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## NATURE

# BIRDS OF PUERTO VALLARTA

**West-Mexican Chachalaca (*Ortalis poliocephala*)**

By Petr Myska - May 2006



This loud and raucous member of Cracid family can only be found on Pacific Slope of Western Mexico from Jalisco to Chiapas. It is a relative of guans and curassows rather than of a turkey, for which it is commonly mistaken.

Although not very colorful, this species cannot be overlooked when vocalizing. Its gruff, throaty, rhythmic chattering, usually performed by several animals at the same time can be heard from a long distance and is an easy giveaway of the birds' location.

Tied principally to the tropical forest surrounding the Bay of Banderas, it can also be occasionally spotted in green suburban areas. Chachalacas usually travel in groups of up to 10 individuals. Rarely seen on ground they prefer to move in the forest canopy, where they feed on vegetable matter, especially fruit.

Nesting is not something Chachalacas are too fussy about. Their nests

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resemble flimsy platforms made of leaves and twigs, placed in a tree or a bush. Usually 2-3 eggs are laid. In the Bay area, this species can be found almost throughout.

Populations of this endemic bird have been suffering from habitat destruction in the area as well as from poaching.

## NATURE

### BIRDS OF PUERTO VALLARTA

**Groove-billed Ani - (*Crotophaga sulcirostris*)**  
**Garrapatero Pijuy**

By Petr Myska - September 2007

*"Hey Petr, is there a species of a black parrot? 'Cause I saw it – this weird black bird with a huge curved beak. Actually, there was a whole bunch of them!"*



I have heard this question (or similar versions of it) quite a few times since I became resident to Baderas Bay several years ago. And I don't blame the perplexed observers. The Groove-billed Ani, with its jet black body and a prominent heavy bill "decorated" with a series of deep

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groves, is indeed quite an unusually-looking bird. There is not much to be said about its body color, which is simply anthracite black overall and especially shiny on the chest and back. Its body reaches lengths of 30 – 34 cm, of which one half is the tail. The most striking feature of the bird is its heavy, curved, laterally-flattened bill, which on the first sight might resemble that of a parrot. Anis, however are cuckoos!

Such as many other species of cuckoos, Anis often live communally. In fact, I have very rarely seen a single individual; the most frequent sight is that of a group of Anis slowly moving from one bush to another in a loose foraging group, looking for insects, lizards, seeds and fruits. Their communality, however, goes much farther than that. Anis belong to birds, who nest communally – several females lay their eggs into one common nest and all members of the group take turns incubating them. This form of reproductive behavior is called plural female joint-nesting and quite interestingly is present in all species of the subfamily Crotophaginae (Hughes, 2003). Why such behavior exists has been studied extensively. The evidence suggests that the advantage of communal nesting is the reduction of parental care costs, particularly the risk of mortality during incubation (Vehrencamp, 2000).

Groove-billed Anis are resident to the Bay area and can be found in a variety of habitats, especially second growth forests, road sides, plantations and greener suburbs (Howell, 1995).

### **Anhinga (Darter) (*Anhinga anhinga*)**

#### **Anhinga Americana**

By Petr Myska - August 2007

Anhingas, sometimes called Darters are quite unique birds. Starting with the fact that the whole family Anhingidae (Darters) has just one genus (*Anhinga*) with only one species (*Anhinga anhinga*)\*. At first sight

Anhinga resembles a large cormorant with extremely long neck. In fact, it is a relative of cormorants, differences, however abound.



Anhinga, unlike other water birds does not possess completely waterproof feathers. That in effect means that its body is much less buoyant than cormorant's for example. While swimming, only the neck and the head of the bird show above the water surface. This makes anhinga an excellent diver and although it is not particularly fast swimmer, it is an effective under water hunter. Its prey is mostly fish, but its diet includes also aquatic invertebrates, amphibians and small aquatic reptiles (Owre 1967).

