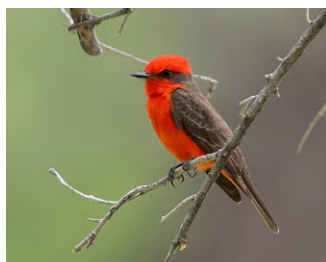
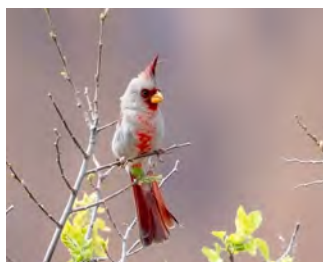


Texas' Big Bend National Park | April 18–26, 2024 | Trip Report | by Dave Mehlman



Guides: Dave Mehlman and Troy Corman, with participants: Brenda, Donna, George, Janet, Janice, Kathryn, Kathy, Ken, Maria, and Patricia



Thurs., Apr. 18

Arrivals in El Paso

Today was arrivals day and everyone got in as scheduled. George and Janice, who had arrived a day early, joined Dave and Troy in the morning for a scouting trip to Rio Bosque Park, the planned first birding site of the tour, since neither Dave nor Troy had been there before. They had a great morning, found everything in order, and returned to the Wyndham El Paso Airport Hotel in plenty of time to meet the group in the lobby for a pre-trip set of introductions and a briefing. After the briefing, we all got into our two vehicles, a full-sized van driven by Troy and a minivan driven by Dave, and drove the short distance to the Great American Steakhouse for our welcome dinner. Returning to the Wyndham after dinner, we all returned to our rooms to prepare for the start of the tour the next day.



Fri., Apr. 19

El Paso | Balmorhea | Fort Davis

We started the day with the minimalist breakfast from the Wyndham, then got all our gear together, loaded the vehicles, and started our West Texas journey. Our first destination for the morning was Rio Bosque Park, along the US-Mexico border southeast of El Paso, owned by the City of El Paso and managed by the University of Texas El Paso (UTEP). This stop got us off to an excellent start for birding on the tour, with over 50 species seen in only about 2 and a half hours! Some of the top highlights were: Burrowing Owls at the entrances to their artificial nest burrows at one of the colonies created by UTEP researchers, a Long-eared Owl (major surprise to see it roosting in a mesquite right by the trail), Verdin, Black-headed Grosbeak, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Western Wood-Pewee, Gray Flycatcher, Loggerhead Shrike, Crissal Thrasher, and many Wilson's Warblers in the mesquite bosque. The wetland areas were very productive with various ducks present (Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, Blue-winged and Cinnamon Teal, Mexican Ducks in abundance), Black-necked Stilt, American Avocet, White-faced Ibis, Least and Western Sandpiper, American Pipit, and 2 Semipalmated Plovers. Meanwhile, the skies were filled with White-winged and Mourning Doves zipping by, many swallows (Northern Rough-winged, Barn, Cliff, Cave), and a few raptors (Swainson's Hawk, Northern Harrier, Sharp-shinned Hawk).

Regretfully, the morning's end was closing in on us and we had to tear ourselves away from this great spot, so we got in our vehicles and headed toward the highway with a quick break at a truck stop for bathrooms. After a few hours eastbound on I-10, during which we passed through the CBP checkpoint and into the Central Time Zone, we stopped at a truck stop in Van Horn for gas and lunch at the adjacent Mexican restaurant. After lunch, we continued east to the small town of Balmorhea, where we got off the interstate and visited Balmorhea Lake, one of the few (if not the only) large bodies of water in a large area. This was also a productive spot, yielding several Osprey (some successful at catching fish!), Clark's and Pied-billed Grebe, Lesser Scaup, Ruddy Duck, Ring-billed and Franklin's Gull, American White Pelican, and American Avocet. We finally tore ourselves away from this spot, too, and drove south through the scenic Davis Mountains to Fort Davis, arriving at our destination, the historic Hotel Limpia, in the late afternoon. After checking into our lovely rooms, we walked across the patio to dinner at the Blue Mountain Bar & Grill, then returned to the lobby of the hotel for our daily checklist and review of plans for the following day. Then, off for a night's rest in our comfy rooms.

