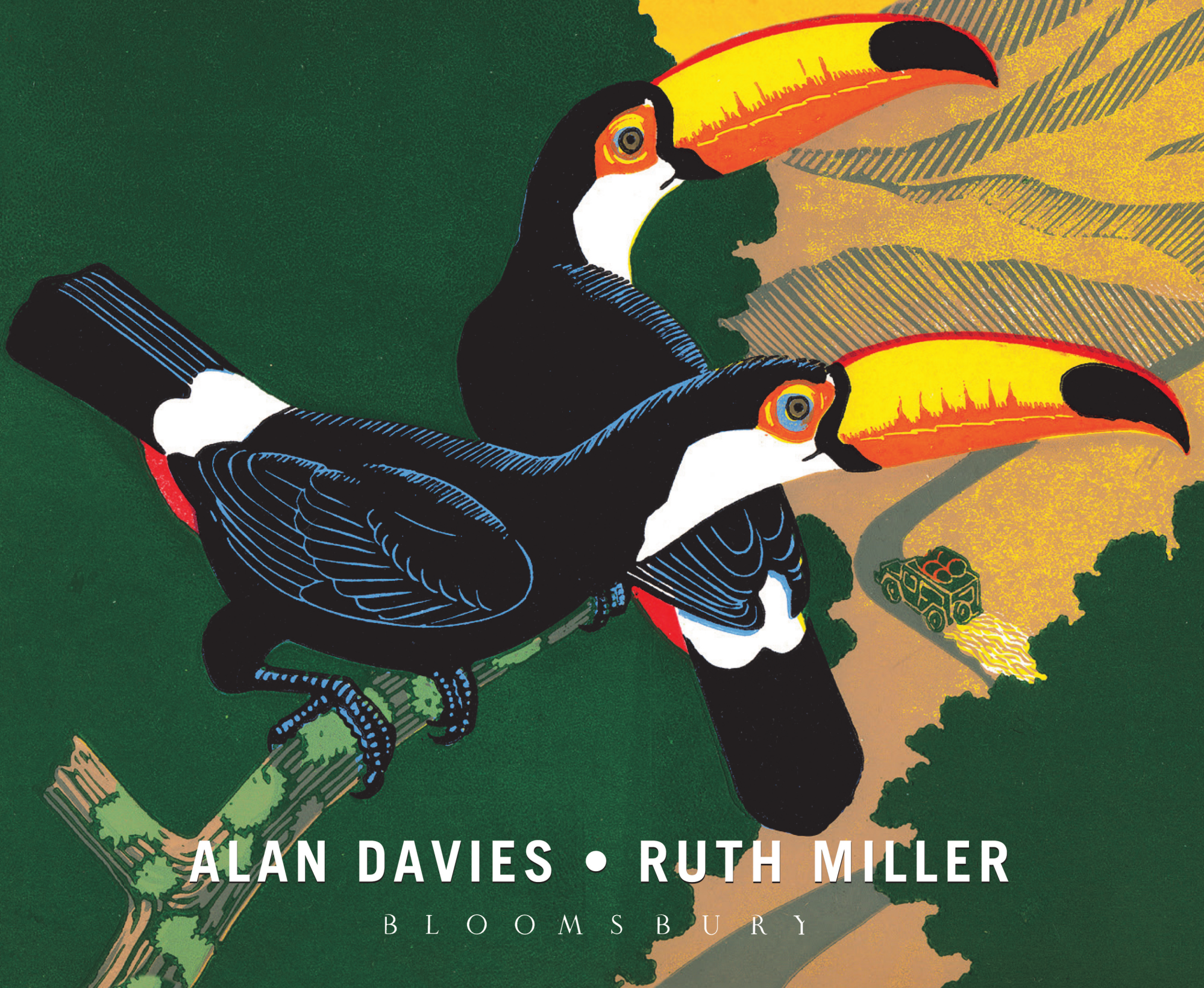


**AROUND THE WORLD IN 4,000 BIRDS**

**THE  
BIGGEST  
TWITCH**

**FOREWORD BY  
MARK AVERY**



**ALAN DAVIES • RUTH MILLER**

B L O O M S B U R Y

# THE BIGGEST TWITCH

'Birding is hunting without killing, preying without punishing, and collecting without clogging your home.'

Mark Obmascik

This book is dedicated to Cecile Miller, without whose enormous generosity *The Biggest Twitch* would never have been concluded. Not only did she ensure the success of *The Biggest Twitch*, but she also had a major part in supplying half the personnel! We are forever grateful.

We also wish to thank Iain Campbell, once described as a manic genius, who is perhaps the person most responsible for our year of non-stop birding; a better friend would be impossible to find.

The list of birds seen on *The Biggest Twitch* in 2008 was based on the 2007 edition of *The Clements Checklist of the Birds of the World*. However, for ease of reading, the species' names in the book are those commonly used in the relevant field guides. A full list of species seen is available on our website, [www.thebiggesttwitch.com](http://www.thebiggesttwitch.com).

# THE BIGGEST TWITCH

ALAN DAVIES AND RUTH MILLER



B L O O M S B U R Y  
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

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## Foreword

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I'd quite like to stand on the top of Everest (but I don't like climbing, heights or being cold) and I'd quite like to sail around the world but I don't like boats (and you get terribly wet). I would really like to have seen more birds in a calendar year than anybody else in the world, but I'm never going to sell my house to fund the trip and devote a year to seeing 4,000 species. In all three cases I'm really pleased I can read about the trials and tribulations, of which there were many, of those who had the bottle to do it.

Ruth Miller and Alan Davies, a couple (when they started the year, when they ended the year, and still) decided to 'go for it' in the leap year of 2008. I was trying to remember what I was doing in 2008, and it's all a bit hazy. Compared with Ruth and Alan I spent less time abroad, less time looking through binoculars, less time in rainforest, less time in deserts and less time eating strange foreign food – and much more time wearing a tie. Maybe that's why I can't really remember 2008.

But in 2008 these two British birders took on the challenge of breaking the record of 3,662 species in a calendar year. How many would they see before the light faded on the evening of 31st December, in Ecuador?

For a birder, it's a remarkably gripping tale. There are birds seen, and, of course, birds missed. There are dodgy roads, dodgy drivers, dodgy hotels and dodgy meals. A large part of the enjoyment of reading this book is in empathising with the protagonists when things aren't going quite as well as they, and we, had hoped.

We could all, just about, imagine doing it ourselves, though none of us has, and few of us will even attempt it. But maybe we should. Mark Twain wrote

*Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.*

And that's what Alan and Ruth did. I know they don't regret it. In fact, there is a bit of yearning to do it all over again.

This is the ultimate adventure story for birders.

**Mark Avery**  
*Author and conservationist*

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## Introduction (Ruth)

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If we'd been given a pound every time we were asked why we were doing it, what countries we were visiting and how we were funding it, we'd be rich by now. We would pay off our debts and set out on *The Biggest Twitch Two*. Everyone seemed to find it a staggering idea to give up everything and spend a whole year birding around the world. To us, though, it quickly became second nature.

