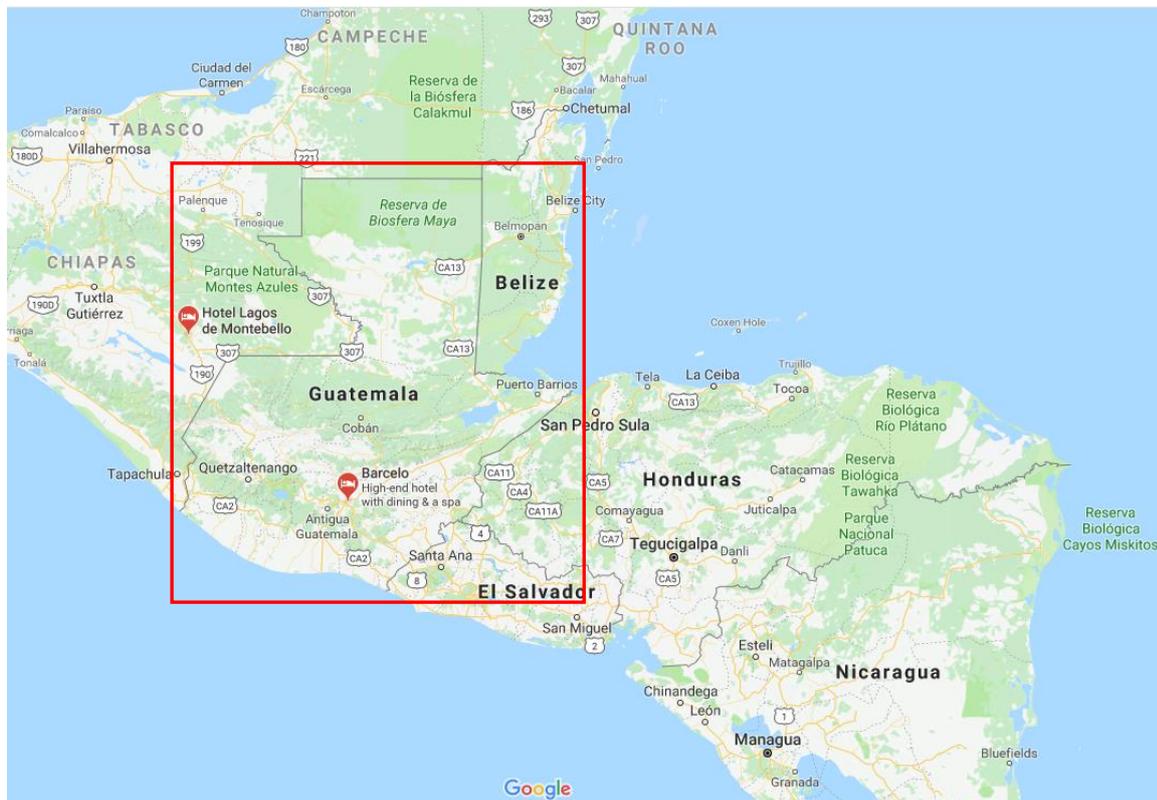


# International Birding Trip – Guatemala

February – 2018

A group of intrepid birders just returned from Seattle Audubon’s International Birding Trip to Guatemala and all had an amazing time. The group were nine travelers from the Seattle region and most were long-time members of Seattle Audubon and our local birding community.

Guatemala, whose name translates from the Mayan language as “place of many trees” has had a checkered past. Human habitation dates back to 12,000 BC with the Mayans, the Spanish conquistadores arrived in 1519 and the civil war which ran from 1960 to 1996. As a result, tourism in general and birding tourism in particular is behind many other Central American countries like Costa Rica and Belize. However, this is beginning to change, and that’s why we were there.



National Audubon’s International Alliances Program (IAP) has worked on various conservation and capacity building projects throughout Central and South America, one of which has been an effort to kick start birding tourism in a few of their focus countries, Guatemala being one of them. These efforts intend to demonstrate to local communities that by protecting birds and their habitat, birders from all over the world, with strange things hanging around their necks, will visit to see their birds. One of the issues this plan faces is the lack of experienced and trained bird guides in countries with less established nature-focused

tourism. In an effort to mitigate this, the IAP have created bird guide training curricula and have engaged local, in-country conservation organizations to deliver this to the trainee guides. The curricula contains various modules, including local bird identification (sight and sound), group leadership, finance management, and English language skills, amongst others. In one of the areas we visited in Guatemala, 60 people went through basic training, and 15 went on to advanced training.