Sat., Apr. 20

Davis Mountains

We started the day with Dave and Troy leading everyone down main street to the Stone Village Market for the breakfast routine which we use in Fort Davis. Arriving at the store, we turned everyone loose to forage for



whatever breakfast they could find in the store. Breakfast burritos for some, yogurts for others, good coffee from a local roaster for almost all. We also picked up our bag lunches to take with us for the day.

At that point, Dave took Donna and Ken to Midland airport since they had to leave early due to a family emergency—we were all sad to see them depart so early in the tour, but it was for an entirely understandable reason. Troy, therefore, took everyone else up into the Davis Mountains for the day in the big van. The first stop was Davis Mountains State Park with its legendary bird feeders and blinds. They almost immediately found what was probably the highlight bird for many: several Montezuma Quail at the Emory Oak Blind! This is a much sought-after species in North America and generally very hard to see well. Fortunately, Davis Mountains State Park is the exception to this rule as the quail have recently started coming back to the feeders allowing for incredible views and awesome photographs. In their time in the park, the group had another fun day of birding, despite the cloudy, damp, and cool weather, finding Acorn and Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Cassin’s Kingbird, Woodhouse’s Scrub-Jay, Black-crested Titmouse, Hermit Thrush, Canyon and Green-tailed Towhee, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, and Summer Tanager. After their morning in the State Park, the group continued up into the Davis Mountains to the Lawrence E. Wood Picnic Area where they walked the Madera Canyon Trail on the surrounding Nature Conservancy preserve and had their bag lunches at the picnic tables.

Finishing up their day, the group returned to the Hotel Limpia for a bit of a rest and caught up with Dave, who had returned from his trip to Midland. We then enjoyed another dinner at the Blue Mountain Bar & Grill next door, then went back to the hotel to do the checklist, discuss plans for the next day, and gather our gear for a dusk outing back to the State Park. During the day, the group had received a tip about a different Elf Owl nest than the one Dave knew about, so we all proceeded directly to that spot. It was a natural hole in an Emory Oak, conveniently located right next to a rest room. The weather continued cool and cloudy, but we had all prepared by throwing on every layer possible (even already used layers!) and we managed to survive the owl vigil in good form. Noting a few Cassin’s Kingbirds and Northern Mockingbirds as we waited, the owl eventually peered out of its hole about 8:25pm. This was followed by a few more appearances before it finally perched on the lip of the hole and then flew out into the night to forage. Truly a rewarding, if a bit chilly, experience for all. We then returned to the Limpia and tumbled into bed.

Sun., Apr. 21 Big Bend National Park: West Side

We started the day with the Stone Village Market breakfast routine and picked up our bag lunches there. At that point, however, Dave received an e-mail from Carolyn Ohl-Johnson, the owner of Christmas Mountains Oasis where we were supposed to go, that the poor weather likely meant a poor day of birding there. She suggested

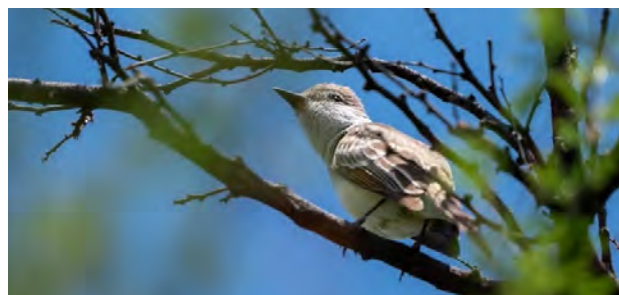


that we reschedule our visit to the following day when no other groups would be present and the weather was due to improve. Therefore, a command decision was made to revise the tour and head to Big Bend National Park for the day and then visit the Oasis the following day.

Therefore, we loaded all our gear into the vehicles and headed south through Alpine to Big Bend. We made a quick stop in Study Butte for gas and to use the bathrooms, then entered the park through the Maverick (West) entrance. After officially entering the park, we turned onto the Ross Maxwell Scenic Drive to explore the western parts of the park (which had originally been the plan for the following day). Our first stop was Sam Nail Ranch, a small desert oasis with a water mill (and formerly a homestead site). The poor weather meant that few birds were about, but we did find Wilson's and Yellow-rumped (Audubon's) Warbler, Bell's Vireo, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, and Black-throated and Brewer's Sparrow. A lucky few had a fleeting glimpse of a Varied Bunting, too.