However, its absorbent feathers come with a price. Anhingas lose body heat quite quickly when under water due to the lack of insulating layer of dry feathers. After each hunt, they need to find a suitable perch and spread their soaked wings in the sun. The distribution of the species is therefore limited to warmer and sunnier latitudes (del Hoyo et al. 1992, Henneman 1985). Anhingas would suffer from hypothermia and die in places, where cormorants thrive. Experts underwater, anhingas can also soar, something cormorants cannot do.

This species can be found from SE USA south to Ecuador and N Argentina. In Mexico it breeds locally on both slopes from Sinaloa and

Tamaulipas south, including Yucatan peninsula (Howel and Webb, 1995). Anhingas are residents to the Banderas Bay area and although not seen too frequently, they can be spotted with some luck perching close to fresh water sources.

\* Some authors recognize more than one species worldwide

### Grey Hawk (*Buteo nitidus*)

#### Aguililla Gris

By Petr Myska - May 2007



Grey Hawk [*Buteo nitidus*]

In most of my previous contributions I focused on describing usually smaller tropical bird species, residents to the Bay area. This month's article deals with a bird that is possibly their worst nightmare. The Grey Hawk (*Buteo nitidus*) is a medium-sized stocky bird of prey, rather common in our area. The adult is quite unmistakable in appearance. Its overall body color is gray, underparts are barred white, legs and cere are yellow. Juveniles are dark brown above, with creamy throat and underparts streaked brown.

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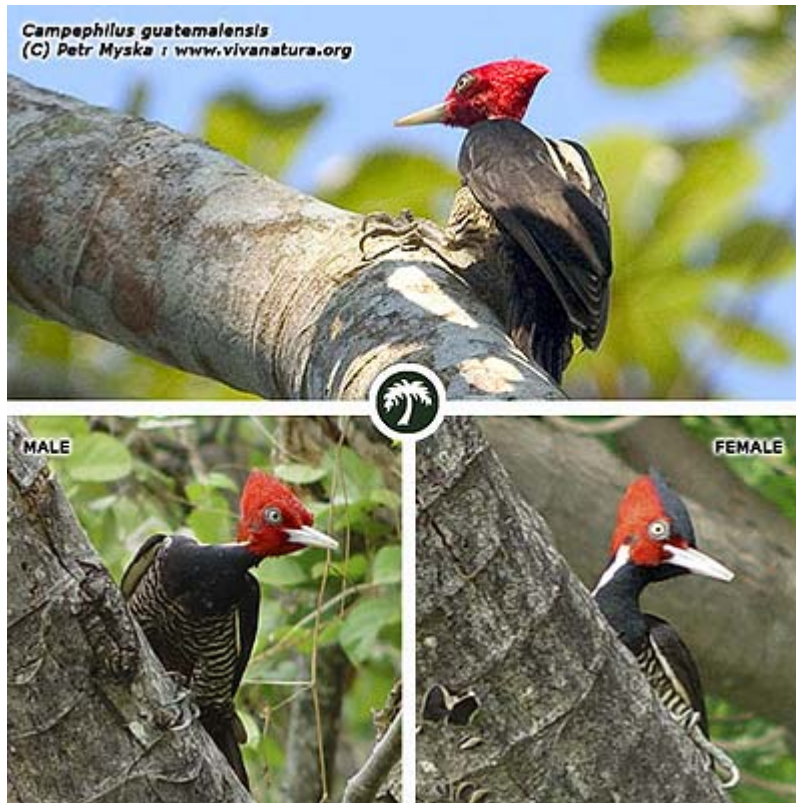
Grey hawks are usually perching high on branches, wires or telephone poles while scanning the surroundings for prey. They prefer forested habitats, but can also be spotted in semi-opened areas with scattered trees. In our area, they can be found throughout, but should you drive in between La Cruz de Huanacastle and Punta Mita, you are almost sure to spot a hawk or two sitting on the telephone poles flanking the road.

