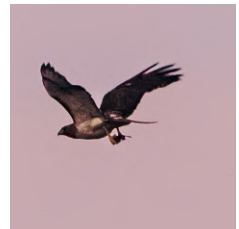
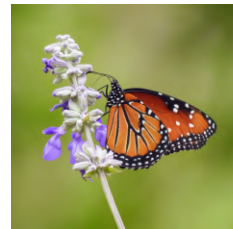
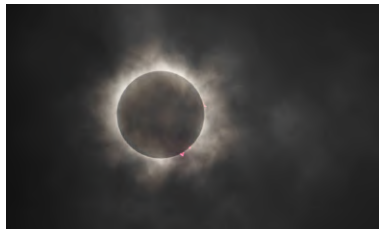
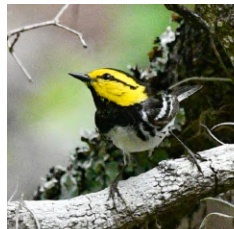
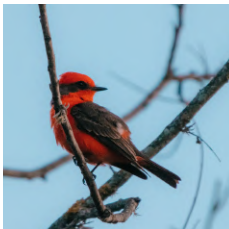


# Texas Hill Country Eclipse | April 4 – 9, 2024

## Trip Report by Stephen Grace



**Naturalist Journeys Tour Leaders Bryan Calk, Bryan Shirley and Stephen Grace with Lisa, Daryl, Fran, Larry, Barbara, Will, Phyllis, Mike, John T, Bruce, Anna, James, Estelle, John C, Rich, Christine, Steve K, Leila, Elizabeth, Maria and Carrie.**



### **Thurs., Apr. 4                      San Antonio | Concan**

After seventeen guests boarded three vans, we put the metropolis of San Antonio in our rearview mirrors as we headed west to Hill Country. Four additional guests drove to Neal's Lodges and met us there. This was an unusually large group for a Naturalist Journeys tour. Because a total solar eclipse during Golden-cheeked Warbler breeding season was a unique opportunity, Naturalist Journeys opted to expand the size of this tour group to help as many people as possible have an extraordinary experience.

The excitement of seeing one of the greatest astronomical spectacles in our lifetimes helped us form immediate and lasting friendships. And our gaggle of twenty-one guests and three guides quickly bonded over our shared interest in birds and natural history.



While caravanning from San Antonio to Neal's Lodges, we climbed from the hot, dusty plains into the cooler, greener climes of Hill Country. During the drive, some guests spotted a Red-tailed Hawk, a Crested Caracara, and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers.

Founded by local rancher Tom Neal in 1926, Neal's Lodges has become a base for world-class birding and nature immersion in Hill Country, a crossroads of habitats and species. In Texas Hill Country, the tropics and the temperate zone overlap, and the deserts of the West bump up against the Great Plains and the forests of the East, producing extraordinary biodiversity. Hill Country is where the ranges of the Northern Parula and Tropical Parula overlap, and the two species hybridize. In Hill Country, The Gray Vireo of southwestern deserts sings alongside the Yellow-throated Vireo, a species that breeds in eastern deciduous forests. The sprawling grounds of Neal's Lodges protect a patchwork of superb bird habitat, ranging from dry scrub to lush pecan groves, and the spring-fed flow of the Rio Frio offers a refreshing respite from the Texas heat.

After settling into rustic cabins at our home for the entire tour, we gathered at the dining hall for a welcome dinner. A Yellow-throated Warbler landed in a tree next to our group and sang its little heart out, officially announcing the start of the tour.

## **Fri., Apr. 5      Cook's Slough | Uvalde Fish Hatchery | Uvalde Memorial Park | Uvalde**

After a hearty breakfast at the lodge, we headed south to Cook's Slough, which offers a terrific combination of Texas brush country and wetlands. A Swainson's Hawk greeted our arrival by perching on irrigation equipment in a field. Waterfowl were seen well on the ponds in lovely early-morning light. Black-bellied Whistling Ducks delighted us with their colors and calls, and as the Sun lifted above the treetops, Neotropic Cormorants spread their wings to dry. Everyone had excellent views of Blue-winged Teals, Gadwalls and American Coots.