In fact, we hadn't originally thought of trying to break a world record. In 2006, after visiting the international stands at the British Birdwatching Fair, we had simply wanted to do more travelling and spend more time birding. Just working on the Tropical Birding stand with our friends Iain Campbell, Christian Boix and Keith Barnes had seen us surrounded by images of mouth-wateringly exotic birds, and the Herring Gulls and Jackdaws back at home just didn't cut the mustard.

Once we'd thought of taking a whole year out of work to travel the world, however, we found that we couldn't come up with a really good reason for *not* doing it. Soon we had compiled a wish list of countries and had started drooling over the field guides.

Then came a pivotal conversation with Iain Campbell and we made what was either the best decision or biggest mistake of our lives. We mentioned to Iain our idea of leisurely birding our way around the world for a year and all the birds we might see on the way. "If you're going to do that," he replied, "you might as well try a bit harder and break the world record."

For a heartbeat there was silence. Alan and I looked at each other. We'd never thought of that. Research revealed that the world record for the highest number of bird species recorded in a single calendar year was 3,662, set in 1989 by the American birder, Jim Clements, author of the celebrated *Clements Checklist of Birds of the World*. It was a daunting figure, but when we looked again at our list of countries and estimated realistically how many species we might see it already came to around 2,000. Perhaps Iain was onto something.

Once we'd mentioned it there was no going back. Everything clicked into place. Suddenly our 'gap year for oldies' had a purpose: it wasn't just a self-indulgent drift around the world any more, it was an attempt to break a world record, something much more serious.

First, we set some ground rules. If we were going to break Jim Clements' record then we should follow his rules too. This meant that we could count only birds that were alive, wild and free flying; road-kills and caged birds were out. Jim had included birds that he had only heard, even if he hadn't seen them, so we would too. Ultimately, though, for a species to make our list we would have to be happy that its identification was verified either by our field guides or recordings, not just by the word of a guide. And it seemed only fair to use Clements' own taxonomic list, as he had been instrumental in creating a scientific list of the birds of the world – even though this made life tougher, as it recognised fewer species than some other popular world bird lists.

As the two of us were in this together, we added an extra rule just for fun: we *both* had to see or hear the bird for it to count. This meant that we would have to spend the entire year living in each other's pockets. For 366 days, because 2008 was a leap year, we would be able to stray no more than a few feet from each other's sides. Wherever one of us went the other would have to go too, because if only one of us saw a new bird it couldn't go on the list until the other had also seen it. We both had to get up and go to bed at exactly the same time; even going to the bathroom alone might be risky.

Next, we needed a name for our adventure. That was easy. Iain Campbell and Nick Athanas had already done *The Little Twitch* in May 2001, a one-month birding frenzy in nine countries setting a record that still stands. Sean Dooley, an Australian birder, had carried out *The Big Twitch*, spending 2002 birding his way across Australia to set a new year-list record, a grand total of 703. So there was only one possible name for our adventure: *The Biggest Twitch*. It had a certain ring to it.

Finally, we needed an itinerary. Our quest dictated our choice of destinations. If we wanted to break the record we needed to visit the birdiest countries and the best birding hotspots around the world at just the right times of year. Catching up with spring migration was going to be crucial to our success, and we had a lot of springs in 2008.

We planned out the year on the living room floor – and it's lucky we have a long living room. First we put down one very long strip of paper and marked it with a square to represent every week of the year. Then we cut up separate squares for each week, and wrote on them the names of the countries we would visit. If we needed four weeks in a country, we used four squares of paper. By the time we'd laid all of these end to end we'd mapped out over eighteen months' worth of travel. Nice, but impossible, so we had to change things. Out went countries with not enough new birds and in came more bird-rich countries to give us more birds in quick time. At our second attempt, we plotted the key destinations against the critical times of year: Texas in April, Finland in May/June, eastern Australia in October, India in November/December and so on. Then the less time-critical countries were slotted into the gaps to give us our schedule of twenty-seven birding countries in twelve months.

This had a huge impact on our budget. Instead of a simple round-the-world tour, we would be zigzagging our way backwards and forwards between continents to be in the right place at the right time. It meant many more flights on different airlines, trebling the cost and the complexity. While I booked up many of the European flights myself, I wasn't up to scheduling our madcap dash around South America, for example, so we asked the help of the professionals. I don't think Trailfinders had ever been asked to book such a complicated schedule of international flights either, but our Man in Manchester, Steve Alban, was brilliant in breaking down our year's travel into manageable chunks and booking us the best deals available.

Meanwhile, I spent many hours on the internet, fixing up accommodation and hire cars around the world. At about this time *The Long Way Down* was shown on TV, featuring Ewan McGregor and Charlie Boorman travelling by motorcycle from John O'Groats in Scotland down to Cape Town over the course

of three months. Watching this became a bit disheartening. OK, so Ewan and Charlie are film stars and had a film crew covering their eighteen-country adventure. But they also had a warehouse for all their kit, and a complete team of organisers and fixers to arrange everything from flights and visas to clothing and luggage. We had just the two of us in our spare time, with a laptop, a telephone and our dining table. There was no comparison. Did we really think we could manage it?

Going for the world-record gave us a good story, however, and made it easier to ask for support. I had done some freelance marketing work for the Conwy-based web and design agency *blahdblah design*, so when it came to building a website for *The Biggest Twitch* there was, of course, only one place to go. Not being particularly web-savvy, we explained what we were looking for with no idea of its cost or complexity. Neil Rylance, the MD, appreciated the potential of our idea and just how much it meant to us, and was able to reduce the cost to something we could afford. The result was a brilliant website that showcased *The Biggest Twitch* and kept us in touch with our growing group of global followers.

Critical to the success of our trip would be our optics. We needed binoculars and telescopes that were light enough to carry easily, but robust and reliable enough to last a year on the road. They also had to be excellent quality: we'd stated up-front that we'd only include birds on our list where we were both happy with the ID, so we really needed to be able to see the birds as clearly as possible in all conditions. We approached Swarovski with a proposal, and they immediately bought into the idea and let us have two pairs of 8x32 EL binoculars and two 65mm ATS HD telescopes.

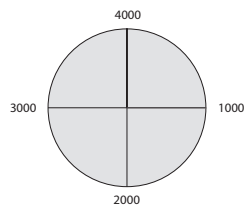
Clothing was pretty important too. We couldn't take much luggage, as the field guides took up most of our space, so what clothing we did take had to be versatile, long-lasting and quick to wash, dry and wear again. We'd known Maria Chilvers, who owns Country Innovation, for many years and she provided us with some fleeces to model in her catalogue and take around the world with us. In an interview for BBC Radio Wales, presenter Jamie Owen teased me about whether I could fit a year's supply of handbags and high heels into our luggage. If only! We didn't miss much from home as we travelled, but I must admit, after a year of living in khaki and walking boots, I couldn't wait to change into something frivolous and girly – preferably bright pink!

But optics, clothing and a website wouldn't do us any good if we weren't in the right place for the birds, so we played our trump card. Over many years of birding around the world, we had built up a huge network of friends and birders in all sorts of useful places. Now we needed to call in favours from as many friends as possible. Not least of these was Tropical Birding. Alan had been friends with Iain Campbell, one of the founders of TB, for years. Maybe we would be living out Iain's own dream of spending a whole year birding while the responsibilities of being a father kept him closer to home. Whatever the reason, Iain and all the guys at Tropical Birding would be fundamental to the success of *The Biggest Twitch*, providing both advice on our itinerary and practical support on the ground in some of the toughest countries. Our final schedule turned out to be a mix of birding with friends, joining tours and relying on our own experience in countries we knew well.

