

# South Texas Birding & Wildlife

## With Naturalist Journeys & Caligo Ventures



February 18 – 25, 2017

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*“Plenty of birds plus a great experienced leader equals an unequalled Rio Grande safari.” — Chase Davies*

South Texas is one of the great birding destinations in the United States, and for good reason. Due to its proximity to the humid tropics of Mexico, the subtropical woodlands of the Rio Grande Valley boast over two dozen tropical bird species that spill across the border, from chachalacas to pauragues. Here, colorful Great Kiskadee and personable Green Jay mingle with temperate species. These tropical species occur nowhere else in the United States.

We explore three of South Texas’ most productive regions: coastal lagoons and shallow wetlands which throng with thousands of shorebirds, herons, and waterfowl (and wintering endangered Whooping Crane); the arid inland expanse of Tamaulipan thorn-scrub, which harbors a collection of species typical of the American Southwest, like Cactus Wren and Pyrrhuloxia; and the subtropical savannas, wetlands, and riparian woodlands of the Lower Rio Grande Valley with its decidedly tropical species like Hook-billed Kite and Altamira Oriole.

Additionally, over 300 species of butterflies have been recorded in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Many sites we visit have plantings to attract these butterflies. And if it is a mild winter, we may see a diversity of these delightful creatures, as well as some of the nearly 100 species of dragonflies and damselflies found in the area.

### **Tour Highlights**

- Enjoy a boat tour at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge to witness the wintering grounds of the only self-sustaining population of Whooping Cranes
- Bird along Paradise Pond, the Birding Center in Port Aransas, Mustang Island, and Corpus Christi
- Search for Least Grebe, Anhinga, Gray Hawk, Altamira Oriole, and with luck both Green and Ringed Kingfishers at Sabal Palm Sanctuary
- Spot Green Jay, Long-billed Thrasher, Olive Sparrow, and perhaps a herd of Javelina at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge
- Visit the North American Butterfly Association’s (NABA) International Butterfly Park to witness a huge number of butterfly species

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- Explore the World Birding Center site at Edinburg Scenic Wetlands in search of ducks, wading birds, kingfishers, wintering warblers, and Buff-bellied and other hummingbirds

### Tour Summary

8-Day / 7-Night South Texas Birding & Nature Tour with Michael Marsden

\$2250 from Corpus Christi, TX, Departing McAllen, TX

Airports are Corpus Christi International (CRP), McAllen Miller International (MFE), respectively

## Itinerary



### Sat., Feb. 18 Arrival in Corpus Christi / Texas Coastal Bend Birding

Welcome to one of America's top birding hotspots, often referred to as the Texas Tropics. If you come from winter-bound areas, warm air, fresh breezes, and brilliant blooms let you know you've reached an exotic realm without ever leaving the USA!

For a group pick-up, please plan to arrive at Corpus Christi International Airport (CRP) no later than 1:00 PM. If you must arrive later, let us know in advance so that we can make special arrangements to meet you. From the airport, we head north to Rockport, but enjoy plenty of opportunities for relaxed roadside birding along the way.

After checking into our hotel, we enjoy dinner at one of our favorite restaurants for some of the wonderful local seafood. This also serves as an opportunity to get acquainted with your guide and fellow traveling companions.

*Accommodations at the Inn at Fulton Harbor, Fulton, TX (D)*

### Sun., Feb. 19

#### Whooping Crane Boat Tour / Aransas National Wildlife Refuge

Although it remains one of the most endangered birds in North America, Whooping Crane populations have steadily increased from a low of fifteen birds in the early twentieth century to well over three hundred. Nonetheless, despite ongoing conservation efforts to create new populations, Aransas

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National Wildlife Refuge hosts the wintering grounds of the only remaining self-sustaining population. On our first morning in Texas, we take a boat trip to Aransas National Wildlife Refuge to observe these special birds. We have a good chance of seeing several family groups of Whooping Crane during our scheduled boat trip.

While on the boat we also look for several species of herons, egrets, and even Roseate Spoonbill. Captain Tommy guides us, aiming to get within close range of these remarkable creatures. With everyone alert on deck, we often find Long-billed Curlew, American Oystercatcher, Seaside Sparrow, and Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, as well as a number of other waterfowl and shorebirds. Past trips have produced rarities such as Short-eared Owl and Greater Flamingo.

After lunch, we drive north to access Aransas National Wildlife Refuge by land, where we check the visitor center with its many displays and small gift shop. Then we drive the 16-mile Loop Road, which passes through a variety of habitats including edges of open water, mudflats, freshwater and saltwater marshes, coastal prairie, oak motte, oak savanna, and grassy fields. Non-avian creatures we may encounter include Texas Coral Snake, White-tailed Deer, Javelina (Peccary), and Nine-banded Armadillo. With luck, we may see a Bobcat.

Tonight we enjoy dinner at another great local restaurant. If the group is willing, we may visit the refuge at dusk in search of mammals and perhaps Short-eared Owl.

