



Winging It

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The Birds of Sonora: Colonial Alamos

BY FORREST DAVIS AND DAVID MACKAY

Sonora, Mexico's second-largest state, is a safe and comfortable birding destination easily accessible from the U.S. In addition to specialties that occur regularly in adjacent southeastern Arizona and the Rio Grande Valley, Sonora boasts more than 50 species that have been recorded only as vagrants or accidentals in the US—or have never occurred north of the border. Two sites that can be birded on a single trip are Yecora in the Sierra Madre (see *Winging It* December 2004) and Alamos.

Alamos is about 425 miles from Tucson. Interstate 19 ends in Nogales, Arizona, becoming Mexico Route 15 across the border; Rte. 15 is a good toll road, and the trip from Tucson takes 8 to 10 hours, including time to obtain tourist and auto documents. For those starting east or west of Tucson, there are border crossings in Yuma, Douglas, and Naco (for the route from Naco by way of Yecora, see *Winging It* December 2004).

Birders driving from Tucson cross the border at Nogales. Follow the signs to one of the two crossings, where you may be subjected to a brief examination by Mexican Customs. Tourist visas must be obtained at the well-marked immigration checkpoint at KM 21 on Rte 15, south of Nogales; present a

valid passport or notarized birth certificate. At the time of writing, the separate permit for automobiles is obtained at the new station just beyond Empalme; permits valid only within Sonora are available at no charge, while there is a fee for driving from Sonora into other Mexican states. Regulations change frequently, so check with AAA or the Mexican Consulate for current requirements. Note that Mexican auto insurance is absolutely required, and must be obtained *before* crossing the border; policies can be bought online, at AAA offices, or from some American insurers. Some US auto rental companies permit travel to Mexico and will provide the necessary insurance.

Please refer to www.rimjournal.com/arizyson/alamos/highway.htm for detailed printable directions from Tucson to Alamos.

Toll booths along Rte. 15 typically have clean restrooms and markets. Soft drinks and bottled water bought in Mexico are safe; most restaurants use purified water (agua purificada), but when in doubt, stick to bottled drinks. Fuel in Mexico is available only at Pemex. Toll booths and gas stations do not accept credit cards; they do accept US cash, but at a less favorable exchange rate than that offered at ATMs.

San Carlos, about 65 miles south of Hermosillo, is an appealing stopover on the Sea of Cortez. Follow the signs off of Route 15 to San Carlos. There are several motels/hotels in this

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The rooftops of Colonial Alamos. © Forrest Davis.

beach-side town. Blue-footed and Brown Boobies, Brown Pelican, and Heermann's and Yellow-footed Gull are among the birds that frequent the picturesque coves and beach.

Once in Navojoa, make the left turn toward Alamos. The winding road from Navojoa to Alamos passes through lush tropical deciduous forest (TDF). This once ubiquitous habitat, which stretches all the way south to Costa Rica, reaches its northern limits in Sonora. Though much has been cleared for farming and ranching, Sonora retains more intact TDF than any other region in the world. A number of interesting trees and plants define this habitat, including hecho—the indicator cactus of TDF—bursera, tree morning-glory, amapa, kapok, strangler fig, and rock fig.

The rugged Sierra de Alamos looms on the right. Watch for Black-throated Magpie-Jays, conspicuous and common in the Alamos area. Enter the town, drive past the hospital, and at the circle across from the Pemex station, proceed up a very narrow street that ends at the cathedral square. A number of lodgings are located off the square.

Alamos is a Spanish colonial town founded in the 1600s to support mining of the area's rich silver deposits. The wealthy owners built spacious haciendas in Alamos. By the early 20th century, the town had fallen into disrepair, but many of the buildings have been restored by Americans and Canadians. There are several excellent restaurants, and lodging in Alamos ranges from spartan to luxurious.

The Alamos area has many fine birding sites; the best-known among them are described below.

