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Texas Big Bend Birding and Wildlife Tour
April 23-30, 2016
*With Southeast Arizona Extension to Portal Arizona
 and the Chiricahua Mountains*
April 30-May 4

"I loved the trip! Woody as guide, a very sympatico group, fabulous birds, mammals, etc. Carolyn Ohr-Johnson is a phenomenal woman and fun to meet. Javelinas, and birds, birds, birds." – Franni Tourtellot

"Accommodations – Wow all the way around. Love those funky old hotels that leave doors open and treat people as friends." – Gail Kohl



Big Bend is large enough to encompass an entire mountain range: the spectacularly eroded Chisos Mountains, home to the elusive Colima Warbler. This is a bold landscape with constantly changing views -- a playground of light, rugged mountains, rolling desert hills, deep river canyons, and endless intrigue.

It is an exotic place close to home, with a definite Texas flair. Even the names of the natural features are exotic: Tornillo and Terlingua Creeks, Mesa de Anguila,

mountains called Dead Horse, Santiago, Christmas, and Glass. Plant names hint of Mexican affinities: Lechuguilla, Agave, Ocotillo, Mesquite, Hechtia, Javelina Bush, Guayacan, Candelilla, and Sangre de Drago. Mammals include Kangaroo Rats, three species of skunks, Javelinas, Mountain Lions, and Black Bears.

Our journey in this wonderfully isolated region features time for birding and wildlife observation while interpreting the region's significance and ecological complexity. We also have time for fun: dining in west Texas restaurants, learning the history, and discovering a fine sense of place.

While many visiting groups rush in to record the rarities, we have the entire week to hike the trails, find lush hidden oases, watch desert sunsets,



and experience the rhythm of spring bird migration. Because eastern and western, Mexican and Rocky Mountain species mingle in Big Bend, nearly 450 species of birds have been recorded here, many of them rare or vagrants. Every field day is exciting; don't miss this chance to discover this special place!

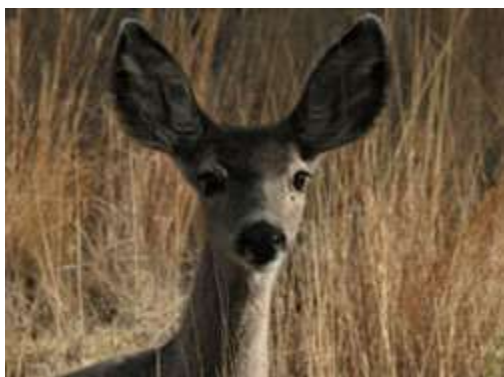
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ITINERARY

Sat., April 23 Arrive in El Paso, Texas

Please plan to arrive in El Paso, TX. no later than 1:00 p.m. today. Your guide will be there at the airport to greet you and we we plan to do some birding en route to Fort Davis and the Davis Mountains. We drive east about two hours to Van Horn, where we take a break, and then continue to Balmorhea State Park, a lush oasis. The park is located at the northern end of the Davis Mountains Here an artisan spring pours forth millions of gallons of water, encouraging the growth of tall trees and marsh vegetation. The park is a haven for migrating birds, with such beauties as Painted Buntings



sometimes coming in to the feeders. We look for Bullock's Orioles, Western Kingbirds, Pied-billed Grebes, and two species of rare desert fish. As time permits, we continue a short ways to one of the larger reservoirs in this area: Balmorhea Lake. Here we may find a variety of ducks and shorebirds, and with luck a flock of magnificent White Pelicans.

Our afternoon drive of 30 miles or so down to Fort Davis is timed for good wildlife viewing hours, with a chance of seeing Mule Deer, Javelinas, Coyotes or Wild Boar. This scenic route reveals tall cliffs of columnar volcanic rocks.. Settle into your

accommodations at the delightful Hotel Limpia and enjoy a group dinner in the hotel.