We separated into two groups to walk paths around the ponds. Texas Prickly Pear with bounteous yellow blooms was a botanical highlight, and Green Jays provided one of the avian highpoints of the tour. This species with its stunning palette of greens, yellows and blues is a denizen of the topics. We saw this gorgeous bird at the northernmost edge of its range.

The Long-billed Thrasher is a Texas specialty species that lives in northeast Mexico and the dry brush country of southeast Texas. One perched in the open, providing good views and fine photos.



Zone-tailed Hawks deceive their prey into thinking these hunters are harmless scavengers, not ferocious predators of scurrying reptiles and mammals, a strategy that scientists call “aggressive mimicry.” Just moments after discussing this remarkable story of evolution, a group member spotted one of these hawks soaring overhead. Several photos were taken showing the telltale banded tail, along with the yellow legs and bill that separate this bird from the Turkey Vulture. Zone-tailed Hawks hold their wings slightly upraised in a dihedral (V-shape) when they soar and rock back and forth in the wind like Turkey Vultures. The Zone-tailed Hawk may fool ground squirrels, rabbits and lizards, but it could not fool our group of eagle-eyed birders.

The Black-crested Titmouse is a close relative of the Tufted Titmouse. This charming bird, native to southern Texas, Oklahoma, and east-central Mexico, was a lifer for most guests. It gave its position in the canopy away with its sweet whistle.

Both subspecies of Yellow-rumped Warblers (Audubon’s and Myrtle) were confiding. But a Nashville Warbler made us work to see it well, and a Ladderback Woodpecker sent us on a wild woodpecker chase as we followed the busy bird from tree to tree to get a clear view among the branches.

Good herping complemented excellent birding at this venue. A Western Ribbon Snake and a Diamondback Watersnake were easily identified by Bryan Calk, who is not only an accomplished birder, but also a herpetology enthusiast.

Red-eared Slider turtles provided more herpetological fun at Uvalde Memorial Park. A baby turtle the size of a silver dollar sunning itself on a stick was a big hit. We ate a picnic lunch and had great looks at a very cooperative Green Heron. Our group enjoyed learning about this bird’s tool use—this species drops feathers and sticks onto the water to attract fish, like human anglers using fishing lures.

Inca Doves that perched in low branches of a tree were cooperative, allowing everyone to get great scope views of the intricately scaled patterning of their plumage.

At Uvalde Fish Hatchery, we found a female Vermilion Flycatcher on a nest. We watched a Black Phoebe flycatching, and a Bell’s Vireo came in close so we could see who was making such a scratchy, hurried song.



To Bryan Calk's long list of natural history competencies add "entomology enthusiast." Roseate Skimmer, a species of dragonfly that Bryan pointed out, impressed everyone with its eye-catching beauty and astonishing aerial displays. Lyside Sulphurs that were "mudpuddling" (eating minerals from the soil) provided another fascinating insect spectacle.

The natural wonders we experienced that day were discussed over ice cream at Uvalde Rexall, a classic soda fountain with tasty treats and friendly small-town service.

After some downtime and casual birding at Neal's, we ate another delicious Texan dinner at picnic tables outside on the patio. We enjoyed house specialties such as "chicken-fried chicken" while watching Black-chinned and Ruby-throated Hummingbirds at nearby feeders and listening to the sweetly whistled song of a Yellow-throated Warbler.

## **Sat., Apr. 6**                      **Lost Maples State Natural Area**

In the early morning we headed to Lost Maples State Natural Area. While stopping to get our permits at the park entrance, we saw our first Golden-cheeked Warbler. It would not be our last.

After we parked and began our bird walk, a Bewick's Wren sang from a prominent perch. A Louisiana Waterthrush wagged its tail, and an Osprey passed overhead as this raptor migrated north. Two Ladder-backed Woodpeckers shared an intimate moment on a tree trunk, doing their best to ensure that their species endures.

Tracking a Tropical Parula that flew back and forth between trees was like watching a tennis match, but later in the tour we got great looks at one of these gorgeous warblers.

A very wound-up Black-and-White Warbler followed the lead of the Tropical Parula by flying from tree to tree, almost giving us whiplash. Later that day, we had nice looks at this species that combines a zebra's stripes with a nuthatch's behavior, climbing up and down tree trunks, sliding along branches, and sometimes moving upside down.

