

# Audubon International Alliances Program



Pink-headed Warbler. Photo by Greg Lavaty

## Guatemala Highlands and Lake Atitlan

### Suggested Itinerary

#### *Birding Guatemala's Highlands and Lake Atitlan*

Guatemala is a fantastic country with a diversity of rich habitats for birds, from montane cloud forest to lowland forest. This tour specifically focuses on the highlands of the Chiapas-Guatemala Highlands Endemic Bird Area, where unique species of birds live in this land of the Maya. The itinerary incorporates the best montane birding opportunities in this scenic country and allows us to experience the wonderful and colorful living culture of the Maya. We will make time to visit Mayan markets, learn a bit about Guatemalan people and their Mayan culture and also visit the world renowned colonial city of Antigua and the picturesque Lake Atitlan.

Many of the great birds we will be seeking are restricted to the highlands centered in southern Guatemala, but also reaching to adjacent Chiapas, Mexico, and El Salvador and



Volcan de Fuego. Photo by Alvaro Jaramillo.

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Horned Guan. Photo by Alvaro Jaramillo.

Honduras. They include the **Highland Guan**, **Ocellated Quail**, **Fulvous Owl**, **Black-capped Swallow**, **Bushy-crested Jay**, **Rufous-browed Wren**, **Black and Rufous-collared robins**, **Blue-and-white Mockingbird**, **Pink-headed Warbler**, **Azure-rumped Tanager**, **Bar-winged Oriole**, and **Black-capped Siskin**, among others. There will be an option for those who are physically fit to endure a steep and difficult hike up a volcano in search of **the rare but spectacular Horned Guan**. Guatemala is a land of **many motmots** where we may encounter **Tody**, **Blue-crowned**, **Turquoise-browed**, and **the local Blue-throated**. We will not lack for great birding, scenery, food, world-class coffee, or cultural experiences.

**Hummingbirds** will make an impression with a great diversity of shapes and colors. Some lodges have started using hummingbird feeders, so species that were once quite

difficult to find are now much more reliable. These include the **Rufous Sabrewing**, **Violet Sabrewing**, **the showy Black-crested Coquette**, **Green-throated Mountain-gem**, **Azure-crowned**, **Blue-tailed**, **Amethyst-throated**, **Garnet-throated**, **Sparkling-tailed**, **Wine-throated** as well as **tiny and local Emerald-chinned hummingbirds!** We will have a great chance to leisurely observe many of these little gems.

Part of the focus of this tour will also be to enjoy, study and learn about **North American birds in their wintering areas**. Guatemala is vital to northern migrants, including those from the eastern and western U.S. and Canada. You may see a **Western Tanager** hobnobbing with a **Baltimore Oriole**, a **Louisiana Waterthrush** with a **Townsend's Warbler**, or a **Hammond's Flycatcher** near a **Least** allowing for great opportunities to hone your identification skills! It is a superb place to learn about their wintering ecology, which can be very different from their breeding and migration habitats and behaviors. Seeing "our" birds in a different perspective adds im-

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mensely to a fuller understanding of their lives and also of how these birds unite people across borders. Our shared struggle to conserve these migratory birds becomes obvious and immediate, and through birding tourism we take a small step to making a statement of the value of bird habitat as a business opportunity. As shade grown coffee has made an impact in migrant bird conservation, so will bird-based tourism.

This itinerary incorporates something special, and that is the opportunity to make you a partner in helping international conservation. **The National Audubon Society Asociación Vivamos Mejor**, based in Panajachel on Lake Atitlan, have teamed up to train Guatemalans to become birding and nature guides. Along with our primary tour leader, we will have their local guiding help throughout this trip, and in turn are helping them make a living while protecting a healthy and diverse ecosystem. Birders who choose to take these tours in order to see and enjoy the natural riches will have a direct economic impact on the local people resulting in preservation of local habitats that maintain a healthy, viable ecotourism industry.

### The Birding Sites We Visit

#### Antigua and Guatemala City

The tour begins near Antigua in an interesting and birdy area, which is approximately 45 minutes drive from Guatemala City. Here one finds a mix of dry valleys and good highland forest (oaks and pines but also wet cloud forest). These highland forests harbor some of the special birds of the trip

#### Asociación Vivamos Mejor

Asociación Vivamos Mejor (AVM) is a private non-profit development organization committed to improving the quality of life of rural communities, mainly in the department of Sololá, Guatemala. We focus on Sustainable Watersheds and Resiliency to Climate Change as a strategy for promoting sustainable development.



