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San Blas:

Big-Time Birding in a Small Tropical Town

by Noah K. Strycker

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Seventeen-year-old **NKS** lives in Creswell, Oregon, where he is a part-time U.S. Army Corps of Engineers field employee. He enjoys watching birds, drawing birds, photographing birds, and writing about birds. His freelance work has appeared in a number of regional and national magazines, ornithological publications, and government documents.



Peso Island, Nayarit, Mexico; March 2002. © Bob Keefer.

World-class birding and surfing may not seem to go together, but they coexist peacefully in the easygoing, coastal town of San Blas, Mexico. While beach tourists funnel into the high-rise resorts of Mazatlán and Puerto Vallarta to the north and south, adventurous birders and surfers stay in those cities only long enough to get off a plane and into a bus (or car) for the greater attractions of tiny San Blas. For birders, this friendly, affordable seaport hosts an amazing feast of avian life in its lush and accessible mangrove swamps, estuaries, lagoons, beaches, plantations—and sewage ponds.

The best time to visit San Blas is between October and April, when the local bird species are joined by many of “our” neotropical migrants spending the winter. The San Blas Christmas Bird Count draws birders from around the world and regularly lists up to 300 species. Some of the area’s “specialty” birds include Elegant Quail, Mexican Parrotlet, Colima Pygmy-Owl, Citreoline Trogon, Russet-crowned Motmot, Golden-cheeked Woodpecker, San Blas Jay, and Sinaloa Wren.

From the 1500s until the 1800s, San Blas operated as a thriving seaport and major stopping-off point for oceangoing Spanish galleons. Historically, San Blas may be best known as the starting point for the

ships that explored Alaska and evangelized California. The city’s ship-building days are now over. Today, its 10,000 inhabitants spend their time farming, fishing, and providing services to tourists along about 20 miles of sandy beaches.

San Blas sits on the Pacific Coast between Mazatlán (four hours to the north) and Puerto Vallarta (two hours to the south). Inland are the sinuous, mangrove-fringed channels of the San Cristóbal and El Pozo estuaries, home to a wide variety of herons, egrets, ibises, parrots, and warblers. Smaller villages and plantations of coffee, banana, papaya, mango, tobacco, and sugar spread out over the countryside. Overall, greens and browns meld with the blue sky and warm sun (most of the time) to make a natural haven for birds and birders alike. The climate is also appealing, with temperatures ranging from 70° to 86° F year-round.



San Blas itself is easily walkable end to end in about a half hour. In the evening, the central zócalo comes alive with music, people, lights, and food—and thousands of Great-tailed Grackles roosting for the night. On a hill overlooking San Blas sits a crumbling mission church and the Fort of San Basilio, with its cannons



The Laughing Falcon is a favorite with visitors to San Blas. The species is conspicuous, it is easy to identify, and it is exceptionally vocal for a raptor. Its diet consists mainly of snakes. *San Blas, Nayarit, Mexico; January 2002.*
© Christopher L. Wood.

leveled at the horizon and flocks of wintering warblers. Just offshore lies Peso Island, reachable by ferry (a guy and a boat), so named because traditionally the fare was a peso. The price has gone up a bit—it's now more like a couple of dollars (U.S.). Just offshore from Peso Island stands Virgin Rock, topped with a statue of the Virgin and swarming with Blue-footed Boobies.

Less traditional, but equally birdy, stops include the delectable sewage ponds (a must for Northern Jacanas) and a jungly maze of streets on the edge of town, which is loaded with tropical birds, such as Streak-backed Orioles and Mexican Parrotlets.

Whether expert or beginner, in town for a day or a week, most birders in San Blas make sure to get on a river boat trip. The few hours spent gliding along the mangrove-edged waterways, in the morning mists or the cool of the evening, are simply

unforgettable (and worth every peso). From a dock by the bridge on the northeast side of town, trips depart whenever customers show up. Tell the guides what you want (gestures will work), negotiate the price (about \$60 U.S. for up to four people), and then get on the small launch and sit back for a grand adventure. Even if you're an expert birder, the guides will probably see and hear many birds before you do. The boats go as far as La Tovar, a popular resort by a spring where crocodiles and people can swim together—on opposite sides of a net.