The Olive Sparrow, a Texas specialty that is usually skulky, came in close for phenomenal views and clear photos, providing yet another checkmark for the life lists of most people on the tour.



The descending trill of a Canyon Wren stood out in the soundscape as we walked along a spring-fed stream bubbling up through the limestone of the Edwards Aquifer. This is the sole water source for the entire city of San Antonio, all the towns of Hill Country, irrigated agriculture, and many endemic and endangered fish and salamanders. Millions of years of rain have eroded the limestone of the Edwards Plateau, creating a karst formation pocked with caves and hidden rivers beneath the earth. In these rain-eroded hollows in limestone, salamanders, bats and blind fish live in the dark. The plateau is riddled with sinkholes and a network of underground chambers brimming with freshwater.

The Bigtooth Maples that drink from this aquifer at Lost Maples State Natural Area are a relict population left over from the last Ice Age, when the climate of Hill Country was cooler and wetter. A “lost” population of maples persists in the sheltered canyons of this area, as if the Pleistocene never ended.

We enjoyed maple shade as we walked. When we started hiking uphill in search of Black-capped Vireos, however, we had to battle the Sun’s heat, as well as the Earth’s gravity—a fitting prelude to the celestial show to come.

While some of the group opted to hang out in the shady lowlands by cool pools of a stream and look for a Green Kingfisher, other hardy souls ascended the plateau. Getting eyes on the Black-capped Vireo, a notorious skulker known for grudgingly giving birders fleeting looks as it hides in thick underbrush, was not easy. But our hard work paid off. We had good glimpses.

Golden-cheeked Warblers, on the other hand, are relatively easy to see and photograph. The males perch in the open to sing their buzzy song and flash their brilliant golden cheeks, sharply accented with black eyelines and a black throat.

As we caught our breath and recovered from the ascent, we heard the pretty voice of a Field Sparrow but couldn’t get eyes on the source of this song. A male Scott’s Oriole streaked past us like a black-and-gold missile, and a female Scott’s Oriole perched nearby on a branch for good looks. From the top of the plateau, sprawling vistas of Hill Country provided ample payoff for our hike, which drained our legs but filled our hearts.

Speaking of full hearts, on the way down from the plateau, Bryan Calk noticed some young birders struggling to find a Golden-cheeked Warbler. When our group was safely down from the plateau, Bryan ran back and put



them on a beautiful Golden-cheeked perched on a juniper in the open to sing. These ebullient young birders were on the edge of tears. We crossed paths with several other people who were not expert birders but were eager to see birds and learn about them. Bryan Calk stopped and shared his knowledge and enthusiasm for the feathered friends he grew up with in a small town at the edge of Hill Country.

To our group, Bryan Calk explained how the Golden-cheeked Warbler, an endangered species that breeds only in Texas Hill Country—nowhere else on Earth—has evolved with the Ashe Juniper in a close ecological relationship. This bird builds its nests by weaving the shaggy, fibrous bark of mature Ashe Junipers and binding the strips of bark with spiderwebs.

After a picnic lunch and cool drinks at Lost Maples, we headed back to Neal’s to freshen up. Then we drove to the nearby town of Leaky (pronounced “Lakey” the locals tell you) for dinner at Texas Cannon Brewing Company. One member of our group quipped that the entire tour was worth doing simply for a taste of tender brisket, the house specialty. Bryan Calk, raised on Texas barbecue, said you’d be hard-pressed to find a better barbeque in the state of Texas. All side dishes, from charro beans to potato salad, were perfect. Even the fried pickle appetizer earned rave reviews.

We completed our daily species checklist while watching White-tailed Deer browse in a nearby field and Barn Swallows swoop overhead.

## **Sun., Apr. 7**                      **Neal’s Lodges | Rio Frio Bat Cave**

After another hearty breakfast at Neal’s, we explored the nearby grounds in search of species we’d heard but hadn’t seen. A male Vermilion Flycatcher seemed too bright to be real—a resplendent shade of red. A Lark Sparrow with chestnut and white stripes streaking its handsome head made a compelling case for this species as one of the world’s most attractive sparrows. A sweet Blue-gray Gnatcatcher busily worked on her nest, camouflaging her shelter with lichen to hide the young she would soon be raising.