Accommodations at the Hotel Limpia, Fort Davis (D)



Sun., April 24 The Davis Mountains

Today we explore the Davis Mountains, another Sky Island mountain range in Texas. Learn more about the ecological significance of the Davis Mountains as a link between Mexico and the Rocky Mountains. In the morning we visit the Nature Conservancy's outstanding preserve high in the Davis Mountains. For many years the higher elevations of this range has been inaccessible as private land. Since the preserve was established, limited public access is allowed, and a number of very exciting birds

have been recorded. Those familiar with the Chiricahua Mountains of Arizona will recognize Olive Warblers, Buff-breasted Flycatchers, Painted Redstarts and Dusky-capped Flycatchers, found there in similar habitat. Enjoy a walk amid large Ponderosa Pines, with a view of the highest peak in the Davis Mountains, Mt. Livermore. Permission to visit this area varies by the year, and if for reasons of fire restriction or other, we cannot visit, we have several other great Davis Mountain areas as alternatives.



Returning by mid-afternoon, we offer an optional visit to historic Fort Davis, one of the best preserved post-Civil War forts in our National Park system. The volcanic geology of its setting is quite spectacular.

Dinner is at your leisure tonight with a choice of local restaurants.

Accommodations at Hotel Limpia (B,L)

Mon., April 25 The Post at Marathon / Prairie Dogs / Big Bend National Park

This morning we visit Davis Mountains State Park, where in some years Montezuma Quail come into feeders along with Scrub Jays, Acorn Woodpeckers and Green-tailed Towhees. It will be hard to tear you away from this idyllic sit-down birding!



However, adventure and Big Bend calls us, so mid-morning we head on. Passing through grassland habitat en route, we are likely to see Pronghorns and possibly Scaled Quail. We enjoy lunch at one of our favorite local restaurants in Alpine (the Reata, see epicureanbirder.wordpress.com) then visit a lush birding oasis at a creek-side park that once housed the U.S. Cavalry. Today it is known as *the Post*, and its large cottonwood trees and small reservoir attract a good number and variety of birds such as Vermilion Flycatchers, Summer Tanagers, Golden-fronted Woodpeckers and possibly Yellow-billed Cuckoos. Driving back into extensive grasslands we visit an active

Prairie Dog town to observe these animals' lively and sometimes comical behavior. With luck a Coyote or Golden Eagle may be here on patrol.

Then we turn south to Big Bend National Park, interpreting the geologic features on the way. We pass through low desert that was once so rich in Tobosa grass the early settlers could cut it as hay. Our destination is Chisos Basin, which sits at a comfortable 5,400 feet surrounded by mountain peaks. Here, we keep an eye out for Zone-tailed Hawks and other birds of prey. Relax, settle in, and enjoy dinner in the lodge's dining room. A Say's Phoebe may have a nest by the door; at night Gray Foxes and Javelinas are sometimes seen from the balconies.



Accommodations at Chisos Mountain Lodge (B,L)



Tue., April 26 Big Bend National Park / Rio Grande Village

We get an early start this morning with a field breakfast in tow, so we can get to Rio Grande Village early enough for prime bird activity. Ro Wauer, author of *The Birds of Big Bend*, regards this as the most consistent location in the park for seeing good numbers of species, and today should be no exception. Painted Buntings often steal the show, but there is stiff competition from Greater Roadrunners, Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, Inca Doves,

Indigo Buntings, and Blue Grosbeaks.

Take time to learn some of the calls -- you'll then be aware of Yellow-breasted Chats and Bell's Vireos; with luck you'll hear the scream of a Gray Hawk. Common Black Hawks have nested here for several years, and Black Vultures can be seen along the river. Along the nature trail -- a boardwalk through a pond created by beavers -- the blend of lush cattails and rushes, desert scrub, and distant views of the Chisos is striking! Enjoy a picnic lunch with a view of the Sierra del Carmen Mountains. A siesta under shade of the cottonwoods is a must before we return to the Basin. We stop at the Boquillas Canyon Overlook and Hot Springs Historic Site as well as the park's visitor center en route. Tonight, enjoy dinner at your leisure.



Accommodations at Chisos Mountain Lodge, Big Bend National Park (B,L)



Wed., April 27 Big Bend National Park/ Boot Springs

Enjoy a full day of walks and hikes in Chisos Basin. Those with energy can scale the nine-mile loop trail high into the Chisos, where we find nesting Colima Warblers. The entire hike is fascinating, and we have all day to do it, so many can participate. We climb steadily through oak and juniper woodland, finding an abundance of Mexican species such as Evergreen Sumacs and Drooping

Junipers. Fresh-flowering Texas Madrones are magnets for warblers. We often find Townsend's, Hermit, Yellow-rumped, and sometimes Orange-crowned and MacGuillivray's Warblers. Wildflowers and brilliant cactus blooms brighten the trail.