Tody Motmot. Photo by John Sterling.

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Wine-throated Hummingbird. Photo by Luis Búrbano.

including: **White-breasted Hawk** (sometimes considered a subspecies of the Sharp-shinned Hawk), **Highland Guan**, **Pacific Parakeet**, **Rufous Sabrewing**, **Green-throated Mountain-Gem**, **Amethyst-throated Hummingbird**, **Blue-throated Motmot**, “Guatemalan” **Northern Flicker**, **Gray-collared Becard**, **Black-capped Swallow**, **Bushy-crested Jay**, **Rufous-browed Wren**, **Black and Rufous-collared robins/thrushes**, **Blue-and-white Mockingbird**, **Chestnut-sided Shrike-Vireo**, **Hooded Grosbeak**, and **Bar-winged Oriole**. Birds of a more widespread range that are found here include some stunners

like **Mountain (Northern) Pygmy-Owl**, **Azure-crowned Hummingbird**, **Collared and Mountain trogons**, **Emerald Toucanet**, **Band-backed Wren**, **Brown-backed Solitaire**, **Gray Silky-flycatcher**, **Crescent-chested**, **Red-faced**, **Chestnut-capped** (the southern form of **Rufous-capped Warbler**), **Golden-browed**, and **Hermit warblers**, **Slate-throated Redstart**, **Flame-colored** and **White-winged tanagers**, **Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercer**, **Chestnut-capped Brush-Finch**, and **Black-vented Oriole**.

We will stay in Antigua, Guatemala’s colonial capital until 1773 when it was destroyed by an earthquake. Antigua was once the cultural center of Central America, and now with its considerable charm, Spanish colonial architecture, and colorful Maya culture, it is a center for tourism. It is known for its silver and ceramics, and of course its coffee.

### Lake Atitlan

Lake Atitlan has sometimes been called the most beautiful lake in the world. It is just above 5000 feet in elevation, nestled in the mountains. It seems that everywhere you look you see a volcanic peak! As you travel across the lake you see local fishermen in their dugouts pushing themselves along with poles through the reed beds along the shallow shores of the lake. Birds may include **migratory ducks**, such as **Less-**

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er Scaup among others. We also may find the fantastic **Sparkling-tailed hummingbird** and maybe the **Slender Sheartail (rare)** along with **Golden-olive Woodpecker**, **Band-backed Wren**, **Blue-and-white Mockingbird**, **Rufous-collared Robin**, **Slate-throated Redstart**, **Black-vented Oriole**, **Black-headed Siskin**, **Rusty and Rufous-collared sparrows**. A local rarity is the pretty **Belted Flycatcher**, which we will try hard to find. We will stay at and visit various sites both in the southern and northern shores of the lake. Some areas are dry forest, while others are wetter or higher elevation. Pine-Oak forests dominate the higher reaches, while drier deciduous habitats are found lower down. Some of the areas we are visiting are well established; others are in the development phase where involvement of locals through birding tourism is not only employing people, but helping to determine which species of birds are in each area.



Turquoise-browed Motmot. Photo by John Sterling.

The Atitlan area also offers us access to the highlands, where **the Horned Guan is the real star of the show for those who are fit and strong** enough to hike up the San Pedro Volcano. **This fantastic bird is nowhere easy to see**, and it won't be easy for us either. It is by no means a sure thing even after the walk. We will climb the steep slopes of the San Pedro Volcano, trying to keep the pace reasonable; but there is no way to get around the fact that it is a long climb beginning at a reasonably high altitude very early in the morning. But if we are successful, it will all seem worthwhile. **For those who would rather take it easy, we will offer a less strenuous option on this day**, perhaps going to the same volcano but only hiking up for part of the way.

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While in the various villages in Lake Atitlan, we will have afternoons or periods of down time. Depending on the group's interest, at these times it may be possible to do some shopping for locally made crafts, visit a weaver's workshop, or see other places of cultural interest. One evening we are planning to have a get together with a community involved in the bird-based tourism initiative. Guatemala is known for its living culture, and we plan on enjoying and learning as much as we can from the local people while we are here.

Finca Los Andes is located not too distant from Lake Atitlan, on the flanks of Volcan Atitlan. This is a coffee and tea farm, run by a family with a commitment to nature. Los Andes has a great set of trails in highland and cloud forest above the tea-growing areas. They have been monitoring and managing (with nest boxes) **a population of Resplendent Quetzal here**, and this is one of the key species we will be looking for. It is a wonderful site to see other highland species, in particular the **rare and local Azure-rumped Tanager, Emerald Toucanets, Tody Motmots and deep forest**

**species like Scaled Antpitta and Spotted Nightingale-Thrush.** Although it has been on the birding circuit for a few years, there are still possible surprises at Los Andes Private Reserve.