We then continued down the Scenic Drive, stopping at Soto Vista to check out the view to the west and use the bathrooms and then on to Cottonwood Campground, where we had our picnic lunch and did a bit of birding. At this point, the skies were clearer and temperatures warmer, so we were joined at lunch by both a Greater Roadrunner and a White-winged Dove, both clearly in search of extra rations. The after lunch birding in the campground was quite productive, with many of the normal residents present such as Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Vermilion Flycatcher, Bell's Vireo, and Gray Hawk. In addition, we dug up some outstanding birds like a Yellow-throated Vireo, Black-and-white Warbler, a pair of Black-tailed Gnatcatchers feeding 2 fledged young, Crissal Thrasher, Plumbeous Vireo, and Lucy's Warbler. Finishing our birding here, we continued to the end of the road at Santa Elena Canyon where the group hiked various distances into the canyon, some getting all the way to the end of the trail at the Rio Grande and others taking a more leisurely route only part way in. We enjoyed great views of White-throated Swifts cruising by our heads, along with Northern Rough-winged Swallows and a couple of singing Canyon Wrens.

At this point, it was getting late in the day and we had to go to the Chisos Basin to check in and have dinner. So, we drove back out the Scenic Drive and continued along the main park road until the turn off to Chisos Basin. At that junction, however, there proved to be a line of cars being held up by a Park Ranger. After assuming our places in the queue, Dave went over to ask what was going on and it turned out that a moving semi-truck was coming down from the Basin, negotiating the hairpin turns on the road, so that we and everyone else would have to wait until it got down the mountain. A new tour delay excuse for both Dave and Troy--who knew there would be a moving van in Chisos Basin?! So, we sat and waited for about an hour until the moving truck finally



appeared headed down hill (to numerous cheers) and we could begin our drive up Green Gulch road into the basin. Arriving at the Chisos Mountains Lodge, we checked into our rooms nearby, then reconvened for a late dinner in the dining room, which at this point was very crowded. All worked out, however, and we enjoyed dinner, gathered for our checklist, and reviewed plans for the following day.

Mon., Apr. 22 Christmas Mountains Oasis | Big Bend National Park

We started today with the Chisos Mountains Lodge breakfast buffet and retrieved and distributed our bag lunches. Heading back to the rooms, we gathered our gear and loaded into the vehicles, then headed down from the Basin and turned to the west. We stopped first at Sam Nail Ranch again in hopes that better morning weather would yield more birds. Although not as active as hoped, we still dug up some nice things including Yellow-breasted Chat, Verdin, Summer Tanager, Black-headed Grosbeak, and an Orange-crowned Warbler. After finishing the walk here, we drove back out to the main park road and on to Study Butte, where we turned north to head to the Chisos Mountains Oasis.

After negotiating the sometimes steep, always rocky entrance road, we arrived at the Oasis about mid-morning to find Carolyn already there. We settled into our seats in front of the feeders and started calling out the birds. Perhaps the biggest highlight here was Lucifer Hummingbird, which periodically came and went from the hummingbird feeders. This is another highly sought-after North American species and the Oasis is one of only two places in the U.S. where it is almost guaranteed. We had dynamite views of a Clay-colored Sparrow at the seed feeders, allowing for great comparisons with all the other sparrows around such as White-crowned, Black-throated, Lark, Chipping, Vesper, and Lincoln's. An American Pipit hung out at the old stock pond while Wilson's Warbler, Bell's Vireo, and Curve-billed Thrasher crawled through the shrubbery. About mid-day, we broke out the lunch supplies and we all enjoyed our bag lunch with the birds—quite a pleasant experience.

By mid-afternoon, the time had come to depart, so we drove down the rocky entrance road, made our way back to Study Butte for gas, then arrived back in Chisos Basin in late afternoon. Since we still had time, most of us when for a short walk on the Windows Trail a short distance down to the campground, finding Pyrrhuloxia, Cactus Wren, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Dusky Flycatcher, Mexican Jay, and both Blue-gray and Black-tailed Gnatcatcher along the way. After returning, we waded into the dining room scrum, had dinner, then returned to our rooms for the daily checklist and briefing for tomorrow.



