

Guatemala



**Independent Budget Birding
February 28th – March 8th 2021**

Ross & Melissa Gallardy
www.budgetbirders.com

Overview:

We recently completed a quick, whirlwind tour of Guatemala, focusing on near endemics and other tricky Central American species and subspecies. The trip was in conjunction with a trip to Oaxaca and Chiapas so some targets that people would typically be interested in (White-bellied Chachalaca and Belted Flycatcher) were not priority birds as we planned to see them the following week in Mexico. I'll be the first to admit that our itinerary was a bit interesting. Notably because I forgot about Blue-tailed Hummingbird and had to figure out a reliable place to see it. Also because we didn't get Resplendent Quetzal at Mirador del Rey, and because we kept dipping hummingbirds (Wine-throated and Slender Sheartail). If you're not going to visit Mexico on the same trip, I'd probably recommend including Tarreles and maybe Finca El Pilar.

Despite a bit of a slow start, in the end the trip went quite well. Fantastic looks at Horned Guan, Unspotted Saw-Whet, Orange-breasted Falcon, Maroon-chested Ground-Dove, Ocellated & Singing Quails, Buffy-crowned Wood-Partridge, White-breasted Hawk, Central American Plumbeous Vireo, Pink-headed Warbler, Goldman's Warbler, Gould's Spotted Nightingale Thrush, and Black-capped Siskin (ok, super crappy looks at the siskin, but who cares). Although with successes come failures as well and I think the misses are more important to discuss than the targets acquired because they indicate birds that may need additional focus. Hummingbirds were a disaster this trip. We tried four spots of Slender Sheartail, two for Wine-throated Hummingbird, and one for Sparkling-tailed Hummingbird and came up empty at all of them. We also missed Belted Flycatcher and Bar-winged Oriole but didn't try any of the more reliable spots (targets in Mexico).

Unfortunately there are very few independent trip reports out there for Guatemala sans Timo's 2015 report and one from Drukker in 2018. Both are helpful but also limiting, as they only concentrate on the Lake Atitlan area. In this report I've tried to focus on logistics and some of the better birds. For more info on all of the expected species in various areas, check out the tour group reports or my eBird checklists.

Writing this trip report is also a bit of a whirl wind as I'm writing it during the transition from Guatemala to Mexico (currently sitting in an airport as I type this and I leave for Africa right after getting home from Mexico so I won't have any more time to dedicate to it).

Special thanks to Luke Seitz and John Cahill for fielding a number of my questions during preparation. Luke leads tours to Guatemala through WINGS and John is an extremely knowledgeable local birder who also runs tours in Guatemala through his company [Xikanel Birding Adventures](#). If you're interested in some help while birding in Guatemala, check them out!

Logistics:

Car Rental: Guatemala might go down as one of the cheapest places to rent a car. I booked through enterprise and didn't even get the "cheapest" car, opting for a mid-sized sedan instead. The cost was \$90 online for 8 days. When I arrived, I expected the typical upcharges, but the guy asked if I wanted additional insurance and I said "no, it's covered by my credit card." He just said okay. No fight whatsoever. To be honest that kind of spooked me a little, so I decided to at least buy the 3rd Party insurance, as most places I visit is mandatory to purchase. It was an extra \$10 a day so adding that and some taxes in, the total came out to \$200 for the 8 days. Can't complain about a price like that. The guy did say there were going to pay special attention to the tires when I returned which I thought was a bit odd, and they did go over them closely, but in the end no additional charges (see below about tires though)

Driving: For the most part driving in Guatemala was straight forward. Being a country of volcanos, roads are very windy and travel times are slow. Google maps was accurate for drive times almost all the time and seemed to factor in speed bumps, slow trucks, and steep climbs. I tried to limit driving at night, although I often found myself not getting to the hotel until around 2000 and often would leave by 0430 or 0500. Roads in some places are extremely steep. The Unspotted Saw-whet road was in pretty good condition (albeit dirt) but so steep my car barely made it up. Melissa had

to push the car for it to make it up the last section. Also for some reason I ended up with 2 flat tires this trip even though the roads aren't too bad. The first was in the side wall so I just stopped at a Dunlop Tire shop and bought a new tire (only \$45!) and the second I was able to get repaired. Perhaps the car dealer knew the tires were cheap and wouldn't last, hence his comment that they would pay special attention to them.

Money: ATMs are present in most major towns. I withdrew up to 1500Q at a time (didn't try higher, but probably worthwhile to try). Very few places took credit card (mostly only gas stations). Exchange rate was around 1 USD to 7.7Q.