**The optional Horned Guan Hike is quite strenuous**, and even when you are in its habitat it can be difficult to find. In order to get to the area at a decent viewing time, this day may involve a very early start. You need to be prepared to walk up a relentless steep



"Guatemalan" Junco. Photo by Alvaro Jaramillo.



Tufted Flycatcher. Photo by John Sterling.

grade with very few switchbacks. This can be tough on knees, particularly on the way down. The climb is several miles in length and it takes several hours! The plan is to keep the pace as relaxed as possible, but even taken slowly, this is a tough hike due to the slope, the dusty nature of the trails and the elevation (starting at 6000 feet elevation). This is not a walk to be tried by all of us. For those who want to skip the hike, we shall offer some great birding lower down, in some very diverse forest.

### *Itinerary for Guatemala*

**Day 1 – ARRIVAL IN GUATEMALA CITY.** Please book flights to arrive into Guatemala City by 2:30 p.m. Staff will be waiting for you at the airport in Guatemala City. From there we will transfer you to beautiful and historic Antigua approximately an hour away depending on traffic. Overnight in Antigua.

### **Day 2 - ANTIGUA GUATEMALA TO LOS ANDES PRIVATE NATURE RE-**

**SERVE.** We begin the morning with a visit to Finca El Pilar, a private reserve with great pine-oak forest and **excellent trails for birding.** We will visit the **hummingbird feeders** and walk the trails looking for species such as **Black-capped Swallow, Blue-throated Motmot, Bar-winged Oriole, Hooded Grosbeak and Pacific Parakeets.** A fantastic and relatively common species here is the awesome **Gray Silky-Flycatcher.** The feeders host **Azure-crowned, Berylline and White-eared hummingbirds as well as Rufous Sabrewing, and Green-throated Mountain-Gem.** In the afternoon, we will travel west to Finca Los Andes. If time permits we will bird near the lodge. For those who are energetic, post-dinner owling is a possibility. Overnight in Finca Los Andes.

### **Physical Requirements & Pace**

In the highlands, **there are slopes to walk up and down** in order to bird the areas appropriately, so you will want to **bring a good pair of hiking shoes and possibly a walking stick.** We will keep our hiking to a slow and moderate pace, enough to see the forest, but also to stop and look at birds. For this itinerary, **you should be able to walk for several miles each day on variable terrain.** For longer resting periods, **you may want to take a folding stool;** standing and waiting for birds can often tire one out more than walking. **To get around on the lake, we often take boats** (“lanchas” as they are known here) from one village to another. This is a quick and efficient way to move around. One does not expect swells, but if it is windy there can be a wind chop which makes for a bouncier ride. The boats are loud, but they are quick, and allow us to avoid windy mountain roads in order to move around. **In general, the highlands are variable in temperature, so layers are best.**

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White-throated Magpie-Jay.  
Photo by Alvaro Jaramillo.

**Day 3 – LOS ANDES PRIVATE NATURE RESERVE.** Hummingbird feeders at the lodge may attract the **Blue-tailed Hummingbird** as well as **Violet and Rufous sabrewings**. The rarer **Wine-throated Hummingbird** may also appear. We will drive in pickup trucks up to the higher forest above the tea plantations where a nice set of trails may allow us to find the **Resplendent Quetzal**. **Tody Motmots** and **Emerald Toucanets**, as well as deep forest species such as **Singing Quail**, **Spotted Nightingale-Thrush** and **Scaled Antpitta**. The rare **Azure-rumped Tanager** is found here, and will be a target for us to find. Overnight in Finca Los Andes.

**Day 4 – LOS ANDES – LAKE ATITLAN BIRDING.** We begin with an early morning breakfast and will **look for bird species near the lodge** that we may not have found yet.

After lunch at Los Tarrales, we board the bus and head to Lake Atitlan where **we will board a boat to get to the town of Santiago Atitlan**. This evening near our lodging at Santiago Atitlan, we will have opportunities to see a few new species. If we are lucky, we may find the **uncommon Slender Sheartail hummingbird** or **the unique looking Prevost's Ground-Sparrow**. Santiago Atitlan is a hub of Mayan culture and there may be an opportunity to meet some locals who are part of the Audubon bird-tourism initiative. Overnight at Santiago Atitlan.

