

## TRAVELOGUE

## Mayan Reptiles

Michael A. Powell

Truman State University, Kirksville, Missouri

All photographs by Michael or Robert Powell.

We had nearly made it to the top of the massive pyramid at Ek Balam (how the Mayans climbed these suckers is a mystery to me; they were short little guys and the steps were tall and steep). I happened to glance over to a small shelf adjacent to the reconstructed steps, only to see an iguana staring back at me. Iguanas (*Ctenosaura similis*) are common on and around the ruins, which provide ample retreats and basking sites while offering protection officially afforded the ruins, but obviously extending to their reptilian residents as well.

Having traveled with my father my entire life, I have learned to expect that some portion of any given trip will involve time spent with the local fauna. I therefore had no illusions going into our holiday trip to the Yucatán Peninsula. Truth be told, I didn't really mind. It would have been hard growing up with someone like my dad and not developing an appreciation for that sort of thing.

We encountered animals with some degree of regularity, although the weather wasn't necessarily ideal, particularly for herps — or the locals, who complained bitterly about the cold. We, in stark contrast, were glad to be wearing shorts and t-shirts, while news of snow and ice storms back home dominated the weather channel.

Our first animal encounter was a Collared Toucan (*Pteroglossus torquatus*) that welcomed us to México as we emerged from the airport. Unfortunately, this was the only toucan sighting of the trip. The next day, however, we found something more up our alley. While wandering around the Mayan ruins at Chichen Itzá and Ek Balam, we found the iguanas that

had taken up residence there. On one of the smaller structures at Chichen Itzá, we counted sixteen lizards while standing on one spot. Although the cool conditions were not what one could call prime iguana weather, we found more than enough to make a destination selected for its historical interest more than a little interesting from a biological perspective. In addition to encounters at the ruins, we regularly saw iguanas on the grounds of our resort, where several had taken up residence in rock piles at one



A juvenile *Ameiva undulata* takes advantage of refuges provided by the crumbling ruins and of the protection afforded this screened stand supporting an ancient Mayan tablet.



Near the top of the pyramid at Ek Balam, I glanced to the side and saw an iguana staring back.



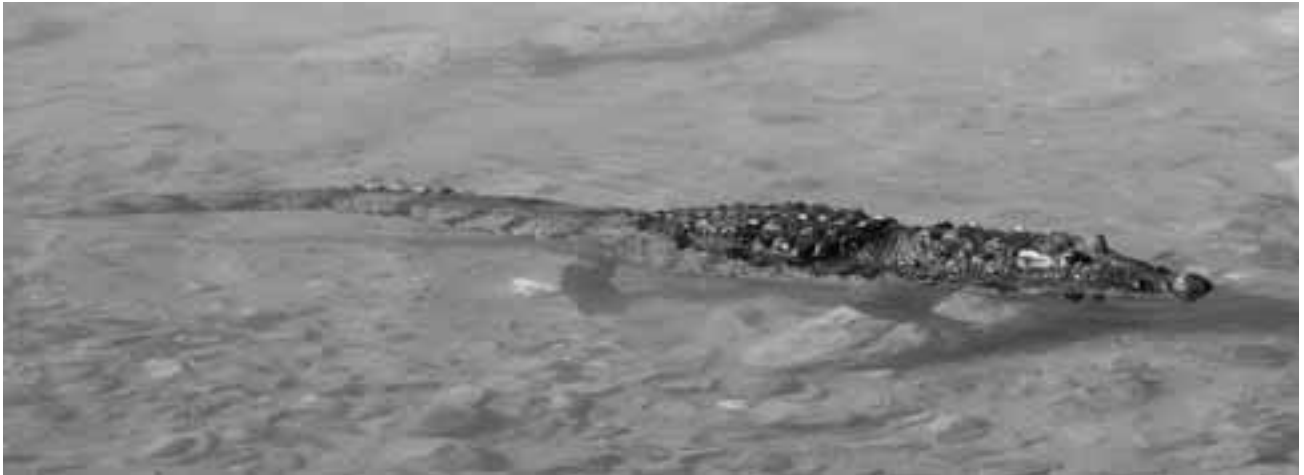
Ctenosaurs (*Ctenosaura similis*) are abundant on the Mayan ruins at Chichen Itzá.

end of a large pond with signs that warned us not to feed the crocodiles. Unfortunately, we never did see the crocs there.