At Seattle Audubon we want to support these efforts. It's really exciting to take trips to exotic places to see unique birds that we generally don't find in the US, but at Seattle Audubon, where possible, we want to add a conservation, community development and capacity building element to these trips. That's what we'll endeavor to provide as the International Birding Trips program moves forward. In addition, in order to add an element of scientific application, the birds seen on each trip will be entered into eBird. The data gathered from these trips will aid in species occurrence and distribution, as well as providing incentive to users of eBird (nearly every birder these days) to indicate where certain species are found and will in turn promote bird tourism.

The IAP has developed a number of tour itineraries that explore three focal countries – presently Belize, Colombia and Guatemala; although the Bahamas and Paraguay are in development. To deliver these birding opportunities the IAP has established partnerships with both Holbrook Travel, and more recently Rockjumper Birding Tours. This trip to Guatemala was organized through Holbrook Travel.

Seattle Audubon's 10-day trip to Guatemala ran from February 8<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> and was a fantastic assault on the senses. Not only were there a host of neo-tropical bird species to be found, but also opportunities to spend time in cities and towns like the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Antigua with its Spanish Baroque-influenced architecture, and beautiful Santiago Atitlan with expansive views of Lake Atitlan and which was afflicted with much violence during the Civil War. We also had a presentation from a local conservation organization called Asociación Vivamos Mejor explaining their work with communities and the bird guide training program.

The trip started with a brief stay in Antigua with its gorgeous architecture and regular eruptions of Volcán Fuego (Fire Volcano) in the background. Fuego, although close enough to see in relative detail, the plumes of ash blown up to one mile into the sky, was actually far enough away that it didn't trouble us. A host of volcanoes followed us around during our highland explorations – Volcán Acatenango, Volcán Agua, Volcán Atitlan, Volcán Fuego, and Volcán Pacaya, and if further evidence was needed to demonstrate the volatility of the environment, we felt four earthquakes within 24 hours at our next destination – Finca



*Volcan Fuego erupting © Toby Ross*

Los Andes. Many of the group had never felt an earthquake before and were fascinated to feel the quake's force. The strongest quake occurred while we were in the forest searching for Resplendent Quetzals. As well as the ground rippling beneath us, dried leaves from the trees rained down as they were shaken loose. It was certainly a unique and perspective inducing experience.

Our basic itinerary was:

- Antigua, 1 night
- Finca Los Andes, 2 nights
- Finca Los Tarrales, 2 nights
- Santiago Atitlan, 3 nights
- Panajachel, 1 night
- Guatemala City, 1 night

### Highlights of the trip:

**Long-tailed Manakin** – the group was birding a trail at Finca Los Tarrales, situated on the lower flanks of Volcán Atitlan. We were on the search for Long-tailed Manakin. Not too far along the trail one individual was heard and then sighted by our local guide – Josue de Leon.

A relatively small bird, about the size of a Black-capped Chickadee with a mostly black body and head, punctuated with a bright crimson cap and bright blue wings. Its namesake long tail is made up of two thin tail feathers that are 4-6" long. The bird was flitting around in fairly dense vegetation about three feet away from the trail. It wasn't easy to get everyone on the bird, and sightings were fleeting, but everyone was excited to have seen a glimpse of such an iconic neo-tropical bird.



*Long-tailed Manakin © Darcy Barry*

We were then alerted by our lead guide, Pablo Najarro, who had wandered further up the path. He was madly beckoning us to come up the path toward him. We didn't know what he had seen, but it was obviously exciting due to Pablo's gesticulations. When we reached Pablo he pointed into the vegetation in front of him and shout-whispered "MANAKIN LEK!" We all peered into the bushes and there, in front of us, slightly obscured by leaves, were three male Long-tailed Manakin conducting their courtship display. Click [here](#) for an example of the display on YouTube. Each male was taking turns jumping into the air, fluttering down and then skipping along a perch where a female was carefully inspecting them all to determine whether one was a worthy suitor. It looked exhausting, but we were thrilled to see this

unusual behavior. Neither of the guides had seen a lek of this species before and were as amazed as we were to witness it.

