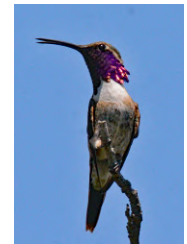
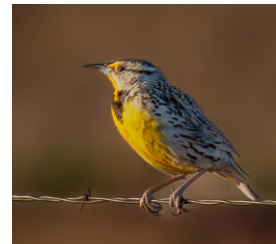
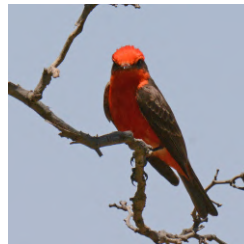
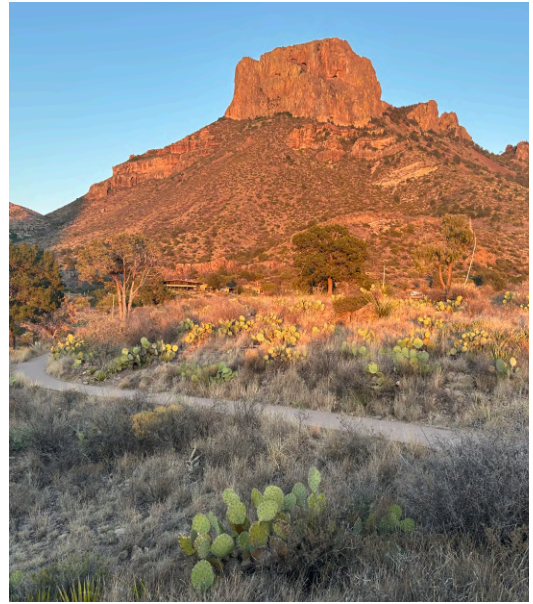


Texas' Big Bend | April 27 – May 5, 2024

Trip Report | by Dave Mehlman



Guides: Dave Mehlman and Michael Good, with participants: Beth, John, Julia, Kathleen, Kathy, Laura, Mark, Mike, Norma, Roy, and Shelby



Sat., Apr. 27

Arrivals in El Paso

Everyone arrived today in good order with no major delays. Early arrivals Kathy and Mike joined Dave and Michael for a morning of exploratory early birding in the El Paso area, visiting the Keystone Heritage Park and Franklin Mountains State Park bird blind. The almost full group met for a trip briefing and introductions in the lobby of the Wyndham where we were joined during our meeting by Kathleen and Shelby, who were the last scheduled arrivals. After getting to know each other a bit and going over some of the basics of the tour, we loaded into our two vehicles, a full-size van and a minivan, and departed to the nearby Great American Steakhouse for dinner. After dinner, we returned to the hotel for last minute organizing of gear and a night's sleep before an early breakfast and departure.

Sun., Apr. 28

El Paso | Fort Davis

We started the day with continental breakfast at the Wyndham and then loaded our gear into the vehicles to start the day. Our first stop on the tour was the excellent 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



372-acre park has a great mix of screwbean and honey mesquite bosque, marshes, and wetlands. We started off the day wonderfully: many migrants were passing through the trees, including abundant Audubon's Yellow-rumped Warblers, along with Wilson's, Townsend's, Orange-crowned, and a spectacularly posing Hermit Warbler (later proved to be a Townsend's-Hermit Warbler hybrid by analysis of the photos). Unexpectedly, flocks of Monk Parakeets periodically zoomed by and at one point perched for great views in a cottonwood. Among the shrubs on the ground were many White-crowned, Chipping, Brewer's, and Lark Sparrows and many Green-tailed Towhees. The wetlands, both open water ponds and mudflats, produced most of the wetland birds of the tour; highlights included a very late Snow Goose, lots of Mexican Ducks, White-faced Ibis, Cinnamon and Blue-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler, and quite a collection of shorebirds such as Black-necked Stilt, American Avocet, Wilson's Snipe, Least Sandpiper, and Wilson's Phalarope. After finishing our main walk (and not finding Burrowing Owls at the two colonies established by UTEP researchers) we drove to the nearby visitor center and hiked a short trail to another colony where, fortunately, we found an owl hunkered down inside its conduit tunnel.