Tues., Apr. 23

Big Bend National Park: Chisos Mountains

Today was the long-awaited day for the long hike into the Chisos for Colima Warbler, for those so inclined. We started the day like the others in Big Bend, with the buffet breakfast right when the dining room opened in the morning and getting our bag lunches to go. After breakfast, we assembled outside our rooms and everyone got whatever extra snacks, oranges, or water that they would need for the day, depending on the distance to be hiked. The entire group set off together to begin the day of hiking, and we walked up to the trailhead and made a quick review of the trail map for orientation. Then, we headed up into the Chisos on the trail, the entire group sticking together as far as the Pinnacles/Basin Loop Trail junction. At that point, we split into two groups. Troy led the dedicated hikers and Colima-ers on the long hike up and to the top of the Chisos in search of Colima Warbler and other birds. Dave led the rest on the shorter Basin Loop Trail and some other activities during the day.

The long hikers had a great day, putting in 10+ miles as they went up Pinnacles Trail to Boot Canyon Trail and continued to Boot Spring before retracing their steps and coming back the same way. The group came back with some great birds, highlighted by the Colima Warbler found near Boot Spring. Other great encounters included Hepatic Tanager, Blue-throated Mountain-Gem, Broad-tailed Hummingbird, Violet-green Swallow, Hutton's Vireo, Zone-tailed Hawk, and White-throated Swift. Tired, but triumphant, this group made it back to the Lodge safe and sound in late afternoon with many memories.

The shorter hike group enjoyed their outing on the Basin Loop Trail, finding a MacGillivray's Warbler on the way back to add to the tour list. After returning to the Basin, some in the group went out for some more birding in the morning with Dave to the Chisos Basin Wastewater Treatment Plant (WTP). The WTP was accessible by driving to the campground and then walking through one of the loops to the WTP access road. This road provides great birding through basin scrub habitat and some canyons heavily forested with Emory Oak to the WTP itself, which has a water outflow that creates a small waterfall and a wetland. As always, water in the desert (even if treated sewage!) is a bird magnet and this site was no exception. Standing quietly off to the side, the group watched as many species came and went, including Chipping, Brewer's Clay-colored, Lincoln's, and White-crowned Sparrow; Wilson's, Audubon's Yellow-rumped, and Nashville Warbler; and a Hermit Thrush came to drink and bathe. On the walk down and back, Acorn Woodpeckers constantly flew back and forth, defending their granaries from all comers, including Mexican Jays.



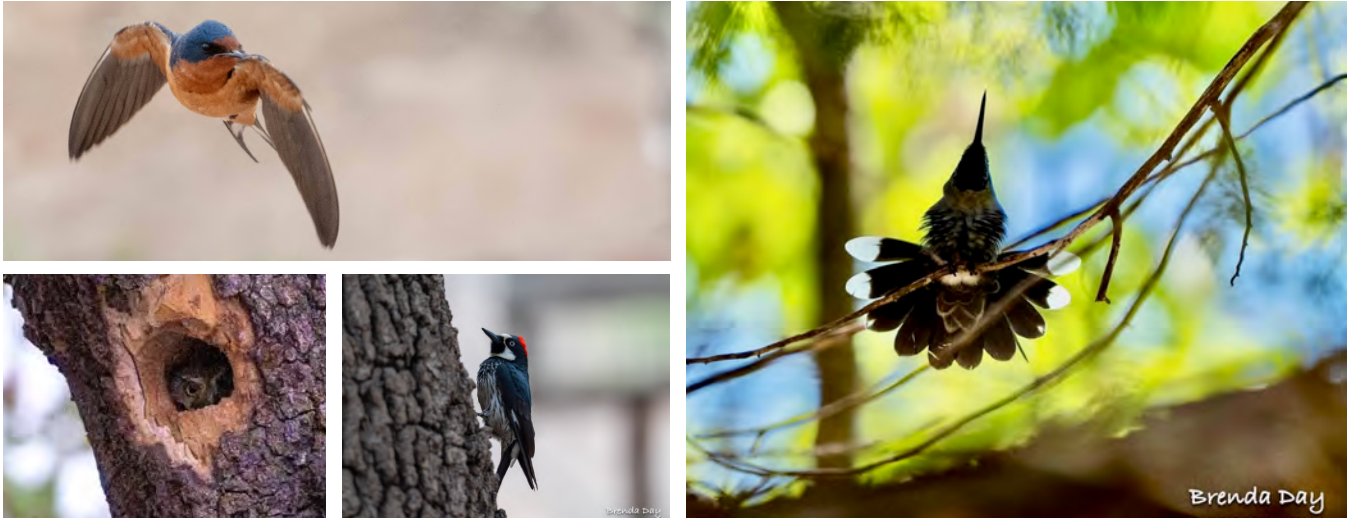
At the end of the afternoon, the group reunited on the Lodge patio and began swapping stories, most of them true! We then went and had our dinner, followed by a return to the rooms and our end of day meeting to go over the bird list and review plans for the following day. Then, for most, it was time to sleep off a tiring, but rewarding, day.