Hotels: I wasn't expecting hotels to be so expensive in Guatemala. Even in small random towns it was hard to find anything below 250Q-300Q. That being said, hotel quality would vary even if prices were the same. Our hostel in Xela was only 250Q and was very nice (including a free breakfast) and Ranchitos de Quetzal was 300Q a night and included access to a great reserve. So just budget 250-300Q per night and you should be good to go.

Mirador del Rey:

Access: Located about 15-20 min uphill from Santiago Atitlan, there is a loop trail that runs from the mirador down a steep hillside and eventually exits a bit further downhill (towards) town. The trail starts just before the mirador around 14.5980,-91.23025 and re-enters the road a bit further down at 14.5978,-91.2300. If you start on the lower entrance (closer to town) make sure you keep right at 14.5964,-91.22754 and then shortly after make sure you are crossing the little bridge at 14.59522,-91.2306. Other than that, it's hard to get lost.

Birds: Lots of good mid-elevation birds here. Azure-rumped Tanager, Emerald-chinned Hummingbird, Resplendent Quetzal, "Gould's" Spotted Nightingale Thrush, Blue-throated Motmot, White-faced Quail-Dove, and Blue-crowned Chorophonia being some of the more important targets.

Summary: We arrived shortly before dawn and had a half dozen Mexican Whip-poor-wills calling in the area. Also distant Great-horned and Fulvous Owls. We quickly went downhill with the goal of concentrating on the Gould's Nightingale Thrush at dawn. This took much longer than anticipated, but finally raked out great looks at one just on the other side of the trail split at 14.59474,-91.23055. Also a very responsive pair of Blue-throated Motmots and some Singing Quail were found at the same spot. Along the way we managed good views of a pair of White-faced Quail Doves on the trail at 14.59531,-91.23143 and a pair of Azure-rumped Tanagers at the same spot. After that, it became quetzal target time. We had already heard a few, but despite some serious effort over the next two hours, we never saw one (yikes). Also, I couldn't find any White-faced Ground -Sparrows along the trail, but did manage plenty of other good birds. We left around 10:30.

Hotel: There are a few options in Santiago Atitlan. There's a hostel across from the soccer pitch called Santiaguito. We first checked there, it's very simple and they wanted 100Q per person. For some reason I was under the assumption Guatemala accommodation was cheap (it's not!) so we passed and moved on to Hosteria del Centro (14.6373,-91.22932) which ended up being 235Q for an equally simple room. We didn't feel like driving back across town (it was late) so settled on that. In hindsight I should have taken the first option.

La Playa

Access: Located on the outskirts of San Lucas Toliman, the road starts at (14.62292,-91.15253). We parked at 14.6200,-91.15594 and walked the road, which eventually turns into a trail and then walked a bit further.

Birds: In theory this is a good spot for ground-sparrows, Slender Sheartail, Bar-winged Oriole, Rufous Sabrewing, etc.

Summary: We arrived mid-day with the goal of finding the ground-sparrows (White-faced and White-eared), Slender Sheartail, and Bar-winged Oriole. We only managed to find the White-eared Ground-sparrow and Rufous Sabrewing. We only had two hours midday to dedicate to this spot, which probably resulted in the dips. This looks like a great spot to spend a morning though.

Other: While in Toliman, we stopped by Hotel Toliman. This is definitely the “fancy” hotel in the area, with a very nice garden and a few hummingbird feeders. We stopped to get a quick juice at the restaurant and look for Blue-tailed Hummingbird, hoping it would come to the feeders or be present in the area. It was pretty dead midday (no Blue-tailed Hummingbird), but the little tube feeder held about 8 Rose-breasted Grosbeaks and 3 Painted Buntings!

Fuentes Georginas



Access: Pro-tip, if you plan to stay here, be sure to arrive before it closes at 1830. We arrived at 1828 and nearly missed getting in and getting a room before everyone was gone, which would have been a huge issue as there’s nowhere else close to stay and no access to the trail above the hot springs before 0800 otherwise.

Birds: Most people come here for Wine-throated Hummingbird and Unicolored Jay, but if you hike up the trail early, it’s also a fairly reliable spot for Horned Guan. Plenty of other good birds are possible including Scaled Antpitta (rare, but we saw one!), Black-capped Siskin (dipped here), Pink-headed Warbler, Fulvous Owl, Garnet-throated Hummingbird, Amethyst-throated Mountain-Gem, and Black-throated Jay.