The birding was so good and the weather very pleasant that we spent the entire morning there, thus destroying our initial lunch plans (but, it was so worth it!). Therefore, Dave quickly cobbled together an alternate lunch plan which, after two tries, had us at the Black Bear Diner for a classic American diner lunch. After lunch, we hit the highway and traveled east several hours on I-10, successfully navigating the CBP checkpoint and taking a break at a truck stop in Van Horn. As we walked out of the vehicles in the parking lot we noticed several Chihuahuan Ravens sitting on the top of a nearby telephone pole. The wind and lighting were perfect so that we could easily see the white necks of several birds as the wind ruffled their feathers—a true identification clinic. We quickly put up a scope and with the aid of close views, it was relatively easy to detect the short bills with extensive nasal feathering also characteristic of this species.

At this point, we were running kind of late (not helped by the loss of an hour when entering the Central Time Zone), so we proceeded directly from Van Horn to Fort Davis with an obligatory stop at the Prada Marfa roadside art outside the small town of Valentine. Arriving at the Hotel Limpia in "downtown" Fort Davis, we checked into our rooms, then proceeded across the small patio to have dinner at the Blue Mountain Bar & Grill next door. This was then followed by our checklist in the hotel lobby, a review of plans for the following day, and a rewarding night's sleep.



Mon., Apr. 29

Davis Mountains

We started the day with our standard Fort Davis-area breakfast ritual: a trip to the Stone Village Market! Before leaving, some of us admired a very patriotic Barn Swallow perching on the flag in front of the Hotel Limpia. Everyone got turned loose in the market to come up with breakfast edibles, some opting for breakfast burritos, others for sweet rolls, others for a variety of more healthy foods. After finishing there, we returned to the Limpia to get our gear then headed off for our day in the Davis Mountains.

The first stop of the day was Davis Mountains State Park. After paying our entrance fees, we stopped first at the Emory Oak Blind and feeding station. As usual, the feeders and water features were mobbed with birds, the most common of which were Chipping Sparrow, White-winged Dove, and Pine Siskin. By waiting quietly and patiently, we began to pick out other species dropping in and out, including Acorn Woodpecker, Canyon Towhee, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Wilson's Warbler, Scott's Oriole, Green-tailed Towhee, and a Swainson's Thrush. After a couple of hours, we walked the short distance through the campground to the bathrooms and the Interpretive Center Blind.

The Interpretive Center Blind proved to be the proverbial pot-of-gold, as a pair of Montezuma Quail were foraging, scratching, and dust-bathing right next to the blind's windows! This, one of North America's most sought-after species, put on a great show and everyone got super looks and decent photos, despite the small size of the blind itself. When the quail wandered off, we continued to be entertained by Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay, Summer Tanager, Black-crested Titmouse, Black-chinned Hummingbird, Black-throated Sparrow, and a Hermit Thrush. As the morning drew to a close and activity diminished, we got back in our vehicles and drove further up into the Mountains for a stop at the Lawrence E. Wood Picnic Area and The Nature Conservancy's Madera Canyon Trail.

At this point, we split up, with Michael leading a larger group on the Trail loop up to the bluff overlooking the road and Dave led a smaller group birding right around the parking area. The various groups had a decent morning, between them finding Gray Flycatcher, Plumbeous Vireo, Western Bluebird, Hepatic Tanager, and Black-chinned Sparrow. Meeting up back at the vans, we then drove back to the State Park for a late picnic lunch under the oaks accompanied by additional casual birding.

After lunch, we drove down back toward Fort Davis, stopping at the Fort Davis National Historic Site. A few folks checked out the visitor center's museum and the others walked around the grounds a bit to see what could be



found. Although in mid-afternoon with a blazing sun, we were able to find Cactus and Rock Wren, Western Wood-Pewee, Ash-throated Flycatcher, and Greater Roadrunner. Finishing here, we went back to the Limpia for a short rest before an early dinner. Meeting up in late afternoon, we drove out in the Davis Mountains Foothills to the Chateau Wright Winery, where we enjoyed a variety of wines on the porch and some food from the food truck. This lovely afternoon dinner not only provided good food and wine, but some interesting wildlife, too, including Pronghorn in the nearby grasslands and Cassin's Kingbird, Vermilion Flycatcher, and Barn Swallows near the seating area.

We returned to the hotel for a quick gear change and then went right back to Davis Mountains State Park for the much-anticipated Elf Owl vigil after dusk. We parked at the Interpretive Center and then walked across the road to the right telephone pole with its appropriately sized owl hole and waited. Sure enough, as darkness approached, an Elf Owl appeared in its hole to check out the world. Disappearing after a quick view, it soon reappeared again and another owl, presumably its mate, called from the oaks. Then, in a flash, the other owl flew in, the one in the hole flew out, and an Acorn Woodpecker swooped in, apparently fed up with this owl foolishness! And, with that, the owl vigil ended and we loaded up and went back to the Limpia for a good rest.

