

# Highlands of Mexico

## A Greentours Itinerary

### Day 1 To Mexico City

After a direct flight from the UK we arrive into Mexico City around six in the evening. We'll spend the night at the nearby Hotel Grand Prix.

### Days 2 - 4 Colima & the Volcan de Fuego

A seven o'clock flight takes us right over the great neo-Volcanic belt that stretches across the country giving us fabulous views of the spectacular landscapes we shall spend the next two weeks traversing. It is just forty-five minutes drive up to the lovely Laguna Maria and though we'll be keen to settle in the abundant and colourful bird and plant life en route will do its best to delay us. On the way up we'll be treated to increasingly impressive panoramas, for the volcanos that rise almost 14,000 above sea level are just to the north of our beautifully situated base. Though warm down at the Laguna it's winter up on the cones, and there may even be snow on the volcano tops. The nearer cone, the still active Volcan de Fuego, erupts regularly and there's a very good chance of seeing ash-clouds rising from its cone, as we have on all of our visits. The Laguna Maria is a crater lake, a kilometre across, and on two sides the inner cliffs of the now inactive volcanic vent are still intact, clad in a riotous profusion of sub-tropical vegetation. *Lobelia laxiflora* hangs its orange and yellow blooms from the ash cliffs as shimmering orange Mexican Silverspots nectar on brilliant *Castillejas*. The local endemic Golden-crowned Emerald nectars on scarlet *Trompetillas* as Mexican Fox Squirrels scurry noisily through the varied tree canopy. The birdlife is extremely rich being at the junction of tropical and montane. Among the hundreds of species present at Laguna Maria are West Mexican Chachalaca, Elegant Trogon, Gray-crowned Woodpecker and Lilac-crowned Parrot. Tracks lead further up the volcano where fields are coloured orange with *Leonotis*. Hummingbirds such as Broad-tailed, Rufous, Calliope and Sparkling-tailed adore these striking flowers! One of the world's tiniest birds, the Bumble-bee Hummingbird is joined by Happy Wren, abundant Inca Doves and coveys of gorgeous Banded Quail. There are many fine butterflies too with Orange-patch Crescents and the fine Bromfield's Beauty alongside the Magnificent Swallowtail and the Surprising White, a species well-named as it is entirely black and red! Night walks along Laguna's tracks will reveal opossums, Gray Foxes, White-nosed Coatis, Nine-banded Armadillos and both Hog-nosed and Hooded Skunks. On the 2008 tour superb views of a Margay were had not ten minutes walk from the hotel and an image of one was captured on the trap camera we put there during our stay in 2012!

We'll visit a beautiful canyon whose walls are cloaked in endemic-rich West Mexican thorn forest, decorated with tall columnar cacti and the lovely red going over to green blooms of *Combretum farinosum*. This is a great spot for butterflies.

We'll see many Blackened Bluewings, a beautiful nymphalid whose uppersides, in the male, are shot with rays of electric purple-blue, whilst the female has bands of paler blue. Emerald-green and black Malachites are common, and we'll see bright orange Julia Heliconians and Orange Banners as well as the impressive Jazzy Leafwing, all cream, russet and black. Several endemic flycatchers and hummers make this unusual habitat their home though we'll most want to see the fabulous White-throated Magpie-Jays which move through the canyon in raucous flocks. Soon we'll be back to the butterflies though, admiring Sky-blue Greatstreak, Many-banded Daggerwing, Red Cracker, Zilpa Longtail, and the wonderful blue-hued Gilbert's Flasher.

It is just over an hours drive down to the Pacific shore from Laguna and so one afternoon we'll drive down to Playa Mezcala, a quiet beach on the border between Colima and Michoacan. Every autumn huge arribadas of Pacific Ridley Turtles come ashore to lay their eggs and some will now be hatching – see our Autumn Turtles Tour for more detail. We'll join the local wardens for a slap-up meal on the beach and hope to watch hatchlings emerging from the sand and scurrying off into the ocean. The nesting season hasn't quite finished and most evenings there's a Green Turtle or two and sometime a Leatherback Turtle even at this season. We'll accompany the wardens as they walk the beach looking for nesters, most likely the Greens, before enjoying a fine evening meal right there on the beach! *Crinum* Lilies line the lagoon back of the beach and we'll see Brown Pelicans, Franklin's Gulls and an assortment of waders as well as Yellow-crowned Night Herons standing sentry at the wave's edge, their feet occasionally glowing as they excite the bioluminescent zooplankton.