But while we were very grateful for all the practical support we received, *The Biggest Twitch* was still a self-funded expedition. We had not only given up our jobs to follow our dream but also sold the house to help fund it, putting every penny we had into this adventure. We didn't know what we would be coming back to, but that was a problem for 2009. We were sure that something would turn up.

Luckily, we are better at birds than we are at budgets. Had we known before we left just how much the rising cost of fuel and the global economic meltdown would increase the total cost of *The Biggest Twitch*, we might never have left home. Thankfully we remained blissfully ignorant of the looming recession and so, with light hearts and heavy bags, we pulled the front door shut behind us and headed off on our adventure of a lifetime.





## Prologue: 1 January, 4am, Arizona

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It is cold and dark. We are waiting. Nobody speaks as all three of us stare at one spot. Slowly the first grey fingers of dawn creep across the Tucson sky. Tension mounts. Will it show?

As the light comes, all we can make out is the prickly outline of a cactus. But this is not just any old cactus. We are staring at it for a very good reason.

There! Under the bush. It's a Cactus Wren. The very first bird of *The Biggest Twitch*. Our scouting has paid off: we knew that a pair were nesting here at the Sweetwater sewage works and wanted Arizona's state bird to be our very first species.

High fives all round, then we're off. We have a world record to set and need to get off to a flying start on day one. The race is on: can we top 3,662 species before the year is out?

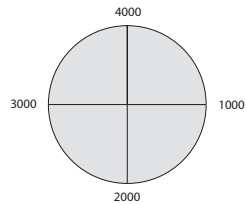
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PART ONE

**New year, new world**

## 1–3 January, Arizona, USA (Alan)

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No time to hang about. We had a world record to set and had to hit the ground running. With Cactus Wren on the list we were free to bird like crazy. Turning around, Sora Rail was bird number two, feeding in a ditch just yards away. Dashing around the pools at Sweetwater we soon had 40 species, including Blue-winged, Green-winged and Cinnamon Teal among the wildfowl, and a family of Harris's Hawks sat out in open view, just where we wanted them.

Madera Canyon was next and we birded it from bottom to top. Unfortunately it was slower birding than on our recce trip a few days earlier, but we still scored some great birds, including Arizona Woodpecker, Magnificent Hummingbird and both Olive and Black-throated Grey Warblers. A Golden Eagle soared overhead and Wild Turkeys scuttled about under the trees, the latter reminding us of our farmyard birds back home.

Then we blasted down to Kino Springs, where although our staked-out pair of Hooded Mergansers let us down (how *could* they?), we did have a fine male Phainopepla feeding in mistletoe. This large silky-flycatcher is a quite a looker, with his jet-black plumage, crimson eye and funky crest.

Patagonia Lake was next up and hopes were high for a big boost to our growing list. A scan of the lake itself gave us Greater Scaup, Common Merganser, Eared Grebe and Neotropical Cormorant, while a short walk along the trail brought us a real treat in the form of a pair of dapper little Black-capped Gnatcatchers. The species only has a toehold in the US and this was *the* place to see it.

As always on big days, the time soon started slipping away. Despite missing several birds at Patagonia Lake we realised that we had to cut and run; there were more sites to visit with, we hoped, nailed-on birds. So, with the sun already heading for the western horizon, we rushed over to Paton's Birder's Haven where, sure enough, birds were lined up on the feeders waiting to be ticked: soon Lazuli Bunting, Blue Grosbeak, White-throated Sparrow and Anna's Hummingbird were all on the list. Phew!

But we were not quite finished; the man who runs Paton's – Robin, appropriately enough – had news of a Gray Hawk that had been seen nearby. This is another very rare bird in the US, so we were off. (Thanks, Robin!) With the daylight almost gone we scanned the scattered woodland – and suddenly Ruth had it, flying directly towards us. Wow! We had a real close-up of this beautiful raptor as it passed low overhead, no doubt heading for its roost.

It was a great finale to day one, and we finished with 119 species. Keep this up and 3,663 should be easy.

The next day dawned grey and chilly with a howling wind. This was not the plan. Ruth had developed a bad cold overnight and the thought of a day in these conditions did not fill her with joy. A day in bed would have been the sensible thing. We decided to head into town in search of some powerful remedy to help get Ruth through the day. While there, we went looking for internet access in

order to update the blog and share news of day one. As was often to be the case over the coming year, this took far longer than planned. We ended up having to use wi-fi in McDonald's, of all places. But we thought it essential to keep the website updated. After all, not to have reported back on day one would have been a very poor start.

Our guide in Tucson was Moez Ali. Originally from Kenya, he was now heavily involved in the local birding scene and knew all the best sites. Moez was itching to get going – and at last we headed out to look for birds.

Back at Carr Canyon the wind was still ferocious and birds were keeping their heads well and truly down. A Brown Creeper did eventually show but we needed numbers fast. At nearby Ash Canyon it was the same story: almost birdless. We tried some feeders near the bottom of the canyon, where it was a little more sheltered, and after a short wait we added Canyon Towhee and Cassin's Finch to our list.

It was time to cut our losses and abandon the canyons, despite having missed numerous species. We dropped down to the grasslands in the hope of better weather. As we drove the wind died and we felt sure we could get back on track. Whitewater Draw in the Sulphur Spring Valley was our next destination. This nature reserve is famous as a roost site for Sandhill Cranes and even before we reached the car park we could see large numbers flying in. These majestic birds stand some five feet tall and are powder grey with a splash of red on the forehead. In flight, the long slender neck is held outstretched and the legs trail behind as the huge wings beat out a slow rhythm.

Stepping from the car we were greeted by the magical bugling calls of the cranes as flock after flock cascaded from the grey winter sky and bounced to land alongside the lake. They gathered along the shoreline, many leaping into the air with open wings. Meanwhile our scopes revealed that the small flock of geese on the open water in front were mostly Snow Geese, with two Ross's Geese and a single White-fronted Goose among them – all new for the list. Scanning the far side of the reserve we picked up a magnificent adult Bald Eagle slowly circling a rough field, a causeway brought us close views of Least and Spotted Sandpipers, and in a willow copse we were able to scope a communal roost of at least eight Barn Owls – unusual for this species. Back at the car park we added our second owl of the day, a huge Great Horned Owl, roosting in an open sided barn. And all the while more and more Sandhill Cranes were dropping in, calling excitedly. It was quite a place.

Moez next suggested we drive the quiet farm roads in the hope of finding sparrows and raptors. We were also hoping for a Greater Roadrunner, which he had assured us would be easy around Tucson ('They're all over the place,' were his words). First up were Sage Sparrows and a Ferruginous Hawk. And then we had a stroke of luck: a lump on a pylon up ahead turned out to be a Prairie Falcon. This was one bird we really had hoped to see: rather similar to a Peregrine, it is both a charismatic bird and a formidable hunter. We watched transfixed as the falcon eased into the air and, with a few deep wing beats, was gone.