Wed., Apr. 24 Big Bend National Park: East Side | Marathon

We started the day with our final buffet breakfast at the Lodge dining room, opening the doors as usual, and got our day's lunches. Returning to our rooms, we gathered all remaining gear, completed loading up the vehicles, and then set off, leaving the Chisos Basin for the last time. We went down the Green Gulch road to the main park road, then turned to the east to explore an entirely new section of park where we had not been before. Our first stop to the east was Dugout Wells, a desert oasis on the site of an old homestead whose windmill keeps pumping water to nourish a small grove of woody trees and many plants. Such oases in the desert usually attract birds and today was no exception. Among the variety of species sighted were Crissal and Curve-billed Thrasher, Painted Bunting, Pyrrhuloxia, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Yellow and Wilson's Warbler, and plenty of sparrows (Brewer's, Clay-colored, Chipping, White-crowned). Finishing up here, we continued to Rio Grande Village and made a short stop by the store to use bathrooms and check out the area. A short walk under the cottonwoods revealed a Javelina cruising by, Vermilion Flycatcher, Painted Bunting, lots of American Pipits, Vesper and Lark Sparrows, and a lovely Common Black-Hawk flying overhead.

Our final stop for the morning was the Rio Grande Village Nature Trail, for which we parked in the parking lot and then walked through the campground to get to the trailhead. The grounds of the campground had many birds in them, an interesting mix of House Finch, Chipping, Vesper, Brewer's, and Clay-colored Sparrows, and a few Lark Buntings, still in winter plumage. The Nature Trail yielded Common Yellowthroat and Yellow-breasted Chat in the oxbow marsh, and by the river we had some Northern Rough-winged Swallows while working on our Coahuila bird list. River birds, kind of split between 2 countries and 2 states, included some Blue-winged Teal, Savannah Sparrow, Western Kingbird, and Vermilion Flycatcher.

At this point, with it already past mid-day, the heat was definitely on, so we drove to the shade of the Daniel's Ranch picnic area. The few picnic tables were occupied so we set up on the grass under one of the large cottonwoods and enjoyed our bag lunches. After lunch, we cleaned up our stuff and took a short walk around Daniel's Ranch, including to the small ponds nearby. Birds discovered included Gray Hawk, an American Coot lurking at the edge of one pond, Lazuli Bunting, an Osprey, and the normal quota of Wilson's Warblers. Leaving here, we stopped at the Common Black Hawk nest by the road and were able to glimpse the top of one hawk's head and edge of its tail as it apparently incubated or brooded while on the nest. After that, we made the brief



detour to the Boquillas Canyon Overlook to view the dramatic escarpment of the Sierra del Carmen in the background, with the narrow profile of Boquillas Canyon cutting the ridge in front of us. While gazing at the buildings of Boquillas, Coahuila, we noticed a few waterbirds sitting in the nearby Rio Grande, including a Great Blue Heron, Pied-billed Grebe, Northern Shoveler, and Cinnamon Teal, while a Black Vulture circled overhead.

At this point, we decided to head north to our night’s destination, the town of Marathon, so we headed back to Panther Junction in the park and then turned north on US 385. We passed the Persimmon Gap (North) station and successfully went through the CBP check point near town. About 5:00pm in the afternoon, we arrived at the delightful Gage Hotel in Marathon, where we would spend the last 2 nights of the tour. Checking into our well-appointed rooms, we had a bit of a rest and then all met on the patio for refreshments, the day’s bird checklist, and a review of plans for the following day. This was followed by an excellent dinner in the Gage’s nice dining room and then all retired to their rooms for the night.

