

SOME OBSERVATIONS OF BIRDS ON THE CENTRAL MEXICAN PLATEAU

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Phillips (1977) described the avifauna of the Chihuahuan Desert region as ranking among the least known bird communities of North America. In the intervening nineteen years, little has happened to alter that assessment. In January and February 1996, the Colorado Bird Observatory studied the winter distribution and habitat associations of prairie-breeding birds in the northern Central Mexican Plateau (defined as that area bounded by the international border to the north, the Sierra Madre Occidental to the west, the Sierra Madre Oriental to the east, and the Transvolcanic Belt to the south; hereafter Central Mexican Plateau). We surveyed a variety of grassland types and made ancillary observations of birds in other habitats. Observations reported here were made while traveling between study sites and at daily campsites, all within 10 km of major state and federal highways between Janos, Chihuahua, and Durango, Durango. We noted records of interest for eleven species, mostly of individuals outside the winter ranges as mapped by Howell and Webb (1995).

Our observations were primarily at the following sites:

El Palmito, a small town at the western terminus of Mexico Route 30 on the east side of Lázaro Cardenas Reservoir in north-central Durango. The site is at approximately 25° 34' N, 104° 56' W, 10 km northeast of El Palmito, and 1.5 km south of Mexico Route 30 on the road to Los Zarqueños.

La Concepción, a small town in central Chihuahua off Mexico Route 45, about 20 road km south of Palomas and about 60 km SSW of Chihuahua City at 28° 10' N, 106° 13' W. The site is along the Río Santa Isabel just east of town.

Ricardo Flores Magón, an ejido (collective farm) on Chihuahua Route 10, halfway between Chihuahua Route 23 and Mexico Route 45 in central Chihuahua, at 29° 57' N, 106° 58' W.

Río Nazas, a large river flowing through north-central Durango. The site is the Mexico Route 45 crossing about 170 km north of Durango City at 25° 18' N, 104° 38' W.

Villa de Nieves, a small town along Mexico Route 45 in extreme north-central Durango about 20 road km south of the Chihuahua border at 26° 25' N, 105° 26' W.

Golden-fronted Woodpecker (*Melanerpes aurifrons*). We found this species in most locations having suitable habitat. The northernmost individual found was a male in riparian habitat near La Concepción on 26 January. We found Golden-fronted Woodpeckers at four other locations, all in Durango, with a maximum of five (three males and two females) at the Río Nazas on 29 January. All birds seen well appeared to be of the nominate race, which is the expected one as it is the form in the United States and in northeastern Mexico. It is distinguished by a nearly all-black tail, wide barring on the back, and, in males, the crown patch is separated from the nape patch (connected in the Pacific slope *polygrammus*).

No species of "Centurus" woodpecker is mapped by Howell and Webb (1995) as occurring in the hearts of either Chihuahua or Durango; the western range limit for Golden-fronted Woodpeckers is drawn as roughly paralleling the eastern borders of the two states, whereas, the eastern edge of the range of the similar Gila Woodpecker (*M. uropygialis*) is drawn as roughly paralleling the western edge of the two states. These records of such an obvious species reflect on how little is known about the Central Mexican Plateau avifauna and how little ornithological investigation has been conducted there.

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Dusky Flycatcher (*Empidonax oberholseri*). We found two individuals in riparian habitat along the Río Nazas on 29 January. The birds were separated from Hammond's Flycatcher by their long bills, long tails, and short primary extensions. Also, one of them was heard to give a soft "wit" call a few times; the call of Hammond's is a sharper "peek." This site appears to lie at the edge of the winter range mapped for this species by Howell and Webb (1995).

Cassin's Kingbird (*Tyrannus vociferans*). We found this species in numerous locations in Durango in late January. The northernmost location was Villa de Nieves on 28 January, about 260 km north of the winter range limit depicted by Howell and Webb (1995), who mapped it as wintering in Durango only in the extreme west and south. Phillips (1994) seemed to suggest that this species winters on the Central Mexican Plateau, *contra* Howell and Webb (1995), but his statement is somewhat ambiguous: "It does winter in northern Mexico (American Ornithologists' Union 1983), but east of the Pacific slope and north of the highlands of southern Nuevo León (A. M. Sada pers. comm.) it is then hardly more regular than in Texas, where the various winter reports are generally considered dubious."

Tree Swallow (*Tachycineta bicolor*). Bradley saw one flying at Ricardo Flores Magón on 25 January. This site is more than 300 km NNW of the northern limit of the winter range in Chihuahua mapped by Howell and Webb (1995). Phillips (1991) stated that "wintering in N Chihuahua (Oberholser) is dubious."

Northern Rough-winged Swallow (*Stelgidopteryx serripennis*). We found this species numerous (>20 individuals) along the Río Nazas on 29 January and one or two at two other locations farther south in Durango on subsequent days. Howell and Webb (1995) depicted this species as wintering in extreme western Durango and not at all on the Central Mexican Plateau. Phillips (1991) reported some birds "returning N by mid- or late January," so there is some question as to the migratory status of the individuals we saw.