Bendire's Thrasher was next on the list, finally popping up in full view after we had spent a few frustrating minutes of watching movements in the scrub. This

species is restricted to the Southwest in the US, and is one of the shortest-billed thrashers with a lovely pale yellow iris. But the sun was sinking fast so we couldn't hang around. We made a dash to Willcox, only to find the wind had caught up with us again. The pools that should have been full of birds were white with waves and almost empty, making Ring-billed Gull our only addition. By way of compensation, Moez's sharp eyes picked out Scaled Quail on the roadside, and we enjoyed great views of this cute, diminutive game bird.

Our final site was Benson's Sewage Ponds, where we found just one new species: a male Vermillion Flycatcher, glowing red in the fading light. It was a cracking bird with which to end any day, but heading back to Tucson in the dark it was clear that Moez was pretty fed-up. The slow start, with the wasted – in his opinion – time in the morning then the poor finish in high winds had taken its toll. Ruth and I had had a great day, of course, but bird guides are a strange breed.

Day three, and we picked up Moez on what was thankfully a calm morning. It was still pitch black and the canopy of stars in the clear desert air was dazzling. Whether it was the stars or the improved weather, Moez was back on form and once again his usual happy smiling self. Meanwhile the power of American medicine had worked wonders and Ruth was also back on her game.

We headed again for the Santa Catalina Mountains, where Moez had back-up. Liz Payne and her mother Jean have a fantastic home on the edge of the desert – well *in* the desert really, as they count Mountain Lion among their neighbours. The bungalow was surrounded by native vegetation and well-stocked feeders festooned the lovely garden.

Liz and Jean greeted us like old friends. Tea, cake and fruit all appeared as we scanned the feeders for new birds. This was birding in style. A Curve-billed Thrasher hopped, rather awkwardly, onto one of the bird tables as a Cactus Wren climbed the garden fence. Gambel's Quails, with their ridiculous question-mark crests, squabbled over another hanging bird table. A Costa's Hummingbird suddenly appeared on one of the sugar-water feeders literally a couple of feet from our faces. We feasted our eyes on this little gem as at least two others buzzed around the garden. Anna's Hummingbirds also vied for our attention, but we were on the lookout for something else. We waited and waited, then – in a flash of blue and green – it arrived: a Broad-billed Hummingbird. This is another really tough bird to see in the States and here it was in a garden right in front of us.

With our target bird under our belts we ventured out of the garden. The desert here is stunning, with Teddy-bear Cholla, Prickly Pear and Saguaro Cactus. Saguaro are the real cowboy-movie cacti, with huge arms reaching skywards. Some must be hundreds of years old. A dry streambed behind the house looked promising and sure enough we were soon watching a pair of Black-tailed Gnatcatchers calling excitedly from some mesquite scrub. But still no road-runner. Liz and Jean told us how they often see them crossing the driveway. Surely we could not miss Arizona's most charismatic bird? We bid our farewells and thanked Liz and Jean for their wonderful hospitality and – more importantly – their new birds.

Back in Tucson Moez had a very nice bird lined up for us at the zoo. Nothing

captive, of course, but a nearby park had some very tall trees that attract woodpeckers. We had just stepped out of the jeep when in flew a Lewis's Woodpecker. What a great-looking bird! Nearly eleven inches long, with a twenty-one inch wingspan, this is a good-sized woodpecker, and with its iridescent black plumage, red head and pale collar it has to be one of the finest. Unusually for its kind, Lewis's often catches flying insects on the wing – and it was strange to watch a woodpecker twisting and turning through the air in pursuit of some juicy fly. We were hooked, watching it climb palm trees, sit on a pylon and chase a Gila Woodpecker around the park. Moez had to drag us away.

Next we searched the nearby desert for Gilded Flicker, another handsome woodpecker, and once again for roadrunner, but neither was playing. Moez was now becoming worried about the roadrunner – so much so that we were starting to feel guilty. Did he see this dip as a slight on his birding ability? Or was it perhaps possibly a visa violation to miss such an easy bird? But hey, birds have wings (and legs) so these things happen.

North of Tucson we reached a rather eerie stretch of very flat farmland. We were sure we had seen this place used in some gruesome thriller, perhaps with a terrified heroine, tumbleweed and the sound of a distant banjo. The sun was gone and a low grey sky did nothing to enhance the mood. Moez assured us the place had birds, so on we went. We came to an area of stock pens where cattle were being raised intensively: a grim sight as they squeezed into small pens deep in their own dung and were fed something that was certainly not grass. It was a very sorry picture. Nonetheless these cattle concentration camps did attract birds. Thousands of starlings and doves fed around the pens. In one small tree a flock of Inca Doves were joined by a single Ruddy Ground-dove, just as we had been hoping.

Leaving this ugly place behind us we returned to cruising the farm tracks. Raptors were plentiful and we had more great views of Prairie Falcons and Red-tailed Hawks. Three Crested Caracaras strutted around a ploughed field and were great additions to our list, as was a distant White-tailed Kite hovering over rough grassland. But still no roadrunner and now time was fast running out. We screeched to a halt alongside a Burrowing Owl standing on the roadside, who returned our stare with piercing yellow eyes.

Moez had one more target bird to try for out here in this agricultural desert, where there was nobody in sight and the fields stretched to the sky. An area of turf fields was our next stop. This seemed strange: the close-cropped grass was criss-crossed with irrigation pipes and there was not a bird to be seen. With the light going fast we did not want to end the day on a dip, so drove slowly up and down, scanning hard. And there they were: a flock of 23 large, beige-coloured plovers scattered over one of the turf areas. Our first ever Upland Plovers. Brilliant – and not only a great bird for *The Biggest Twitch* but a lifer too! Now let's get out of here, we thought, before the bogeyman comes.

We rolled back into Tucson well after dark, tired but very happy with our birding. We had recorded 161 species in just three days, proving what a great place Arizona is and, of course, what a great guide Moez is. We celebrated back at Moez's house with his wife Beth and their irrepressible labradoodle, Luna. The food tasted good and we felt that *The Biggest Twitch* had got off to a flyer.

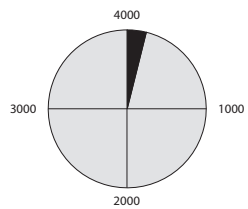
So, three days in and how did we feel things were going? Well, no problems with the birds. OK, missing Greater Roadrunner was painful, and that lovely pair of Hooded Mergansers seen on 30 December should really still have been there on New Year's Day. But we have been birding long enough to know you never see everything on the agenda and 161 species in three days was a very satisfying start.

We were already realising, however, that keeping up the website diary was going to be tougher than we had thought. It was a great way to keep the birding world in touch with our progress but it ate up time. Typing up a diary at the end of a long day in the field and then finding internet access to upload it to the website was clearly going to be quite a job. But we both agreed that it was essential for the success of the project. We wanted to create a buzz about *The Biggest Twitch* and we couldn't do that unless we shared our adventure with the world. It seemed to be working, with around 800 hundred hits per day on the site the first few days. Emails were coming in thick and fast from around the world with lots of encouragement and questions. We were determined to reply to them all. But we needed to find a way of doing this without becoming slaves to the computer.

Another problem had also emerged: too much luggage. We needed to find a way of reducing our three large bags. One large bag each and our hand luggage would be much easier to move around – and to find stuff in. But one thing we could not leave behind though was our mascot, Toco the Toucan. This realistic-looking soft toy proved very popular with people we met and made for some great photo opportunities – none better than when we perched him on a cactus!