Grey Hawks range from SW USA, through both Mexican coasts down to Central and South America as far as Argentina. They are non-migratory lowland residents to the Banderas Bay.

**Orange-fronted Parakeet (*Aratinga canicularis*)**  
**Perico Frentinaranja**

By Petr Myska - March 2007

Woodpeckers usually belong to people's favorite birds. Perhaps it is their striking color combinations, their active foraging habits or their ability to knock impressive holes into hard tree trunks. How knows. From my first hand experience as a bird watching guide, I can confirm, that sighting of a woodpecker is always somewhat special. A moment which always seems to cheer everybody in the party up.



*Campyphilus-guatemalensis*

In our region, woodpeckers are not scarce. The most frequently seen species is likely the Golden-cheeked Woodpecker (*Centurus chrysogenys*), which I described in one of my previous contributions. The Pale-billed Woodpecker, a much larger species, in fact one of the largest woodpeckers on the planet, is a bit harder to find.

The overall color of the bird is black, with a striking white V-shaped mark on the back. Its head is red. Its underbody is barred black and white. In most of my sightings, if not all, I could observe both the male and the female foraging together, keeping in contact by frequent vocalization. Both sexes are of the same size and the only distinction in between them is a presence of a black frontal stripe running from the top of the head to the base of the beak in the female. The males head is uniformly red (see photo).

The Pale-billed Woodpecker's life history is tied to trees. It is where they find their food – insects, and construct their nests. Therefore loss of the

large forest trees inevitably means disappearance of this species from the area.

*C. guatemalensis* can be found on both Mexican coasts, from Tamaulipas and Sonora, south to W Panama (Howell and Webb, 1995).

They are non migratory resident species protected on Mexican territory by law NOM-059-SEMARNAT-2001 \*

\* NORMA Oficial Mexicana NOM-059-ECOL-2001, Protección ambiental-Especies nativas de México de flora y fauna silvestres-Categorías de riesgo y especificaciones para su inclusión, exclusión o cambio-Lista de especies en riesgo.

<http://www.profepa.gob.mx/NR/rdonlyres/84142613-CF26-4223-B7E938BE4AEB0C96/1426/NOMECOL0592001.pdf>

### **Orange-fronted Parakeet (*Aratinga canicularis*)**

#### **Perico Frentinaranja**

By Petr Myska - March 2007

After visiting Puerto Vallarta, you will inevitably carry home a memory of a night Boardwalk stroll, or a gorgeous sunset over the Bay, possibly also a photo of the Church of Guadalupe or Los Arcos Islands. I am equally certain that, unless you spent your vacation indoors, which would be a depressing thought, you will have seen and heard a noisy green cloud of fast flying darts, dodging tree crowns of trees in the tropical forest you visited.

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These restless voices belong to the most common of the 4 parrot species of the region, the Orange-fronted Parakeet (*Aratinga canicularis*). About 10 inches in size, Parakeets are not large birds, but they sure are difficult to miss. Although well blended into the canopy thanks to their predominantly green color, their ever-sounding voices are an easy giveaway. To identify them proves to be as easy as it is to hear them. With a good pair of binoculars, you will be able to make out typical parrot features, such as strong curved beak. On closer inspection you will notice that their head carries an orange patch above the beak and a yellow eye ring.

*A. canicularis* can be spotted throughout the Bay in the tropical forest and also in gardens and greener suburbs. These birds are rarely seen alone. They usually travel in small groups during the day but also gather into larger flocks on their favorite night roosts, fruiting trees, or midday resting sites, where up to 100 birds can be seen perching together as a nervous crowd. Vocal communication is of paramount importance in the

highly fluid Parakeet society, where flock associations frequently change (Bradbury et al, 2007).