**Roadrunner** – While visiting Lake Atitlan, renowned as one of the most beautiful lakes in the world, we took a boat from Santiago to San Juan La Laguna in search of a few target species which included Belted Flycatcher, Prevost's Ground Sparrow and the Lesser Roadrunner (meep meep!). As we crossed the lake, we passed flocks of familiar Lesser Scaup, occasional pairs of Pied-billed Grebe and the only gull we encountered on the entire trip, Laughing Gull. Unfortunately, there were no signs of the now extinct (1996) Atitlan Grebe that I was hoping to rediscover :)

Once landed on the dock, we found a flotilla of tuktuks waiting for us that whisked us through town to a trail at the base of a volcano that lead slowly through dry forest habitat. Walking the trail we saw a number of flycatchers, sparrows, and doves, along with a 'heard' Buffy-crowned Wood-Partridge. As we reached the top of the trail, where the dry forest turned into tall dry grassland and scrub, we heard our first Lesser Roadrunner, sadly it didn't meep meep, but moved through the dry scrub! At the top of the trail, the group clustered together as one, and then another roadrunner were seen about 50 feet down the trail in the open. At this point we assumed they were interacting normally with each other, then one of them picked up a piece of dried grass. They then performed a brief courtship display and we watched as the bird with the grass "gift" jumped on to the back of the other and proceeded to mate. We were all aghast at our fortune, witnessing this behavior! It only lasted about 30



*Lesser Roadrunners mating! © Darcy Barry*

seconds, but it was spellbinding. Once finished with their dalliance, we watched them disappear into the grass. We looked at each other with huge grins on our faces and the guides were as excited as we were, as it was the first time they had ever seen that behavior. We knew at that point that this would be one of the highlights of the trip.

**Pink-headed Warbler** – On the first day of the trip, while still in Antigua, our lead guide, Pablo, asked each of us which species we most wanted to see. A number of our group hoped to see a Resplendent Quetzal, a couple wanted to see a Horned Guan and I wanted to see a Pink-headed Warbler. I didn't even know this bird existed before I started to plan this trip, but when I came across this species as one that we might encounter I knew this would be my most treasured find of the trip. The itinerary placed the habitat where this species could be found, on the last day of the trip and didn't leave much room for error.

We left Panajachel on the shores of Lake Atitlan, and headed toward the capitol, Guatemala City, where we would spend our last night before heading home. Half way to the city, we pulled off the Pan-American Highway to a small reserve called Corazon del Bosque (heart of the forest) containing oak pine forest habitat. As we pulled up, this appeared to be the most unlikely place to find such a spectacular bird. The parking lot was directly next to an area of picnic tables and a decrepit playground, and due to it being Saturday, was flooded with youth and families celebrating birthdays. As we walked past them we stopped to enjoy a very familiar Steller's Jay. We continued through a couple of gates and walked along the bottom of a ravine where a small stream ran. Within only a couple of minutes, the first Pink-headed Warbler was spotted, and there it was, the most bizarrely colored bird I'd ever seen. It truly had a pink head. Not quite flamingo pink, but a light pink, with darker streaks leading to a reddish-pink body. We got good looks at this species and ended up seeing four individuals. My trip was made. As we returned to the picnic area, most of us fell fowl of deep mud next to the stream, but it didn't dampen our moods after the species we had just witnessed.



*Pink-headed Warbler © Darcy Barry*

Below are the species we recorded that are also found in Washington State. Species in bold may migrate from Washington state to Guatemala, and back.

**Lesser Scaup**

**Pied-billed Grebe**

Great Blue Heron

**Green Heron**

Black-crowned Night-heron

**Turkey Vulture**

**Osprey**

**Sharp-shinned Hawk**

Red-tailed Hawk

American Coot

**Spotted Sandpiper**

Rock Pigeon

Band-tailed Pigeon

Vaux's Swift

Hairy Woodpecker

Northern Flicker

**American Kestrel**

Peregrine Falcon

**Olive-sided Flycatcher**

**Hammond's Flycatcher**

Dusky-capped Flycatcher

**Western Kingbird**

Hutton's Vireo

**Warbling Vireo**

Steller's Jay

Northern Rough-winged Swallow

**Violet-green Swallow**

**Barn Swallow**

Bushtit

House Wren

**Swainson's Thrush**

**Northern Waterthrush** (rare in WA)

**Nashville Warbler** (rare in WA)

**MacGillivray's Warbler**

**Common Yellowthroat**

**Yellow Warbler**

**Townsend's Warbler**

**Wilson's Warbler**

**Lincoln's Sparrow**

**Yellow-breasted Chat** (rare in WA)

**Western Tanager**

**Rose-breasted Grosbeak** (rare in WA, but  
seen during last year's CBC!)

House Sparrow

If you'd like to be notified of information on the next International Birding Trip, please get in touch with Science Manager, Toby Ross at [tobyross@seattleaudubon.org](mailto:tobyross@seattleaudubon.org).