**Day 5 – PARQUE MIRADOR DEL REY TEPEPUL.** This is a **3500-hectare park**, mostly forest with a wide altitudinal range. Although new to the bird-tourism scene, **this park has great birds, including the Yellow-naped Parrot, Blue-crowned Chlorophonia, and the gorgeous Azure-rumped Tanager**, and perhaps even the rare and **spectacular Resplendent Quetzal**. In the afternoon, we will take a boat to San Juan La Laguna. Overnight in San Juan La Laguna.

**Day 6 – SAN JUAN LA LAGUNA.** Bird-tourism is also new to the San Juan La Laguna area. We will seek out the rare and **gorgeous Belted Flycatcher**. We may also come across the **Lesser Roadrunner** and other dry forest spe-



Lake Atitlan. Photo by Alvaro Jaramillo.

cies, such as **Prevost's Ground Sparrow**. San Juan offers another opportunity to experience Mayan culture up close, including perhaps viewing a weaver at work. This afternoon will be less strenuous to prepare for tomorrow's long and difficult hike. Overnight in San Juan La Laguna.

**Day 7 – VOLCAN SAN PEDRO HORNED GUAN.** **The hike to try and find the Horned Guan is a very difficult one**, on a single dirt track that becomes steep at times. We will divide into two groups, each with a guide, a faster paced group and a slower paced group. **The slower paced group will look for birds lower down on the slopes of the volcano**, and will not climb to the Horned Guan habitat. For those who do continue, this is a very difficult and strenuous hike, not for everyone. As well, climbing to the habitat is by no means a guarantee, the guan is rare and local, and you may not see it even once you are up there! Great birds can be seen on the hike; although rare, in the lower slopes, we may encounter **Belted Flycatcher** and **Lesser Roadrunner**. **During the climb, one may find Emerald Toucanet, Mountain Trogan, Mountain Elaenia, the incomparable Chestnut-sided Shrike-Vireo**, and rarely seen **Black-troated Jay** among others. Depending on the number of fast-paced versus slower-paced birders, we may be able to have the slower-paced birders visit another birding or cultural site in the area after lunch. Overnight in San Juan La Laguna.

**Day 8 – REST MORNING – BIRDING SAN MARCOS.** After our busy day looking for the guan, we will have a **leisurely morning**. After lunch, we will travel via boat to San Marcos where **we will bird some nice dry forest sites**. Overnight in San Marcos La Laguna.

**Day 9 – PARQUE TZANKUJIL TO PAN-AJACHEL.** In the morning **we will take a boat to Parque Tzankujil**, which has some very good dry forest. Various species of birds are seen here and not in wetter forest sites in the area. This area could give us a chance to find the **showy Sparkling-tailed Hummingbird**. This is a great spot for wintering warblers, resident orioles including the Bar-winged, Bushy-crested Jay



Violet Sabrewing. Photo by Luis Búrbano

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and even the skulking **Blue-and-white Mockingbird**. We will bird the morning here, have lunch and then will transfer to Panajachel. Panajachel is a bustling, tourist hub where you can do some afternoon shopping or relax and take in views of the Lake. On this evening, we may be able to entertain members of the local community involved in Audubon's bird tourism initiative. Overnight in Panajachel.

**Day 10 – CORAZON DEL BOSQUE.** Corazon del Bosque is a superb community reserve, located higher up in the oak-pine forest zone. The star bird at Corazon del Bosque is the gorgeous and uncommon **Pink-headed Warbler**. As we look for the warbler, we may see **Mountain Trogan**, **Spotted Woodcreeper**, **Yellowish Flycatcher**, **Rufous-browed Wren**, **Olive Warbler**, **Crescent-chested Warbler**, **White-naped Brush-Finch** and the local form of the **Yellow-eyed Junco** which many consider a separate species: the “Guatemalan Junco.” We will have lunch and then a free afternoon in “Pana”. Overnight in Panajachel.

**Day 11 – PANAJACHEL – GUATEMALA CITY.** We will make our way back to Guatemala City today. There will be a **birding and lunch stop in the wet highland forests** of Rincón Suizo, where we hope to see any highland species that have eluded us so far. Tonight we say farewell to this colorful, diverse and birdy country. Overnight in Guatemala City.

**Day 12 – FLY OUT OF GUATEMALA.** Transfer to Guatemala City Airport to take your flight home.

