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## Guatemala Trip Report

**Main Tour: February 12 – 19, 2017**  
**Tikal Extension: February 19 – 24, 2017**

Guatemala offers a world full of contrasts, colonial cities, jungles, volcanoes, archaeological sites and most of all exceptional birding. Located in the heart of Central America, Guatemala encompasses a wide variety of ecosystems from both Southern Mexico and Central America. More than 720 bird species have been reported in Guatemala with at least 370 of them known to breed. On our inaugural tour of Guatemala, it was evident that this fabulous country is truly something special and is sure to be the next birding hotspot! This small, yet little known country has it all - stunning scenery, friendly people, superb food, wonderful accommodations, superb local guides and some fantastic wildlife, not to mention the incredible Mayan ruins of Tikal. Our tour was a wonderful success with great sightings and adventures shared with fun people!



### HIGHLIGHTS & BEST SIGHTINGS:

- |                                      |                                     |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <b>Pink-headed Warbler</b>           | <b>Horned Guan</b>                  |
| <b>Azure-rumped Tanager</b>          | <b>Belted Flycatcher</b>            |
| <b>Orange-breasted Falcon</b>        | <b>Guatemalan Pygmy Owl</b>         |
| <b>Blue-throated Motmot</b>          | <b>Collared Forest Falcon</b>       |
| <b>Yucatan Woodpecker</b>            | <b>Painted Bunting</b>              |
| <b>Agami Heron</b>                   | <b>Chestnut-colored Woodpecker</b>  |
| <b>Gray-throated Chat</b>            | <b>King Vulture</b>                 |
| <b>Black-and-white Hawk Eagle</b>    | <b>Buffy-crowned Wood-Partridge</b> |
| <b>Tody Motmot</b>                   | <b>Slender Sheartail</b>            |
| <b>Resplendent Quetzal</b>           | <b>Highland Guan</b>                |
| <b>Sungrebe</b>                      | <b>Azure-rumped Tanager</b>         |
| <b>Northern Potoo</b>                | <b>Wedge-tailed Sabrewing</b>       |
| <b>Vermiculated Screech-Owl</b>      | <b>Ocellated Turkey</b>             |
| <b>Black-throated Shrike-Tanager</b> | <b>Rose-throated Tanager</b>        |

Top photo: Guatemalan Pygmy Owl by Steve Bird.

## Main Tour: February 12– 19, 2017

**Day 1:** By late afternoon, everyone had arrived in Guatemala City and transferred to our lovely colonial style hotel in the charming city of Antigua. The official tour started with dinner tonight, where we were entertained by folkloric dance and marimba music.

### Day 2: San Cristobal Alto, Finca El Pilar and Antigua.

This morning we explored the hills above Antigua meeting our first Bushy-crested Jays and Gray Silky-Flycatchers. We birded the hillsides before breakfast and highlights included Elegant Euphonia, Prevost's Ground Sparrow, Bar-winged Oriole and Black-headed Siskin. We enjoyed a fantastic breakfast al fresco



overlooking the city and then continued on to El Pilar, a private reserve with hummingbird feeders and a trail into the forest.

Most numerous here were **Rufous Sabrewing**, Berylline Hummingbird, and Magnificent Hummingbird and a short walk up the trail yielded a Blue-throated Motmot, Tufted Flycatcher and a Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercer that did its best to avoid detection. We returned to Antigua for lunch and then enjoyed an informative cultural tour of Antigua visiting the magnificent churches, ruins and museums that was enhanced by Maynor's historical stories and legends from Antigua's rich past. We visited the Capuchin Convent, La Merced Church, Central Park, and learned about the famous Arch of the 5th Avenue. In the evening, we enjoyed a nice dinner and then reviewed the checklist of our first day in Guatemala.



### Day 3: Tecpan and Los Tarrales. Night Los Tarrales

Today we made an early start departing from Antigua just after sunrise to the Tecpan area. We spent the morning at Tecpan Private Reserve and as we arrived a Mountain Trogan was in the parking lot and provided us with great views. We enjoyed another superb breakfast near to the Tecpan Private Reserve and then walked and birded the forested trails of the reserve. The towering forests were laden with mosses and the sun soon warmed us as we made our way along.



