

# Discoveries

News and Views from the Discovery Foundation

Winter 1998

*Lincoln's Sparrow • Gorrión de Lincoln*

## "Our Birds" in Mexico

Richard Carstensen

In January 1992, when I first visited my sister Tina Carstensen de Lopez at her home in Guadalajara, I saw a Wilson's Warbler in an acacia by her door. That bird's migratory journey from summer nest to Tina's yard spanned between 1500 and 4000 miles, an incomprehensible feat for a yellow featherball the size of my thumb. Ever since, I've dreamed of an educational exchange program focusing on the shared migratory birds of southeast Alaska and western Mexico. This January, 1998, the concept flew.

**Jan 9, 1998, San Blas, Nayarit, Mexico. Population 8000. Elevation 10 feet. Temperature 80 degrees F.** (Birds shown **in bold** are migratory species which also occur in Southeast Alaska.)

Longhorned cattle shuffle past us on the dusty road. Cathy Pohl and I are walking a two mile loop on the eastern outskirts of San Blas. Morning glory vines dangle from thorn-studded leguminous trees about 50 feet tall. We're looking for birds, and we've found the right place. Cathy spots most of them, because her eyes and ears are sharper, and because I'm often busy flipping through our Mexican bird guide trying to figure out what we've just seen. Several times I face a welcome dilemma; which of 3 novel species, simultaneously in view, should I look up first? Our "lifers" (birding lingo for a first-ever sighting) include Tropical Parula (a brilliant blue-and-orange

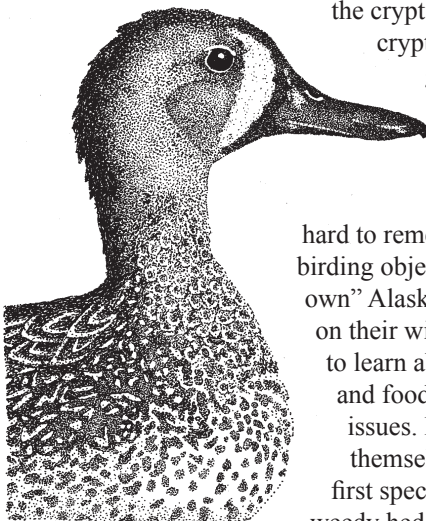
non-migratory warbler), Rose-throated Becard, the cryptic Pauraque, and the huge, less-than-cryptic Pale-billed Woodpecker (same

genus as Louisiana's extinct Ivory-billed).

As we rack up lifers, it's sometimes hard to remember my primary birding objective, to locate "my own" Alaskan migratory species on their wintering grounds, and to learn about their habitats and foods and conservation issues. Fortunately, the birds themselves remind me; the first species to pop out of a weedy hedgerow in response to

our fake alarm calls (a whispering "pish-pish-pish") turns out to be a **Lincoln's Sparrow**. Our lifer Russet-crowned Motmot with its violet "eyelashes" brings slack-jawed disbelief; our first tropical Lincoln's Sparrow brings smiles of reunion.

Mexico is rife with flycatchers. We've encountered about 20 kinds in the triangle between San Blas, Guadalajara and Manzanillo. Most are resident but some are overwintering birds from as far north as Alaska. In San Blas the commonest species is a little "Empi" (birder shorthand for the notoriously hard to separate genus *Empidonax*). Luckily, these particular *Empis* are very tame, allowing close views of their diagnostic tear-shaped eye rings. They're **Pacific-slope Flycatchers**, one of the most important birds of the old-growth canopy in Southeast Alaska. In Juneau they're hard to see; only the dry "tseewhip" from the conifer foliage high overhead betrays their abundance. Here at San Blas their favorite hunting perch is a bush or grass stem at about waist to head height, somewhere on the edge of forest cover. In the next few hours we see about 6 Pacific-slopes, swooping low over the

