the swifts (close views with a telescope) was discovered along the road to Valle Bravo, 1-2 km from the Pemex station; 260 Whitenaped Swifts, 2000 Vaux's, 12 Whitethroated and 1 Chestnutcollared Swift. No luck with the Whitefronted Swift, despite being able to check out all the *Streptoprocne* swifts. American Dippers are still around despite the recent changes. I did not do the Polvorin loop as all the target species had already been seen.

Volcan Toluca (Nevado de Toluca)

Easy to follow approach from Valle de Bravo. Great scenery along the main road and great birding along the short access road to the entrance gate & campsite. Plenty of birds around the junction and also along the last two hundred meters before the gate. Strickland's Woodpeckers were easy to find, great views of a Russet Nightingale-Thrush, Striped Sparrows, Red Warblers, Pygmy Nuthatches, a variety of hybrid (?) Spotted Towhees, Abeille's Orioles lower down in the valley. It can be rather cold up here early in the morning.

There was ground frost in some places before sunrise between Valle de Bravo and the Volcan Toluca access road.

La Cima

Arrived at 11 AM, having got lost for three hours in a maze of local roads south of Toluca (spent my night at Malinalco). No signs but the place was easy enough to identify – an opening with undulating hills of bunch-grass and a sandy road to the left. I followed the road for 300-400 meters, went left at an Y-junction and parked my car in a place where it could not be seen from the libre highway. Despite my late arrival, it took only 15 seconds to locate the first Sierra Madre Sparrow which was soon followed by others + Striped Sparrows. A Sprague's Pipit was an unexpected bonus.