Highlights were stunning views of one of the most sought after birds the **Pink-headed Warbler**, plus Crescent-chested Warbler, an almost tame and yet very seldom seen **Guatemalan Pygmy Owl**, Guatemalan Flicker, White-eared Hummingbird, Rufous-collared Robin and Black-capped Swallows.

Leaving this wonderful site we travelled to Los Tarrales and had our lunch. We then spent the afternoon bird watching around the

lodge beginning at the fruit feeders where we got super views of Lesson's Motmot, Velasquez's Woodpecker, Yellow-throated Euphonia and Yellow-winged Tanager. A short walk soon found us White-bellied Chachalaca, Pacific Parakeet, Spot-breasted Oriole, a stunning male Painted Bunting, King Vulture and a few Lesser Swallow-tailed Swifts.



#### Day 4: Los Tarrales Reserve. Night Los Tarrales

Los Tarrales Reserve represents one of the most important areas for conservation in Guatemala. It protects pristine forest around the upper slopes of Atitlan Volcano as well as cloud forest, and at lower levels, broad-leaved forest and coffee plantations. This morning we were sipping coffee just before sunrise and were then on our way up into the reserve in several 4x4s. Not far away, we stopped along the road for our first looks at the rare and endangered Azure-rumped Tanager, a species restricted to just a tiny area in Guatemala and Mexico. Other highlights of the morning included Blue-tailed



Hummingbird, White-throated Thrush, Ruddy Foliage-Gleaner, Northern Bentbill and Red-legged Honeycreeper.

Arriving high in the coffee plantation we were greeted by a wonderfully laid out breakfast, washing facilities and hot coffee. After this scenic picnic breakfast we walked up a tract to see a fruiting tree that supported 4 beautiful **Blue-crowned Chlorophonias** and both male and female Long-tailed Manakin. We stopped to check the coffee plantation for Prevost's Ground-Sparrow which was well seen and nearby we enjoyed the smart looking and brightly colored White-winged Tanager. Raptor highlights included excellent views of White Hawk and King Vulture. Pacific Parakeets flew overhead and a Mottled Owl was seen roosting in a stand of bamboo.



After lunch we took a walk on the reserve trails soon finding **Lesson's Motmot**, Altamira and Spot-breasted Orioles, Violet Sabrewing, Long-billed Starthroat, Spot-breasted Wren, a magnificent Collared Forest Falcon, McGillivray's Warbler, a tricky Rufous-breasted Spinetail, more White-winged Tanagers, Long-billed Gnatwren and a host of other excellent species.



wonderful pair of **Slender Sheartails**.

#### Day 5: Los Tarrales to Lake Atitlan.

This morning after early coffee we birded the trails of the reserve. As the sun was coming up we were spying on a male Highland Guan perched low and showing through a hole in the vegetation. Other highlights were Crested Guan, Scrub Euphonia, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, Velasquez's Woodpecker and several species of warbler and vireo.

In an area of woodland with big patches of bamboo, we searched for the tiny Tody Motmot which was in residence but very elusive and only really seen well when the scope was strategically set up with just small windows of opportunity.

Back for breakfast we packed up and headed toward Lake Atitlan. On the way we stopped in an area outside of town and with the help of one the area's local guides we found a

#### Continuing on to our lodge we enjoyed lunch overlooking the picturesque lake. In the afternoon we went up to an overlook which was mostly clouded in and found Cabinis's Wren, Brown-backed Solitaire, Hammond's Flycatcher and Chestnut-capped Brush-Finch.

#### Day 6: Volcan San Pedro. Night Posada Santiago

Today we were up very early for our quest to see the mythical Horned Guan. We boarded a boat to head across Lake Atitlan and once we reached town we hopped on some trucks to get to the beginning of our hiking trail. We slowly ascended the steep trail and finally after one and half hours we reached the "flattish" part at the lower reaches of the Guan habitat. It was cloudy and misty but the trees were full of birds, mostly warblers and a few tanagers. As time passed we found ourselves at 8,500 feet and all at once we could hear the low pitched call of the bird. Over the next few minutes we strained to see the **Horned Guan** moving sky above us landing on an open tree where it sat for several minutes while we positioned ourselves and got scope views and photos of this intriguing and much sought after bird. We stayed with the bird until it flew off and then celebrated our amazing views. We slowly made our way down the mountain and once at the bottom our finale came in the form of the rarely seen **Belted Flycatcher**.