*Accommodations at the Inn at Fulton Harbor (B,L,D)*

### **Mon., Feb. 20 Port Aransas / Mustang & North Padre Islands / Corpus Christi / South Texas Ranchland**

After an early breakfast we head south towards the Rio Grande Valley, birding all the way! After a ferry crossing over the Intracoastal Waterway, we spend a couple of hours at Paradise Pond and the Birding Center in Port Aransas, where we should get close views of ducks, shorebirds, and waders. Then we drive down Mustang Island to Corpus Christi where we have a picnic lunch at Hazel Bazemore Park or, depending on time, one of the other local birding hotspots. It's from here that we start to come across more and more of the valley specialties such as White-tipped Dove, Great Kiskadee, and Green Jay.

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After lunch, we head for Kingsville and visit the bird feeders at the King Ranch Visitor Center, where Curve-billed Thrasher and Pyrrhuloxia are often seen. Continuing southward, much of the journey is through the historic ranchlands of South Texas with chances of Snow and Ross's Goose, Harris's Hawk, Crested Caracara, Vermilion Flycatcher, Cave Swallow, and Brewer's Blackbird.



The delightful Inn at Chachalaca Bend, where we stay for three nights, is set on 40 acres of attractive grounds with native plants, feeders, and walking trails by a resaca (the local name for an ox-bow lake), so we try to arrive in time to do a little birding before dinner at a restaurant in Los Fresnos. The Inn has an impressive bird list of over 170 species, including regular Black-bellied Whistling Duck, Common Pauraque, White-tipped Dove, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Green Jay, and of course Plain Chachalaca.



*Accommodations at the Inn at Chachalaca Bend, Los Fresnos, TX (B,L,D)*

**Tues., Feb 21**

### **Sabal Palm Sanctuary / South Padre Island / Laguna Atascosa NWR**

After breakfast (and perhaps a little morning birding around the inn), we drive straight to the Sabal Palm Sanctuary, one of the gems of South Texas with a wonderful mix of woodlands and wetlands, bird-feeding areas, and butterfly gardens. Birds here include Least Grebe, Anhinga, Gray Hawk, Altamira Oriole, and with luck both Green and Ringed Kingfishers.



We then head north to South Padre Island, stopping briefly on the way to bird the coastal flats along Highway 48 in search of Wilson's Plover, Gull-billed Tern, and White-tailed Hawk. At the convention center, a boardwalk provides access to wetlands along the bay which can provide incredible views of normally secretive rails such as King, Clapper, and Virginia.



There are also many other species to see here, including Reddish Egret, Tricolored Heron, Black Skimmer, American Avocet, and various other shorebirds, terns, and waders. We also hope to find Piping Plover — one of the country's most threatened shorebirds. The center's butterfly garden and

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other protected woodlands provide habitat for wintering songbirds. After lunch at a local restaurant, we cross back to the mainland.

Heading north we visit Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. Lying on the western shore of the Laguna Madre, Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge protects over 65,000 acres of coastal habitats. More than 410 species of birds have been recorded here, including Aplomado Falcon. Extirpated from much of its original range in the United States until the 1950s, this elegant falcon is making a comeback in this part of the world due to reintroduction efforts by the Peregrine Fund.

At the visitor center and nearby trails, we check out the feeders for close-up views of Green Jay, Long-billed Thrasher, Olive Sparrow, and perhaps a herd of Javelina (Peccary). With luck, we may also encounter a Coyote, Bobcat, Nine-banded Armadillo, Texas Tortoise, or even (but very improbably!) an Ocelot.

Brownsville has the largest parrot roost in South Texas and if everyone's not too tired after a full day of birding, we could fit in a visit to the roost before dinner. There are sometimes as many as 300 individuals of these colorful birds at the roost. Red-crowned Parrot is the most numerous, but Red-lored, White-fronted, Yellow-headed, and Lilac-crowned are all possible.

*Accommodations at the Inn at Chachalaca Bend (B,L,D)*



### Wed., Feb. 22 Santa Ana NWR / Estero Llano Grande State Park

This morning we head towards Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, which protects 2,000 acres in the heart of the Rio Grande Valley Wildlife Corridor. With well over 300 species of birds recorded, many birders regard this reserve as the highlight of a South Texas visit. Extensive trails allow exploration of wetlands, fields, and Tamaulipan thorn-scrub habitats. We listen for the boisterous calls of Couch's Kingbird and Great Kiskadee, as well as the repeated whistle of the diminutive Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet. To get eye-level views of Gray Hawk and a chance at seeing the rare Hook-billed Kite, there is the option of going up the hawk watch tower. Santa Ana is also a great site to see all three North American kingfishers, although their day-to-day presence depends on water levels at the various impoundments. At red-flowering shrimp plants we check for Buff-bellied and other hummingbirds. Least

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Grebe may cruise the small ponds and we keep our eyes open for Sora or some wintering shorebirds.