During the nesting though, pairs become quite antisocial. Orange-fronted Parakeets lay eggs almost exclusively inside a chamber, which they carve into arboreal termite nest. A typical clutch contains 5 eggs, which are incubated by the female only. The male is left with the important tasks of territory defense and feeding his incubating mate. The young hatch after approximately 20 days and are fed by both parents (Bradbury et al, 2007). Both the young and the adults feed on a large variety of fruit and seeds.

*A. canicularis* can be found in W Mexico from Sinaloa south through Pacific Coast of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua to NW Costa Rica (Howel et al., 1995).

They are non migratory resident species protected on Mexican territory by law NOM-059-SEMARNAT-2001\*

- NORMA Oficial Mexicana NOM-059-ECOL-2001, Protección ambiental-Especies nativas de México de flora y fauna silvestres-Categorías de riesgo y especificaciones para su inclusión, exclusión o cambio-Lista de especies en riesgo  
<http://www.profepa.gob.mx/NR/rdonlyres/84142613-CF26-4223-B7E938BE4AEB0C96/1426/NOMECOL0592001.pdf>

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**Wood Stork (*Mycteria americana*)**  
**Cigüeña Americana**

By Petr Myska - February 2007

In most of my previous texts on birds of Banderas Bay I tended toward introducing species, which are resident to the area, or even endemic – found nowhere else, but on Mexican Pacific Coast.

As a tribute to the effort of 3rd Annual Nayarit International Festival of Migratory Birds in San Blas and Tepic, earlier this month I will dedicate the February edition to a wide ranging migratory bird – The Wood Stork (*Mycteria americana*).

Although this impressive long-legged, heron-like bird is reported in our area in summer, fall and winter months (Cupul Magaña, 2000), most of my personal records are from winter – precisely months of January and February. Apparently a resident to the Mexican Pacific Coast, this species breeds in Mexico only locally (Howell & Webb, 1995). Overall distribution range of the species is huge – Wood Storks can be found from Southern USA to Northern Argentina.



*Mycteria\_americana*

Being a highly colonial species, a Wood Stork is rarely found alone. Most frequently, one can enjoy observing a number of these birds either foraging or perching in a tight group. Even completely inexperienced birder will not find it difficult to identify a stork. Its overall body color is white, only flight feathers, tail, head and legs are black. Striking heavy head and thick bill distinguish storks from any heron or other long-legged wading bird in the region. Storks with their 1.5m wingspan also belong to the largest birds around here.

Should you spot a high-flying formation of large, predominantly white birds with outstretched long necks, you are looking at storks. You will have a better chance of finding them by visiting some of the coastal wetlands in the bay area though. Early morning is possibly the best time. If you approach unseen, you might be rewarded by a sight of a group of storks stalking in shallow water with their bills continuously submerged systematically searching for prey.

Storks feed mostly on fish, amphibians and reptiles, but invertebrates are also consumed. Nest built of twigs and sticks is constructed by both parents. Both parents also cooperate in incubation of (usually) 3 eggs. After approximately one month semi-altricial\* young birds hatch and are cared for by the parents for another 2 months.

Wood Storks are protected by Mexican Law (NOM-059-ECOL- 2001) but their populations have suffered considerably due to habitat destruction. Coastal lagoons and mangrove swamps in our area –favorite feeding grounds to storks - are of paramount importance not only to them, but to dozens upon dozens of other fauna species.

\* **SEMI-ALTRICIAL:** the young have a very limited mobility immobile, but their bodies are covered by down-like feathers (they do not hatch naked)

## **Colima Pygmy-Owl [Glaucidium palmarum]**

### **Tecolotito Colimense**

By Petr Myska - January 2007



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*Colima Pygmy-Owl [Glaucidium palmarum]*

This baseball-sized owl is another of pacific slope endemics. Related to the wide-ranging ferruginous pygmy-owl [*G. brasilianum*], this species can be found only in Mexican west coast from Sonora to Oaxaca. Unlike many owls, pygmy owls are diurnal – they are most active during the day, when they also hunt, their prey are mostly birds – up to the size of robin, but reptiles and insects are frequently taken.