Thurs., Apr. 25 The Post | Gage Gardens | Marathon

We began the day by walking a block or so down main street to the V6 Coffee Bar for breakfast, then returned to our rooms to gather gear and load up in the vehicles. We then began a delightful morning of birding by driving south of town to Fort Peña Colorado Park (more commonly known as The Post), spending a lot of time birding the entrance road on our way in. The entrance road, which soon gets you out of town into some desert scrubland habitat, was very productive, including several Pronghorn outstanding in their field. Avian highlights included Loggerhead Shrike, Scaled Quail, Scott’s Oriole, some Killdeer, and Black-throated, White-crowned, and Cassin’s Sparrows.

Arriving at The Post park itself, we commenced birding the surroundings. This very productive spot yielded Summer Tanager, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Yellow Warbler, Ash-throated, Dusky, and Olive-sided Flycatcher, Orchard Oriole, Brewer’s Blackbird, Plumbeous Vireo, and Pine Siskin—a great list for the day. On the way out, a few observers noted some Blue-winged and Cinnamon Teal hidden away in a small pool back under the trees. After finishing our walk around the park grounds, we headed back into town for birding at the lovely Gage Gardens. These formal gardens were hopping with birds, with particularly high traffic coming into and out of several fruiting mulberry trees. The White-crowned Sparrows and Western Tanagers were apparently satiating their mulberry fix today as many individuals of these two species came and went constantly. After watching the trees a while, we walked around the grounds and out to the small pond, finding many things along the way. Some of the highlights included many Cave Swallows flying overhead, Yellow-headed Blackbird, Orchard Oriole, Swainson’s Thrush, Lark Sparrow, and several Brewer’s Blackbird with one male Bronzed Cowbird. The pond



itself had a Spotted Sandpiper and, while we waited, a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher flew in and perched on a phone wire, providing satisfactory views of this iconic prairie species.

After concluding our birding morning here, we drove the very short distance to the V6 Coffee Bar for delectable lunch sandwiches (and we also placed a breakfast pre-order for the next day) and then returned to the hotel. Dave and Troy offered a last birding trip out to the nearby Black-tailed Prairie-Dog town, but no one was inclined to go, preferring instead to relax at our comfortable accommodations for this final full day of the tour. We all reconvened at the end of the afternoon on the patio for some libations, the final bird checklist, and a discussion of our departure plans for the following morning. Then, we had our farewell dinner in the 12 Gage Restaurant, enjoying a last final meal together before heading to the rooms for a night's sleep.

Fri., Apr. 26 Departures from El Paso

We began our departure day by loading the vehicles with bags and then heading down the street for breakfast at the V6 Coffee Bar; we had cleverly pre-ordered our breakfasts the day before to speed up the process. After finishing our tasty food and coffee, we climbed in and hit the road west on our way back to El Paso. After stopping for gas in Alpine, we swung by the (in)famous Prada Marfa roadside art exhibit outside Valentine so that everyone could take a look and a selfie. After a final stop in Van Horn for bathrooms, we completed the rest of the journey west on I-10, arriving at the El Paso airport in mid-morning in plenty of time for all flights out. We unloaded, said our farewells, and then everyone departed for home with great memories of West Texas and the Big Bend region.

Photos: Group Hike (David Mehlman - DM), Pyrrhuloxia (DM), Black-chinned Hummingbird (George Lauterbach - GL), Vermilion Flycatcher (Brenda Day - BD), Greater Roadrunner (BD), Rio Bosque Park (DM), Montezuma Quail (GL), Western Tanager (GL), Catclaw Acacia (DM), Orchard Oriole (GL), Scenic (Janet Terchek - JT), Rio Grande Scenic (JT), Blind Pricklypear (DM), Big Bend NP Sign (BD), Summer Tanager (BD), Curve-billed Thrasher (BD), Green-tailed Towhee (BD), White-crowned Sparrow (BD), Ash-throated Flycatcher (BD), Christmas Mountains Oasis (DM), Western Black-necked Garter Snake (BD), Cactus Wren (GL), Pyrrhuloxia (BD), Western Tanager (GL), Common Black Hawk (BD), Ladder-backed Woodpecker (BD), Barn Swallow (BD), Elf Owl (BD), Acorn Woodpecker (BD), Blue-throated Mountain-Gem (BD), Yellow-rumped (Audubon's) Warbler (BD)