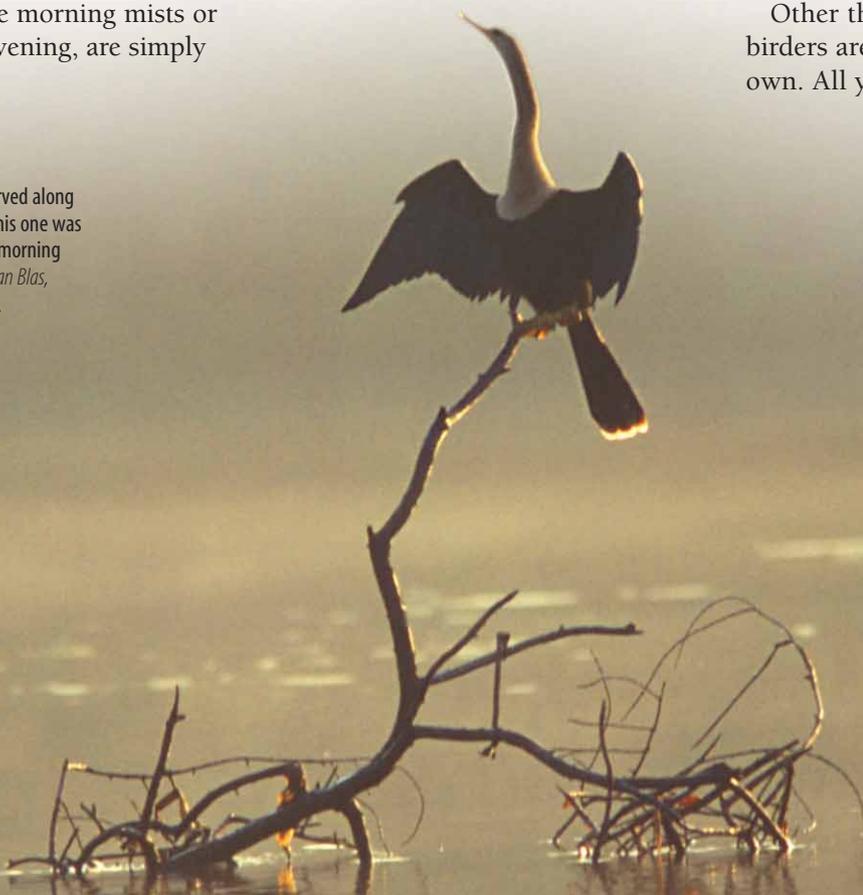
From the boat, birding is spectacular. Several of the guides know the birds well; Chenco is the recommended guide for serious birders, but he's not always available. He knows the bird names in English:

Boat-billed Heron, Bare-throated Tiger-Heron, Muscovy Duck, Great Black-Hawk, Rufous-bellied Chachalaca, Rufous-necked Wood-Rail, Mangrove Cuckoo, Green Kingfisher, Tropical Kingbird, Mangrove Vireo, Mangrove Warbler, Tropical Parula, and Streak-backed Oriole. The birds are used to boats and can be remarkably tame, allowing close approach and good chances for observation and photography.

A special night trip for birders targets a variety of difficult-to-find species. Chenco leads this one. As the boat winds upriver in the fading light, he can call out and spotlight Yellow-crowned Night-Herons, Northern Potoos, Lesser Nighthawks, Pauraques, and other night birds. When I made the trip, he called in a Mottled Owl and got it in the flashlight—a truly awesome sight.

Other than the guided boat trips, birders are pretty much on their own. All you need is a pair of

Anhingas are readily observed along the rivers near San Blas. This one was photographed in an early morning mist on a river boat trip. *San Blas, Nayarit, Mexico; March 2002.*
© Noah K. Strycker.



binoculars and a couple of field guides. I like Howell and Webb's excellent *Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America*, which must be used in tandem with a guide for North American birds, as Howell and Webb concentrate on Mexican species. Howell's *Bird-Finding Guide to Mexico* also is indispensable. For on-the-spot advice, the English-speaking proprietor of the Hotel Garza Canela (a comfortable accommodation that caters to birders) knows the area and is familiar with competent local bird guides for hire.

Although you can see birds almost anywhere, I recommend the following areas because they are safe, accessible, and birdy.

Peso Island

Peso Island is easy to reach, scenic, and loaded with birds. Find a guy with a boat along the beach of San Blas, and he'll take you over for no more than a couple of dollars (U.S.). Once you're on the island, an obvious trail leads across its width through scrubby trees and bushes. This is a good place to find Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Stripe-headed Sparrow, and many wintering migrants, such as Black-and-white Warbler, American Redstart, and Yellow-breasted Chat. After about a half mile, the trail emerges on a beach on the opposite shore. Virgin Rock is visible out to sea and, if you scope it, might reward you with glimpses of Blue-footed Boobies. American Oystercatcher, Willet, and Wilson's, Snowy, Semipalmated, and Collared Plovers could be nearby on the beach. A beach walk can turn up more shorebirds, or you can explore the trees and bushes for Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Lincoln's Sparrow, and the occasional Grasshopper Sparrow. The island is



A visit to Peso Island, where this Fan-tailed Warbler was photographed, is highly recommended. Peso Island is just offshore from San Blas, and it is easily reached by boat. *Peso Island, Nayarit, Mexico; February 2003. © James Zipp.*

small enough to explore in a relatively short time. When you want to return to the mainland, just stand on the shore in view of town and wave. The guy with the boat will come to pick you up.

