



Winging It

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Birding Northeast Mexico

BY ROBERT CECIL

Many birders flock to South Texas for a taste of "Mexican" birding. But traveling just five hours south of the US border can acquaint them with the full smorgasbord. Thicket Tinamou, Sungrebe, Olivaceous Woodcreeper, Barred Antshrike, and many other specialties mingle with species found in North American field guides, including western migrants that follow the Rocky Mountains down through Big Bend to Mexico's east side. And in the 65 years since George M. Sutton chronicled his travels here in *A Bend in a Mexican River*, travel here has become considerably easier.

Gomez Farias and El Cielo

The short road to the famed and pleasant birding town of Gomez Farias, Tamaulipas, the point of departure for exploring the El Cielo Biosphere, is just 100 kilometers south of Ciudad Victoria on Highway 85. Approaching Gomez, watch for the sign at the base of the hills to Bocatoma II, a rustic open-air restaurant featuring just-netted fish and langostinos (a local freshwater crustacean) from its aquaculture pools and a small river with transparent aquamarine water and excellent birding. Recommended is the short boat ride (about \$8) with Manuel Santiago or another local operator, who can point out Boat-billed Heron and Sungrebe; the ride also offers chances

at Bare-throated Tiger-Heron, four kingfisher species, and Blue-crowned Motmot.

Proceeding up the hill takes one past north-east Mexico's most photogenic Bat Falcon pair on the twin powerline poles. A short distance farther up is Gomez Farias, which, recognizing the economic potential of its famous biosphere preserve, now features several small hotels and lodgings, numerous concessions providing rides up the rugged roads into more remote areas of the preserve, and birding guides. Accommodating to birders is Hostal Casa de Piedra (about \$45 per night/double room, breakfast included: www.tourbymexico.com/elcielo_casadedepiedra), which, in November 2006, featured a roosting Northern Potoo. Birding can be good anywhere on or off the bouncy road as it leaves town to the west through citrus and cactus fields. A parking area at the fork a kilometer or so past town facilitates exploration of both the old and the newer road up to the tiny village of Alta Cima, and provides chances at Bronze-winged Woodpecker, Olivaceous Woodcreeper, Barred Antshrike, Yellow-winged Tanager, Hooded Grosbeak, Black-headed Saltator, and often perplexing looks at flying parrots.

Continuing up the new road as far as your vehicle allows takes you through some excellent forest habitat and finally to Alta Cima, a sort of base camp (basic accommodations available) for travel, on foot or by high-clearance vehicle, higher into the mountains. A visit here can yield some high-elevation species, such as Black-headed Nightingale-Thrush or Black-headed

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Siskin, but most of the area's specialties can be found closer to Gomez Farias.

South to El Naranjo

South from Gomez Farias, many birders detour to Ocampo, northwest of Ciudad Mante, but most go about 30 kilometers beyond Mante and take Highway 80 west to the dusty town of El Naranjo. Hotel del Valle (about \$35 per night: www.hoteleslara.com) is adequate; a couple of small competitors have popped up. Watch for flocks of Tamaulipas Crows. West of town about five kilometers is a small forested



Side road on the way to the Bocatoma II restaurant near Gomez Farias. Photo © Robert Cecil.

stream valley with parking turnouts. Although the constant traffic is distracting, birding can be good, with Elegant Trogon, warblers, and Scrub and Yellow-throated Euphonias.

Continuing west on Highway 80, check out the Mague de Oriente road at kilometer 148, especially the first 2 or 3 kilometers before the habitat changes from mixed deciduous forest to sugarcane fields. Watch for Barred Antshrike, Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Blue Mockingbird, and the secretive Yellow-billed Cacique. Raucous calls frequently announce the mid-morning appearance of often distant Military Macaws.

Continuing west, Highway 80 leads to the 1,196m crest of the mountains near kilometer 139. Pull over at the firetower entrance; if the gate is open, bird the tower grounds, or cross the highway and squeeze through the gate to the microwave tower road, which winds upward through several kilometers of open pasture and upland oaks, featuring Ivory-billed and Spot-crowned Woodcreepers, Crescent-chested Warbler, Painted Redstart, and Rufous-capped

Brushfinch.

