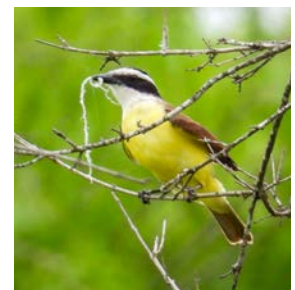


South Texas: Birding and Nature | March 12-20, 2024 | Trip Report | by James Peterson



Guides Bryan Calk and James Petersen with participants: Deanne, Debbie, Glen, Donald, Frank, Irene, Janice, Kathleen, Linda and Ruth



Tues., Mar. 12

Suter Wildlife Refuge | Indian Point | Rockport

We gathered at Corpus Christi before heading off for some birding straight away on our first afternoon in Texas. Our first stop was at Suter wildlife refuge where a water treatment outflow feeds into a saltwater bay, leading to good concentrations of water birds. Some of the favorites included good comparisons of Blue and Green-winged Teals side-by-side, Belted Kingfisher, Black-necked Stilts and a Yellow-crowned Night Heron. Next, we headed over to Indian Point Park for some more waterbird action, and as we drove into the park, we birded from the windows of the van where we got a great diversity of shorebirds. Least, Semipalmated, and Western Sandpipers gave good views as they worked the edge of the water. A white morph Reddish Egret was a fun puzzle to



identify, and a myriad of pelicans, ducks, gulls, and terns entertained all.

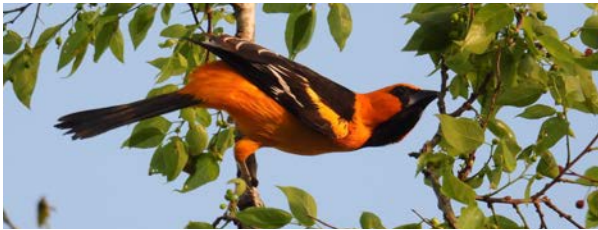
We then made it up to Rockport where we checked in on the Great Blue Heron rookery. This was worth a stop for the birds as they were at their absolute peak of their breeding finery with plumes blowing in the breeze and brilliant red-orange bills. The wildflower show was nice below them with phlox, Texas bluebonnets, and blanket flowers. We finally stopped in at Tule Marsh in town where we got our first Black-bellied Whistling-ducks, Couch's Kingbirds, and a great view of a Red-shouldered Hawk.

We checked in to our inn for some down time, had our orientation and first species checklist, and then headed to dinner at the Old Fulton.

**Wed., Mar. 13 Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Center | Mustang Island |
JFK Causeway Wetlands | Live Oak Country Club |
Cape Velro**

After a quick breakfast, we gathered to head out for our first full day of birding. Our first stop was the Leonabelle Turnbull Birding center, with a short ferry ride to get on to the barrier island. After a short walk to the boardwalk, we set about scanning the large concentration of waterfowl, wading birds that were spread out feeding in the area. Some of the highlights here were an Alligator surrounded by several Black-necked Stilts and American Avocets, close looks at Tricolored Herons and a white morph Reddish Egret. The shorebirds gave decent looks as we watched dowitchers probe the mud in their sewing machine type motion while both Greater Yellowlegs and Willets were seen. The cherry on top was seeing two Roseate Spoonbills, with one adult inflating his throat while chasing a younger bird away in a breeding display.

We then continued down Mustang Island, keeping an eye on the nest platforms spaced out for a special falcon. About 3 platforms down, we pulled over to view a silhouette perched on the side of one of the platforms. It turned into the falcon species we were keeping an eye out for, an uncommon Aplomado Falcon. Once out of the Vans, it was noticed its mate was perched above us on the top of a telephone pole. After everyone got their fill of these reintroduced, endangered falcons, we continued to lunch.



After a quick lunch at Snoopies, we continued onwards to the J.F.K causeway wetlands. As we slowly drove down the beach, many Lesser Scaup and Red-breasted Mergansers swam in the nearby bay, some close, some far. Several shorebirds ran around the edge of the beach which included Sanderlings, Least Sandpipers and a highlight of the area, 3 plovers with light colored backs and broken black collars which turned out to be Snowy Plovers!

From the causeway, we continued on to the Live Oak country club which yielded a number of Eastern Meadowlarks, Brown-headed Cowbirds, some extremely distant White-faced Ibis as well as a very camouflaged Wilson's Snipe. A short drive later, we found ourselves birding the port-bay road in Rockport with varying numbers of shorebirds and herons including both species of Yellowlegs. A short stop at the end of the road yielded a heard only Seaside Sparrow that refused to come out.