The overall color of this species is brownish, head is rather spotted than streaked, which together with only 3-4 visible white tail bars, distinguishes colima from ferruginous pygmy owl. Both species, just like all members of the genus *Glaucidium* possess black triangular patches on the hindneck resembling a pair of large eyes. Some studies indicate that this unique coloration pattern plays a role in diminishing avian mobbing against the pygmy owls. The attacking birds are possibly discouraged by

the sight of these two “huge eyes” staring at them, not realizing that at that precise moment the owl is actually facing exactly the opposite way.

In our bay species can be found especially in the tropical forest, but reports from greener suburbs are also frequent. Colima pygmy owls nest in tree cavities and typically lay 2 – 4 eggs.

**Russet-Crowned Motmot (Momotus Mexicanus)**  
**Momoto Coronicafé**

By Petr Myska - December 2006



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*Momotus Mexicano*

Motmots are colorful, long-tailed inhabitants of forested areas with most species concentrated in Middle American countries. Six species can be found in Mexico of which one is endemic to the Pacific Slope. Motmots are generally easy to tell apart from other species and Russet-Crowned Motmot is no exception. There is simply no other bird like it in the area of Banderas Bay.

To start with, Russet-Crowned Motmot is a fairly large bird, reaching lengths of 30 -33 cm, tail included. Its coloration is also quite singular,

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the head and nape are rufous, black face mask is edged violet, upper parts are green and under parts a lighter shade of the same color. Eyes in adults are deep red.

The most outstanding identification feature is the bird's tail. The tail itself is quite long accounting for at least half of the total body length. The interesting detail about tails of all known motmot species is the fact that in adult birds the shape of the tail resembles a tennis racket – long handle followed by a narrow neck section after which comes wide "head". It is necessary to point out that both sexes of all motmot species possess such a tail shape. To add to the mystery, motmots do not hatch with this particular tail shape - young birds have a perfectly straight, unbroken tail feathers. Why then, do the adults seem to change their mind about its design and decide to shape it into such an exceptional form?

As it turns out, the "racket-tipped" motmot tails are a byproduct of the bird's affinity to hygiene and faulty design of the barbs near the center rectrices. These seem to be quite loosely attached and tend to fall out as the birds preen and clean the tails with their strong decurved bills – Mystery solved...

Russet-Crowned Motmots can be found in the bay area in the tropical forest habitat and quieter greener suburbs. I have found them a little tricky to spot for the most of the year, but as the mating season commences in the spring, they can be seen and heard very frequently and I will never forget an early morning surprise in the Mismaloya canyon, where 4 motmots regularly spaced on a horizontal branch greeted the sun with their soft hooting.

**Yellow-Winged Cacique (*Cacicus melanicterus*)**  
**Cacique Mexicano (*Cacicus melanicterus*)**

By Petr Myska - November 2006



*Yellow-Winged Cacique (*Cacicus melanicterus*)*

There are certainly many reasons why I like caciques. For their beautiful and varied songs, their elegance and nest-building capabilities and their pre-mating displays, just to mention a few. Another reason, which bird-watching beginners might also appreciate, is the fact, that in our area, it is impossible to confuse a Yellow-winged Cacique with any other bird, resident or migratory.

If you come to see a black bird with strikingly yellow stripes in wings and tail, there is no mistake. Yes, there are other birds roughly the same size, mostly or entirely black inhabiting the same habitat, but none of them shows the same color pattern. To be precise, our bird is black overall, with the exception of wing patch, rump, under tail coverts

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and outer part of the tail, which, as I mentioned above, are bright yellow.

There is very little sexual dimorphism. Both sexes are roughly the same size; males are jet black and females just a little duller, rather smoky brown.