We did, however, see crocs near the archaeological site at Cobá. My dad was attempting to photograph a Motmot (a bird with a pair of bizarre tail feathers that appear to be missing portions of their vanes) when a gardener warned him about the crocs in the lake. Of course, a warning for ordinary folks is a call to action for us. We quickly crawled through the carefully trimmed hedges near the shoreline and immediately came upon a 12-foot-long croc lazily basking in the shallows. Morelet's Crocodiles (*Crocodylus moreletii*) are an endangered species that once ranged widely through Middle America. Years of exploitation have left only a few occupying isolated enclaves such as the lakes at Cobá. Here the crocs are relatively common and often congregate near shore, where locals sometimes feed them scraps to entertain the tourists. The individuals we encountered were either well-fed or we didn't look or smell too tasty, since they were content to bask as we photographed them to our heart's content from only a couple of meters away.



A Turquoise-browed Motmot (*Eumomota superciliosa*) near the lakes at the Cobá archaeological site.



These Morelet's Crocodiles (*Crocodylus moreletii*) in the lake at Cobá were not at all disturbed by our presence.

Perhaps the most interesting encounters involved the highway. When traveling, we always stop from time to time to examine roadkills. Generally, that's what we find — roadkill. Twice on this trip, however, we encountered something much more interesting. We were driving the back roads from Chichen Itzá to Ek Balam when we saw a fairly large snake in the middle of the road. Dad immediately said: "Boa!" and hit the brakes. After a quick U-turn, we were once again approaching the snake and my dad was turning to pull off to the side of the road. As he leaned out the window to see if the snake was alive or not, he failed to see an oncoming car — at least not until my mom brought him back to reality. Fortunately, dad continued off the road and the other driver adroitly avoided hitting us. Dad immediately jumped out of the car and picked up the snake —



Rescuing a boa (*Boa constrictor*) from the highway nearly resulted in a collision with oncoming traffic.



The Barba Amarilla (*Bothrops asper*) is a common and deadly snake.

a fairly good-sized *Boa constrictor*. The driver of the other car also pulled over and got out. To Dad's dismay, he was wearing the uniform of the local policia. Dad immediately apologized in his broken Spanish (I caught the words "estoy idiota"). Fortunately for us, the policeman seemed a bit taken aback by a gringo who picks snakes up off the road. He stopped well short of us, asked if the snake was alive. As dad responded in the affirmative, the cop smiled nervously, shrugged, got back in his car, and drove away. We took several photos, which didn't seem to please the snake at all — I kind of felt like I was playing paparazzi to the boa's Sean Penn as it struck repeatedly at me and the camera.

Later the same day, after touring the archaeological zone of Ek Balam, we saw another snake crawling across the road. This time we stopped without incident. Dad immediately recognized it as a Barba Amarilla (*Bothrops asper*), one of the more common snakes in the region and also one of the most dangerous. Having already experienced the hostility of local reptiles toward photographers, I opted not to get involved with this one; instead I merely watched from the car as dad rescued the snake, photographed it, and then encouraged it to crawl off into the brush alongside the road.

As our trips to the tropics go, we spent relatively little time in the Yucatán hunting critters. That said, the time we did spend was exciting enough (read: had enough near-death experiences) to keep me satisfied.

---

## A Yucatecan Adventure

It's hard not to feel some sense of adventure when you're standing on top of a pyramid built by a long dead civilization, looking out over a thick, green jungle — even though the person standing next to you appears to have been getting his senior citizen discount for a good 15 years, ropes and guard rails everywhere try to keep the less coordinated from plummeting to their deaths, and souvenir shops are visible back where you parked. Nevertheless, I felt as though I should have donned my fedora and grabbed my trusty bullwhip before setting out on such an expedition — but I'm getting somewhat ahead of myself.