## **Day 5**

### **Nevado de Colima**

A good track takes us right up into a national park and to the tree line on the higher dormant northern volcano, the Nevado de Colima. This passes through extraordinarily beautiful pine-oak forest. Though there's no less than 170 species of oak in Mexico this fact barely touches upon the diversity of plantlife. Mexico has fully one-tenth of the world's quarter of a million known plant species! There are bromeliads and epiphytic cacti mixing with ferns and orchids on the mossy tree trunks. On roadside banks are red *Penstemons*, all sorts of *Asteraceae*, and a multitude of blue and red *Salvias* such as brilliant *elegans* and the impressive two inch long scarlet flowers of *fulgens*. Hugely impressive *Cirsiums* with blooms three inches across are easily overshadowed by the gorgeous spires of yellow *Galphimia glauca* and the yellow bowls of *Cochlospermum vitifolium* on bare silver branches. We might encounter our first Monarchs and we'll certainly find sulphurs, crescents, Mexican Fritillary, and red and black Cattleheart Swallowtails. Flying Mexican Elfstreaks flash brilliant blue though settled they show zebra-like stripes. Brilliant Slate-throated Redstarts flit from bush to bush. Parties of azure Gray-breasted Jays stop to investigate us intruders whilst in the undergrowth are both Red-faced and Red Warblers. In the lower fields three gorgeous buntings, Varied, Painted and Indigo, search for seeds with flocks of Blue Grosbeaks - it's a very colourful avian world here!

Nearby Zapotlan Lake harbours Snowy Egrets, White-faced Ibis and the fabulous Roseate Spoonbill. Belted Kingfishers dive energetically after prey whilst Crested Caracaras keep an eye out for anything that's been dropped! Violet-crowned Hummingbirds and various Orioles attend scarlet *Erythrina* flowers while, out on the flats, are the last of the winter's flocks of Snow Geese!

## **Days 6 - 9**

### **Morelia, Patzcuaro and Cuitzeo Lakes, Tzintzuntán & Mil Cumbres National Park**

Travelling eastwards we'll stop by the remarkable Parícutin Volcano. Parícutin started to grow in a farmer's field in 1943 and by the end of its first year the volcano had grown to over a thousand feet. It still continues to pour forth lava and is now over 6,000 high.

Morelia is one of the loveliest cities you'll ever see. It has been declared a national monument and any building work has to perfectly match the old style. In company with our local guide Eric, a resident of Morelia, we'll explore the arcaded plazas and broad avenues of Morelia. One of 'New Spain's' original cities, Morelia's wealth in the 17th century is amply illustrated by the entire city centre dating from this period! The superbly proportioned cathedral boasts the tallest towers in Mexico and this dominates a central plaza surrounded by mansions now used as hotels and shops.

We'll spend some time exploring the city but of course there's plenty of marvellous places full of beautiful birds, butterflies and flowers within easy reach. To the east lies the Mil Cumbres (thousand peaks). A road allows us ready access to this sparsely populated region - the views south across range after range of ever bluer hills are enchanting. Air plants and bromeliads decorate pines and oaks - in fact some of the latter host fabulous aerial gardens, these including various orchids such as the gorgeous red-lined white flowers of *Rhynchostele cervantesii*. Grey-barred Wrens seem incandescent with rage at our intrusion - they must surely exhaust themselves from such vibrant scolding? Beautiful Blue Mockingbirds are endemic to these mountains and are joined by brightly coloured Rufous-capped and Crescent-chested Warblers. High on the Cerro Burro are yet more stunning hummingbirds, the aptly named Magnificent and Amethyst-throated are both abundant along banks festooned in *Lobelias*, *Senecios* and *Dahlia rosea*. From cliffs droop the extraordinary metre long flowering spikes of *Furcraea bedinghausii* and sheets of *Calceolaria mexicana*. The landscape descends rapidly to Tacambaro and below the lovely Arroyo Frio, a place to appreciate on a warm February day. Particularly so as it is full of birds and butterflies. Motmots, hummingbirds and vireos will try and draw our attention away from the many butterflies as well as a rich variety of Odonata including an extraordinary gold-tipped helicopter damselfly. The turquoise-infused Teal Beamer is all you wouldn't expect from a skipper and here we'll also encounter the Orange Owlet, Banded Peacock, Ruddy Daggerwing, Leading Red-ring, Mexican Fritillary, Juno Heliconian and that mimic of the Monarch, the Queen.