Finishing the day up were the last two stops of the day; Cape Valero Drive--where we had our first Crested Caracara of the trip--a very cooperative one at that. As well as numerous wading birds and ducks--including a couple of Ring-necked ducks. Rockport beach park was our last stop of the day, with everyone marveling over the huge colony of nesting laughing gulls--with the first Black Skimmers and Royal Terns of the trip mixed in. We finished the day with dinner at Hu Dat, a restaurant with two kitchens and a nice serving of deep-fried Oreos for a dessert.

Thurs., Mar. 14

Aransas NWR | Hazel Bazemore County Park | Oliveria Park

A very early breakfast followed by a boat trip out to hopefully see Whooping Cranes at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. The boat trip did not disappoint with a total of 16 Whooping Cranes seen. One of the family groups first seen got close to the boat with the adults appearing unconcerned. The juvenile decided it wanted to leave, so it took flight, with the adults following closely behind. Later on, we had a few more cranes seen, with some close enough to see bands on the males' legs. Some other highlights from the boat trip included American Oystercatcher, 3 lesser Black backed Gulls, and two Merlin's. We also did well in the mammal department, with



several Bottlenose dolphins seen playing ahead and behind the boat as well as a group of feral hogs seen briefly running away from the shoreline.

After a quick lunch at the Nueces Cafe, we spent a short time birding the grounds at Hazel Bazemore. Walking onto the hawkwatch platform, we had a number of Mourning doves, Northern Cardinals and a few Inca Doves feeding before they all flushed out of the area. Followed closely by a small Sharp-shinned Hawk who had failed to catch anything. After a while, the birds came back along of with an explanation of why the area is so great for migrating raptors and a brief description of the hawk watch that is run there every fall.

After a long drive to Brownsville, dinner was eaten at Cobbleheads where we enjoyed antics of some Green Parakeets, as they called and flew around before all going into the gutters of the Holiday Inn. The last stop of the day was to see the parrot spectacle at Oliveria Park in Brownsville, where we marveled as 200 Red-crowned Parrots came into roost in the trees/wheeled around in the evening light. Also seen were both Red-lored and White-fronted parrots in smaller numbers.

A desert of Ice Cream at Freddys cold custard was gotten before heading back to the hotel.

Fri., Mar. 15 South Padre Island | Laguna Atascosa

The first full day down in the Valley after the first part of the trip spent birding the Corpus Christi area. We Started with heading to South Padre Island to bird the nature center/mudflats. Upon arriving at the mud flats, we were greeted with hordes of both Laughing Gulls, Dunlin and Black Skimmers, all either loafing or feeding on the beach. With some careful scanning, a few long billed Marbled Godwits were picked out along with some Long-billed Curlews and smattering of other wintering shore birds such as Black-bellied Plover, Willets and Sanderlings. Towards the end of our time at this spot, all the of the shorebirds flushed, with some careful scanning overhead, the silhouette of a Peregrine Falcon was seen cruising towards the water tower, the obvious culprit.

From there, we went over to the South Padre Nature Center, which held multiple wading birds as the tide was high. Some of the highlights here were 2 Scissor-tailed flycatchers, Green and Blue-winged Teals, Black-necked Stilts, Lesser Yellowlegs, Yellow-crowned Night Herons and a Green Heron. One surprising bird here was a fly over adult Gull-billed Tern towards the end of the boardwalk. After finishing the boardwalk, some downtime



was given for exploring the nature center, while a group of us congregated to do some butterfly identification. A few butterfly species were found here, such as Firey Skipper, White striped Longtail, Red-boarded Metalmark along with a Great Southern White.

After a quick lunch at Joes Oyster Bar, we continued to Laguna Atascosa, where we started to find some of the specialties of the lower Rio Grande valley. On the road leading to the visitor center, great views were gotten of a Greater Roadrunner as he slowly walked in and out of the thick vegetation by the road edge as well as a few Golden-fronted Woodpeckers on the telephone poles. A few Green Jays were seen coming in and out of the feeders while Black-crested Titmouse were heard but not seen at the visitor center. A White-tipped Dove put in a brief appearance while also being heard. From here, we continued onto a wildlife drive that allowed great behind-the-scenes views of this cool, expansive habitat that is so uncommon. On the way back to the hotel, an adult White-tailed Hawk was the highlight, hovering high above the highway.

Sat., Mar. 16 Resaca de la Palma State Park | Buena Vista Cemetery | Sabal Palm Preserve

We started out with a slow morning walk birding the Resaca de la Palma State Park. Starting in the parking lot we worked our way onto the tram road leading to the first dry oxbow lake. As we walked, we came across numerous flocks of species including the long staying 3rd US record of Gray-Collared becard, both calling and chasing kingbirds away from a few of his perches! Some other special birds that were seen was a flock of birds lead by Ruby-crowned Kinglets. This flock also contained Nashville, Orange-crowned Warblers as well as a Blue-headed Vireo. All the while serenaded by calling Plain Chachalacas. After finishing on the tram road, we walked the Ebony Trail, which yielded great looks at a long staying Roadside Hawk that had been wintering in the area. Continuing on, we had some great looks at a few amazing butterflies in the butterfly garden, including a Blue Metalmark, a specialty of the Rio Grande valley.