Tues., Apr. 30 The Post | Gage Gardens | Big Bend National Park

We began the day with a reprise of our breakfast routine at Stone Village Market, then returned to the Limpia to retrieve our gear and do the final loading of our vans. All aboard, we then set off toward the south, first stopping at Muzquiz Creek alongside Texas 118. This wetland area yielded a bunch of birds for us, despite having to bird alongside a busy road. However, we saw none of the previously reported wetland and shorebirds there except for a Great Blue Heron and some Killdeer. Nevertheless, Yellow-breasted Chats were spotted and the Vermilion Flycatchers, Summer Tanagers, and Bell's Vireos put on a show for us.

Finishing here, we continued south to Alpine, then turned east to Marathon and the destination for the morning: Fort Peña Colorado Park (aka "The Post") and its entrance road. This site has always produced great birds for the tour and today was no exception. In fact, it took us about an hour and a half to cover the several mile entrance road alone, before even reaching the main attraction! The entrance road yielded some sought-after species by the group, including several Scaled Quail and a small flock of 4 Scissor-tailed Flycatchers. The latter caused us to get out of the van and explore more and was a highlight of the tour. Also present were Pyrrhuloxia, a Loggerhead Shrike, Bewick's Wren, Black-throated, Chipping, Brewer's, and Lark Sparrow, and an Orchard Oriole seeming out of place in a mesquite.



We finally arrived at The Post itself in late morning and commenced exploring the grounds. Everyone delighted in the numerous Vermilion Flycatchers present, along with almost equally common Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, Summer Tanagers, Western Kingbirds, and Orchard Orioles. Among the birds feeding on the ground were many Brown-headed Cowbirds, a few Brewer's Blackbird, a conspicuous male Bronzed Cowbird (with red eyes glowing), and a small army of American Pipits. Further careful exploration of the area produced an Olive-sided Flycatcher high in a tree, a Common Yellowthroat, and an Orange-crowned Warbler seen and photographed by a few. Right at the end of the walk on our back to the vehicles, a few in the group spotted a Red-eyed Vireo in one of the pecans, perhaps the most notable sighting of the morning.

At this point, the morning was pretty much over and stomachs began to raise objections, so we headed back into Marathon for a tasty lunch at the V6 Coffee Bar, right on main street. After lunch, we drove a short distance across the train tracks to the Gage Gardens, another great birding site in this town. Particularly interesting here were several fruiting mulberries which sucked in birds of all kinds, though they could be hard to spot. Patient watching yielded a multitude of Western Tanagers, White-crowned Sparrows, Lesser Goldfinch, Summer Tanagers, Orchard Orioles, Cedar Waxwings, one or two Bullock's Orioles, and several spectacular Painted Buntings. A short walk through the grounds turned up Pine Siskin, a female Lazuli Bunting (under a feeder), Cave and Barn Swallows, and a female American Redstart to cap off a superlative morning of birding.

At this point, time was running out, so we got in our vans and began the long drive toward Big Bend National Park, down US 385 to the Persimmon Gap entrance station (just arriving there as it was closing for the day) and then into the park to Panther Junction and then up Green Gulch Road to the Chisos Basin. Arriving at Chisos Mountains Lodge, we got our room keys and then went to our rooms in the A and B blocks. This was followed a short while later by reconvening on the dining room patio followed by dinner. We then reconvened at the small patio by the rooms, discussed plans for the following day, and did our daily species checklist. Then, off to our rooms for our first night in Big Bend.

Wed., May 1 Big Bend National Park: East Side

Everyone cued up in the early morning darkness in front of the dining room door, which opened promptly at 7:00am and we began to forage at the breakfast buffet—the competition at the coffee urn was fierce! We also picked up our bag lunches for the day and then returned to our rooms to collect our gear and load up the vehicles. Our plans for the day were to explore the east side of Big Bend National Park, so we went down the



Green Gulch road and turned right on the main park road. Our first stop was Dugout Wells, an old homestead with a functioning windmill which pumps water to maintain a literal desert oasis. The oasis indeed held many birds and we had super views of Northern Cardinal, Pyrrhuloxia, Verdin, Curve-billed Thrasher, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, several Lesser Nighthawks still out and about, and a female Indigo Bunting.