The day after arriving in México, we visited Chichen Itzá, one of the best known of the Mayan ruins that dot the Yucatán Peninsula and adjacent regions of Central America. I knew something about the ruins already; my dad had been here 25 years ago, and had given me a bit of a briefing. We paid for our tickets and entered the park. A short walk from the entrance, we emerged from the forest into a clearing dominated by a towering pyramid, every architectural feature of which seemingly represented some aspect of Mayan astronomy. We set out to climb the massive structure. We had arrived early in order to avoid the



Climbing the large pyramid at Chichen Itzá is a daunting task.

tour-bus crowds and we wanted to get up and down the pyramid without being trampled by masses of German tourists going on their industrious way. We arrived at the top, looked around the painfully empty inner chamber, and enjoyed the view of the rest of the site. By this time, more tourists had begun to arrive, and we started back down. Climbing up the pyramid was tough, simply because of the many really steep stairs. Climbing back down was even more exciting, as the uneven steps and downward perspectives emphasized the possibility of one small misstep leading to a rather unpleasant ride ending with an even more unpleasant landing.

According to the guidebook, the pyramid had been built over an earlier, smaller structure, which was accessible. This sounded like an adventure, braving booby traps and ghosts of Mayan guards to enjoy the splendor of an ancient temple. Humming to myself, I followed a line of people into the pyramid. The path was dark, but not too difficult. It quickly turned into a huge set of stairs. I started climbing, figuring that the temple at the top and its Red Jaguar Throne would be an ample reward for my effort. I finally reached the top, only to find that the “temple” consisted of a poorly lit room and that the “throne” was more like a bench that I couldn’t see very well. The whole area was smaller than my dorm room — and anyone who’s lived in a dorm can appreciate just how tiny that is. Disappointed, I made the trek back down. So much for Indiana Powell.

My mood improved, however, as we wandered through the rest of the ruins, learning about ancient Mayan culture. The ball court, where the intent was to pass a ball horizontally through a stone ring hung high on a wall, was interesting, both in terms of the fates of the losers (rather grim) and for the fact that the walls were so precisely designed that a clap in the middle of the field would echo exactly seven times.

We next followed a *sacbe* (an old Mayan “road”) that extended from the clearing past a retaining wall that surrounded the center of the city, which had been built on an artificially raised, level platform. As impressive as the construction of the pyramid and temples had been, I was amazed that such a “primitive” culture could accomplish the immense task of moving thousands of tons of soil and compacting it adequately to support the huge stone structures. The road led on past the wall to a cenote, essentially a natural cistern that served as both a cere-

monial site and a water source for the city’s inhabitants. It was what it was — a massive hole in the ground with water in it. Being who we are, our attention was immediately attracted to a bird perching on a small tree near the bottom. It turned out to be an Anhinga or “snake-bird” (so called because of its “serpentine neck”).

I must admit that I was somewhat disappointed at how developed the site had become. I had been looking forward to climbing the various structures, an activity that’s discouraged — it’s hard on the ruins, particularly with the vast numbers of people that visit the site. Ultimately, though, I had to admit that it was better this way. The sacrifice of my adventurous fantasies was worth the price of preserving the ruins, and the development of the site into a tourist attraction was more than justified by the worthy goal of exposing the average cruise ship passenger to a little ancient culture.



The retaining wall around the elevated platform on which the main structures at Chichen Itzá were constructed clearly demonstrates the engineering feats of which the Mayans were capable.



Returning from the cenote along the ancient *sacbe* (road), the pyramid at Chichen Itzá is an imposing structure.

## MAYAN SITES

Although Mayan archaeological sites extend across the Yucatán Peninsula and throughout much of Central America, visitors to the region who land in Cancún should definitely include the following four sites in their travel agendas. Visits early and late in the day are strongly recommended; not only are temperatures more pleasant, lighting more varied, but the vast busloads of tourists, especially at Chichen Itzá and Tulum are thus avoided to a large degree. Adapted from material provided at <http://www.mayasites.com/>.



Map of the Yucatán Peninsula showing the approximate locations of Cancún and the four major Mayan archaeological zones in the northeastern part of the peninsula.