In sheltered Boot Canyon we find huge pines and Arizona Cypress, a Mexican relict species. The route down through Laguna Meadows opens up great vistas and more birding. Listen for calls of Hutton's Vireos and Bewick's Wrens as well as the trill of Broad-tailed Hummingbirds during courtship displays.

Those who do not wish to scale the mountain can -- if we have a large enough group for two guides -- enjoy a very special hike to a place where orchids and Cardinal Flower grow at a backcountry desert spring. This oasis is great for birding and affords a visit to the Old Sam Nail Ranch, one of the best birding spots in Big Bend. If we have a small group, then those not hiking can walk partway with us, or enjoy free time in the basin where the park may have activities scheduled. Dinner is once again at your leisure. On this, or another evening, your guide will offer an optional drive out to a location where we have a great chance of observing Elf Owls, Poorwills and possibly Lesser Nightjars.

Accommodations at Chisos Mountain Lodge. (L)



Thurs., April 28 Big Bend National Park/ Burro Mesa Pouroff/ Santa Elena Canyon

Today we head west towards magnificent Santa Elena Canyon. Our first stop is at the Old Sam Nail Ranch, where water coming from a windmill attracts Varied Buntings a variety of other migrant songbirds. We then walk to Burro Mesa Pouroff, a unique geologic feature where unusual plants like the Texas Persimmon and Texas Buckeye bear fruit that attracts some of the larger songbirds. The arid hills provide good habitat for Black-chinned Sparrows, while the canyon seems to echo with the songs of Rock and Canyon Wrens.

We have lunch at Cottonwood Campground, another oasis with large trees and a Hackberry and Lotebush hedgerow that provides shelter and food for migrants. In some years we see waves of birds coming through – grosbeaks and buntings seem especially fond of this area. We may also

find Lucy's Warblers in the dry mesquite, and Hooded, Orchard, and Bullock's Orioles.

In the afternoon, after siesta, we discuss the vivid geologic story of the Big Bend region. Visit historic Castolon, where ice cream is a welcome treat. In the late afternoon, the sun is off the trail into Santa Elena Canyon, so we can enjoy a walk along 1,000-foot limestone walls laid down during the Cretaceous Period. Watch swallows hunting over the river, and listen for the calls of White-throated Swifts. From here we take a back road north to the West Entrance of Big Bend, and enjoy dinner at a local restaurant as unique as its desert surroundings.

Accommodations at Chisos Mountain Lodge (L)





Fri., April 29 Big Bend National Park/ Blue Creek

This morning explore Blue Creek Canyon, taking a leisurely route along a dry stream that allows for wonderful views, grand geology, and consistently excellent birding. Species to look for include the Lucifer Hummingbirds, Gray Vireos, Crissal Thrashers and Varied Buntings. Learn more about the history and impact of ranching in the Big Bend Region.

In the afternoon we head on to Marathon, TX, as time allows stopping en route to see a spectacular forest of Giant Dagger Yuccas. The Gage Hotel is a delightful historic hotel with a pool and courtyard, a perfect place to celebrate the end of our

journey. Their menu is a delight and we plan to enjoy a great final dinner and a chance to reminisce with now familiar traveling companions.

Accommodations at the Gage Hotel, Marathon, TX. (L,D)

Sat., April 30 Departures from El Paso

Our journey comes to an end today in El Paso. We have a four-hour drive, so plan to arrive to arrive at the airport by 11:00 (time change works in our favor today!) for flights out NOON or later. (B)

PACE of the JOURNEY:

Big Bend is best experienced by those fit enough to do some hiking, as the route to see the famed Colima Warbler is a 9-mile loop hike with a gain of almost 2000ft. elevation. Our other walks average 2-4 miles at a leisurely pace over uneven terrain, so you may forego the 'big' climb but should be able to do the others for full participation. Days at lower elevation can be HOT (90° plus) on occasion. Birding is incredible always and in some years we also have a burst of spring wildflowers. Expect full field days with evenings to relax.