Finishing here, we continued to head east, soon arriving at Rio Grande Village, where we stopped by the store to use the facilities and take a short walk among the cottonwoods. This was a very productive spot and we got Black Vulture right away as a pair was sitting in a dead tree along with a Turkey Vulture. Also around were an Osprey, another small army of American Pipits, Painted Bunting, Brown-crested Flycatcher, Greater Roadrunner, and an unexpected male Rose-breasted Grosbeak. All of these were joined by veritable hordes of sparrows on the ground, including Chipping, Brewer's, and Vesper; a few Yellow-headed Blackbirds pretending to be Brown-headed Cowbirds in a tree; and a pair of lively Javelina exploring their world.

Since the morning was not done yet (and temperatures were still somewhat bearable), we drove to the nearby campground, parked the vans, and walked through the campground to the nature trail. Despite the rapidly increasing heat, we found some great things such as Verdin, Vermilion Flycatcher, and Bell's Vireo in the campground; Common Yellowthroat and Yellow-breasted Chat in the marsh; a crazy Little Blue Heron flying over the Rio Grande (we could not tell which country it was in, but we counted it anyways!); and, on the way back to the vehicles, a calling Common Ground-Dove and a completely unexpected female Tennessee Warbler. The warbler was very cooperative, allowing great looks and some photos at very close distances.

At this point, the heat was on, so we returned to the vehicles and drove to nearby Daniel's Ranch for a picnic under the cottonwoods. After satiating ourselves, we took a short walk around the cottonwood grove there, picking up a seemingly out-of-place Red Crossbill, a male Indigo Bunting, Summer Tanager, and Gray Hawk, which clearly had a nest in the grove. Having wrapped things up, it was getting hot, so we started our return trip, first stopping at the Common Black-Hawk nest by the road. Today, probably because of the heat, the individual on the nest was clearly visible as it stood in the nest, probably shading the chicks from the hot sun. We finished the day with a quick side trip to the Fossil Discovery Exhibit to admire its excellent displays of the prehistory of Big Bend and then headed back to Chisos Basin in search of cooler temperatures and a rest.

We all then walked up to the dining room for an early dinner, then went to the small patio to do the bird list and discuss our plans for the following day. Some stayed up a bit later to admire the spectacular sunset in the Basin and/or to listen for Elf Owls at dusk.



Thur., May 2 Big Bend National Park: Chisos Mountains

After meeting up for the breakfast buffet and collecting our lunches, the group divided into two. Michael, along with Beth, John, Julia, Kathy, Laura, Mark, Mike, Roy, and Shelby had elected to do the ~~death march~~ long hike into the Chisos Mountains to look for Colima Warbler and other birds. Dave went with Kathleen and Norma on a shorter walk in the Chisos Basin followed by a re-supply trip into Study Butte.

The Chisos/Colima group had a fabulous day, weather-wise, with nice temperatures and a successful hike. The group did the Laguna Meadows—Colima Trail—Boot Canyon Trail—Pinnacles Trail loop with a short spur hike to Boot Springs. After much effort, the group did indeed find a Colima Warbler (with photographic proof) near Boot Springs! Other avian highlights of this epic hike included Red-tailed Hawk, Western Flycatcher, Blue-throated Mountain-Gem, Broad-tailed Hummingbird, Hutton's and Plumbeous Vireo, and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. The main non-avian highlight was a Western Diamondback Rattlesnake which joined the group at its lunch spot-- fortunately, it was spotted before getting too riled up!

The Basin group took the short hike from the Basin Campground down to the Water Treatment Plant, a very nice birding hike though a mix of desert scrub and some oak stands to where the outflow from the Plant is released via a pipe onto the ground. Perhaps the most sought after bird this group found was a singing, male Varied Bunting. Also found were a Broad-tailed Hummingbird, Western Tanagers, Hermit Thrush, and a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. A patch of blooming catnip by the spill-over pond proved to be loaded with butterflies; Norma and Dave spent significant time in the patch trying to identify species. Some of the ones identified included Red Admiral, Reakirt's Blue, American Lady, Texan Crescent, and Palmer Metalmark. The Basin group then returned to the lodge area for lunch and then reconvened to head into Study Butte for a re-supply mission at the grocery store. While in town, Dave took the small group to the Study Butte Wastewater Treatment Plant which yielded a variety of waterbirds for the day, including an amazingly large flock of 25 Willet, American Avocet, Western Cattle Egret, Pied-billed Grebe, a Wilson's Phalarope, and a Clay-colored Sparrow.