A quick visit to the Buena Vista Cemetery before lunch yielded a small flock of birds that included a few Ruby-crowned Kinglets and a Black and White Warbler.

An afternoon birding stop at the Sabal Palm Preserve was productive. Some of the highlights were Olive



Sparrows and Black-crested Titmice. Another highlight was the finding of a Rough Green Snake that everyone people carefully observed.

Sun., Mar. 17 Hugh Ramsey Park | Estero Llano Grande State Park | Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge

A hotel move day; we started after loading up the vans with a slow walk at Hugh Ramsey Park. We had a good start with the raucous call of chachalacas and three Javelina to start the day. Continuing further into the park, we were greeted with Olive Sparrows and a few Curve-billed Thrashers. A little bit further down the trail, a chip not sounded off which turned out to be a not so cooperative wintering Golden-crowned Warbler, which stayed hidden despite looking for it. While at that spot, we had a White-eyed Vireo call but also stay well hidden. A Gray Catbird briefly made an appearance as Bryan was getting the scope on a cooperatively roosting Common Pauraque. The rest of the walk yielded more Green Jays, Olive Sparrows and Black-crested Titmice as well as the group's first glimpses of Buff-bellied Hummingbird. As the hummingbird flitted around a dense mesquite tree a Wilson's Warbler was a bit more cooperative.

Our next stop, Estero Llano Grande State Park, we stuck to the tropical zone of the park due to the ongoing extreme drought. Birding was very productive, with 2, possibly 3 adult Rose-throated Becards seen and heard. Further down the trail, the group had great looks at a roosting "Mcoll's" Eastern Screech Owl and 2 more Common Pauraques, both insanely hidden. Some other highlights were a kettle of 43 Broad-winged Hawks wheeling in the sky, signifying the very start of raptor migration, as well as with both Hooded and Altamira Orioles. Even with the cloudiness, a few new trip butterflies were observed on the walk back to the car, including a stunning orange, Julian Heliconian.

The afternoon was spent at Santa Ana, with the abundant water around Pintail Lake. This caused large abundances of ducks and waders to be seen here. The highlights being multiple Eared Grebes with one being in full breeding plumage! Other species included all three teal (Blue-winged, Green-winged and Cinnamon Teal), several Ruddy Ducks, with some in their ruddy breeding plumage and both Tropical and Couch's Kingbirds. As the afternoon crept on, we ventured from Pintail Lake to the Hawk Tower, where we observed the vultures starting to drift north with a stunning 500 plus seen while another small kettle of 43 Broad-winged Hawks wheeled in the sky again, with one coming low over us, giving great looks at the plumage.



Mon., Mar. 18 Salineno | Falcon State Park | Roma Bluffs | Rancho Lomitas

A super early day, leaving at 630am. We drove west to bird the drier areas of the Rio Grande Valley. Arriving first at Salineno, we spent time along the Rio Grande River in the misty rain. Some highlights included two Morelet's seedeaters that were heard only, an obliging Marsh Wren, and a wild Muscovy Duck that flew up the river. All the while, one Osprey was perched on a dead snag in the middle of the river that called every time any other Osprey flew over. Probably telling them to keep on moving, this was its section of the river. Heading back to the vans, everyone had great looks at both Ladder-backed and Golden-fronted Woodpeckers.

From Salineno, we continued towards Falcon Lake State Park, where the rain seemed to pick up in intensity. While driving around the park we had some more good looks at multiple wet Greater Roadrunners moving among the tall grasses. Down in the dam area, we watched 1000 cormorants, mixed with pelicans take off, streaming past us on the lake. Thankfully, there was a little visitor area that was open. So, we were able to eat our lunches in a warm dry place, as it poured outside. Before leaving the park, we came across a small flock of birds that included brief looks at a Pyrrhuloxia and some Cassin's Sparrows that were calling in the distance but never came in.

On the way to Rancho Lomitas, we stopped at Roma Bluffs, which gave a good view of Mexico and some signs explaining the historical importance of the city. It was quiet bird wise, but we did have several cliff swallows flying around along with distant looks at a few Mexican Ducks.

Continuing to Rancho Lomitas, the rain had lessened a bit, and we navigated the muddy, dirt road up to the ranch. Greeting us at the Ranch were some Scaled Quail who came to the feeders. Giving decent views of these dry "cotton-topped" Quail. We continued to sit and watch the feeders as a Mexican Ground Squirrel came out, all the while Cactus wrens both chattered and flew around. After a little while longer, we finally had 1 of two Audubon's Oriole sneak in to feed at the feeders. Never giving good looks, they quickly departed as we followed them, hoping for better looks at this bright yellow Oriole. We finished off the day with a fantastic dinner at Rio Grande City and a long drive back to the hotel.