Book your tour by e-mailing info@naturalistjourneys.com or phone us at toll-free 866.900.1146, worldwide: 520.558.1146



"It's a very beautiful, untraveled part of the country with many surprises around every corner. Woody was great fun. He was flexible, always accommodating, great sense of humor, very helpful." - Mary Deutsche

“the utter unfamiliarity of the desert...I returned with a great appreciation for the water we take for granted – many of us watch TV weather praying to see rainclouds over the Trans-Pecos.....can’t praise Woody enough. A saint” - Gail Kohl

“It’s a totally different world and fascinating. A new set of everything- climate, birds, mammals, geology, history and Woody is an exceptional guide.” - Franni Tourtellot

PLAN AHEAD!

Protect yourself with [Allianz Travel Insurance](#).

Offset your [Carbon Footprint](#). Show us the receipt and we'll take 50% - up to \$50.00 - of your carbon offset fee off your final payment.

COST OF THE JOURNEY

Cost of the main journey is \$2250.00 per person, based on double occupancy, from El Paso, TX (ELP). This cost includes: accommodations for 8 nights, most meals as specified in the itinerary (B=breakfast, L=lunch, D=dinner), airport welcome and transfer or hotel shuttle, land transportation during the journey, professional guide services, park and other entrance fees, and miscellaneous program expenses. Single supplement is \$495.00.

Cost does not include: round-trip airfare to and from El Paso, items of a personal nature such as laundry, telephone, drinks from the bar, gratuities for luggage handling or personal services. With fewer than 6 participants, a small-group surcharge (typically \$100-200 per participant) may apply, or we may request that you pick up the cost of a few additional dinners in lieu of this surcharge.

Group Size: This is a birding and wildlife trip, maximum of 8 and minimum of 4 participants.

TRAVEL INFORMATION

The airport for this journey is El Paso International Airport (ELP). A good number of airlines service El Paso. Plan to arrive in El Paso no later than 1:00 PM on April 23, and plan to depart after NOON on April 30. If you arrive early or stay on after the trip in El Paso, there are a number of motels close to the airport; we recommend the historic Camino Real Hotel downtown, which has an airport shuttle, the Wyndham Hotel at the airport, or the economical Microtel Inn and Suites next door to the Wyndham.

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Photo credits:

All photos by Peg Abbott

Texas Big Bend Post-Tour Extension Portal, Arizona April 30 – 4, 2016

Sat., April 30 Departures from El Paso / Rodeo, New Mexico / Portal, Arizona

After we drop folks off at the airport in El Paso, we make our way west. The Chiricahua Mountains reside in the southeast corner of Arizona, a remote area that is home to some of the most interesting landscapes of the American Southwest; it is here that the small village of Portal is nestled. Mountains rise from colorful deserts and grasslands, dramatically portraying a classic Southwestern landscape of rock spires, distant views, and rugged canyons. These mountains have their own geologic story, and host a rich variety of plants and animals; species from Mexico meet those of Rocky Mountain origin, and species of the western deserts mingle with those of the Great Plains. Over three hundred bird species have been recorded in the region, including Zone-tailed Hawk, Montezuma Quail, Elegant Trogon, Red-faced Warbler, Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, and Thick-billed Kingbird.

After our three-hour drive and before heading up into the canyon to our lodgings in Portal, we stop in Rodeo, New Mexico, a small, sparsely populated western town just 10 miles from Portal. Rodeo often hosts three or even four species of dove, as well as thrashers, blackbirds (including the occasional Yellow-headed flock), and resident pair of Vermilion Flycatcher.

We take a quick peek at nearby Willow Pond, one of the few places where birds and animals can get water in this area, and a spot frequented by unusual birds. There may be

Mexican Mallard and Black and Say's Phoebes, as well as other flycatchers and sparrows.



We then head to our lodgings via Stateline Road, which has specialties like Crissal and Bendire's Thrashers, and sparrows including Cassin's, Black-throated, and Brewer's. Gambel's and Scaled Quails, as well as Greater Roadrunner, may be seen.