Before leaving the El Naranjo area, visit the spectacular Rio El Salto waterfalls, the region's most accessible. About two kilometers before entering El Naranjo from the east, follow the sign to El Meco. Keep to the left through the small town to the scenic overview of the falls, then continue down the road, keeping left, to the gate of the hydroelectric facility. Turn left down the dirt road to the riverbed. Another rough road goes toward the base of the old falls and a series of pools. Birding opportunities here are limited,

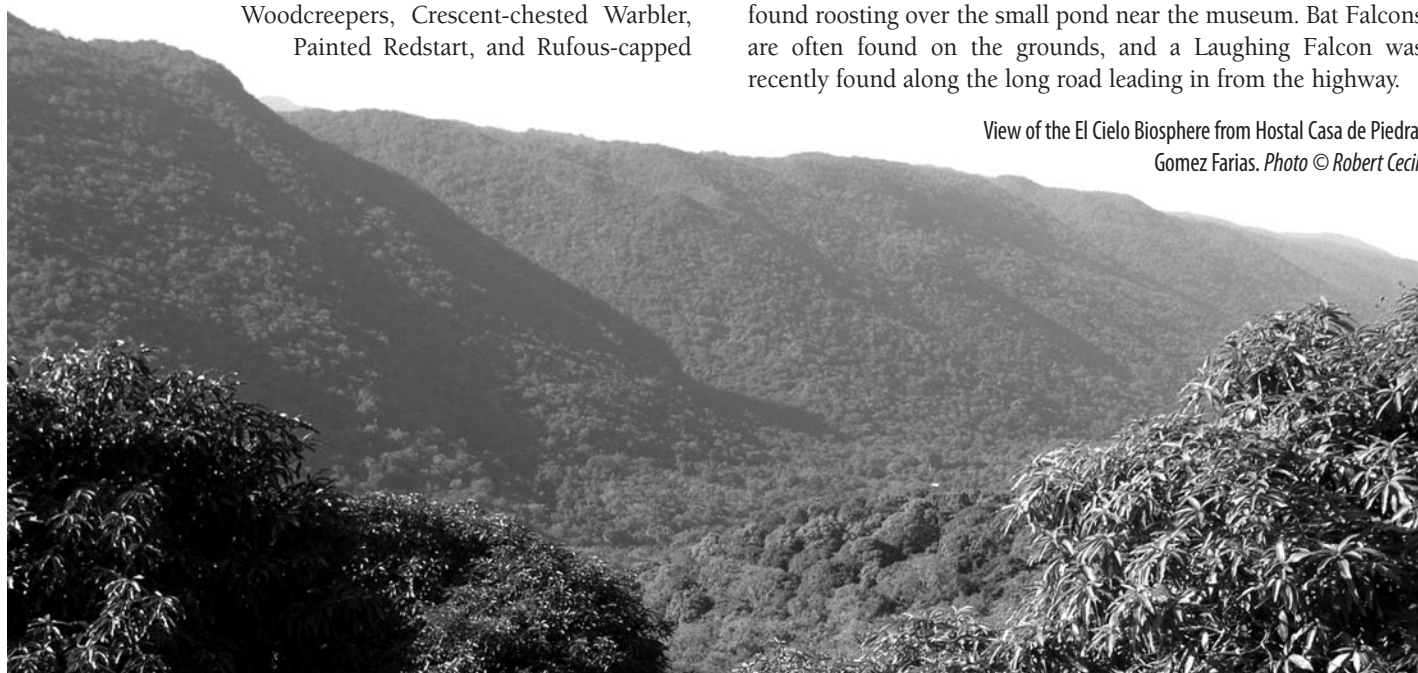
but watch for the Peregrine Falcons nesting on the cliff.

Exploring trails and rough vehicle tracks in this and other parts of Mexico can yield new birding hotspots. These are traditionally public or *de facto* public rights-of-way used by local residents to get to homes, work sites, or small settlements. If you go through gates, be sure to close them behind you: they are for keeping livestock in, not people out. Keep in mind that many local workers carry machetes as part of their work; there is no reason to be intimidated.

Taninul

This palatial hotel and spa provides sumptuous grounds and interesting birding just 20 kilometers east of Ciudad Valles on Highway 70 towards Tampico (about \$42 per night: www.surf-mexico.com/states/SLP/taninul.htm). Parrots and parakeets scream through the grounds, and a group of Boat-billed Herons is easily found roosting over the small pond near the museum. Bat Falcons are often found on the grounds, and a Laughing Falcon was recently found along the long road leading in from the highway.

View of the El Cielo Biosphere from Hostal Casa de Piedra, Gomez Farias. Photo © Robert Cecil.



South to Xilitla

South of Ciudad Valles at kilometer marker 139, just past an apparently failed aquatic park, a dirt road meanders two or three kilometers to the west through rangeland with scattered trees and wet areas. Probably the most reliable location for Aplomado Falcon in the region, this road is rough in good weather and impassable when rainy, but is excellent for raptors, including Gray Hawk, Roadside Hawk, White-tailed Hawk, and Laughing Falcon. The stream bottom and nearby ponds can yield Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, herons, White and White-faced Ibises, Roseate Spoonbill, Wood Stork, and shorebirds.