Summary: After we arrived and secured our room, we were tired, but did a quick night session. Multiple Mexican Whip-poor-wills were in the area and we called in a group of three Fulvous Owls which showed very well. The next morning we started at 0450 on the trail that leads above the hot springs (starts at the back, just across the bridge at 14.74864,-01.4795. The trail splits a few times (I think it rejoins each time, otherwise just take the one that looks more uphill) and after 600 meters you reach the ridge. To the right apparently goes to a clearing (didn’t go far this way), but to the left continues up towards the volcano. Our goal was to go as high as we could along the trail to the volcano in the dark and then go a bit further after light and look for the Horned Guan (and look as we walked down). The trail climbs a decent amount before flattening out on an awesome section at 14.74518,-91.47179. Eventually the trail hits a road!?! which to the right continues towards the volcano and to the left apparently to some village (I had no clue this road existed). We went to the right a little bit, but then turned around and started working back down. We eventually found a single Horned Guan at 14.74571,-91.47312 on the way back down after hearing it “click, click click” high in a tree. Shortly afterwards flushed and relocated a Scaled Antpitta on the trail at 14.74573,-91.47465 (few records here). Lots of other birds in mixed flocks, but despite serious effort, no luck with Wine-throated Hummingbird.



Hotel: The obvious option is the lodging at the hot springs (as noted above, nothing else close by). It is 60Q to enter per person and \$25Q for the vehicle. On top of that it’s 190Q per person per night for lodging. The room is very nice and you can fill up your own personal hot tub with the hot spring water which is pretty cool. They give you a bundle of wood to build a fire too. Overall a pretty cool place to stay and not really overpriced compared to most other places. The restaurant closes at 1800 though, so come with food if you’re arriving just as they close! We didn’t get in the hot springs, opting instead for a private hot spring bath from the comforts of our room, but the 60Q entrance fee includes them if you’d like.

San Marcos (Blue-tailed Hummingbird spot)

Access: There's a woman who has hummingbird feeders just below Refugio del Quetzal. Her driveway is at GPS. When we arrived, there was a chain across the driveway so we just parked near the road and walked up hoping to talk to her and see what was going on (our only info was a few eBird points). Surprisingly, when we walked up to the house a local bird guide, Marvin Laynes, was there with a client photographing hummingbirds. Marvin was very friendly, and the homeowner had no problem with us hanging around. It was Marvin's eBird points that indicated the feeders were present. Total coincidence.

Birds: Reliable spot for Blue-tailed Hummingbird. Also, Rufous Sabrewing, Violet Sabrewing, and Rivoli's Hummingbird.

Summary: Most people would probably wonder why we drove to San Marcos to see a Blue-tailed Hummingbird, but that is because we didn't go to Tarreles and outside of Tarreles, Blue-tailed Hummingbird can be pretty tricky (i.e. have a plan and don't end up like us! haha). Anyway, when we showed up Marvin said it was easy/reliable and perhaps it is at times, but in a two hour wait, I had only one land briefly in a bush next to me for about 1 minute, and Melissa saw it buzz the feeder twice but that was all (a very aggressive Violet Sabrewing had claimed territory on the feeders which had caused the lack of Blue-tailed Hummers). It was a success despite the delay. We had hoped to spend the rest of the afternoon at the Refugio de Quetzal looking for the quetzal which we had dipped the day prior, but on the way we got a flat tire which ended up being in the side wall and thus unrepairable, so we had to stop and buy a new tire and change it. We were very delayed and only had time for the hummingbird.

Hotel: We didn't stay in San Marcos, but plenty of options around

Chui-rax-amolo National Park

Access: The park entrance is at 14.74955,-91.29380. When we arrived at 0600 it was closed and no one was around. There was a sign that said it opened at 0800 so we decided to leave and head downhill to the Rostra Maya Trail (see next section). By the time we got back here it was around 0930. Entrance was 10Q for parking and 20Q per person entrance.

Birds: This is a "reliable" spot for Wine-throated Hummingbird and known location for Maroon-chested Ground Dove. Lots of other high elevation species.