After our drive and some afternoon birding, our creek-side lodge under huge sycamore trees is a pleasant end to the day. We settle into our rooms and enjoy dinner.
Accommodations in Portal, AZ (B,L,D)

Sun., May 1 Village of Portal / South Fork Road / SW Research Station / Herb Martyr Road

Portal is a gorgeous heritage village set in spectacular mountain surroundings. Simply spending time in this area and at the nearby settlement of Paradise is a highlight; the woods and valleys are full of wonderful and approachable birds.



This morning we spend time on the road through the village (a post office, a library, and the Lodge) where there are some feeders, as well as mature sycamore and juniper trees along the riparian area. Dusky-capped Flycatcher and Bell's Vireo are often heard here before they're seen, and warblers and tanagers forage in the tree tops. Next we move up the canyon, making a few stops on our way to the famed South Fork Road. Flycatchers, including Brown-crested and Cassin's Kingbird, nest in the area, as do a host of interesting warblers such as Black-throated Gray and Painted Redstart. Mexican Jay quickly make their presence known among the oaks. Chiricahua Fox Squirrels are unique to the region.

Here we walk along the dirt road or a well-worn trail looking for these and other iconic and colorful birds, including Elegant Trogon, Blue-throated Hummingbird, Hepatic Tanager, and Scott's Oriole.

We slowly work our way up the canyon to the Southwest Research Station, operated by the Museum of Natural History in NYC, and is one of the premier research stations in the US. There are picnic tables where we lunch, as well as restrooms and a gift shop — and fabulous birds! A hummingbird station with numerous feeders is near the office, and large trees along the creek host woodpeckers, warblers, and tanagers. Moving up canyon, we always hope for Montezuma Quail to cross the road. We stop at two dams built by the CCC, check the low willows by the creek for warblers and flycatchers, and make sure to scan the sky for raptors and swifts.



Tonight we dine at our lodge, and afterwards gather for some owling. We venture out in search of Elf, Whiskered Screech, and Western Screech Owls, as well as Poorwill and possibly Mexican Whip-poor-will.

Accommodations in Portal, AZ (B,L,D)

Mon., May 2 Rustler Park / Barfoot Park / Turkey Creek Crossing / Paradise



Today we head up the canyon even further, to the top of the Chiricahuas, stopping at Turkey Creek Crossing before visiting Rustler and Barfoot Parks. We pass through Pine-Oak Woodland and end up in Mixed Conifer Forest surrounded by tall Ponderosa Pines. We hope to connect with migratory Townsend's and Hermit's Warblers, as well as resident Steller's Jay, Hermit Thrush, Mexican Chickadee, Pygmy Nuthatch, Hutton's Vireo, and Grace's, Red-faced, and Olive Warbler. With luck, a Greater Pewee is vocalizing and Yellow-eyed Junco should be numerous.

The Chiricahuas are home to wonderful and unusual mammals as well; there are Javalina and Coatimundi in canyons close to town, and Black Bear, Bobcat, and rare Mountain Lion in the hills. The bears are sometimes seen around local feeders, not always popular with residents but a wonder to visiting enthusiasts!

After spending time birding and enjoying a picnic lunch on the mountain top, we head back down and pass through the historic mining town of Paradise, where we visit the feeders at the George Walker House. Here we see many of the wonderful area hummingbirds, orioles, and tanagers; with luck a Juniper Titmouse visits the feeders.

Accommodations in Portal, AZ (B,L,D)

Tues., May 3 Grasslands / Mid-Canyon

Today we may visit the grasslands and Willow Pond again to have a second chance at species missed and to see what may be new at the Pond. We visit local feeders and explore the beginning of the Hummingbird Springs Trail, a wet thicket area that quickly turns into a rocky slope, and is a good place to see Black-chinned and Rufous-crowned Sparrow, as well as Crissal Thrasher and Pyrrhuloxia.

In the late morning, we visit the fascinating Chiricahua Desert Museum to learn about local reptiles and amphibians and see their lovely garden. We may also enjoy a stop at the local art gallery in Rodeo, New Mexico. After lunch, we head east to Las Cruces and our lodgings for the night.



Dinner tonight is in the historic Mesilla neighborhood, a festive way to end a great trip!
Accommodations at Mission Best Western, Las Cruces, NM (B,L,D)

Mon., May 4 Depart for El Paso Airport

We pack up and head out early for the hour-long drive back to the El Paso Airport and our flights home. Please book your flights out after 11:00 AM.