Improbably scenic Pátzcuaro is a lake nestling between shapely green-cloaked hills. Marsh Wrens and the endemic Black-pollled Yellowthroat frequent reedy channels where we'll encounter Sora Rails and the beautiful Tricoloured Heron. The nearby village of Quiroga has some great market stalls with the most succulently cooked pork in the country though it will be at a local Ostrich Farm that we'll partake of a spectacular lunch spread. Indeed the whole tour features some marvellous restaurants with highlights being some of Patzcuaro's finest restaurants and Eric himself serving up a wonderful meal at a friend's wildlife-filled ranch. Patzcuaro's vast lake has a tremendously rich birdlife. As fishermen throw circular nets in the shallows we'll see groups of White Pelicans in fishing formation. Flocks of colourful Yellow-headed Blackbirds and Great-tailed Grackles feed by reedy shores where we'll see Northern Jacanas and elegant Black-necked Stilts. Flocks of American Avocets reach into their thousands! Tall Cardon cactus are scattered across arid hillsides where abundant flowering shrubs attract Lucifer and Broad-billed Hummingbirds. There's plenty of archaeological sites in the area and we'll visit perhaps the most significant at Tzintzuntzán, the ancient Tarascan capital which in its heyday, around the time of the Spanish Conquest, had 40,000 residents.

## **Days 10 - 12**

### **Monarchs of the Highlands: Talpujahuá, El Rosario & El Chincua**

Each autumn Monarch butterflies depart rapidly cooling North America and migrate south. The populations to the west of the Rocky Mountains don't go far but those from the rest of this huge continent head down into Mexico. Instead of spreading out over the whole country they gather together on a scale unprecedented in the butterfly world. They winter at a very few localities some eight to ten thousand feet up in Mexico's beautiful Central Highlands. Amazingly each year it takes about five generations to reach the north and come back again - thus a Monarch that leaves these forests in spring might go as far as Texas before breeding and then dying - the next generation then carries on northwards and so forth...

About the size of our European Swallowtail, the Monarch is a beautiful butterfly. The bold orange and black stripes are very striking and to see one on its own might cause you to take time out to look at or even photograph it. But when gathered together in their thousands or even millions they are transformed into a swirling carnival of colour. The experience is mesmerising as they flutter all around us, the air shimmers with their bright wings. At the El Rosario Sanctuary we'll see an estimated twenty to fifty million butterflies gather in a few hectares of fir forest. The fir needles are swamped with Monarchs to such an extent that the trees begin to look like autumn in New England, only the brilliant orange and peach leaves are made up of millions of wings. As the sun warms them the wings start to vibrate and by mid-morning they are leaving their night-time home for the sunny valleys below in droves. There are so many you can hear them flying!

The numbers defy description. A hundred million ... A hundred and twenty million ... Most recent estimates have suggested that five hundred million might be nearer

the mark. You've just got to feel sorry for the people who have to count them! But count them they do for since the rest of world got to hear about this incredible phenomenon only some twenty five years back, scientists and conservationists have been keeping a careful eye on the butterflies' habitat. The beautiful fir forests which harbour the butterflies are dwindling and efforts are being made to protect those that remain and to encourage the local villagers to embrace ecotourism to supplement their pastoral incomes. We'll be staying in lovely Tlalpujahua, a small town close to the El Chincua Monarch Sanctuary. Local guides will take us to the Monarchs here and in the nearby El Rosario Sanctuary where we'll be able to enjoy the spectacle to the full whilst at the same time providing a much needed boost to the local economy. And hopefully helping to ensure that the butterflies have somewhere to return to in winters to come.