Summary: I hate to call our visit a disaster, but... it was a disaster. After dipping Wine-throated Hummingbird, this was our backup for this near-endemic. It's supposed to be quite common, but despite FIVE HOURS of effort, we dipped hard. During the process of dipping I contacted two local guides who tried to explain the area to find it, but I still don't know if I was in the right area or not. Once you enter you drive steeply downhill to a campground (would be a great option to camp here if you have your own gear, just make sure to show up before 1800 when they close). From the campground you take the road to the right (need to park here) and then the road turns into a trail and continues around the side of the mountain. Eventually there is a split, there's actually two splits – the first isn't sign posted, keep left going flat instead of downhill, and the second has two signs, one back towards the campground and one to the right going downhill towards Santa Clara. My question is, is the Wine-throated Hummingbird on this first section of trail up to these signs or is the Wine-throated Hummingbird further downhill along the "Santa Clara" trail? We birded the first section extensively and didn't have a sniff of the hummingbird. You're supposed to listen for its song/call as it's supposed to be very vocal. Nada. Eventually we came to the conclusion it must be lower down past the Santa Clara sign, but by this time we really needed to get on the road, so despite a quick run down the trail another couple hundred meters, no sign of the hummer. Fail. Also, since we were there from 0930-1400 we had no sign of Maroon-chested Ground-Dove either. Sorry I can't be more helpful for here. I guess my only advice is figure out where the hummer location is before arriving.

Hotel: We stayed a little over an hour away in Xela. There's a hostel in Xela called Mucachs Artes (14.8365,-91.52098) which is 250Q per night and is super nice for the cost and included breakfast. The downside is there's no parking. You

must park at least three blocks away for 40Q for the night. I still would recommend staying here as the owners are very nice and our overall experience was very good.

San Pedro La Laguna (Rostra Maya Trail)

Access: Parking is at 14.69875, -91.28972 and the trail starts just uphill from here. I'm not sure what time it opens, but we arrived around 0630 and had no problem. Parking is 10Q, entrance was another 10Q per person, and also just entering town has a 5Q toll.

Birds: The Rostra Maya Trail connects the lower town of San Pedro La Laguna with the upper town of Santa Clara La Laguna. The lower portion of the trail is very reliable for White-faced Ground-sparrow and is also supposed to be good for Slender Sheartail. The entrance from the upper section is supposed to be quite good for Belted Flycatcher.

Summary: We ended up here shortly after dawn, because Cui-rax-amolo was closed when we arrived at 0600. It took about 30 minutes to get from Cui-rax-amolo to SPLL, and about 45 minutes to get back up (super steep road!). Our main targets were White-faced Ground-sparrow which was quite simple along the steps up to the first mirador (and cross) and Slender Sheartail. Becoming a reoccurring theme, we dipped the sheartail despite about 2 hours of effort. Hummingbirds, amiright?! Supposedly the first section of steps from the trail head to the cross is reliable for it, but I cannot confirm, as we did not see it here. It was an enjoyable morning with Guatemala Pygmy Owl (just above the cross in the plantation), Rusty Sparrow, Blue-and-white Mockingbird, Black-vented Oriole, and other common but enjoyable species. No sign of Belted Flycatcher, but like I stated, I think the upper section is more reliable for it.

Cuchumatan National Park



Access: The national park and surrounding areas is accessed via the (kinda) nearby town of Todos Santos Cuchumatan. The closer town of Chiabal looks like it has some hotel options via google, but none of them are legit. Local guide Esteban lives in Chiabal. Getting around to most spots is doable in a small car (although there might be a few bottom scrapes), but some sites are high clearance only. There's no entrance or fees to pay in the area.

Birds: Lots of great birds here. The biggest targets are Ocellated Quail, Black-capped Siskin, and Goldman's Warbler. Other great birds include Maroon-chested Ground-Dove, Buff-crowned Wood-Partridge, Unspotted Saw-whet Owl, Flammulated Owl, Singing Quail, Pink-headed Warbler, Red Crossbill, and lots of cool subspecies (Yellow-eyed Junco, Steller's Jay, Northern Flicker, Savannah Sparrow, etc)

Summary: We didn't have too much info on this locale and eBird points were a bit confusing and misleading, so last minute (i.e. 2000 the night before), we decided to message Esteban and see if he was available for guiding. We had allotted 1.5 days here but figured if we could knock it out in a day, it would be worth it. Esteban said he was available but that we'd need a 4wd. His fee was 400Q and the vehicle was 350Q. We said, that was quite pricey, and hoped we could do it with our vehicle instead. He countered that his friend (not the original rental) is also a birder and would like to come along in his 4wd for 200Q. We said yes. We met Esteban at 0515 in Chiabal (well actually 0520 because we woke up to another flat tire!), but his friend was going to be another 45(!) min late, so we headed off without the 4wd to the first spot for Ocellated Quail which was accessible without 4wd. This spot was about 1 hour away and struck out (it was very windy). From there we met up with the 4wd (and driver Daniel) and went down a somewhat steep road to another spot (although you could probably make it in a small car or at least park at the top and walk). At this spot we quickly saw a male Ocellated Quail run across a field and then flushed it trying to re-find it. Shortly afterwards we heard