*161 species*





## 4–11 January, Mexico (Ruth)

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I looked at my watch one more time. Where was he? The airline staff watched us with frustration. Why didn't we just board the plane? At last we shrugged and gave up the wait. It looked as though Michael wasn't going to make it.

As we stepped onto the aircraft, there he was: Michael Retter, large as life, sitting in the front row of first class and grinning broadly. 'I was worried you guys had missed the flight,' he said, as he sank back into his seat. We were ushered back to our places in cattle class, the last two passengers to board. Forty rows of eyes glared at us for having held them up.

Michael Retter works as a bird guide for Tropical Birding and knows Mexico – and especially the Yucatan Peninsula – like the back of his hand. We knew we were in for a bird-filled time over the next few days. It was a relief to see him; birding on our own for the first time in this area would have been tough.

Alan's and my bags appeared first on the carousel and we loaded them onto a trolley. Then Michael's luggage started to arrive: not one, not two, but three huge black bags were piled high onto a separate trolley. And we thought *we* were travelling with too much kit! What did he have in there – a dead body?

In fact it was nothing so dramatic. Michael was running two tours back-to-back in Mexico so he needed plenty of gear. He showed us how he'd loaded his field guides into a cool box inside a black holdall, Russian doll-style. But over the next few days, boy, did we curse the six pieces of check-in baggage, three day-sacks and two telescopes we hauled around!

First stop was the car hire desk, and here began the first of many painful relationships with car hire companies worldwide. At first, the computer said no. But after much muttering and glaring at the screen a vehicle was eventually produced. To call it a car, however, would be over-stating things. Our luggage and the three of us already filled the office to bursting point, so there was no way that we could compress ourselves into the toy vehicle they were offering and we refused to budge. Even more muttering and stabbing at the keyboard followed until, finally, a slightly larger vehicle was offered: a Dodge Attitude. Great name, we thought, and took it. Next we had to try packing it, and as none of us was a Tetris expert, it took three attempts before we managed to fit in all the bags, three people and close all the doors. Eventually we managed it and Michael headed out into the Cancun traffic. At that point we thought our car hire problems were over.

Our first destination was the ferry terminal at Playa del Carmen, a few hours' drive away. This was the jumping-off point for the island of Cozumel, our final destination for the day. Having reached the town in the early evening, our first priority was to park the car somewhere that we could leave it securely for a day. Finding a walled courtyard serving as a car park, we paid the security guard and staggered with our luggage along the busy streets towards the local ferry port. We joined the end of a long queue for the catamaran to San Miguel on Cozumel Island and settled down to wait.

Up until now, the weather hadn't really brought itself to our attention, but standing waiting in line we had plenty of time to study it. The sun was sinking below the horizon, making the heavy purple clouds seem particularly sinister. The wind was blowing sharply, whipping the waves up into rows of white crests. These hurled themselves against the wooden jetty and periodically, one would completely douse the pier in cold salty spray. Kitted out for birding, we wore fleeces and outdoor trousers so didn't find it cold, though the sun-kissed holidaymakers around us in shorts and strappy sandals began to shiver. Alan, a bad sailor who can feel queasy just watching ocean footage on the television, began to fidget nervously in anticipation of a rough crossing ahead. Complete darkness fell and, beyond the glare of the harbour buildings, we could only see the lurching lights of ships moored out to sea. At least we couldn't see the waves any more but we could still hear the rising pitch of the wind. One set of lights detached itself and the outline of a large catamaran hove into view. Deckhands rushed out to catch the mooring ropes. The doors opened and the passengers burst out onto dry land, gulping in the fresh air. They looked seriously rough: haggard and green with seasickness, as if they'd just endured the funfair ride from hell.

Then it was our turn and Alan's stomach sank as we braced ourselves to leap across the gap onto the heaving catamaran. Below decks, the air was hot and stuffy and the acrid whiff of vomit made it clear just how much the previous passengers had suffered. Alan held my hand hard, curled up against me, his head on my shoulder, and closed his eyes to shut out the world. This was to become a familiar routine whenever we went to sea.

Anyone who has been birding with Alan will know that he and boats do not get on. But recently, after years of suffering crippling seasickness on even the shortest boat rides, he had discovered the miracle of ear patches. Peeled open and stuck on the skin behind the ear, these patches release chemicals into the bloodstream that counteract the imbalance caused by the sea's motion. The result for Alan: no seasickness at all.

This time, unfortunately, Alan had not expected a boat trip so had not brought his patches. Instead he had to hunker down and endure it as, for an hour, the catamaran fought its way through the waves. But even the longest hour does pass, and eventually Alan's torture was over – he'd survived the crossing without being sick, a major achievement – and we were let loose on Cozumel Island.

Cozumel did not seem like our natural habitat. All around us trendy bars like Monsieur Frog's were offering cocktail happy hours and holidaymakers were wearing new suntans and ethnic jewellery. We clomped past them in our walking boots, outdoor clothing and fleeces. Where on earth had Michael brought us?

Once again picking up our hire car proved hard work. We'd booked it weeks earlier and had arrived well within business hours, but the hire car office was closed and in total darkness. Clearly there was nothing doing here. While we pondered plan B, a short Mexican, complete with drooping moustache, sidled up to us. 'You want car?' he murmured from the side of his mouth, furtively scanning the street from side to side. 'I find you car!' We hung around on the street corner – after all, what was there to lose? Then, just as we were about to give up on him, he reappeared. 'You like VW?' A VW would do just fine, so we

followed him as he led us on a crazy route across town until finally he brought us out onto a narrow but busy street, lined with parked cars all the way.

‘There!’ he said proudly, opening his arms wide to display our transport for the next two days. It was a VW all right, but not as we knew it. A Beetle: well past retirement age, a torn black soft top, no locks on the doors, no windows on either side and – as we were to find out – no brakes. And it was pink. Bright, Barbie pink! Not exactly the ideal bird-mobile. But beggars can’t be choosers, so we filled in the paperwork, piled our gear into the ‘Pink Peril’ and chugged out very cautiously into the San Miguel traffic, Alan at the wheel.

Stopping the car once we’d located our backstreet hotel was quite a challenge. In fact, the only way to come to a complete halt was to run the wheels into the kerb, so we did just that. The day had been quite long enough and we were ready to collapse into our very comfortable beds at the welcoming Hacienda San Miguel.

The next day began abruptly with loud hammering on the door to our room. ‘Wake up!’ shouted Michael from the other side. Had we overslept? We checked our watches: 5.30am. But no, according to Michael – and the rest of San Miguel – it was 6.30am. Why hadn’t anybody told us about the different time zones across Mexico?

Now, I’ve got a bit of a confession to make. I’m not very good at getting up in the morning. In fact, let’s be honest here, that’s an understatement. I am appalling at getting up in the morning. My idea of morning starts about 7am-ish, preferably with a steaming cup of tea brought to me in bed, and ideally with a half-hour or so to come round slowly, maybe reading a book or something. Anything before 7am isn’t morning but part of the night before, so I was already seeing parts of the day I hadn’t realised existed. For the rest of the year that was to follow, the alarm would go off at 5am, 4am, 3am, even once at 2.30am, and I would stumble about like a zombie trying to get ready. I soon learned to lay out everything the night before to minimise the need for pre-dawn thinking, but still I’d find myself with T-shirts on back-to-front and my feet in Alan’s socks. And as for trying to put in my contact lenses, you could open the vaults at the Bank of England easier than I could prise open my eyelids at those ungodly hours.

