



The Blue-footed Booby
Quit your giggling

Flight *of* Fancy

Rebecca Philips discovers a Mexico without suntan lotion and nightclubs, but with plenty of fine-feathered friends.

It's 6:30 a.m. and I'm bitterly regretting that okay-just-one-more cerveza from the night before. Milling about the lobby of our hotel are a few fellow bleary-eyed journalists and a larger, decidedly more keen group of khaki-clad, fresh-as-rain bird watchers, endearing in their enthusiasm at any other time of day. We've all gathered in San Blas, a sleepy coastal town situated between the tourist behemoths of Mazatlán (four hours to the north) and Puerto Vallarta (three hours to the south), not for your typical sun-drenched, tequila-fuelled Mexican getaway but to watch birds. And count birds. And celebrate birds. Specifically,

the largest concentration of migratory winged beasts on the North American continent.

And what seemed like quirky adventure sitting back at home ("Bird watching? In Mexico? Hilarious, sign me up") is now, in the early light of day, feeling like a big mistake, like agreeing to a blind date only to realize, two minutes in, that it'll be the longest meal of your life. The bird nerds, bless them, trill excitedly, comparing notes and jealously poring over each other's stats. The rest of us sausage into a van and head out for a day of what I can only assume will be mind-numbing, butt-numbing bird watching.



Birding in Mexico's Riviera Nayarit province encompasses everything from slowly trawling through inland lagoons (top) searching for rare species like the Chara Verde Green Jay (right) to heading far offshore to witness the sheer numbers (up to 23,000) of seabirds, gulls and five types of boobies at the rocky Isla Isabel (above).

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Our destination is Isla Isabel—a tiny island 75 kilometres off the coast of San Blas—via a rudimentary fishing boat hired for the day. Visibility at first is poor; the sea is choppy and, somewhat disconcertingly, there don't appear to be any life jackets. Still, our captain has spent a lot of time in these waters (he spots a solo whale shark bobbing in the water from what seems like several kilometres away, and, most breathtakingly, steers us within 50 feet of breaching humpback whales) and as the day brightens, so do we.

After two-and-a-half hours of chugging out to sea, Isla Isabel appears, a dot on the horizon, with a black cloud hovering overtop. On approach the cloud begins to dance. Closer still and a Hitchcockian scene comes into view: the island, only one kilometre long, is at this moment home to 23,000 birds, and there's no escaping their deafening cries or the acrid smell of their droppings. One non-birder member of our group immediately lapses into full-blown ornithophobia.

For the rest of us, it's like stumbling into a prehistoric adventureland. But for a few fisherman's shacks on the beach and a Mexican research station, there's no sign of human life. We hike the island end to end, delicately treading between ground-level nests where yellow-, red- and blue-footed boobies tend to their fluffy

chicks and pelicans, and seagulls and tjeretas (a type of hummingbird) circle and swoop overhead. Female frigates nest in stubby, six-foot-high trees, while the males inflate their blood-red, billowing neck pouches to warn us off when we venture too close. More than once I feel beating wings brush the top of my head. After an afternoon of taking a million they'll-never-believe-this-back-home pictures, and snorkelling in the pristine waters surrounding the island, we head back to the mainland, surprisingly energized by the day.

Back in sleepy San Blas we amble about and sample taquerías—Señor Frogs has not yet invaded this part of Mexico—trying shredded pork pockets and sipping refreshing tejunos, a thick slush of fermented corn mixed with freshly squeezed key-lime juice, salt, ice and a scoop of lime sherbet. The Mexico of golf courses and condo developments seems decades away.

The next afternoon we venture into the lagoons surrounding San Blas, where the birds in La Tovarana national park play hide-and-seek in the greenery, coming into focus only when our guide, don Chencho, with cat-like instincts, points them out. We sit transfixed as the setting sun lights up the tropical sky in a patchwork of pink and orange. “American crocodile,” whispers don Chencho, pointing toward a pair of glowing orbs hovering just above the mangrove-edged waterway, as I carefully remove my dangling fingertips from the water.

I pick out a chubby, boat-billed heron squatting on a mossy outcrop. A streak-backed oriole calls to his mate and a muscovy duck paddles past. Overhead soars a great black hawk and, peeking out of the twisted witch-finger mangrove roots, is a rufous-bellied chachalaca. Two days ago I couldn't say boobie without stifling a giggle; now I'm tracking my personal bird count. In the middle of this lagoon I'm beginning to grasp the appeal of birding, what it is that gets the keeners so jazzed. After years of squirming through yoga class and nodding vacantly when friends spoke of the benefits of meditation, here and now I understand: stillness can bring joy. The quieter I am, the more my senses are rewarded: by a movement, a flutter, a flash of colour. And everything else fades away. *wl*

Watch the Birdy

The great thing about birding is that you can do it anywhere. Here are four starting points.

Andrew Molera State Park, Big Sur, California

Once upon a time thousands of condors migrated between B.C. and Baja. Now the condor is among the rarest bird species worldwide.

Ventana Wildlife Society's California Condor Viewing Tour (ventanaws.org) offers a remarkable chance to spot the near-extinct condor in the wild. **Stay** Nestled on a hillside overlooking the dramatic Pacific coastline, **Ventana Inn** (ventanainn.com) is a luxurious option situated in 243 acres of wildlife. Ventana offers spa services, yoga classes and personal hammocks in select suites.

Hakalau Forest National Wildlife Refuge, Big Island, Hawaii

Hakalau, meaning “many perches,” is the first National Wildlife Refuge established in the United States for forest birds, and remains a critical bird habitat today. On the **Hakalau Forest Adventure daytrip** (hawaii-forest.com), keen birders can spot Hawaii's remarkable endemic species while trekking the rainforest and the restricted-access Pua Meadow. **Stay at Mauna Lani Bay Hotel and Bungalows** (maunalani.com)—its saltwater

ponds are used to nurture turtles from Oahu's Sea Life Park.

Brackendale, B.C. Bald eagles are fairly common, but colossal raptor aggregations are not. From late November to early February each year, view B.C.'s fierce bald eagle population as they feast on spawning chum salmon. Amp it up with the **Bald Eagle Watching River Raft Safari** (canadianoutback.com), where you can view the spectacle from the water, or you can easily take in the mayhem on your own by driving near the Cheakamus River.

Everywhere, Costa Rica

With astounding avian diversity and tiny national boundaries, Costa Rica is a birder's dream. Create a coast-to-coast custom tour with **Bird Watching Costa Rica** (birdwatchingcostarica.com) and take in sights from the Caribbean foothills to the lush rainforest and cloudforest highlands. **Stay** at the **Tiskita Jungle Lodge** (tiskita-lodge.co.cr) an 800-acre hillside gem near the less-travelled Panamanian border. Birder bonus: owner and environmental activist Peter Aspinall helped reintroduce the scarlet macaw to the area.



Getting There

Westjet flies directly from Vancouver, Edmonton and Calgary to Puerto Vallarta—your closest gateway. From there buses run twice daily directly to San Blas. The trip takes about 2.5 hours.

Taking a Tour

Professional birder Mark Stackhouse knows the area like the back of his wing. He'll do group or bespoke outings. 323-285-1243, mark@westwings.com

Where to Stay

GARZA CANELA
This rustic, homey spot unintentionally channels a '70s vibe but makes up for it with the great food and warm hospitality provided by the Vázquez sisters who own the property. The best choice in town. garzacanela.com
LA TRANQUILA
If you need four-star service, then Punta de Mita's new La Tranquila has a Greg Norman-designed golf course, a luxe spa and suites with butler service. latranquila.com

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