Caciques are endemic to Pacific Slope and can be found in forests and greener suburbs throughout the bay area. They are social species and usually can be spotted traveling and foraging in groups, sometimes associated with other birds, especially San Blas Jays (*Cyanocorax sanblasianus*). The jays being quite a bit larger and much bolder than caciques tend to spook insects from their hideaways, which might benefit caciques, who follow closely behind and pick items overlooked by jays.

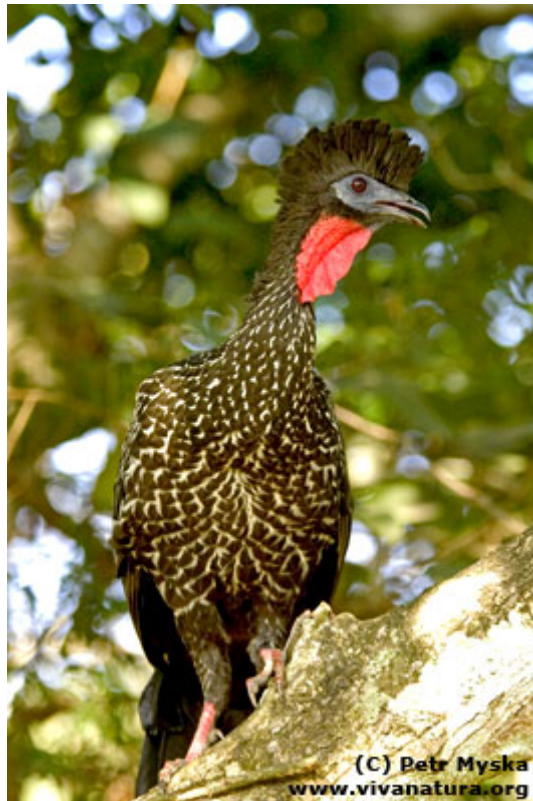
Caciques, just as many other Icterid species, construct elaborated suspended nests woven from long plant fibers. These large structures are places high in the canopy, at the end of a branch, where they cannot be reached easily by tree-climbing predators. Two to four pale blue eggs mottled with black and gray are laid at the bottom of the nest in a cup-like chamber.

**Crested Guan (*Penelope purpurascens*)**

**Pavo Cojolito (*Penelope purpurascens*)**

By Petr Myska - October 2006

After having introduced some of the most frequent birds of the area in the past 6 articles, I believe there is time to become acquainted with some of the rare members of the local avifauna.



*Crested Guan (*Penelope purpurascens*)*

Many less seen bird species tend to escape our attention by being tiny or drab or silent, or all of the above. Crested guan is neither. One of the

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largest forest birds of Mexico and vigorous singer, guan would be difficult to miss. Alas, its populations are suffering a severe decline throughout their distribution range, due to massive hunting. Plainly stated – a guan is a substantial chunk of tasty meat.

Crested guans are dark, turkey-like (but not closely related to) birds, which inhabit humid and semihumid evergreen and semideciduous forest on both Mexican coasts from Sinaloa and Tamaulipas south to El Salvador and Honduras. An adult can grow up to 90 cm in length. The overall color is very dark brown to black, streaked and mottled white. Prominent erectile crest together with large red throat wattle are the best distinguishing features of the species. In our region a guan could be confused possibly only with Chachalacas, which are at least 1/3 smaller, do not have a crest and are also lighter-colored.

Guans usually feed on fruit and travel in pairs or small groups. Just like other Cracids, guans are not fussy about nesting. Fairly flimsy structures made of twigs and other vegetable matter are placed anywhere in bush or canopy. Usually 2-3 eggs are laid.

There are still several resident populations around the bay area, but let's say nothing about their whereabouts for the birdies' sake. Those of you, who are true birders, nature lovers or vegetarian, are granted my permission to listen up early in the morning mist over a forested canyon for the "yoink yoink yoink" and "kyeh-kyeh-kyeh" of a guan greeting the rising sun.