Rio Cuchujaqui

Arrange for a box lunch to allow for a full day's birding, and plan on an early morning departure for the Rio Cuchujaqui. From the cathedral square, turn right next to the museum on the corner, then left, then right

again. A stop at the crossroads below the dump, 2 miles from town, may yield Purplish-backed Jays. Proceed south 7 miles, following the sign towards "El Chinal," to a large dry river crossing signposted "El Mentidero." Along the way, watch the tops of the cactus for roosting Crane Hawk.

Take a left into the Arroyo de Mentidero. A 4wd vehicle is highly recommended if you intend to continue towards the river. About 1 mile in, you will come to the Rio Cuchujaqui. Park at the crossing, where you can look for Rufous-bellied Chachalaca, Elegant Quail, Lesser Roadrunner, and Happy and Sinaloa Wrens. Wade the river and walk to the right. Watch for Common and the rare Great Black-Hawks; Bare-throated Tiger-Heron often perches in the Montezuma cypress. Gray Hawk, Crested Caracara, and White-fronted Parrot may be seen overhead. Solitary Eagle is resident but very rare; we have seen an immature in this area on three occasions. Green Kingfisher, Lineated Woodpecker, and Rose-throated Becard can be found along the river as well. Tooting will usually bring in Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl and Plain-capped Starthroat.

Cross the river again at a grove of large fig trees about a mile from the first crossing. Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush is often found in the heavy brush and Elegant Trogon in the canopy. In winter, Tufted Flycatcher, Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush, Slate-throated Redstart, and Rufous-capped Warbler are here as well.

Aduana Arroyo

Depart early on another day for Aduana Arroyo. A mile from Alamos, Black-vented, Hooded, and Streak-backed Orioles can often be found feeding on the flowers of the palo santo (morning-glory) trees. Proceed another two miles and turn left onto a dirt road (at a small lean-to market and large beer ad). Begin birding about a quarter mile down the very sandy road (high-clearance 4wd recommended). Watch for Red-billed Pigeons on snags and cactuses. Rufous-backed Robins are easy to find in the fig trees. White-tipped Dove, Nutting's Flycatcher, Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, Thick-billed Kingbird, and Streak-backed Oriole are fairly common.

Mexican Parrotlets can often be found here or in the fig trees in the town of Aduana. A nighttime excursion can produce Elf, Mottled, and Great Horned Owls, as well as Western Screech-Owl.

Alamos Sewage Outflow

Late afternoon is a good time to visit the Alamos sewage "ponds," actually a sewage stream. The route can vary depending on the recent weather. Generally, head east toward the village of El Sabinito on the road that passes the cemetery. Just follow your nose after that. The good news is that the farther you get down the drainage, the better the birding gets, and so does the air!

Groove-billed Ani, Social Flycatcher, Great Kiskadee, Happy and Sinaloa Wrens, Rufous-backed Robin, and Blue Mocking-



A Bare-throated Tiger-Heron at the Rio Cuchujaqui. © Forrest Davis.

bird can all be found in this area; Grayish Saltator and Scrub Euphonia are present but rare. Rufous-crowned Motmot can usually be located along the road.

Estero Tobarí

A trip to Estero Tobarí can be highly productive, especially in the winter. From Alamos, return to Navojoa, then turn north on Rte 15 and proceed about 5 miles to the turnoff for Villa Juárez. The road is often under construction, and you may have to make detours. About 5 miles beyond the turn, a bridge crosses an effluent stream from a local pig farm. If you can stand the odor, we have found White-faced Ibis and large numbers of shorebirds, including Northern Jacana, feeding here.

Continue 15 miles, watching for White-tailed Kite and Burrowing Owl, until the road ends. Turn right at the “T,” proceed another 5 miles, take a left turn, drive another 3 miles, then take another left at the sign for “Isla Huivuláí.” Continue about 4 miles to the toll gate (about 30 pesos). Drive onto the causeway. Fulvous Whistling-Duck, Roseate Spoonbill, Wilson’s Plover, Black Turnstone, Surf-bird, Yellow-footed and Heermann’s Gulls, and Gull-billed and Elegant Terns feed on the mudflats and in the shallow waters of the estuary; a couple of hours here can produce more than 70 species. A couple of minutes’ drive from the end of the causeway is the Sea of Cortez, where Brown and Blue-footed Boobies, Magnificent Frigatebird, and loons can be found.