a Maroon-chested Ground-Dove and were quickly able to track it down at 15.5574,-91.6082. We walked around for a while looking for more quail which we didn't find but we did manage Buffy-crowned Wood Partridge and a few Pink-headed Warblers. From here we went back up to the main road and to another spot that was very reliable for Singing Quail. We heard 6-7 and got looks at 3-4 (and also had a flyby Ocellated here). Afterwards we headed into the park proper accessed from Puerta de la Cielo which translates to "the door to the sky". There's a main loop that is accessible by small car that goes from roughly 15.54556,-91.56145 to 15.54907,-91.56506 (check satellite imagery to see the track). Along this road you could part and conceivably get Ocellated Quail and Black-capped Siskin. My only sighting of Black-capped Siskin was from this section of road at 15.54546,-91.57904. But before we did this main section we cut across the main open valley to one of the distant ridges (high clearance needed) and searched a large area that's supposed to be good for Black-capped Siskin (but only managed Pine Siskins, although I did flush two more Ocellated Quails, bringing the day's tally to 4). Afterwards we did the main loop where I had brief view of two Black-capped Siskins. We were done with this loop and back to my car in Puerta de la Cielo by 1430, which was a bit disappointing, as the only section that truly needed the 4wd was the one distant ridge. Combining that with the fact we had to drive the whole way in and out ourselves since Daniel was late, made the 200Q for the 4wd a bit iffy, but oh well. Overall Esteban was great, knew his birds well, and is definitely recommended if you want to take a guide. He doesn't speak much English other than knowing all of the bird names. Goldman's Warbler was present at most spots.

Also of note, the night prior when we arrived, we dropped our bags at Hotel Puertas Del Cielo (15.50819,-91.60402) and headed back out to try an eBird spot for Unspotted Saw-whet that was 20 min away. It was a super steep road and our little car barely made it up the mountain. At one point Melissa had to get out and push as I floored the gas! But when we arrived, we easily found a single Unspotted Saw-whet Owl (15.48833,-91.57037).



Hotel: There are multiple options in Todos Santos Cuchumantan. We stayed at a very basic hotel in a simple room with shared bathrooms. It wasn't a very clean place, but for 50Q per person I didn't complain. It was the cheapest lodging of the trip.

Guiding: We used Esteban for the day (WhatsApp +502 5381 0540). He charged 400Q and we used his friend Daniel's 4x4 for an additional 200Q (although a typical 4x4 rental is 350Q). Daniel was very nice and also interested in photographing the birds.

RNP Chajbaoc

Access: This private reserve is owned by Max Noack (WhatsApp +502 5704 4525) who lives on the property, and is located just outside of Coban. Prior coordination is required to visit, and the cost is 25Q per person.

Birds: Our main goal of visiting here was a lot of recent sightings of "White-breasted" Sharp-shinned Hawk, but there's some other good birds and for someone doing the "typical" Guatemala route, a good place to get Slate-colored Solitaire and Crimson-collared Tanager.

Summary: We had stayed halfway between Todos los Santos and Coban in the town of Chicaman, so we didn't arrive at RNP Chajbaoc until shortly after 0730 (which is ok if your only target is a hawk!) Despite spending about 3 hours searching for the hawk, we came up empty. It was a nice place to bird though as we saw Slate-colored Solitaire, Crimson-collared Tanager, Long-billed Gnatwren, Pauraque (at a nest), Stripe-throated Hermit (at a nest), and a few Agotis!

Hotel: Traveling between Todos los Santos and Coban we stayed in Chicaman. The first place we stopped was full (Hotel Victoria) so we ended up at the next hotel (forget name) for 150Q per person. The room was fine, but like most hotels in Guatemala, pricey for what you get.

Slender Sheartail spot

Access: We found this location on eBird and confirmed with Max some details of birding this spot. No prior coordination is needed. We parked at 15.43777,-90.32248, but in order to do so we had to go up and over a curb. There were two dirt ramps to make it doable in a small car. Then cross the road and go up a trail at 15.43802,-90.32232. Instead of taking the main trail up over the hill, take the right split past a little house and this trail parallels right above the road where you look down at a scrubby hillside. It's not much, but apparently reliable for Slender Sheartail at the right time of year.

Birds: Slender Sheartail and White-breasted Hawk

Summary: We didn't spend long here (only 20-30 minutes), but once again dipped the sheartail (that's the third time for those keeping track at home), but amazingly managed an adult White-breasted Hawk attacking a juvenile Broad-winged Hawk. Awesome. Also had a solid mixed flock that contained 5 Hermit Warblers, Grace's Warbler, and a few Black-headed Siskins.