Cave Swallow (*Hirundo fulva*). We saw two Cave Swallows among the Northern Rough-winged Swallows at the Río Nazas on 29 January. The Río Nazas site is within the range of permanent residency depicted by Howell and Webb (1995); however, until recently, little was known of the whereabouts of this species during the nonbreeding season. The few data available suggested that some or most individuals migrated out of Mexico for the winter and/or that wintering in numbers on the Central Mexican Plateau is recent (Howell and Webb 1995, Peterson and Chalif 1973). This has changed with the report by Komar (1997) of in excess of 10,000 Cave Swallows wintering in El Salvador.

Another problem posed is determining the wintering status of individuals seen after December. Phillips (1991) stated that the species may return to Texas as early as 6 February. This suggests that individuals in Durango in late January could be on migration (as in the Northern Rough-winged Swallow). However, Leukering (pers. obs.) has seen the species over the Río Grande at Bentsen-Río Grande Valley State Park, Texas, in early January.

European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*). Leukering saw two flying over Janos, Chihuahua, on 24 January. Howell and Webb (1995) depicted this species as occurring in Mexico only in the northwestern corner of the country. Janos is on the southern edge of this species' range in Mexico.

Gray Vireo (*Vireo vicinior*). While casually birding around our campsite near El Palmito, Durango, on the morning of 30 January, L. Dombroski found, and the whole field crew observed, a single Gray Vireo foraging in desert scrub. The bird was gray above and whitish below, with a decided resemblance to a gnatcatcher (*Poliophtila*) in both plumage and habits. Its bill was typical of *Vireo*, being deep and hooked, despite the bird's small size, not thin, long, and pointed as a gnatcatcher's. Its eye ring was less pronounced than that on a Plumbeous Solitary Vireo (*V. solitarius plumbeus*), and its actions were more energetic than those of a Solitary Vireo, though not as frenetic as

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those of a gnatcatcher. The outer webs of the outer rectrices were contrastingly pale (another gnatcatcherlike feature); however, the bird's tail was not as long, relatively, as in a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (*P. caerulea*). Dombroski heard it twice give the short, harsh rattle call described by Bates (1992). The vireo foraged from near the ground to near the tops of various shrubs ranging to 3.5 m. Dominant plant species of the habitat were Desert Hackberry (*Celtis pallida*) and Ocotillo (*Fouquieria splendens*) with numerous other shrub and ground-cover species present.

This record is apparently the second for this species in Durango; the first was of an individual collected at Inde on 13 August 1898 (Fry *et al.* 1996; this record not depicted by Howell and Webb 1995), now in the Smithsonian. Even though Phillips (1991) described the specimen as "hopelessly worn," he suggested that it represented an undescribed subspecies. The most interesting aspect of this record is that Inde is less than 35 km northwest of the El Palmito site. Except for a very few reports [Barlow and Wauer 1971 (Big Bend National Park), Fry *et al.* 1996 (San Luis Potosí), and, possibly, Howell and Webb 1995 (Coahuila)], the species is not known to winter outside of Baja California, Sonora, and extreme southern Arizona, though these suggest that this species may be distributed more widely across northern Mexico during the nonbreeding season than is currently recognized.

Wilson's Warbler (*Wilsonia pusilla*). We found a male in riparian vegetation at the Rio Nazas site on 29 January, at least 200 km north of the mapped winter range in extreme western and southern Durango (Howell and Webb 1995). B. Howe and D. Hawksworth reported to us a male Wilson's Warbler on 12 January along the Rio Casas Grandes, just west of the city of Nuevo Casas Grandes in northern Chihuahua. This site is only 120 km south-southeast of the southeastern corner of the bootheel of New Mexico.

Blue Grosbeak (*Guiraca caerulea*). On 28 January, we found two, one adult male and one brown-plumaged bird, just south of the town of Guadalupe Aguilera, Durango. This site is at least 200 km north or 150 km east of the winter range mapped by Howell and Webb (1995) in extreme western Durango.

Clay-colored Sparrow (*Spizella pallida*). We found this species fairly common at many localities from La Concepción south. The La Concepción site had a large flock of *Spizella* (>75 individuals) on 27 January, with Brewer's and Clay-colored sparrows in a ratio of about 2 or 3:1. This site is 75 km north of this species' winter range as mapped by Howell and Webb (1995).

Baird's Sparrow (*Ammodramus bairdii*). We recorded a total of 53 Baird's Sparrows on 18 of 99 study plots, as well as more than 25 individuals in an extensive grassy pasture at Ricardo Flores Magón, Chihuahua. Generally, areas with denser, taller grass and patches of bare ground contained Baird's Sparrows. We found the species in most patches of suitable habitat from Janos, Chihuahua, in the north, to just north of Durango in the south. Baird's Sparrows occurred with Grasshopper Sparrows (*A. savannarum*) in many places, and the Ricardo Flores Magón site held about equal numbers of the two species.

Concerted efforts to study the avifauna of the Central Mexican Plateau will continue to provide much new information. We were able, with little effort, to record eight species at least 75 km outside of their mapped ranges, with most records of "extralimital" individuals being at least twice that distance from their known ranges. Moreover, many of our records appear to represent resident or regular wintering populations, rather than vagrants or odd individuals.

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