We all reconnected later in the day for dinner (and many tales, most of them true!), then our bird list, and a discussion of plans for the next day. This was followed by a well-earned night's sleep.

Fri., May 3 Big Bend National Park: West Side | Terlingua

We started the day with another buffet breakfast at the Lodge dining room; a few early risers noted calling Elf Owl from the area behind the B building and a cooperative pair of Hepatic Tanagers in the large mesquite in the



parking lot in front of the A building. After eating and getting our bag lunches, we returned the rooms, got our gear for the day, and then headed out to explore the western side of Big Bend National Park.

Our first stop was Sam Nail Ranch, another old homestead site located at a point where groundwater is close to the surface; a windmill there supplies a bit of water to keep the ground wet and maintain the oasis. This site has always been a favorite of Dave's, particularly for its usually ubiquitous Yellow-breasted Chats, and today it lived up to its reputation! The chats were singing constantly, many from the tops of trees, and were accompanied by Summer Tanager, Bell's Vireo, Pyrrhuloxia, and the usual chorus of White-winged Doves. Much to everyone's delight, an obliging male Varied Bunting flew into the top of a tree allowing for great views and photographs. As we walked around the small oasis, alert eyes picked up many interesting birds, including a Dark-eyed (Gray-headed) Junco, some Townsend's Warblers, a lovely male Phainopepla, and a MacGillivray's Warbler. Another super start to a day in Big Bend!

We then continued to the Sotol Vista parking area for a bathroom stop and to admire the views of Santa Elena Canyon in the far distance. While there, we discovered our second Western Diamondback Rattler of the tour—a lovely individual, apparently recently shed, that slowly crawled off into the bushes. At Dave's recommendation, we then headed straight for Santa Elena Canyon to be able to hike the canyon while the heat was still somewhat tolerable. Arriving at the Canyon parking area, we put on our packs with some extra water and headed out for the short hike. Alas, the Rio Grande at this point had essentially no flowing water in it, unfortunately typical of the drought conditions and upstream water extraction along the river that are so typical these days.

We then crossed over the dry Terlingua Creek and began the hike into the canyon, climbing up the steep entrance steps and then descending gently into the canyon until the trail ran out at the water (or, more correctly, mud). The views were great, the canyon itself had a nice breeze in it, and it was a spectacular day. Some of the birds noted along the way included Painted Bunting, Northern Rough-winged Swallow, Turkey and Black Vulture, Black Phoebe, Rock Wren, and a delightful Canyon Wren with its wonderful song echoing from the canyon walls. Returning to the cars, it was getting a bit hot and everyone was famished, so we drove back to the Cottonwood Campground (already closed for the season) for a picnic lunch under some shady trees. Accompanying us at lunch were some very friendly White-winged Doves and a Greater Roadrunner clearly looking for an alternative meal to its normal lizards.

After lunch, deciding that we could bear the heat a bit longer, we walked through the campground to see what was around. Despite the afternoon time and high temperatures, we found some great birds, including an Olive-



sided Flycatcher, a perching Gray Hawk, numerous sparrows of various kinds, a Black-tailed Gnatcatcher with fledged young, a Yellow Warbler, and a Warbling Vireo. At that point, we decided the heat was too much, so we drove back up to the Chisos Basin for a respite in the cooler mountain temperatures in the late afternoon. Toward the end of the day, almost everyone in the group went back to the “town” of Terlingua for a fun dinner at the Starlight Theatre. Along the way down we experienced the very unique sight of a flock of 10 Swainson’s Hawks “kiting:” they were hovering in the wind and swooping down constantly, apparently to pluck some kind of insect out of the air. A unique sight which neither Dave nor Michael could recall seeing before. After dinner, at the group’s insistence, we stopped at the “legendary” Study Butte Wastewater Treatment Plant birding site to see what we could find. Due to the late hour, there was not much there but a few ducks (Gadwall, Northern Shoveler, Green-winged Teal), Spotted Sandpiper, American Coot, and a Killdeer or two. Then, we drove back to the Chisos Basin, admiring the sun lighting up the Chisos Mountains the entire way.