Alan, on the other hand, enjoys getting up early in the morning. The second the alarm goes off, he’s wide awake and irritatingly chirpy, and he stays that way all day. Or at least he does if there are birds to go for. He sees a 4am alarm call to go birding as no problem at all, but a 4am alarm call to catch a plane is a different matter. As far as I’m concerned, 4am is still oh-my-god o’clock whatever you’re supposed to be doing.

But, as it happened, the loss of time that morning didn’t matter, as there was some great birding right in the courtyard itself. Surrounded on three sides by terracotta-coloured rooms, the pretty courtyard had raised flowerbeds, ornamental pools and full-size palm trees that the local warblers were taking full advantage of. While we tucked into hot coffee, tea and croissants, we enjoyed close-up views of Yellow-throated and Yellow-rumped Warblers, while a fidgety gang of Blue-grey Gnatcatchers flicked their way through the branches. Then the star bird, a male Black-throated Blue Warbler, showed off for us, with his black

face and throat, rich blue head and mantle and a shockingly bright white wing patch. If this was the standard of Mexican birding, we were in for a real treat.

The reason for our excursion to Cozumel was to add the island's endemics to our list, and Michael knew just the place to look for them. We had only half a day to tick them though, so breakfast and courtyard birding over, we jumped into the Pink Peril and headed out of town. Luckily, given our lack of brakes, Cozumel turned out to be mostly flat, and by trundling along in a low gear we managed to avoid most of the tourists who stepped out in front of us. Driving along the seafront we dodged pedestrians and added our first Ruddy Turnstone to the list.

Soon we were through the built-up area and out onto the open road. Alan risked changing up into second gear and the wind through the open windows ruffled our hair. After a short drive we came to a turning. 'Left here!' instructed Michael from the back seat. Just as Alan indicated and started to turn the wheel, a honking blast burst from behind and a huge lorry thundered past just inches from his wing mirror.

'Oops, sorry!' said Michael. 'I forgot to warn you about that. If you want to turn left in Mexico, you pull off to the right first and then cross over when the road is empty,' he explained. 'Indicating left here means please overtake me.' Another piece of information that would have been useful in advance. Still, no harm done, and we crossed over safely and drove down the side road.

No sooner were we out of the car than we heard the singing of Cozumel Vireo, our first endemic. But even with much patience and some tape playback the bird remained obstinately hidden from view, so we continued on our way. Some other interesting clucks and squeaks in the bushes turned into a Black Catbird, and a Cozumel Bananaquit showed off in a spindly tree – a nice bird but as a sub-species, we couldn't count it towards *The Biggest Twitch*, unless it is split in the future. The next call rang out and again Michael played his tape. Obliging the bird flew in and the next endemic, Cozumel Wren, added itself to the list. As it is the only wren on the island there is no mistaking this one.

More birds kept coming. White-crowned Pigeons and Yucatan Woodpecker shared a dead snag, a pair of Caribbean Doves shot low across the road in front of us and a trail into the bushes brought us a Caribbean Elaenia. Ten minutes' patient wait by a massed bank of flowering bushes was rewarded with a smart male Cozumel Emerald, which flew in and buzzed the red blossoms. With a green body, red bill and deeply forked tail, this hummingbird was handsome indeed.

We pattered back to the town and bounced the Pink Peril into the kerb outside the hire shop. We're not saying it looked abandoned, but as we passed it again only five minutes later with our luggage, people had already started throwing their litter into it.

Next day, back on the Yucatan Peninsula, we jumped back into the Attitude and headed to the Mayan ruins at Cobá. Now, the thing I liked best about the Yucatan Peninsula is the way birding comes with culture. To Alan, culture is something you grow on a petri dish in science class at school; it has nothing to do with birding. But in Mexico you can combine the two. In fact, you have to. The natural habitat across much of the country is too dense to penetrate on foot. But

if you visit a Mayan temple site you can follow well-maintained trails right into the heart of the jungle and enjoy birds all around you. And magnificent temples too, of course.

Mixed flocks were passing through the trees over our heads but so far up that we couldn't see them in enough detail to identify. Then someone had a brain-wave. Why not climb the pyramid ruins until we were eyelevel with the canopy? Clearly the Mayans were keen birdwatchers. Why else would they have built the most perfect canopy towers: large blocks of chiselled grey stones layered in steps to form pyramids, making it easy to climb up to exactly the right height for birding the canopy flocks? Now we could look at the birds face-to-beak, and we enjoyed great views of a myriad warblers: Black-throated Green Warblers, Black-and-white Warblers, American Redstarts and Northern Parulas, plus Masked Tityras and Yellow-throated Euphonias.

Tearing ourselves away from warblers, we headed off down some less-trodden paths and were rewarded with two excellent new birds. First up, Rose-throated Tanagers called in the branches overhead. This is a species that has becoming increasingly hard to see as its habitat has been disturbed by a succession of hurricanes, so we were delighted to enjoy a good view of its distinctive plumage, with sharply demarcated rose-coloured patches on its crown, throat, wings and tail. Then, in the midst of another mixed feeding flock, we encountered a Grey-collared Becard, another very tricky bird. Michael was certainly pulling out all the stops today.

There are just too many birds in Mexico. The next morning, we had planned to head straight for Rio Lagartos and another boat trip, but birds kept distracting us en route. A flock of hundreds of passerines was flushed out of the roadside, so naturally we had to take a closer look. It was as if we'd stepped into a paintbox. At first it was variations on a theme of blue, with Indigo Bunting and Blue Grosbeak, whose names give a good idea of their appearance. But then the blue cloud parted and we saw an incredible rainbow spectacle in the middle. Give a six-year-old some felt tips and a colouring book, and they will instinctively create a Painted Bunting: a cobalt blue head with a red eye-ring; a scarlet throat, belly and matching rump; yellowy-olive over the mantle shading to darker green on the wing; and a grey tail, just to make sure all the colours are used. That's the male, of course; as usual the female is much less colourful. (I'm so glad to be a member of a species where the female has the more attractive plumage!) As we feasted our eyes on this paint-by-numbers bird, Michael – ever the hard-core bird guide – insisted we stop drooling over this 'trash bird' and concentrate on a Yucatan Flycatcher in the tree overhead. OK, it was a Peninsula endemic, but boy was it drab in comparison.

We finally made it to Rio Lagartos, where Michael had arranged for us to go out on another boat. No chance of seasickness this time though, as we would be exploring the marshy inlet that stretches for miles either side of the town. We piled into the open-top dinghy and our captain fired up the outboard. A chunky chap, he obviously enjoyed life and had an infectious chuckle, his belly wobbling in time with his laugh. He was used to taking tourists out on the water, most of whom wanted close-up views of the thousands of American Flamingos that congregate here, but he knew we were after more specialist stuff and he knew

just where to find it. His binoculars were slung around his neck, though he didn't need to lift them once, birding almost by ESP.