### Day 7: Lake Atitlan area.

This morning we were up and out early bird watching on the western slopes of Atitlan Volcano at Rey Tepepul. Surveying the subtropical humid forest at an altitude of 1800 meters we were hoping for the chance to see Guatemala's national bird, the Resplendent Quetzal. It was a gorgeous, crystal clear morning and offered great views of the volcanoes and lake. From the overlook, our local guide Freddie could hear a Quetzal calling but it was a long way away. We moved down to a short trail on the edge of a forest which was quiet but our guides were on a mission to find us the Quetzal. Aron checked a hillside trail and then called us down to see the bird perched in a distant tree.

We positioned ourselves and got scope views and then the bird flew straight up over the valley and dropped like a bullet into the trees below. Aron relocated the bird again and we positioned for the scope. The bird was moving up the hillside in our direction and we chased it right back up to the original trail. From the trail, the bird sat in an open tree for several minutes, offering side views with its long tail being picked up by the light breeze. All at once the bird flew even closer and landed on an open branch giving front views! Cameras clicked away and we all marveled at this amazing sight of a stunning male **Resplendent Quetzal** not 30 feet away from us. For many, this was the highlight of the trip! And no matter how many times you may have seen a quetzal before, this was simply amazing!



Later in the day, we traveled back to Guatemala City for the night. A stop along the shore of Lake Atitlan gave us the opportunity to see a few ducks such as Ring-necked and Redhead while Violet-green Swallows and several other species were also noted. Over dinner, we reminisced about the adventures and highlights of our fabulous week. Before retiring, we said good bye to Annie and Carter and to one of our wonderful local guides Maynor.

### Day 8: Guatemala City – End of Main Tour. 19th Feb – Tikal Extension

Getting out of Guatemala City this morning proved to be a challenge and in fact did not happen for many. Morning fog caused the cancellation of our flight to Flores so after navigating the controlled chaos of Avianca airlines we rebooked on a late evening flight and went back to the hotel for breakfast. After a few hours of rest, Maynor appeared at the hotel and rescued us from certain boredom by taking us to his patch, an area called Cayala Ecological Park and Nature Reserve on the outskirts of Guatemala City. Just as we got off the bus, Steve called to us to hurry and see the two **Buffy-crowned Wood Partridge** that were moving along the edge of a bank above the main trail. We got on the birds and then watched them for about 20 minutes while they moved, fed and generally ignored us though we were less than 20 feet away.



We enjoyed studying the birds in stunning detail until they finally moved off to the other side of the hill. Other highlights of the afternoon were two **Ferruginous Pygmy Owls** perched together, one rufous and one gray, Bushtits and a couple of fast moving flocks filled with warblers. We returned to the city proper, enjoyed a nice dinner in a Mexican restaurant and then headed back to the airport once again bidding goodbye to our friend and guide Maynor. We finally boarded our domestic flight to Flores and went to our hotel for the night.



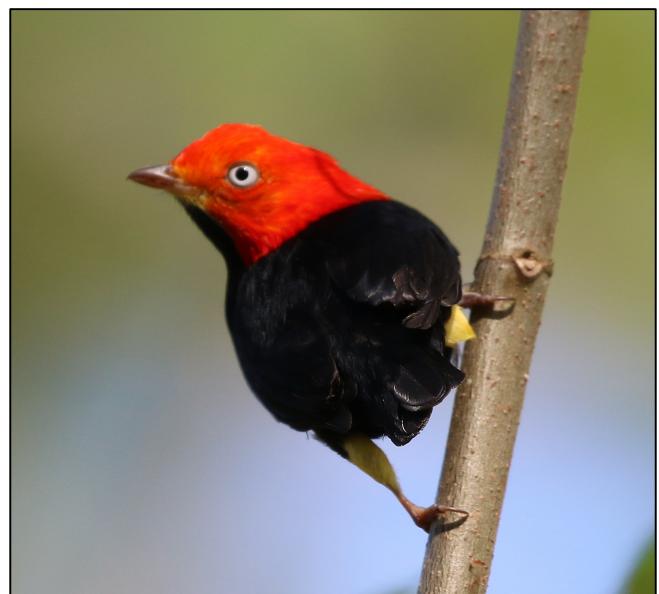
#### **Day 9: Flores to Guacamayas Biological Station**