Laguna Chichoj

Access: There's two places to bird. East part of the lake accessed from a little park and then the west side of the lake accessed from some crappy little side road. The lake access from the park is at 15.36427,-90.46961 and is fairly nice. The access from the west side 15.36269,-90.47615 is pretty crappy, but gives views of a lot of vegetation which should be good for Spotted Rail

Birds: Spotted Rail, Ruddy Crake, White-throated Flycatcher, White-breasted Hawk, list padding waterbirds

Summary: We visited in the middle of the day so not ideal for activity. We first stopped at the east side, where the first high grass/marshy area is good for White-throated Flycatcher. We taped one in at 15.36472,-90.47008. Shortly past there we called in a Ruddy Crake at 15.36427,-90.46961. The pines sometimes have White-breasted Hawk, but we only had Ferruginous Pygmy Owl. We then made a quick stop on the west side to continue our scan for Spotted Rail, but no luck. Morning or evening would probably be more successful for Spotted Rail.

Finca Santa Rosa

Access: Birding is along the road from Pantin to Salama. The entire road is supposedly fantastic birding, although there's a few creek crossings and at times is only accessible with 4WD. The first part of the road though to Finca Santa Rosa should be fine no matter what, and it's the only section that we visited. The road starts at 15.2532,-90.2830.

Birds: Our main target here was the Central American ssp of Plumbeous Vireo, although the road holds some great pine/dry forest birding. There's a few spots where Belted Flycatcher is sometimes found (dipped), but other notable birds include Maroon-chested Ground-Dove, Hooded Grosbeak, and large mixed flocks of warblers (including Golden-cheeked and Golden-winged).

Summary: We visited this area twice in the afternoon (very windy both times) and once in the morning. On our last visit (in the morning), the local bird guide from Ranchitos de Quetzal asked if he could join. Rudy knows his birds well and is pretty impressive, especially because he doesn't have binoculars (although he does have a camera which helps)! We tried a few spots for Belted Flycatcher (15.24427,-90.28129 and 15.23688,-90.28684), but never got a response. Mixed warbler flocks were common with Golden-cheeked and Golden-winged being the highlights. A Maroon-chested Ground-Dove was heard calling distantly from 15.24427,-90.28129 and at the same spot we saw a few Hooded Grosbeaks. Past the finca the road climbs again to GPS (a spot where Slender Sheartail has been seen on occasion) and then descends again. Blue-headed Vireo is common in the area in the winter months, so care needs to be taken in finding a CA Plumbeous Vireo. After finding a number of Blue-headed Vireos, we finally found a group of 3-4 Plumbeous Vireos at 15.2232,-90.28532. On the way back we found 2-3 more at 15.2263,-90.28419. Overall a very enjoyable road to spend

some time birding. We also saw a Coyote cross the road and stop down in the gully. Afterwards I found out that this was a lifer for Rudy and quite a rare animal to encounter in Guatemala.

Ranchitos de Quetzal

Access: This private reserve located next to the Biotopo National Reserve is a very reliable spot for Resplendent Quetzal as well as a few other species. The reserve entrance is at 15.2154,-90.2191. Entrance is from 0600-1700 with a cost of 40Q per person. It's also possible to stay in the reserve. The room is quite nice and has a good hot shower. I'd highly recommend staying as it's also great to be able to walk the trail at night. There's a single trail (probably 1.5-2 km loop) that goes through the reserve. Costs for one night is: 200Q (1 person), 300Q (2 person), 350Q(3 person), 400Q (4 person), and 500Q (5 person). Since we stayed at the reserve, we were not charged the entrance fee. The reserve also has a restaurant which was reasonably priced (35Q for an Omelet or Quesadilla). WhatsApp: +502 36953862. Rudy Botzoc is available to guide at Ranchitos or other local areas. He's a sharp birder. Contact via WhatsApp +502 32977999 or rudybc.gt@gmail.com



Birds: Of course the keystone species is the Resplendent Quetzal, which is typically quite easy to see in the area during the morning. Other interesting species in the reserve include Barred Forest Falcon, Unicolored and Azure-naped Jays, Spotted and Black-headed Nightingale thrushes, Tawny-throated Leaf-tosser, Scaly-throated Foliage-gleaner, and Blue-crowned Chorophonia. Also, the reserve is home to the spectacular Yellow-blotched Palm Pit Viper (*Bothriechis aurifer*). Luckily our visit coincided with a visit from Fred Muller, a Frenchman, who is a herp/botanist guide in Central America. We spent some time out at night with him and he expertly located the pit viper which was great to see up close.