### Chichen Itzá

Maybe the most famous of all Mayan archaeological sites, Chichen Itzá dates from the Late Classic period (~600–900 AD). Within the 6 km<sup>2</sup> of the archaeological zone are two distinct architectural styles (classified as “new” and “old” Chichen). The glorification of the Toltec god Quetzalcoatl in his Mayan form of Kukulcan, the Feathered Serpent, led to the belief that the Toltecs had taken over this formerly Mayan city. Now, however, scholars are beginning to dispute the idea of a foreign invasion. Contemporary thought is that Chichen Itzá was a cosmopolitan city inhabited by a diverse group of peoples including the Puuc Mayans and the Toltecs.

### Ek Balam

Dating from 100 AD to its height at 700–1,200 AD, the newly opened archaeological site at Ek Balam is unique and well worth a visit before the word gets out and the site is overrun by tourists. The main temple is over 500 feet long and 200 feet wide, making it one of the largest structures ever excavated in the Yucatán. Various sculpted works are

extremely well preserved. The site’s most striking temple is the “monster mouth,” representing a portal to the “other world.”



Tulum was the only Mayan city still thriving when the Spanish conquistadors arrived.



Many sculpted works at Ek Balam are extremely well preserved.

### Tulum

Situated on a cliff facing the beautiful turquoise waters of the Caribbean, this is among the most scenic of all the Mayan sites. Tulum was at its peak from 1,000–1,600 AD and is unusual in being surrounded by a high wall that speaks to a need for defense against invaders from both land and sea. Tulum was one of the first cities encountered by the conquistadors and was the only Mayan city still thriving when the Europeans arrived. The Mayans eventually abandoned the city, but not until almost a century after the Spanish conquest.

### Cobá

The Mayan ruins at Cobá are unique in that they have been barely restored. Only a few of the estimated 6,500 structures have been uncovered. Cobá, dating from



Tulum is situated on a cliff overlooking the Caribbean and is among the most scenic of all the Mayan sites. Waves breaking over the barrier reef that parallels the coastline can be seen in the background.



Climbing the pyramid at Cobá was exciting, as the uneven steps forced one to consider how one small misstep would lead to an unpleasant and possibly lethal experience.



The main pyramid at Cobá is the highest Mayan structure on the Yucatán Peninsula.

600–900 AD, may once have had a population estimated at 100,000 people, largest of all the ancient Mayan cities. The site's pyramids and buildings are situated on the shores of several lakes and as many as fifty *sabes* (ancient roads), one of them over 62 miles long (longest in the Mayan world), connected Cobá to cities throughout the region. The Nohoc Mul pyramid, at over 126 feet, is the tallest Mayan structure on the Yucatán Peninsula, and the building techniques are characteristic of the Petan region of Guatemala.

## 25 Years of Change

Several years ago, before a visit to México after an absence of over ten years, a friend who traveled south of the border on a regular basis told me that I would immediately notice three major changes that had come to pass since my last trip: (1) There are a lot more Mexicans (villages had become towns, towns cities, and cities major metropolitan areas). (2) One can buy safe ice nearly everywhere (in the old days, one often had to search diligently for the local ice plant and then, not knowing the source of the water used, had to be extremely careful for fear of contracting what is widely known as “Montezuma’s revenge”). (3) The PEMEX (Mexican national petroleum company) stations had clean restrooms (during previous visits, even females invariably preferred the “bushes” to the often-gruesome facilities at the filling stations). All of his observations were right on the money.

If such dramatic changes were evident after only ten years, you might imagine what had happened in the 25 years since I had last visited the Yucatán Peninsula with students in 1980. I won’t try to list them all, but some of the innovations were impossible to ignore — and some were a bit disturbing.



One significant advantage of development is access to fine dining establishments.



This juvenile *Coleonyx elegans*, a eublepharid gecko, was crossing the road at night. Travel speeds that prevail today would have made seeing this little lizard difficult and stopping in time to catch it nearly impossible.