The Fort

The Fort of San Basilio, located on a hill at the northeast side of the city, is a good walk from the center of town (about a mile one way). A cobble road winds uphill, through a banana plantation and past a cemetery and aging mission church, terminating at the fort, which commands a panoramic view of San Blas and the bay. Massive black cannons and crumbling stone walls, a monument to the colonial days, provide a historic backdrop for birding. Numerous trees and tangles along the road are worth checking for species such as Orange-fronted Parakeet, Great Kiskadee, Rufous-backed Robin, and wintering warblers.

Black and Turkey Vultures and Common Black-Hawks circle overhead.

The Sewage Ponds

No true birder can visit San Blas without experiencing the sewage ponds located on the southeast side of town. You'll know when you're close by the smell. But the birds make the prospect worthwhile, as Least Grebe, Black-necked Stilt, Northern Jacana, and many ducks can be observed there. Along the road to the ponds, look for Crane Hawk, White-tipped Dove, Squirrel Cuckoo, Groove-billed Ani, Vermilion Flycatcher, Masked Tityra, Grayish Saltator, and White-collared Seedeater. Between the sewage ponds and the town is an old overgrown grid of streets in all stages of decay, zigzagging through trees and bushes. Birds abound here, but stay away from the darkest corners for safety reasons. White-winged Dove, Orange-fronted Parakeet, Mexican

The road to Chacalilla can be quite birdy. It wends past shrimp ponds, banana plantations, and open fields. *San Blas, Nayarit, Mexico; March 2002. © Noah K. Strycker.*

Parrotlet, Gila Woodpecker, Lined Woodpecker, Purplish-backed Jay, and Orchard Oriole can be found here, as well as a variety of biting insects (bring repellent).

Lower Singayta

The village of Singayta, located inland about five miles from San Blas, is considered by many to be one of the best birding spots in the area. It is not within normal walking distance of town, so a taxi or rented car is recommended. Go through the village, park along the road on the far side, and walk the dirt road into the forest. Many birds may be found along this route, including Rufous-bellied Chachalaca, Lesser Ground-Cuckoo, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, Cinnamon Hummingbird, Russet-crowned Motmot, Pale-billed Woodpecker, Ivory-billed Woodcreeper, Black-throated Magpie-Jay, San Blas Jay, Happy Wren, Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush, Scrub Euphonia, and wintering migrants. Vagrants also are regularly sighted here. I was once surprised by a male Hooded Warbler, which isn't normally seen in western Mexico. The insects can be annoying, but ordinary repellent will generally keep them off.

The Shrimp Ponds

A short drive from the edge of town will take you to the shrimp ponds, another good spot with views of a variety of waterbirds. I recommend driving along the road and stopping frequently. The shrimp ponds may contain Roseate Spoonbill, Collared Plover, Whimbrel, Marbled Godwit, and a variety of herons and egrets. After a few miles, a dirt road to the right leads to the delightful village of Chacalilla. Walking this road on a sultry afternoon, I watched a lot of birds (Green Kingfisher, Loggerhead

Shrike, Ruddy-breasted Seedeater, Lark Sparrow, Eastern Meadowlark)—and was watched in turn by the local farmers, who were obviously amused by my pishing tactics and dangling camera gear.

Farther Afield

A person could easily spend a week birding just the sites close to San Blas. Plenty of other good spots for birding lie within driving range, though. La Bajada, a village about 40 minutes away, provides some good birding in and among coffee plantations. The El Mirador del Aguila overlook, a 45-minute drive, is the most reliable place to see highly sought-after Military Macaws. Cerro de San Juan is another good spot about an hour's drive away, where birders may see a variety of species not found in the lowlands.

San Blas not only holds birds, but it also holds people. On the whole, the Mexicans that I've encountered have gone out of their way to be friendly and accommodating. On a birding trip to Puerto Vallarta, I made friends with the first taxi driver I flagged down (José) and was delighted when he agreed to take me birding around the area for a full day for about 600 pesos (\$70 U.S.). Although not an experienced bird guide, José knew the area well and



The historic fort provides good views of the city and good birding. *San Blas, Nayarit, Mexico; March 2002. © Noah K. Strycker.*

often saw the birds before I did (and enthusiastically shouted their names in Spanish). A perfect day of birding ended at José's house, where we had a delicious meal of beans, rice, and radishes.