From one of the oldest reserves in the valley, we then visit one of the newest: Estero Llano Grande State Park in Weslaco. Amazingly, it has already accrued a bird list almost as impressive as that of its older cousin. It offers a wonderful variety of wetland and woodland habitats with plenty of easy walking trails that attract more birders than just about anywhere else in the valley. Some of the species we look for here include Cinnamon Teal, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, Common Pauraque, Green Kingfisher, and Clay-colored Thrush. We enjoy dinner tonight at a local restaurant. *Accommodations at the Inn at Chachalaca Bend (B,L,D)*



### **Thurs., Feb. 23 Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park / Anzalduas County Park / Edinburg Scenic Wetlands**

Today we visit Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park, one of the valley's World Birding Center sites. Bentsen protects an array of habitats that support most of the valley's special birds. By walking short trails, we explore the riverine forest, ponds, marshes, thorn-scrub, and mesquite. We hope to see most of the South Texas specialties here including Altamira Oriole, White-tipped Dove, Green Jay, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Northern Beardless Tyrannulet, Clay-colored Thrush, and Great Kiskadee.



If there is interest, we could visit the gardens at the North American Butterfly Association's (NABA) International Butterfly Park, only a few minutes from Bentsen. During its short existence this site has already produced a huge number of butterfly species, including several first U.S. records.

For lunch we dine at a local café, then visit Anzalduas County Park, whose Spanish moss-clad live oak trees often host Tropical Parula and a variety of wintering warblers. In fields near the entrance road, we can try for Sprague's Pipit, a very local and rare wintering bird.



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We then head for the World Birding Center site at Edinburg Scenic Wetlands where two major ponds draw in ducks and wading birds by the score, as well as kingfishers of all three species. The extensive native-plant gardens are a haven for wintering warblers, and the feeders attract Buff-bellied and other hummingbirds.

Nearby McAllen has a regular evening roost of Green Parakeet that sometimes number in the hundreds; we may visit their roosting area before dinner.

*Accommodations at the Alamo Inn, Alamo, TX (B,L,D)*

**Fri., Feb. 24**

### **West Along the Rio Grande / Salineno / Falcon / Rancho Lomitas**

Today we venture into higher and more arid lands to the west, following the Rio Grande River. We pass through Rio Grande City and Roma — once the most inland port for steamship traffic on the Rio Grande. We are likely to find a number of desert birds which could include Verdin, Cactus Wren, Black-throated Sparrow, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Bewick's Wren, and Pyrrhuloxia.



During the earlier part of the morning we station ourselves along the Rio Grande, hoping for fly-by Red-billed Pigeon or perhaps Hook-billed Kite or Muscovy Duck. Hopefully, we are able to catch sight of two beautiful songbirds, Altamira and Audubon's Orioles. And there is just a chance of a White-collared Seedeater in the canes by the river!

Continuing a short distance we visit the 573-acre Falcon State Park adjacent to Falcon Dam, with chances of desert scrub species such as, Curve-billed Thrasher and even Northern Bobwhite. In the afternoon we visit Rancho Lomitas, a private ranch owned by Benito Trevino. Benito is a leading ethnobotanist and a fountain of knowledge on local history and culture. An added attraction is that his land is also very birdy with good chances of both Audubon's Oriole and Scaled Quail at the feeders.

*Accommodations at the Alamo Inn (B,L,D)*



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### Sat., Feb. 25 Quinta Mazatlan / Departures

We make sure that everyone who has not made other arrangements gets to the McAllen Miller International Airport (MFE) by noon. It's only a 15 minute or so drive from the Alamo Inn so there's time in the morning to do some last-minute birding at the World Birding Center of Quinta Mazatlan, conveniently situated almost next door to the airport. Quinta is a historic house in a park-like setting, with walking trails, benches, and birdfeeders — ideal for a couple of hours of relaxed birding before the flight home.

## Cost of the Journey

### Plan Ahead!

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

Offset your Carbon Footprint on one of the many online programs. 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 journey is \$2250 DBL / \$2695 SGL, from Corpus Christi, TX, departing McAllen, TX. This cost is reduced from previous years by our being able to partner with the Alamo Inn B & B and their expert local guides. We are thrilled to offer you the best insider guiding around, and all the hospitality we are known for.

### Travel Information

Please plan to arrive at Corpus Christi International Airport (CRP) no later than 1:00 PM on February 18. If you must arrive later, let us know in advance so that we can make special arrangements to meet you. We plan to arrive at our departure airport, McAllen Miller International Airport (MFE), in McAllen by NOON on February 25, so please plan your flights out after 2:00 PM.

*Naturalist Journeys, LLC is an equal opportunity service provider and committed to the goal of ensuring equal opportunity for all in employment and program delivery.*

### Photo Credits

Page 1: Green Jay, Tom Dove (TD); Great Kiskadee, Bud Ferguson (BF); Least Bittern, TD; Altamira Oriole, TD.

Page 2: Roseate Spoonbills, Betty Andres.

Page 3: Green Heron, Greg Smith (GS); American White Pelican, GS.

Page 4: Whooping Cranes, Robert Behrstock (RB).

Page 5: Green Jays, RB; Harris's Hawk, GS; Plain Chachalaca, TD; Tricolored Heron, Mike Boyce (MB).

Page 6: Great Kiskadee, GS; Birding Estero Llano, RB.

Page 7: Roseate Spoonbill, Tony Beck; Sora, Peg Abbott (PA); Buff-bellied Hummingbird, TD.

Page 8: Rose-throated Becard, TD.

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