Mexicans are definitely more abundant. Cancún has grown from a little town into a booming metropolis with all of the accompanying traffic and pollution. Playa del Carmen is a city (with a Sam’s Club!) instead of a sleepy seaside village. Much of the population growth is attributable to immigration into the region from other parts of México. When the government decided to foster development for the tourist trade some 40 years ago, it began the process by constructing an international airport. When we visited in 1980, the airport had been in operation only a few years and the terminal was an open-air affair through which one passed in seconds. Today, the airport rivals those in large cities anywhere in the world with jet ways, huge customs complex, and stores and restaurants galore (even a Hard Rock Café). In 1980, our rental vehicles had to be brought in from Mérida (capital of the state of Yucatán); today the rental car options equal those at any major international destination. Growth and expansion continue.

The more popular archaeological sites at Chichen Itzá and Tulum now have paved parking lots with attendants, extensive visitor centers, and the free-lance vendors of largely hand-made crafts have been replaced by row after row of shops catering to almost any whim (local vendors still exist, but their access to the sites is carefully controlled). Getting there is faster, since the old two-lane roads that had only recently been paved were now four-lane, limited-access highways. Deserted stretches of beach have been replaced by one huge resort after another, and, instead of nesting sea turtles, the beaches are occupied by dense crowds of tourists covered in oil. Note, however, that many of the attractions that promote near-shore snorkeling experiences require (and sell) biodegradable sunscreen to prevent the formation of huge oil slicks.

Sadly, the remaining Mayan culture that we experienced so vividly in 1980 is much less visible today. This is partly attributable to the speed of travel (one couldn’t drive fast on the old roads even if so inclined) and partly to the displacement of



Mayan villages along the roads have been displaced by commercial development along the highways.



Treefrogs, like this *Phrynobates venulosa*, are abundant, but inconspicuous — until the males call during rainy periods.



Archaeological zones provide protection for wildlife as well as ruins. Here a Great Egret (*Casmerodius albus*) waits patiently for lunch at the lake at Cobá.



Red-eared Sliders (*Trachemys scripta*) are not native to the Yucatán Peninsula, but the crocs seem to find them every bit as tasty as the native species.

Mayan villages farther into the interior to make room for profitable enterprises. Mayan faces were common then; today, one encounters them only rarely, usually in the form of maids or laborers with whom tourists have limited contact.

Wildlife still exists, but the diversity that was so evident 25 years ago is much harder to find (during our 1980 trip, we collected 25 snakes of 17 different species). Those species that adapt well to humans and their altered habitats abound; those that don't have retreated farther into the remaining forests, access to

which is now more difficult. We were able to enter the forests along numerous small dirt roads that led to little villages or hunting and logging camps. These no longer exist. The huge flocks of shore birds that populated the myriad inlets and bays have moved to the protected biosphere reserves farther south and are rarely seen along the Mayan Riviera, replaced instead by motorboats and jet skis (an abomination and a sure sign of a declining civilization).

Was the Cancún of 1980 more charming than what exists now? Sure. However, I have a hard time condemning the development. Not only has it proven to be an economic boon in a previously depressed area (well over 90% of all local revenue in the state of Quintana Roo is tourist-related), a large portion of the millions of tourists who have visited the region in the past couple of decades have been enticed to visit the archaeological sites — and a few may well have left with a much greater appreciation of pre-Columbian culture than they could have acquired by watching the travel channel. Knowing our past speaks well of our future, and tourism, albeit motivated largely by white-sand beaches and crystal-clear water, has been largely responsible for the education of many.

*Robert Powell*

## MUCH MORE THAN AN ALLIGATOR FARM

Just north of Puerto Morelos on what has become known as the Mayan Riviera, is a small roadside zoo called CrocoCun. As the name implies, crocs are the featured attraction — and both American Crocodiles (*Crocodylus acutus*) and Morelet's Crocodiles (*C. moreleti*) are abundantly represented. In fact, the privately supported facility has become sufficiently adept at breeding the latter that they have run out of sites to release them (many of the developers of luxurious resorts along the Caribbean coast apparently resist efforts to reintroduce crocs to the lagoons and beaches where they once were plentiful).