Summary: We arrived here in the late afternoon and spent two nights. The first morning/mid-day was spent at the reserve (with a late afternoon trip to Santa Rosa, which is only about 15 min away), and on the last morning I visited Santa Rosa again while Melissa birded the reserve. Despite the quetzal usually being easy, we had to work quite hard. On our first late afternoon and first morning we didn't hear a single peep from the quetzal. Determination paid off though when I finally found a single male at around 11:00AM a good ways up the trail. We were able to stay with it for about an hour and got some really nice views. We found a Barred Forest Falcon roosting at night near the creek and then had a pair along the trail as well the next day. Blue-headed Nightingale Thrushes were fairly common, but we didn't hear any Spotted Nightingale thrushes. In the early morning they feed the Unicolored and Azure-naped Jays near the restaurant. There's also a number of hummingbird feeders, but Violet Sabrewing was the only species regularly visiting them during our stay. On the last morning while I was at Santa Rosa, Melissa got nice looks at a subadult Ornate Hawk-Eagle along the trail.



Tikal

Access: The ancient Mayan ruins accessed from the city of Flores is also a great birding destination, certainly one of the best in all of Guatemala. There's two main ways to access Tikal. #1 Take an overnight bus. #2 Fly on TAG airlines.

Although the flights are pricey (\$100 each way) we decided to fly vs take an overnight bus since logistically we would have probably lost our first morning had we taken a bus. Once you arrive in Flores, it's about an hour car drive to Tikal. Some people stay in Flores and will make day trips up to Tikal, but there's also three hotel options at the ruins, which of course is best for birding. A few general notes when planning a visit:

- It costs 150Q per person per day for entrance to the reserve. In addition, you can buy a sunrise pass for an extra 100Q that will let you enter at 0430 or a sunset pass for an extra 100Q that lets you stay in till 2000. Otherwise the typical entrance ticket is good from 0600-1800. We just bought the general entrance ticket as birding is good outside of the reserve as well
- Buying tickets is a bit of a pain. You can not buy tickets at the reserve. All tickets must be purchased ahead of time from a BanRural bank and can be purchased up to 30 days in advanced. Ban Rural banks are located throughout Guatemala so it's simple enough to stop in and purchase the tickets, but of course, banks in these countries can have major queues so plan accordingly. Also make sure you buy a ticket for each day you plan to visit. The first bank I went to the guy refused to sell me two sets of tickets for Melissa and I and insisted we could buy more once we entered. This of course is incorrect and I stopped in a different bank to buy another set.
- There's two entrance gates for Tikal. At the first entrance there is a Ban Rural bank so you could wait to buy your tickets there, but it's only open 0600-1800 (don't quote me on those hours, but it's definitely not open any earlier). Once you go through the first gate, it's another 18km driving to the three lodges and the actual entrance to the ruins.
- Most people will take a shuttle to Tikal from the airport/Flores. We arrived pretty late (2000) and with COVID there weren't any tourists around, so shuttles weren't running. Right before we boarded our plane to Flores, I booked a rental through Alamo for only \$45 for two days (once again, rentals in Guatemala are so cheap). Unfortunately, when we arrived the Alamo counter was closed (not sure if that was due to the late booking that they didn't see before they left.) Fortunately the Hertz counter was open, and their price was \$45 a day or \$90 in total (700Q). The taxi driver there was quoting us 500Q and wouldn't come down, so I just went with the rental car to afford us more flexibility and reliability in getting back to Flores. Typically, from the research I've done, private shuttles are \$50-\$60 each way, so renting a car is a very good option. Shuttles I think range around \$20 per person (still super expensive— yay for the tourist tax!)
- There are three lodges right at the entrance to the ruins, all with prices around \$60-\$70 per night. Jaguar Inn offers camping for \$15 per person per night (tent with mattress and sheet). This is the option we went with, and since we had our rental car, it was easy to store our bags in it while we were away. The national park also rents tents/hammocks but no other gear so if you bring your own sleeping bag, that's definitely the cheapest option.
- Food at the restaurant is stupid expensive. We brought a little food with us, but definitely should've brought more. A simple chicken plate was 100Q! I think typically there's a comedor that's open with a bit more reasonable rates, but with COVID and very few visitors, it was closed.