First we reached a shorebird-covered mudflat, where we worked our way contentedly through flocks of Marbled Godwits, Short-billed Dowitchers, Royal Terns and Black Skimmers. Cutting the motor, we paddled silently in amongst the mangroves. Away from the cooling breeze out on the open water, the heat became oppressive and the trees seemed to lean over to smother us. I pulled my hat down firmly to cover the back of my neck and tried to ignore the headache that was developing. Even so, I was glad when we regained the open water and at least the illusion of a breeze. Here we found an area of exposed mudflat so packed with Wilson's Plovers and other waders that all we could see was a carpet of grey-brown backs and heads, spiked with chunky black bills and the occasional brown chestband. Then the colour changed, taking on the deep pinky-orange of American Flamingos. The lurid carpet rippled as the birds paced slowly forward, heads down in the classic croquet mallet posture of *Through the Looking Glass*, swaying their necks from side to side as they sifted tiny shrimps from the shallow brine. Wooden posts stuck out of the water at intervals, each topped by a Royal Tern busy preening.

The captain turned the boat around and we headed back towards the town. By the time we climbed ashore I was beginning to feel pretty rough. My head was thumping now, my eyes were sore and my stomach was making those ominous gurgling noises that had me nervously checking out the distance to the nearest bathroom. While Alan and Michael gulped down toasted sandwiches at the restaurant where we'd landed, also conveniently owned by our birding captain, I stuck to soft drinks, hoping I was just suffering from dehydration. I made it as far as the car park before the first rush to a toilet. It was clean and even had toilet paper – a real bonus, though by now I was packing a loo roll in each trouser pocket, just in case.

Soon, though, Michael had to start the long drive to our next destination, while I hunkered down in the back seat amongst the luggage and hoped to sleep things off. Some chance! Luckily for me, we were driving along a main road with plenty of petrol stations. Petrol stations meant toilets, and we needed to stop at every one. The distances between loo stops became progressively shorter and the time spent in the cubicle longer. I must be empty by now, I kept thinking, as my body turned itself inside out to rid itself of whatever had caused the upset.

I must have dozed off at some point, as it was dark when I woke up. Something was clearly very wrong and it was about to become to be explosive. 'Stop the car now!' I shouted, and before we'd even come to a halt I hurled myself out of the vehicle while the last remains of my insides hurled themselves out of my body at both ends. This must be the lowest moment of my life, I thought to myself, gasping for breath and wiping my face clean. Surely it can't get any worse, can it? Only two weeks into our big year and here I am, feeling like I just want to shrivel up and die. How totally humiliating!

At least it was dark, so my very public misery was only lit up for seconds at a time as headlights flashed past. This was no simple case of sunstroke; Montezuma was getting his full revenge. Who did I feel most sorry for: myself in such a mess or Alan who had to clean me up? No contest, I was feeling very, very

sorry for myself as I changed into clean clothes and climbed shakily back into the car. I don't remember much of the journey after that, though I do remember shuffling into the hotel like an old crone, curled up with cramps, and collapsing almost comatose into bed while Alan and Michael went off in search of supper.

Even the hardest of hardcore bird guides has a soft heart, and Michael was no exception, so I was allowed a bit of a lie-in the next morning to recover. Nothing too excessive – after all, we had a race to run – but it was at 11am rather than dawn that we arrived at our next birding destination. And what a destination: Calakmul, the largest ruined Mayan city on the Yucatan Peninsula. Given that we'd missed the best birding time and arrived at the hottest part of the day we didn't have high hopes of our birding here, but how wrong we were. The drive down the entrance road alone took over an hour and had us leaping out the car several times to catch up with new birds.

Our progress once we'd finally reached the ruins wasn't much quicker. No sooner were we out of the car park than we started hitting flocks of birds: Grey-throated Chat, Northern Bentbill, Magnolia Warbler, Hooded Warbler, Scrub Euphonia, Ivory-billed Woodcreeper, Bright-rumped Attila, Violaceous Trogon: gorgeous birds and great names, coming in so thick and fast that Alan could barely keep up recording them on the dictaphone for that evening's bird list. 'What looks like a small wren with a very long bill?' he asked Michael. Long-billed Gnatwren, of course, doing just what it says on the tin. Another one on the list.

Suddenly four large birds stepped onto the path ahead of us. We froze, hardly daring to breathe: a male and three female Great Curassows strutted out. What incredible luck! The male was such a striking bird. Apart from his white belly, he was black all over, topped off with a funky black crest that curled forward as if he'd combed it in place with Brylcreem. The finishing touch was a stonking great banana-yellow bill with a knob on top. His ladies were more discreetly coloured in shades of brown, with a subtler black crest and yellow bill. We felt privileged to have seen them, and were so excited that we even managed to get their name wrong in the blog that night. It's an easy typo to make, swapping Cassowary for Curassow, and it wasn't until we had some frantic phone calls from Nick at the Tropical Birding office in Ecuador that we realised we'd managed to ship four extremely large birds all the way from Australia to Mexico by mistake.

The highlight for your average visitor to Calakmul is the Gran Pirámide, the largest Mayan building anywhere. Gasping for breath, and a little light-headed from the exertion on an empty stomach, we finally reached the top and turned to admire the view. It was awe-inspiring. Nothing at ground level had prepared us for this and we were reduced to total silence as we contemplated the immense vista. In all directions we could see rainforest stretching into the distance, a seamless green carpet of domed canopy tops, punctuated only by a handful of grey pyramids poking up through the vegetation, marking the sites of other Mayan ruins – one even as far away as Guatemala. It was thrilling to see so much undisturbed habitat. No wonder the birding here was so good.

Once again, the Mayan canopy tower didn't disappoint as we enjoyed eye-level views of the wildlife. I caught sight of an unmistakable rainbow of colour flashing through the vegetation: orange, green, yellow and black – it was a Keel-

billed Toucan, a new bird for Alan and me. I had no doubts about the ID. After all, this was the bird on the front cover of our Mexican field guide, something I'd pored over for hours on the plane. Alan was scanning the treetops through his scope and drew me over to take a look. Across the Grand Plaza from us, a Bat Falcon was perched up, enjoying the peace on top of a less-visited pyramid. Maybe he too appreciated the eye-level views of other wildlife. Then Michael started laughing. Following his pointing finger, we saw a gang of young Black-handed Spider Monkeys fooling about on the top of yet another pyramid. They were playing tag, taking it in turns to pull each others' tails and then run away before getting caught, ambushing each from behind pillars and dropping down from overhead branches. Mayan ruins obviously made perfect playgrounds as well as birding sites. We could have watched their antics for hours, with toucans in the canopy and Black Hawk-Eagles soaring overhead, but we had miles to cover and were behind schedule.