Sat., May 4 Big Bend National Park | Christmas Mountains Oasis | Alpine

We started the last full day of the tour with the Lodge buffet breakfast and picking up our bag lunches for the day. Returning from breakfast, we got all our belongings out of the rooms and stowed them in the vehicles. Everything accounted for, we checked out of the Chisos Mountains Lodge and began the trip down from the Chisos Mountains. Our first stop was the Study Butte Wastewater Treatment Plant again, in hopes of finding more things early in the day. Indeed, this proved to be the case—more ducks were present (Gadwall, Northern Shoveler, Blue- and Green-winged Teal, Mexican Duck) along with more Coots, Wilson’s Phalarope, Spotted Sandpipers (including one tightrope walking on a wire!), Yellow-headed Blackbird, and a Clay-colored Sparrow among the many Brewer’s Sparrows.

After finishing here, we drove north to the highlight destination for the morning: the Christmas Mountains Oasis. This privately owned reserve is well-known to birders for its diversity of resident and migrant birds and we spent a good part of the middle of the day there, it being full of birds and quite comfortable. We spotted the main target species there, Lucifer Hummingbird, almost right away and got great, repeated views of male and female Lucifers throughout the morning. Other sightings included Scaled Quail, Pine Siskin, quite a few Green-tailed Towhees, Black-chinned Hummingbird, Pyrrhuloxia, a pair of Varied Bunting, and Scott’s Oriole. Some dedicated time at the water drip in the back yielded MacGillivray’s and Nashville Warbler, Warbling Vireo, and a Ruby-crowned Kinglet. Some of the group had a Lesser Nighthawk fly by and, while most of us were eating lunch sandwiches, a Coachwhip put in an appearance.

At last tearing ourselves away from this great destination in mid-afternoon, we completed our drive north to the town of Alpine and we checked into our rooms at the historic Holland Hotel, right on main street. Most in the



group then got together for one final birding outing in Alpine, this time to the Johnson Ponds (coincidentally owned by the same person who owns the Christmas Mountains Oasis). We began birding immediately after getting out of the vehicles at this great site. In our spirit to never stop birding, we added some new species to the trip list here, like Northern Waterthrush and Inca Dove, and found many other interesting things. Some of the highlights included Orchard Oriole, Lesser Goldfinch, Snowy Egret, a Belted Kingfisher, Blue Grosbeaks, Western Tanager, and Yellow Warbler. Carolyn Ohl-Johnson, the owner of the property and the Oasis, was home and came out to join us on our birding rounds, so everyone got a chance to meet this renowned local conservationist.

After this great end to the trip, we returned to the Holland to freshen up then walked the short distance to the Reata Restaurant for our farewell dinner on the patio. Returning to the hotel, we did our final day's bird list at a table in the lobby and mapped out the departure plans for the next day.

Sun., May 5 Departures from El Paso

Due to flight departure times, we divided the group into two departures at different times. Michael took himself and Shelby, John, and Norma in the minivan to El Paso, leaving quite early in the darkness. Dave took the rest, who had later flights, in the big van; they could leave late enough to enjoy a nice breakfast at Judy's Bread & Breakfast just down main street from the hotel before departing. The return trip was quick and uneventful, with only one stop for gas and bathrooms in Van Horn before arriving on time at the El Paso airport. After unloading, we all said good-bye and pledged to meet again on the birding trail at some future point in time.

Photos: Group (Michael Good - MG), Casa Grande (David Mehlman - DM), Pyrrhuloxia (MG), Greater Roadrunner (MG), Vermilion Flycatcher (MG), Chihuahuan Meadowlark (Roy Knight - RK), Lucifer Hummingbird (MG), Verdin (MG), Wilson's Phalarope (MG), Curve-billed Thrasher (MG), Gambel's Quail (MG), Acorn Woodpecker (MG), Summer Tanager (MG), Townsend's x Hermit Warbler hybrid (MG), Burrowing Owl (MG), Monk Parakeet (MG), Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay (MG), Montezuma Quail (MG), Plumbeous Vireo (MG), Panoramic (RK), Bronzed Cowbird (MG), Painted Bunting (MG), Western Tanager (MG), Western Kingbird (MG), Black-headed Grosbeak (MG), Group in Santa Elena Canyon (MG), Western Diamond-backed Rattlesnake (MG), Mexican Jay (MG), Scenic (MG), Blue Grosbeak (MG), Warbling Vireo (MG), Nashville Warbler (MG), Varied Bunting (MG), Inca Dove (MG), Texas bluebonnets (RK), Ladder-backed Woodpecker (MG)