By 6 AM, we were up and having breakfast and soon off toward Guacamayas Biological Station. We drove through Flores making our first stop at a bridge over a river where there were many birds in all directions. The highlights included a Laughing Falcon and a juvenile Aplomado Falcon that was perched and then proceeded to give a show by harassing some Laughing Gulls in the water. We continued on stopping for a stunning Bat Falcon perched in the morning sun and then made several more stops where there were interesting species such as Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Gray-crowned Yellowthroat, Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture, White-tailed Kites and Fork-tailed Flycatcher.

We arrived at the community of Paso Caballos where we boarded a boat and cruised up the San Pedro River towards Las Guacamayas Biological Station. Along the way we had good views of Yellow-tailed Oriole and several species of heron and swallow. We arrived and settled into the "Station" which offered superb accommodation with each room having its own animal or bird theme.

The hummingbird feeders were a big distraction from going to our rooms and even having lunch as Wedge-tailed Sabrewing, Long-billed Hermit, White-bellied Emerald and Green-breasted Mango vied for our attention. Then a stunning **Red-capped Manakin** stopped everyone in their tracks as it fed at almost point blank range right in front of us.

In the afternoon, we walked up the trail to the Mirador and found Black-faced Antthrush, Chestnut-colored Woodpecker and Rufous-tailed Jacamar on the way. We climbed the tower and at the top a lovely table set with wine and beer which we enjoyed as we took in views of the river, the sunset and the expanse of wetland and forest out in front of us. Wow what a wonderful setting.



## Day 10: Guacamayas Biological Station

This morning after early coffee, we boarded our boats and explored the quieter sections of the nearby river. We set off from the dock as the mist was rising from the water and the sun was lighting up a clear blue sky above us. Cruising up Sacluc River, we found American Pygmy Kingfisher, Russet-naped Wood Rail, and Yucatan Woodpecker and had great views of **Agami Heron** one of the target birds for many people in our group. On the way back, a Gray-headed Kite was seen by the second boat and the localized Morelet's Crocodiles put in a few appearances.



After breakfast, we took a walk on the trails of the reserve. We started off with Rufous-tailed Jacamar and Stub-tailed Spadebill. At the helipad, we saw a high soaring Black-and-White Hawk Eagle and further into the forest we had superb views of a pair of Gray-throated Chats, Scaly-breasted Hummingbird, a pair of Dusky Antbirds and even Geoffroy's Spider Monkey.



Lunch and early afternoon was a relaxed time to enjoy the hummingbirds or simply lounge in this wonderful accommodation.

In the late afternoon we set off on another boat exploration of the Rio Sacluc. We saw many water birds such as herons, kingfishers, cormorants and Anhinga and even brief looks at a Yucatan Jay. As the sun started to set we lazily drifted with both boats tied together and enjoyed either a soft drink, beer, rum punch and some cake.

What a great

way to end a day. But the day was not over as we were now ready to cruise quietly back in the dark trying to see if we could spot any nocturnal life.

We were not to be disappointed as we had fantastic close looks at 2 **Northern Potoos** sat on their perches and showing those weird bulging yellow eyes. We also saw close Common Pauriques and some wonderful views of Great Egrets in flight looking like angels against the night sky.

## Day 11: Guacamayas Biological Station to Tikal.

Our last early morning boat trip on the San Pedro River was specifically to search for the elusive Sungrebe. An Agami Heron was spotted soon after we left dock and then the search began.