However, this little zoo offers much more than crocodiles. Exhibits include many species native to the forests of the Peninsula, including several snakes, a few lizards, and mammals that include Whiterail Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*, yes, the same species overrunning suburbs throughout the United States), Collared Peccaries or Javelinas (*Tayassu tajacu*), and Spider Monkeys (*Ateles geoffryi*).

Because the rather steep admission price includes the services of a guide, visitors can interact with animals, feeding monkeys or deer and holding snakes or even crocs. Even more interesting, however, than some of the exhibits are the wild animals that have learned that the zoo is an ideal place to scrounge an easy

meal. Wild Spider Monkeys readily approach humans in hopes of a handout and the fortunate visitor might stumble across an iguana foraging for scraps or a snake taking advantage of the rodents attracted to the stocks of animal food kept onsite.



Wild Spider Monkeys (*Ateles geoffryi*) had learned that the zoo was a good place to solicit a handout.



Crocs start out small, but don't stay that way. The author holding a hatchling *Crocodylus moreleti* (left). An adult *C. moreleti* at the breeding facility at CrocoCun (above).



With their bright blue backs, wings, and tails, Yucatan Jays (*Cissilopha yucatanica*) provided atmosphere in the form of raucous calls and splashes of color.

Nearby and also worthwhile is the Dr. Alfredo Barrera Marín Botanical Garden, with winding paths snaking through the various vegetative communities found on the Peninsula. In addition to the flora, the facility also is a terrific place to see birds, occasional reptiles, and sometimes even a fleeting glance of a wild mammal disappearing into the brush.

Also worth exploring, at least for the aquatically inclined, are the fabulous coral reefs that parallel the coast, forming North



The very slender Vine Snake (*Oxybelis aeneus*) feeds primarily on lizards. These snakes were abundant 25 years ago and remain that way today.

America's longest barrier reef. Unfortunately for tourists (but presumably fortunate for the area's inhabitants), core areas of the region's terrestrial and coastal Biosphere Reserves are off-limits to casual visitors. Biologists, archaeologists, and other scientists must obtain permission from the Mexican government to conduct research in these areas.

Numerous other "natural wonders" are promoted on billboards along every stretch of highway, in every brochure that offers daily tours, and by the staff of "activity desks" at the area's abundant hotels and resorts. Most are pricey and some may be worth the investment of time and money, but don't go expecting to see anything remotely resembling nature. What were once pristine and unique habitats supporting an unbelievably diverse wildlife have become just another tourist attraction.

## SOME ADVICE

Use sunscreen. Even during the cooler winter months, the tropical sun is fierce and will fry you much faster than anything you've experienced back home.

Take insect repellent. Although I overheard one tour guide tell visitors to Cobá not to worry about bugs, reminding them that it was winter and "mosquitoes don't like snow," the truth is that biting insects are abundant — and seem to enjoy the taste of tourists.

Don't be paranoid about food and drinks. The bad old days are in the past. The tourist-oriented economy on the Peninsula has adapted well to the reality that folks won't come back if they spend most of their vacation worshipping at the porcelain alter. Do, however, use common sense. Avoid food purchased from street vendors and eat fresh fruits only if served in a reputable restaurant or that you've peeled yourself. Tequila is not a disinfectant that will save you from your sins if you eat something you should have avoided.

As much as possible, plan activities for early and late in the day. Midday temperatures can be brutal and no one has fun in a blast furnace. Also, most animals are likely to be active in the morning and evening. So, eat a light lunch and take a siesta (a very civilized custom) or spend time in the pool or at the beach (but not in the sun!).

If you decide to drive, figure on paying a premium for local insurance (U.S. insurance does not apply in México). When you drive, be patient. Even if the locals drive like they're in a NASCAR race (go fast, turn left, ...), don't emulate them. Traffic violations involving injuries or property damage are criminal offenses and even minor transgressions can be expensive, since you may end up paying the arresting authority a substantial amount to allow you to proceed on your way (incidentally, don't automatically assume that a policeman is looking for a bribe, that could get you into even more trouble, but follow Boy Scout guidelines and be prepared).

Above all, enjoy yourself. México is a terrific place full of mostly friendly people and with lots to offer in the way of cultural and natural history.