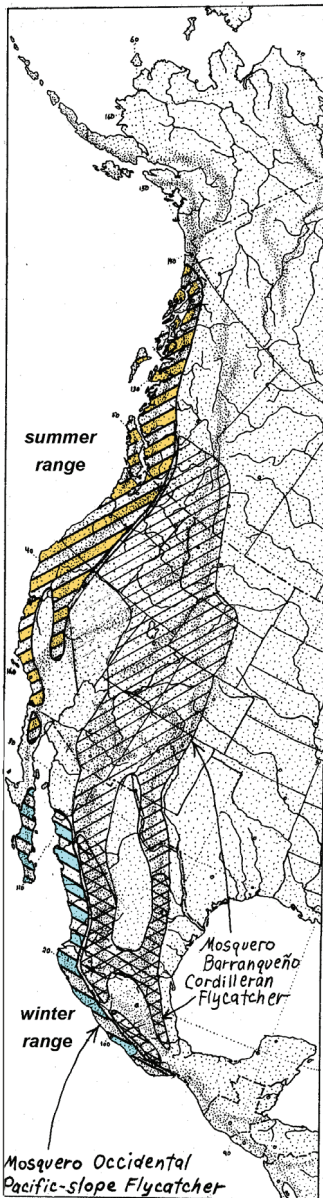
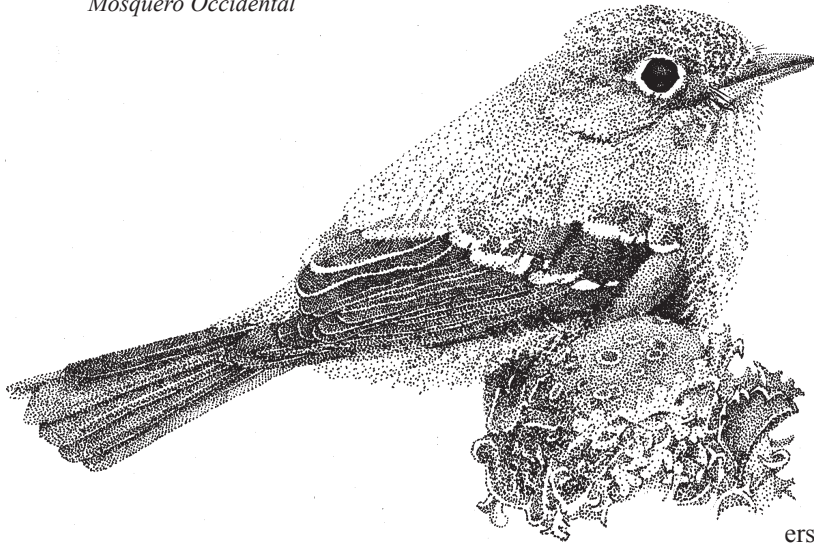


*Blue-winged Teal*  
*Cerceta Aliazul*

*San Blas*







road ahead of us, even competing with the big blue-throated lizards for insects in the dust.

Pacific-slope Flycatchers are well named. We never see them far inland, nor much above 1000 feet elevation. Their winter range is a narrow sliver of Pacific coast running from Sonora to Oaxaca, only a fraction of the size of their breeding range. No wonder they seem packed in shoulder to shoulder.

**American Redstarts** flash out from low branches, and **MacGillivray's Warblers** skulk in brush; both species breed in southern mainland Alaska's deciduous habitats. Even commoner at San Blas are **Wilson's** and **Yellow Warblers**, well known to Juneau birders. Of these 4 warblers, none seem to accompany the large mixed-species flocks of warblers and gnatcatchers that sift slowly through the trees overhead. They seem more dispersed and solitary, perhaps defending territories.

We set up the spotscope to glass the far shore of a reedy pond. Foraging alongside of jacanas and ibises are three waterbirds that could conceivably have nested in Alaskan wetlands only a few months earlier: **Northern Shoveler**, **Blue-winged Teal**, and **Greater Yellowlegs**. And out on the surf-swept beaches we find our old friends the **Bonaparte Gulls** in their winter dress, cruising with Forster's Terns and Brown Pelicans.

**Jan 15. Coffee plantation above La Bajada, Nayarit. Elevation 600' to 1800.'**

We spend the day with bird expert Armando Santiago, walking cobblestone roads in a mountainous tropical forest with an understory of coffee bushes and bananas. For several years I've wanted to see a *finca de café*. This is one of the few forms of tropical agriculture that retains valuable habitat for both resident wildlife and overwintering migratory birds. In a San Blas restaurant I was served delicious locally grown coffee, a pleasant surprise considering we're at the extreme northern limit of coffee country.

I'm strongly predisposed to appreciate the Bajada plantation because coffee has defined my mornings for the past 30 years. But my wildest imaginings couldn't have anticipated the wilder beauty of this place. Enormous white figs and banyan trees hold Ivory-billed Woodcreepers, Crested Guan and 4 species of parrots. Cactus orchids bedeck limb crotches in humid stream gorges. Armando told us not to bother packing heavy lunches because ripe avocados the size of softballs lie on the roadside, and sweet royal lemons go begging.