After an hour of intense looking, Steve, giving the local guides a run for their money spotted a Sungrebe more than 200 meters away. We approached the area and with engines off drifted close to the vegetation where finally the attractive female **Sungrebe** came out and swam unconcerned amongst the roots close to the bank giving us spectacular views.



We returned for breakfast, took a last look at the hummers and Red-capped Manakin and then set off by boat and then coach towards Tikal National Park. A stop beside an area of wetland produced a Sora, brief views of Ruddy Crake, Limpkin, a group of 8 Purple Gallinules having a fight and a restaurant surrounded by Baltimore Orioles. In fact the trees full of orioles were so bright that we renamed a collection of orioles as a "sorbet".

After lunch and a short drive we arrived at our lodge inside Tikal National Park. Both Gray Fox and Collared Peccary were seen on our approach. After settling in to our rooms we met up for a short afternoon walk. Blue Buntings, Olive-throated Parakeets, White-fronted Parrots, Back-crowned Tityras and Northern Schiffornis all showed well. Gina found an obliging Rose-throated Tanager, there was a brief Northern Royal Flycatcher and then at dusk we heard Yucatan Poorwill followed by great views of a Vermiculated Screech-Owl in the spotlight.



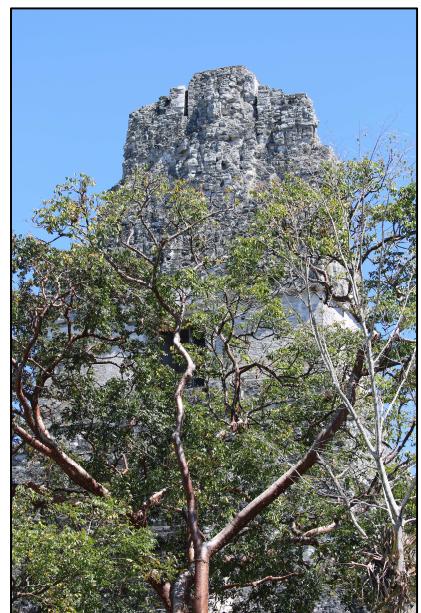
#### **Day 12: Tikal National Park. Hotel Jaguar Inn**

A brief pre-breakfast walk near the lodge produced amazing views of a group of **Ocellated Turkeys** warming up in the patches of sunlight breaking through the trees. We also enjoyed Bare-throated Tiger-Heron and a nest containing two well grown Boat-billed Heron chicks with adults in attendance.

Tikal is the largest excavated archeological site in the American continent and contains some of the most fascinating archaeological remains of the ancient Mayan civilization. Declared a world heritage site in 1979 it comprises 576 square miles of lush jungle surrounding one of the most impressive Mayan ruins imaginable.

We set off on our morning visit to this fascinating site. Surrounded by forest it wasn't

long before we came across our first birds that included Kentucky Warbler, a very showy Pale-billed Woodpecker, and even a Black-throated Shrike-Tanager. At the ruins we were distracted by a magnificent perched Orange-breasted Falcon and the Ridgeway's subspecies of Northern Rough-winged Swallows. After this fascinating visit, many photos and a nice lunch we made our way back towards the lodge. The close sighting of a Chestnut-colored Woodpecker on our way back was a very memorable sighting.



We enjoyed another relaxed hour or so before our final evening walk near the lodge. Keel-billed Toucan flew over we had already seen Double-toothed Kite and Swallow-tailed Kites, Blue Buntings were on

show and then one of the most remarkable things was a pair of **Northern Royal Flycatchers** feeding and showing off in some very small trees beside the track. We enjoyed amazing views of a bird that is nearly always tucked away in deep forest. With another Rose-throated Tanager seen and several other nice species we ended our birding in Tikal.



An evening review of all the birds and wildlife seen showed just what a fabulous trip we had had and how fantastic Guatemala is as a birding destination.

#### **Day 13: Tikal National Park to Guatemala City**

This morning we transferred to Flores airport and took the short flight to Guatemala city where we all went our separate ways ending this wonderful trip with a wonderful group of people.

We can't wait to return.

Gina & Steve