## References

### General Guides

Numerous guidebooks address the logistics of travel to what has become one of the Western Hemisphere's major tourist destinations. All provide some basic background on the archaeological sites buried among recommendations for lodging, dining, and experiencing the apparently abundant nightlife. All are totally devoid of any meaningful discussions of the region's natural resources (except those that have themselves been converted to tourist destinations). Two guides that we found particularly useful, primarily because they went farther beyond the mundane than most of the alternatives, were: *Yucatán* (Lonely Planet) by Ben Greensfelder and *Hidden Cancún & the Yucatán* by Richard Harris.

### Reptiles and Amphibians

*The Amphibians and Reptiles of the Yucatan Peninsula* by Julian C. Lee. Phenomenally comprehensive, a reference rather than a guide. Highly recommended, but expensive and not for carrying into the field.

*A Field Guide to the Amphibians and Reptiles of the Maya World: The Lowlands of Mexico, Northern Guatemala, and Belize* by Julian C. Lee. A field guide based on the more authoritative coffee table book by the same author. Highly recommended.

*Amphibians and Reptiles of Northern Guatemala, the Yucatán, and Belize* by Jonathan A. Campbell. A nice guide enlivened by tales of the author's per-

sonal experiences in the region. Recommended.

*Reptiles of Central America* by Gunther Köhler. Nicely illustrated, but broader coverage than the other books listed results in less detail than in the other recommended guides. Recommended, but expensive.

### Birds

*A Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America* by Steven N. G. Howell and Sophie Webb. The most comprehensive guide to the region, but large and heavy. Highly recommended.

*Birder's Mexico* (Louise Lindsey Merrick Natural Environment Series, 12) by Roland H. Wauer. Not so much a traditional guide as an introduction to birding in México; definitely nice to have and great for preparation prior to a trip. Recommended.

*A Field Guide to Mexican Birds: Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador* (Peterson Field Guides) by Roger Tory Peterson (Series Editor) and Edward L. Chalif. Not up to the standards of the Peterson Field Guides for the U.S. and useful only with both U.S. guides in hand. Definitely a third choice among those listed.

*Field Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Adjacent Areas: Belize, Guatemala, and El Salvador* by Ernest Preston Edwards and Edward Murrell Butler (illustrator). Nice pictures, but disorganized and difficult to use. Not recommended.

## SPECIES PROFILE

### Blunt-headed Tree Snake *Imantodes cenchoa*

Snakes in the genus *Imantodes* are among several Central American species to effectively exploit arboreal prey. Like many other species that spend most of their lives in vegetation, these snakes are very slender and elongate and have very long tails. Compressing their sides and forming their bodies into a semblance of an I-beam, they can span remarkable distances as they move from branch to branch. Although they can and do occasionally venture onto the ground, most individuals probably never leave the trees and bushes on which they're usually encountered. Active at dusk and well into the night, these snakes take refuge during the day, occasionally hiding in bromeliads or other epiphytic vegetation.

As do many Neotropical snakes in the Family Colubridae (which includes most common snakes throughout the world), Blunt-headed Tree Snakes have enlarged, grooved teeth near the back of each upper jaw with which they can inject venom. However, the location of the fangs renders the delivery of venom difficult unless the prey item has been taken well into the mouth. Also, the venom appears to be most effective on their usual prey of lizards and frogs. They are not dangerous to humans and very rarely bite, even when handled.

Unlike Vine Snakes in the genus *Oxybelis*, which fill a comparable arboreal, lizard- and frog-eating niche during the daytime, *Imantodes cenchoa* has a vertically elliptical pupil that allows for considerable enlargement in order to trap sparse light at night. Like most snakes, however, Blunt-headed Tree Snakes rely primarily on chemical cues to find lizards sleeping on branches and leaves, nocturnally active frogs, clutches of frog eggs suspended over water, or lizard and snake eggs hidden under bark or in nooks and crannies above the ground. Their blunt heads allow them to consume larger prey than their slender bodies would seem to be able to accommodate.



The long slender bodies of Blunt-headed Tree Snakes (*Imantodes cenchoa*) allow them to span considerable distance as they move from branch to branch.