Just south of the Aplomado road, the habitat becomes decidedly more tropical, with banana, coffee, and tangerine groves mixed in among small fragments of forest; jagged, green-shrouded mountains protrude along both sides of the highway. Watch for Highway 120 towards Xilitla, the location of Las Posas. Las Posas ("the pools"), a surreal melange of concrete structures by the "Mad Englishman" Edward James, has never been described without using the word "bizarre." Set in a tropical forest remnant, the lush habitat and tortuous trails offer birders an opportunity to observe several species at the northern edge of their ranges, including Violaceous Trogon, Emerald Toucanet, Slate-colored Solitaire, Common Bush-Tanager, and Montezuma Oropendola, as well as more expected species. You can also climb up the stone stairways to the surrounding forests, hamlets, and coffee fincas. Being disoriented here is pretty much a full-time experience; heading downhill will take you to the stream, its waterfalls, and more familiar territory. Las Posas was never intended to be a public display; getting around and climbing on the sculptures can range from difficult to treacherous, especially when wet weather makes surfaces slippery.

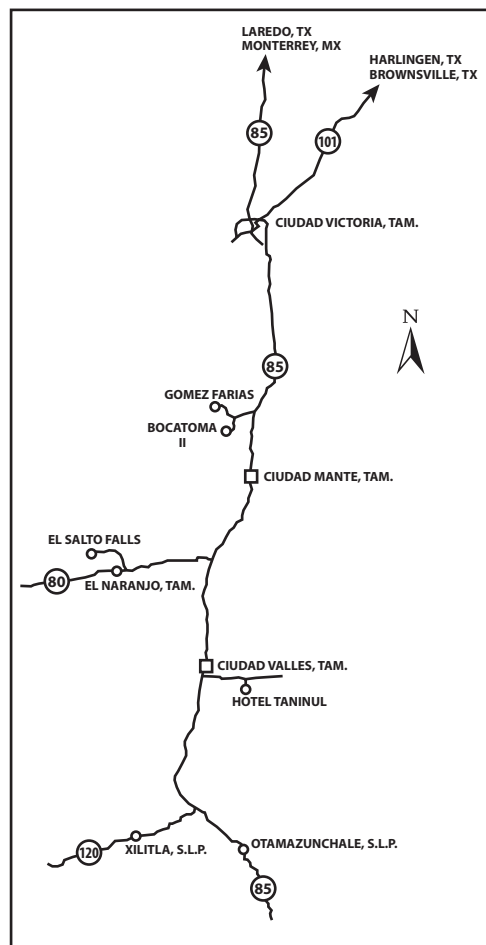
There are several smaller hotels and lodgings in Xilitla, and a large new hotel is under construction, but if you will be here only once, stay at El Castillo, the quaint, quirky, and somewhat pricey posada described at www.junglegossip.com, a website that also gives historical information about Las Posas. Reservations are recommended.

Traveling south will take you to more great birding areas, and still others are waiting to be discovered. If you have a day or two to spare, consider spending it with Rudolfo (Rudy) Reyes in Tamazunchale, a one-man environmental movement who speaks perfect English. While not really a birding guide, Rudy can acquaint visitors with his work, take them to remote Nahuatl villages, and show them locations rarely visited by other tourists. E-mail him at rudytam50@hotmail.com.

Robert Cecil lives in Des Moines, IA and works for the Economic Development Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce. With family and friends, he has taken dozens of road trips throughout Mexico. Thanks to Carol Schumacher and Judy Garton for their assistance with this article.



Pools above the falls on the El Salto River near El Naranjo. Photo © Robert Cecil.



Travel into Mexico by auto is not difficult with proper preparation. At the time of writing, the following documents are required: a title or current registration receipt in the importer's name or jointly with spouse; if applicable, a letter from the lien holder authorizing the vehicle's operation in Mexico; a driver's license; a birth certificate or passport; a credit card to post a bond guaranteeing the vehicle's return to the U.S.; and Mexican auto insurance. All travelers to the interior of Mexico need a tourist permit (about \$20). Since regulations can change, it is essential to check for updates on online sites such as www.sanbornsinsurance.com. It is important to have your vehicle permit canceled before leaving Mexico. Failure to do so will prevent you from returning to Mexico by vehicle in the future, and you may be charged the amount of the bond. Comprehensive Mexico travel guides such as *Lonely Planet* give detailed information about getting around in Mexico, and *The People's Guide to Mexico* (Franz) gives invaluable and often amusing descriptions of the idiosyncrasies of Mexico driving, signage, auto services, etc. Overall, signage in Mexico is fairly good, as are the highways. Especially south of Ciudad Valles, watch carefully for the ubiquitous *topes*, or speed bumps.

Keep in mind that northeast Mexico is not a major tourist destination. Consequently, English is not widely spoken, and rudimentary knowledge of Spanish is desirable, although, with patience and an English/Spanish dictionary, not essential