Michael's driving, I should mention, was not for those of a nervous disposition. Maybe it had to do with the long distances and tight schedule or maybe he's just a speed junkie. And perhaps it was drivers like Michael that the speed cops had in mind when they introduced 'topes', Mexico's answer to 'sleeping policemen'. No matter how small the village, be it only a couple of tin shacks and a donkey, there are 'topes' on the road in and 'topes' on the road out, to make sure you cut your speed. Sometimes they are painted with yellow warning stripes, sometimes there are road signs to alert you, and sometimes they are unmarked, simply lying in wait to trap the unwary motorist. When the crawling lorry in front of us started to slow down even more on a perfectly straight stretch of road, Michael didn't hesitate. He dropped a gear, gunned the accelerator and we shot out past the lorry. And that's when we hit it at full speed: Mexico's largest 'tope', unmarked, unsigned and massive. The world went silent as all four wheels left the ground and spun uselessly beneath us. For a moment we were breaking all records for a flying car – until BANG! All four wheels hit the ground with a huge thump. The car seemed to hesitate, shake itself like a dog while we waited for something to fall off, and then carried on down the road as smoothly as if nothing had happened. What a car! Move over, Dukes of Hazzard, here comes Michael with Attitude!

It became my job to keep the driver awake on our long drives. Michael always underestimated the time it would take to drive to our next stop for the night, and we always made the mistake of believing him when he said we'd arrive in time for an early supper. We soon got used to arriving at 10pm, with just time to grab a bite, update the bird list and write a quick blog before collapsing in bed for a very short night's sleep – then starting all over again the next day. However, the upside of the long drives was that this gave us plenty of time to catch up with Michael's news. He was very excited as his partner, Matt, a geneticist from London, had recently moved over to the States and they'd set up home in Indiana. Two nations divided by a common language: there had apparently been a few crossed wires at first, something to do with pants and just where to wear them, and the perils of walking on the pavement rather than the sidewalk, but Michael was gradually ironing out Matt's Britishness.

Michael and I got on famously, and I was to realise as our Big Year progressed

how refreshing it was to chat about something other than birding at the end of a long day in the field. Now don't get me wrong: I'm as keen to talk up the day's birds as the next man, but I did find that if you put Alan and a bird guide (usually a bloke) together, the conversation would invariably range from birds to birds and more birds, with the odd digression into football for light relief. With Michael, however, we talked about everything from music (you can learn a lot about someone from what's on their iPod) to fashion, and why there is no such thing as stylish birding clothes. Even Trinny and Susannah would struggle.

Another day, another temple, but this time it was an adventure just getting there. First we travelled down the Rio Usumacinta in a *lancha*, a narrow wooden boat with a very pointed prow, a tin roof and a bench down either side, which swept along the river at high speed powered by a noisy outboard motor. The riverbank on our left was Mexico, the one on our right was Guatemala, so we added a few birds such as Mangrove and Ridgway's Rough-winged Swallows to our Guatemalan list as we sliced our way upstream.

When we reached the site, we scrambled up a set of slippery steps cut into the high riverbank and set off along a trail through the rainforest. The undergrowth was dense and the trees closed in over us. The atmosphere was cool and green, and we experienced a great sense of isolation, as if no-one ever came here. Suddenly our path was blocked by a high moss-covered stone wall with a narrow arch at its base. A dark and dank tunnel led us on, a pinpoint of light showing at the far end. We stumbled our way through, running our hands along the damp stone walls to guide us and prevent ourselves falling on the roughly hewn floor. There was a movement of air as something brushed our heads: bats! Ahead of us we could hear blood-curdling roars. What dread place was Michael bringing us to?

Then we burst out of the tunnel into the Great Plaza of Yaxchilán and found ourselves surrounded by incredible ruins, half smothered in greenery, with immense fig trees overshadowing the gently crumbling stonework. We were the only visitors, and it felt as though we were the first to discover this wonderful place, with its overwhelming sense of peace, calm and incredible green-ness. The peace didn't last long, however. Howler monkeys, those blood-curdling callers we'd heard from the depths of the tunnel, announced very loudly their displeasure at our arrival, and a flock of noisy, pheasant-like Plain Chachalacas crashed about in the canopy overhead before flying off in disgust.

One particular fruiting fig tree held our attention. In fact, for the next three hours we were unable to move any further as bird after bird came into the tree to feast on its bounty. First up, more colourful Keel-billed Toucans showed off. I hesitated to drag Michael away to look at a dull grey bird, but it was an immature Lovely Cotinga, and as an adult male flew in to join it I could see how it deserved its name – and top place on Michael's most-wanted Mexican list. A cobalt blue body and a plum throat and belly, it was lovely indeed. Two Collared Araçaris arrived, smaller members of the toucan family with a serrated bill and a brandy belly making them look like they were wearing one of their mum's knitted jumpers. Noisy Montezuma's Oropendola showed next: a large, crow-sized brown bird with a wickedly pointed red-tipped bill and the distinctive yellow outer tail feathers of its family. Red-legged Honeycreeper shot through,

its name pointedly overlooking its obvious bright blue body and green cap. All of these birds and more came in to enjoy the fig tree before we had reluctantly to tear ourselves away as the afternoon drew to a close. The sunset boat trip back brought a spectacular flypast by squadrons of Red-lore'd, Mealy and White-crowned Parrots. And as the sun dropped below the horizon, Lesser Nighthawks came out to feast on the insects swarming over the water, swooping low over the boat and racing us as we scythed our way downstream.

The next day we had another long drive, and a few birding stops en route, so it was well after dark when we reached San Cristóbal for the night. By the light of the streetlamps it looked to be a very attractive town, with a beautiful church set in an impressive square and narrow cobbled streets lined with elegant buildings. Not that we had time to play the tourist. After finally finding a parking space, we checked into our hotel and went through the bird list as we waited for dinner, a well-earned margarita definitely helping the process!

By now, even I was ready for a change from temples, and San Cristóbal provided just that. Here we were birding high-elevation pine woodlands just outside town. We drove the car a short way up the track into the woods and continued on foot. All around us the forest was silent. At this early hour and at this higher altitude the air was surprisingly cold, which was quite a shock after the lowland warmth. It wasn't until the sun began to filter through the trees that the birds began to appear. They were worth the wait. A handsome male Garnet-throated Hummingbird displayed amongst the bromeliads, its iridescent ruby-coloured throat flashing in the sunlight. Michael played a quick burst of tape to encourage a calling Rufous-collared Robin to show itself and we were rewarded with a close view. We hadn't really noticed the trogon call in the background of the robin tape, but a male Mountain Trogon certainly had and he flew in directly overhead, showing off his fine ruby belly. Was it the surroundings that encouraged red-coloured birds to thrive particularly here? We didn't know, but our last bird here was definitely the best: the astonishing Red-faced Warbler. His bright-red face above a white body and grey back shone out like a traffic light through the pine branches and really made Alan's day. This was a bird he had drooled over for many hours as a young boy in North Wales, thumbing the pages of American field guides and dreaming of brighter warblers than Chiffchaffs.

By mid-morning we were on the road again and heading for the spectacular canyon of El Sumidero. As we climbed up this steep ascent we experienced a real change of habitat. We started in the foothills in an area of dry thorn forest. Here, exposed among the short scrub, we really felt the heat of the sun, which was such a contrast to our nippy start to the day. Not ideal conditions for birding but that wasn't going to stop Michael. He started to hoot.

Much of our year would turn out to be spent in the company of people and tapes imitating small owls. Pygmy owls of various types accompanied us as we birded in nearly every continent of the world and became a regular soundtrack to our birding. At the sound of the call – usually a metronome hoot or beep – small passerines flock in to mob the owl and move it on, and a human imitation can work nearly as well as the real thing. Michael was no exception and his rendition of Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl brought in a succession of hummingbirds,