Rio Mayo Float Trip

When the water level is adequate, usually from November to March, arrange a raft trip on the Rio Mayo (\$100/person; contact information below). This is a full-day outing, with stops made for lunch (provided), a hike to look for Russet-crowned Motmot, and a visit to a Mayo Indian vil-

lage. Most of the species found in the Alamos area can be seen on this idyllic float trip.

Sierra de Alamos

A climb of several hours into the Sierra de Alamos is a strenuous undertaking, but it can produce a number of species not found at lower elevations. A local guide can usually be found. Military Macaw, Mottled Owl, Colima Pygmy-Owl, Gray-crowned Woodpecker, White-striped and Ivory-billed Woodcreepers, Spotted Wren, Rufous-capped and Crescent-chested Warblers, Rusty Sparrow, and Rusty-crowned Ground-Sparrow can all be found at higher elevations in the pine-oak forest.

El Cajón

Another area that can be visited with a guide and a 4wd vehicle is El Cajón, a jolting 3-hour drive east into the Sierras. This is the only location where we have found Laughing Falcon, a species that, like Bat Falcon, was collected to near-extirpation in the 1940s and ‘50s. This is also the only reliable area in Sonora for Masked Tityra.

On the return trip to Arizona, there is a series of ponds on the left about a mile past the turnoff to Villa Juárez and Estero Tobarí. Turn right and cross the railroad tracks, then right down the dirt road. Entering Hermosillo, the reservoir on your right can also be excellent if there is water.

Forrest Davis is President of High Lonesome BirdTours (800/743-2268 or 443/838-6589; hilone@hilonesome.com). David MacKay guides for High Lonesome and other companies, and is the owner of Solipaso, a birding and ecotours company (info@solipaso.com; 011 52 647 428 0466 or 520/241-6682), offering float tours on the Rio Mayo and other services and facilities.

Pishing in the Woods

BY LAURA GILCHRIST

I always marveled at birders who could ‘pish’ and magically coax birds into view for all to see. Amazing! Fascinating! When I tried, the results were not amazing and not fascinating. There was little understanding and lots of spit.

And so I had to smile when I stumbled across *The Art of Pishing*, a book and CD by Pete Dunne. Maybe there was a chance I could become a pishing power instead of a pishing pouter—ineffective and laughed at by birds everywhere. I read the book and practiced with the CD. I learned how to do a good (spitless) pish, and how to make squeals, smacks, and owl calls on my own. It was time to try out these techniques. Alone, of course!

My journey of pish-discovery began one sunny day in October at a local conservation area, when I veered off the trail and into the birds’ world. I started off with some pretty ardent pishing. Presto! In came a Black-capped Chickadee and a Tufted Titmouse! The Yellow-rumped Warblers were curious and moved closer, as did two White-throated Sparrows.

The birds were making lots of call notes, which inspired me

to try something else. I started copying the birds, trying to match their call notes. To my delight, the birds were both curious and forgiving of my attempts, and wouldn’t leave! A flicker announced its presence with a ‘Kyeer’. I let go my own ‘Kyeer’. Two flickers took notice, calling back and forth with me. I couldn’t believe it. They would listen, turn their heads in my direction, fly in closer, and call again. I matched them every call of the way! I had close encounters this way with numerous birds, including Winter Wrens, Song Sparrows, and Swamp Sparrows.

My pishing bottom line: Amazing! At each new location, I would start by pishing. Once the birds came in, I would mimic them, and throw in a squeal or an owl whistle here and there. With the help of *The Art of Pishing* and the birds themselves, I am no longer a pishing pouter, but a confident and happy pishing power, investigated by birds everywhere.

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