Birds: Birding at Tikal was down right fantastic. Tons of birds, nice wide trails/roads through the forest, and awesome canopy towers in the form of ruins (I guess the ruins themselves are kinda cool too). In a little less than two days we had around 130 species. Of course one of the main attractions is the pair of Orange-breasted Falcons that nest on the ruins, but some other goodies occur with Black-throated Shrike Tanager and Yucatan Poorwill probably being the “best” range wise. If you’ve never visited the Yucatan, there’s some species that you can eek out here like Rose-throated Tanager and Yucatan Flycatcher.

Summary: We arrived at Jaguar Inn at 2100 and then had a full day the next day and on the second day had to leave around 1600 to head back to the airport. The weather was fantastic the entire time. Overcast all day which kept the bird activity high. Although many people mention encountering nice flocks at antswarms, we didn’t encounter a single antswarm the entire time (although plenty of old ant trails were seen)! In total we walked about every trail possible, putting in around 20 miles over two days!

There are two main areas to bird at Tikal: #1 The ruins and surrounding forest and #2 The secondary forest along a road that heads east of the ruins. More open habitat around Flores is also worth exploring if you have the time and interest, but unfortunately we did not have the time.

1. Ruins/Surrounding forest: Of course with COVID we lucked out in having very few visitors/tourists to deal with. It was absolutely fantastic. The first day only 45 people entered the ruins and the second day even less. We barely saw anyone the entire time. We spent a lot of time walking the trails, but on the second morning made sure we made it to the Central Pyramid by 0800 to still catch some of the parrots flying around (it was overcast, probably want to get there a little earlier otherwise). Although Temple IV is the highest temple, the Central Pyramid observation deck (17.21985,-89.62271) is definitely the best place to scan from. From here we managed White-necked Puffbird, multiple parrots (although dipped Brown-hooded), and saw lots of raptors (Double-toothed, Plumbeous, and Hook-billed Kites, King Vulture, Black Hawk-eagle). Otherwise we spent a lot of time walking the trails. Black-throated Shrike-Tanager was unfortunately quite difficult to locate and we didn’t get a good view until the last afternoon at 17.21979,-89.61947. Tody Motmot was found at 17.22460, -89.61817 and 17.21979,-89.61947; Chestnut-colored Woodpecker at 17.22774, -89.6251; a massive flock at 17.22160,-89.61520 that included 3 species of trogon, Lesson’s Motmot, and Rufous-tailed Jacamar; Red-capped Manakin at 17.2179,-89.6176; and a very responsive territory for Tawny-winged Woodcreeper at 17.2228,-89.61706. On the walk in the first morning just at dawn, a male Great Curassow crossed the path. The Orange-breasted Falcon was often not in view, but luckily made appearances on Temple IV on both days. Just outside the entrance there are two small ponds at 17.22447, -89.61274 which held Bare-throated Tiger Heron (nesting directly over the path!), Limpkin, and Russet-naped Wood-Rail.
2. The road that heads east of the ruins starts at 17.22692,-89.60894 and goes through secondary growth. The road leads to the crocodile pond but then continues further. We walked this trail once in the evening and again in the midafternoon. Any of the target birds can probably be seen anywhere along the stretch of road. Some of the better birds we managed to see included Pheasant Cuckoo and Thicket Tinamou at 17.22756,-89.60710; Rose-throated Tanager, Gray-breasted Chat, Mangrove Vireo, Yucatan Flycatcher, and Gray-headed Dove at 17.22795, -89.60623. At the crocodile pond there were a few Boat-billed Herons and a single Yellow-crowned Night-Heron.

3. Night birds: Mottled Owl and Middle American Screech Owl were both very common, calling all night and readily seen from the lodge grounds, parking lot, and along the secondary growth road. Northern Potoo easily came in to the snags at 17.22692,-89.60894. We heard Spectacled Owl. No sign of Black-and-white Owl. Both Pauraque and Yucatan Poorwill were easy along the secondary road as well with numerous poorwills coming in at 17.22795, -89.60623.



Budget Breakdown

Overall we were in Guatemala for 10 days and spent a total of \$1,040 for two people. As stated above, hotels were surprisingly expensive especially for what you got. On average we spent just over \$30 a night per hotel room. Rental car was the next most expensive category at \$200 with \$74 in fuel and \$55 to buy a new tire. Before in a summarized breakdown.

Category	Total (USD)
Hotels	\$ 336
Rental Car	\$ 200
Meal	\$ 172
Entrance Fees	\$ 124
Guide	\$ 78
Fuel	\$ 74
Car repairs	\$ 55
Toll	\$ 1
Grand Total	\$ 1,040