If you're looking for life birds, or just a Mexican experience punctuated by birds, San Blas offers plenty of both. This unspoiled Mexican pueblo has a charm that goes beyond its history and inhabitants. I know people who have returned many times, captivated by the blue sky, yellow sand, lush jungle, friendly people, and amazing birds.



Several species of small *Charadrius* plovers, including the Collared Plover (shown here), are possible along the shore at San Blas. *San Blas, Nayarit, Mexico; January 2002. © Christopher L. Wood.*

San Blas: Information For Travelers

General Information

San Blas, Nayarit, can be reached from North America by land, sea, or air. Although it is possible to drive your own car, it can be expensive because of the toll roads and challenging if you don't speak Spanish. I recommend flying to Mexico City,

Puerto Vallarta, or Mazatlán, and taking a bus or taxi from there to San Blas. You could also rent a car. I prefer the Puerto Vallarta route because the airport is small and convenient, the nearby bus terminal is also efficient, and buses run regularly and reliably (twice-daily di-

rectly to San Blas and more often through Tepic). Also, the area around Puerto Vallarta offers some good birding spots, with a few species, such as Red-breasted Chat and Nutting's Flycatcher, that are hard to find in San Blas.

In addition to your passport, pack plenty of long-sleeved shirts and pants—even though the weather is likely to be warm—to protect

FINDING BIRDS IN SAN BLAS

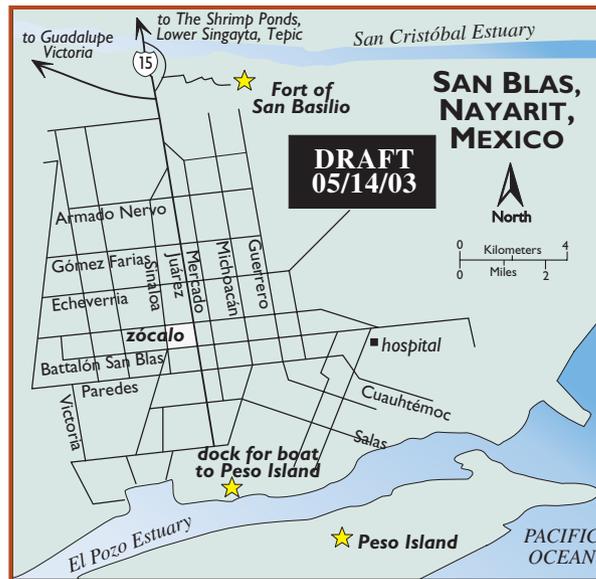
against thorns, stinging insects, and the sun. It's also a good idea to bring bug repellent, sunscreen, and a wide-brimmed hat.

Although the language of Mexico is Spanish, you can get around with English, polite gestures, and a friendly attitude. It helps to speak a little Spanish, at the very least *gracias* (thank you), *por favor* (please), and *pájaros* (birds).

Food and Lodging

Just a few blocks from the center of San Blas, the Hotel Garza Canela is a comfortable lodging that caters to birders. The proprietor, Josefina Vazquez, speaks English, knows the area well, and can help visitors with just about anything. The hotel's restaurant is also excellent. You can learn more at the hotel website <www.garzacanela.com>. The San Blas area

Birds of many species may be seen on the boat trips along the San Cristóbal River. *San Blas, Nayarit, Mexico; March 2002. © Noah K. Strycker.*



Map by Virginia Maynard

boasts many delightful restaurants, including small palapas on the beach where regional food is prepared by hand with fresh ingredients.

Climate and Health

San Blas enjoys a tropical climate that draws birds year-round, but the best time for humans to visit is October to April. The rainy season, July and August, is especially challenging because of the swarms of

stinging insects. If you have a sensitive stomach, you may want to take extra precautions with the food, drinking only bottled water, eating only cooked foods, and avoiding unpeeled fruits and vegetables. Take along some antacid just in case.

Guides

Several guides can help ensure an organized and productive trip. At a minimum, take two field guides: Howell and Webb's excellent *Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America*, plus a reliable guide to North American birds (such as *The Sibley Guide to Birds* or the National

Geographic Society *Birds of North America*). I also find Howell's *Bird-Finding Guide to Mexico* to be indispensable. The 19-page section on San Blas is finely detailed with maps, bird lists, and directions to the best sites.

Professional bird guides are few (Chencho is the best), but the locals tend to know the land and the birds quite well, and are good-natured about being asked.