Of course there's plenty else to see in these beautiful mountains. Banks of *Salvias* and *Leonotis* attract some stunning hummingbirds such as the large Blue-throated and glorious White-eared, the latter with a shining red bill and a violet 'poll' contrasting with its shimmering green plumage. Pine Forests are home to Whiskered Screech-Owls and Mexican Whip-poor-wills. Much larger than the Monarchs are bright golden and black Two-tailed Swallowtails. With the Monarchs are some very beautiful birds, not least the Red Warbler whose only concession to non-redness is a large white cheek patch! Golden-browed Warbler, the strange warbler-like Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercer and the endemic Abeille's Oriole frequent shrubberies of brilliant yellow *Roldanas* and garish red and green Poinsettias. *Geraniums seemannii* and *latum* populate damp banks where we'll find the tiny orchid *Spiranthes hyemalis* along with *Corallorrhizas* and several elegant little Lobelias. On rocks are the orange flowers of succulent *Echeveria secunda* and the blue trumpets of *Gentiana bicuspidata*. The impressively beautiful and varied *Salvias* continue to amaze with *gesnerifolia*, *longistyla*, *mexicana* and *polystacha* joining the already familiar large red species. Flocks of Yellow-eyed Juncos and pretty blue and red Eastern Bluebirds seek seeds on short turf and in the pines Black-headed Siskins and bright orange Black-headed Grosbeaks feed, the latter occasionally wolfing down a Monarch even though they are poisonous to most birds. Surprisingly easy to find are two local species of Axolotl, the large *Ambystoma velasci*, and the beautiful marbled *Ambystoma ordinarum*, both in the tranquil streams that meander through the mountain forests and meadows. At night Virginia Opossums and Nine-banded Armadillos frequent tracks outside the town and with persistence one can see Bobcat too. One memorable night walk during the 2009 tour yielded very good sightings of Bobcat and Cacomistle as well as brief views of Puma – could we be that lucky again?!

## **Days 13 - 15**

### **Valle de Bravo, Los Sauces Monarch Reserve & Colorines**

On the shores of the blue Laguna de Avandaro are lush forests surrounding a traditional Mexican village of cobbled streets and red tile-roofed houses. Sounds nice? Well 'Avandaro' means dream-place in the Tarascan Indian language! This area has a wonderful diversity of habitats from the immense cone of Volcan

Toluca through highland pinewoods to the bird and butterfly-filled canyons and fields around Colorines. Mountain Trogons sit quietly on boughs overhanging the country roads vying with Flame-coloured and Red-headed Tanagers for the title of brightest bird. Rufous-capped and Green-striped Brushfinches rustle in the undergrowth whilst banks of colourful flowers attract a multiplicity of hummingbirds including the gorgeous Green Violet-ear. Above pine-clad ridges flocks of White-naped Swifts, the world's largest swift, and the rare and almost equally large Greater Swallow-tailed Swift, arc through the blue skies. One can watch Spotted Wrens in the pines then just a few kilometres away are delectable Orange-breasted Buntings in a thoroughly arid landscape. Bridled Titmouse and Squirrel Cuckoo are found here as well as Russet-crowned Motmots. Berylline and rare Dusky Hummingbirds frequent narrow valleys that lead to pretty waterfalls. The purple trumpets of *Cobaea scandens* and bright purple-flowered *Monochaetum calcaratum* and related *Tibouchias* decorate cliffs where the large-leaved carnivorous *Pinguicula nevadensis* earns its living. Three-tailed Swallowtails, Orange-barred Sulphurs and the lovely Red Cracker are joined by tropical butterflies such as the King Shoemaker and elegantly-patterned Small Beauty. Los Sauces is another Monarch sanctuary, and here the paths take us through some very rich flora, to once again marvel at the roosting Monarchs. In canyons below are trees draped in the yellow orchid *Oncidium cavendishianum* and waterfalls attracting hordes of Zebra Heliconids, dartwhites, Angled Leafwings, the Gulf Fritillary with its shimmering mother-of-pearl undersides and the narrow winged brilliant orange Julia. Amongst many whites and yellows are Ghost Yellow and we'll see the regional endemic West Mexican Gemmed-Satyr as well as the beautiful Orange-striped '88'. On a tour of fabulous butterflies we'll finish off with two real beauties, the huge endemic White Morpho, the strikingly marked Anna's Eighty-eight, whose perfect 88s are set next to shining red and blue! On day 15 we'll travel to Mexico City and enjoy a couple of hours in the peaceful university botanical which features a very good collection of cacti and Echevarias. Stunning green and red Xami Hairstreaks visit the flowers as do many hummingbirds. We'll enjoy a mid-afternoon 'lunch' before checking in for our flights home.

## **Day 16**

### **Arrive UK**

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