Families of Black-throated Magpie Jays flap from crown to crown, trailing their rather excessive tail plumes. Hollow calls of Collared Forest Falcons echo from the lush hillsides. As everywhere we go in Mexico,

**Wilson's Warblers** are common. We also find **Western Tanager**, **American Redstart**, and **Warbling Vireos**, three species that breed in the cottonwood riparian forests of southeast Alaska.

A truck comes by full

Loud cries of parrots and chachalacas echoed from the canopy of this shade coffee plantation near Mecatan.







*Clockwise:  
Coffee beans*

*Anhinga drying  
its wings in the  
sun near San Blas*

*Oscar Reyna,  
teacher and  
bird ecologist,  
Universidad de  
Guadalajara*

*Santos Bugarin  
at his coffee  
processing plant  
in Jalocotán,  
Nayarit*

of machete-wielding workers, driven by Santos Bugarin, the finca manager. With Armando interpreting, we explain our reverence for the bird life of Santos' domain (not to mention his red bananas). This leads to an invitation to tour the coffee processing plant in nearby Jalocotán, and afterward to visit Santos' home, where we meet his wife and new granddaughter, and admire his show horse and caged fighting cocks. We're sent back to San Blas with homemade cheese and fresh-roasted coffee, our heads and hearts brimming with the day's sights and sounds and tastes, and with the generosity of the Mexican people.



***Jan 21. To Parque Nacional la Primavera. Elevation 5500.' Just west of Guadalajara.***

At the American School of Guadalajara we meet Nancy Frederickson, middle school science coordinator. Nancy's taking her afternoon off to drive us west of the city to join Oscar Reyna and Leonor Gomez, bird researchers with the Universidad de Guadalajara. Oscar, who teaches a course on the management of ecological reserves, has offered to show us his mist-netting site at a remote streamside forest in the 36,000-hectare Parque La Primavera. We'll also get to see the university's nature center, where Oscar and Leonor host visiting school groups. Mexico's birds ("our" birds!) face compounding threats from habitat loss and the cage bird market, and Oscar feels his research must be wedded to public outreach.

The center is an elegant two-story stone building deep in the heart of La Primavera. As with Juneau's Eagle River Boy Scout Camp, overnighting classes have to walk the last mile over undriveable road, a long-remembered rite of passage. The center sleeps and feeds 25, not including the whitetail buck who beds on the cool veranda. Student-made maps and posters hang on the walls beside beautiful bird portraits by university staff artists. A table downstairs is covered with skulls and skins and feathers. Cathy and I grin; here, obviously, is the Dis-







covery Foundation of Jalisco! We immediately start planning a week's "working vacation," bringing down a delegation of Alaskan teachers, students and bird biologists to help Oscar and Leonor with their research.

The banding takes place in a diverse "gallery forest" of long-needled pines and leathery leaved oaks fringing Las Animas Creek below its birthplace at a bouldery clearwater spring. Blue Mockingbirds slip furtively through the streamside tangle, and White-throated Robins pluck laurel berries in the tree tops. Cathy, who runs the US Forest Service's mist-netting stations at Juneau, Hoonah and Yakutat, asks Oscar how the mockingbirds react to handling, guessing correctly that they deliver angry whacks to banders' fingers.

I later ask Cathy what, for her, has been the highlight of our day afield with Oscar and Leonor and Nancy. "It was toward the end of the day," she replies, "when we asked Oscar about the pines and oaks, and he started naming them all, and I realized how much he knew about La Primavera." Oscar, we learn from Leonor, did an intensive Masters study on the flora of the park. This quiet man has a bond with La Primavera that our 97th natural history question suddenly, accidentally revealed. It recalls for us our own pledges to the rain forests of home.

But just how big is home? I watch a Wilson's Warbler fidgeting in the dry, droopy needles of a Lumholtz pine.

*Pine-oak woodland on the San Miguel volcano, Parque Nacional La Primavera. Foreground grazed by cattle. Birds here that also occur in Southeast Alaska include: **Sharp-shinned Hawk, American Kestrel, Rufous Hummingbird, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Hermit Thrush, American Pipit, Wilson's, Orange-crowned, Townsend's and Yellow Warblers.** Not all are visitors from the US, though. Some of the kestrels, "sharpies" and Yellow Warblers are local breeders.*