Tues., Mar. 19 Bentson-Rio Grande State Park | National Butterfly Center

Our last full day of birding started off cloudy with no rain unlike the day before. Starting at the feeders at Bentson-Rio Grande State Park, we watched some from inside, some from outside, as Plain Chachalacas fed right out in the open as well as a Clay-colored Thrush, finally giving good views as they both foraged by the feeders. The more common birds like Altamira Orioles and Green Jays were there as well.

Continuing further into the park, we stopped at the feeders at the entrance to the park, finding more of the same with great looks at Chachalacas, Green Jays, Altamira Orioles, Golden-fronted Woodpeckers and White-tipped Doves walking underneath the feeders. On the way to the overlook, we came across a small flock of songbirds that included more White-eyed Vireos, Ruby-crowned Kinglets as well as a few Verdin who we were able to briefly get looks at. We stopped at an overlook of the oxbow lake to scan for any waterbirds, kingfishers and ducks. An elusive Green Heron was spotted hunting from the reed bank, as were 25 Anhingas perched on the opposite side of the lake. A group of 5 Least Grebes were spotted way out on the other side of the lake, giving distant views. Before walking further down the path, a Red-winged Blackbird entertained us all with an unusual rattle call that none of us had ever heard one do before. Walking further down the path, we stopped at a blind with feeders that was birdy. Our only Hooded Oriole of the day was by these feeders, as were many Red-winged Blackbirds. On the way back to the visitor center, a small bat was spotted roosting by the bathrooms. It turned out to be a Mexican Free-tailed bat.

After a lunch of sandwiches at a local café, we then headed to the National Butterfly center. Here we had some more Chachalacas, Altamira Orioles, Red-winged Blackbirds and some Long-billed Thrashers. Even with the cloudy weather, some new butterflies were seen, being Western Pygmy Blue and Celia's Roadside Skipper. The highlights here didn't really happen till the end, where after taking the group picture and uttering the magic words, we are done here—out popped a female Vermillion Flycatcher, giving us good scope views of the bird. Almost at the same time, an animal was spotted in the back, which turned out to be a Bobcat!! Our second time trying to leave was foiled again with the appearance of the continuing male Black-chinned Hummingbird at a nearby hummingbird feeder. The third time was the charm, with no unusual birds showing



up as we finally left to go back to the hotel for the daily checklist and some downtime. Another fantastic dinner was at the Republic of Rio Grande.

Wed., Mar. 20 Edinburg Scenic Wetlands | Quinta Mazatlán

Our last half day, we packed two stops into one hoping the 20 percent chance of showers were just that. Unfortunately, McAllen was in the 20 percent of the shower area. Which meant the whole morning, it misted/rained on us, not that the birds cared. Our first stop was at Edinburg Scenic wetlands. Here we slowly walked the trail that bordered the wetland, while scanning both the waterfowl and the vegetation. With some scanning, we were able to spot a Green Kingfisher. Unfortunately, it was perched only briefly before flying away, never to be seen again. Continuing down the trail, we pished up a small flock of songbirds, which included Wilson's and Orange-crowned Warblers along with a Northern Parula. Some more pishing brought in a few more species including some decent looks at a White-eyed Vireo. By the time we were finished here, we had a large list of 55 species including decent looks at 12 Least Grebes, finally!

Our last stop was Quinta Mazatlán, a large house that was built in the 1800's. Everyone spent time viewing the beautiful house and elegant marble bathroom. After a some exploring around the house, we spent 25 minuets or so walking the trails, in the rain still. Not many birds were seen as we assume they were successfully staying dry, although we did see numerous Eastern Cottontails by the trails. After finishing at Quinta Mazatlán, we finished up saying our goodbyes at the airport as everyone was dropped off.

Photos: Group (James Petersen - JP), Roseate Spoonbill (Ruth Passarge - RP), Red-lored Parrots (RP), Whooping Crane (JP), Great Kiskadee (RP), Group (JP), American Avocets (RP), Crested Caracara (Deanna Schiel - DS), White Ibis (RP), Greater Roadrunner (RP), Green Jay (RP), Altamira Oriole (RP), Blue-winged Teal (RP), Yellow-crowned Night Heron (DS), Lunch (R Nathby), Blue Metalmark (JP), Eastern Screech Owl (RP), Rose-throated Becard (RP), Wild Turkey (JP), Scaled Quail (JP), Redhead (JP), Neotropic Cormorant (JP), Whooping Crane (JP), American Oystercatcher (JP), Roadside Hawk (JP)