**San Blas Jay (*Cyanocorax sanblasianus*)**  
**Charpa de San Blas (*Cyanocorax sanblasianus*)**  
By Petr Myska - July 2006



San Blas Jay - Adult

This loud and daring member of the family Corvidae belongs to the many black-and-blue species of Mexican jays. However, in our region it is the only one with such color combination. Therefore, should you come across a bird, which has entirely black underparts and beautiful metallic blue upperparts, rest assured that you are looking at the endemic San Blas Jay.

Just as in many other species of local fauna, this bird's distribution range is restricted to a fairly small section of Mexican Pacific coast. It

can only be seen from the state of Nayarit in the north to Guerrero in the south.



San Blas Jay - Juvenile

Although sexes are almost impossible to tell apart, it is quite easy to distinguish in between an adult and a juvenile. While both the young and the adults show the typical black and blue body color combination, the juveniles have brown eyes and yellowish bill and the adults golden eyes and dark bill. In addition, although both age groups posses an erectile crest, it tends to be more visible in the juveniles.

As all members of the genus *Cyanocorax*, San Blas Jay is a cooperative breeder, meaning, the birds hatched during the last season will help raising their brothers and sisters this year. The team spirit is not limited to breeding, though. San Blas Jays are almost exclusively found in groups. Flocks typically count in between 15 - 20 birds and forage low to high in canopy and often on or near the ground.

In our area they are found principally in arid to semihumid forests, forest edges and suburbs rich in vegetation.

**Golden-Cheeked Woodpecker [Centurus chrysogenys]  
Carpintero Cahetidorado [Centurus chrysogenys]**

By Petr Myska - June 2006



Golden-Cheeked Woodpecker - Female

This species is certainly Vallarta's most seen and busiest woodpecker. Although restricted to Mexican Pacific slope from Sinaloa to Oaxaca, it is quite abundant within its distribution range. In the bay area it can be observed easily in a variety of habitats, including tropical forest, mangroves and even suburbs rich in green areas.





Golden-Cheeked Woodpecker - Male

This bird is almost always seen in company of its couple. Both sexes are of similar size (19 – 22 cm) and both have upperparts barred in black and white. To distinguish in between sexes, I suggest focusing on the birds' heads. While both male's and female's nape are yellow-orange, only male possesses a red crown. Male and female never seem to be too far apart and although they might be occasionally feeding on different trees, they almost constantly keep in touch through loud vocalization. Just like all members of the genus *Centurus*, this species feeds mainly on insects, especially larvae found under the bark and in the wood of trees.

It is quite surprising that very little is known about this species' reproduction, apart of the fact that, as can be expected from a woodpecker, the nests are built in hollow trees. Golden-cheeked woodpeckers seem to be thriving in our region also thanks to the abundance of *Cecropia* trees, which with their hollow trunks offer these birds perfect nesting conditions.

### **Black-Throated Magpie Jay (*Calocitta formosa*)**

By Petr Myska - April 2006



This impressively beautiful jay can be found only in North western Mexico from Sonora to Jalisco. The Bay of Banderas, where this species is a year round resident, represents a part of the southernmost corner of its small distribution range.

Although carrying the common colors of Mexican jays – black, blue and white, this species clearly stands out among its kin thanks to its enormous size (up to 80 cm, 30 in) enhanced by the presence of a very long tail.

The first part of its common name (Black-throated) refers to the color of its head, chest and crest. Its nape and upperparts are metallic blue and underparts are white.

The Black-throated Magpie Jay, just as other members of family Corvidae, which embraces all jays, crows and ravens, consumes a wide variety of food items, including insects, fruit, seeds, nestling birds, small

reptiles and amphibians. It is usually seen traveling through the canopy either in pairs or in small family groups.

Just as many other species of tropical Corvidae, this species is a cooperative breeder. Several individuals will build and attend a single nest.

In the Bay of Banderas area, this species is tied to the tropical forest habitat. Although distributed throughout, it is most frequently spotted in the Punta Mita area.

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Have a great time!