Lunch at Hippy Chic’s Riverfront Shack was delicious, and the trippy 60s theme of this funky venue delighted our group. The artistic sign that the restaurant made to welcome our Naturalist Journeys tour was a nice touch.



Following lunch, free time at Neal's was filled with pursuits as varied as napping, creating art, and snorkeling in the Rio Frio in pursuit of native fish. Endemic Guadalupe Bass and gorgeous Rio Grande Cichlids were viewed through the snorkel mask of guide Stephen Grace. Bruce and James watched from shore as these fish swam through the shallows of this cold, clear-flowing river.

After an early dinner at Neal's, we headed out on a short drive to the famous Rio Frio Bat Cave for a sunset show narrated by a bat biologist. Watching millions of Mexican Free-tailed Bats pour out of Frio Bat Cave, pursued by raptors at sunset, is one of the greatest shows on planet Earth.

Stunning images of a Red-tailed Hawk hunting bats were taken by several members of our group, and Merlins, Cooper's Hawks, and Harris's Hawks pursued this moveable mammalian feast. While the pink sunset glow faded to dusk, winged mammals kept erupting from the cave—a river of bats blasted out of the earth and surged across the sky, flowing into the night in pursuit of insects. As hawks and falcons went to roost, we imagined owls taking flight to hunt bats, but it was too dark to see. We turned on lights to find our way back to the vans. Masses of bats blocked the stars above. The sound made by millions of bat wings flapping was strangely soothing, like rain.

Speaking of rain, the forecast for the following day was not looking good for eclipse viewing. Naturalist Journeys had planned for a bad weather scenario, organizing viewing options at two different venues so we could choose the optimal site to give our group the best chance to see the eclipse. After scrutinizing local weather forecasts, we decided to stay at Neal's and take our chances there.

During an optional night walk that was well attended, Bryan Shirley put his ornithological prowess on full display when he heard the distant call of an Eastern Screech-Owl, and then somehow spotted the bird in what seemed like total blackness. Bryan Shirley speaks fluent Japanese—he also speaks owl and many other avian languages. His 30-plus year guiding career has sent him to some 60 countries and pushed his life list toward the 5,000 mark. You could parachute this guy into just about any place on planet Earth and he'd tell you what birds you are seeing and hearing.

As we marveled at stars in crystal clear skies and bemoaned the cloudy forecast for eclipse day, a Ringtail appeared. A few of us glimpsed the eyeshine and striped tail of this racoon relative before the creature disappeared in the dark. Bryan Calk said he hadn't seen one of these elusive mammals in many years, despite



logging countless hours as an expert naturalist in Hill Country. His excitement was palpable and contagious. This rare sighting was a fitting end to a full day of being endlessly surprised by the beauty and mystery of nature.

## **Mon., Apr. 8**                      **Neal's Lodges | Total Solar Eclipse**

The guides and several guests woke up in the early hours to check updated weather forecasts. Complete cloud cover threatened to deny us a view of one of the most remarkable astronomical events of our lifetimes. Eclipse day dawned dark. Remaining optimistic became a Herculean task.

While taking a morning bird walk around the grounds of Neal's, nervously looking overhead at the gathering gloom, our groups saw a Great Horned Owl silently roosting. We heard an Eastern Screech-Owl call later in the day—when night briefly engulfed the Earth in darkness at 1:30 PM.

After our morning bird walk, we gathered in an area with chairs, picnic tables, food and beverages. Our venue had an open view of the sky, which was ... covered with clouds. Ugh! We made the best of it with jokes and good humor. We had a fun, interactive demonstration with group participation, which included a lot of shenanigans and laughter, along with solid science. We learned how the astronomical phenomenon of a total solar eclipse occurs. We discussed why this eclipse would be especially long (because the Moon was near its closest point in its monthly orbit of Earth), and why this eclipse was predicted to be especially beautiful (because the Sun was near its solar maximum, the peak of its eleven-year cycle, when activity such as solar flares is most prominent).

After setting up several spotting scopes and one telescope with safe filters for viewing, when the clouds cooperated, we saw an astonishing sight—sunspots, areas of relative coolness on the surface of the Sun. These dark spots appear when the Sun is especially active. This boded well for the show to come, when the Moon would completely block the Sun, creating a total solar eclipse, or "totality," for 4 minutes and 24 seconds. At that point, it is safe to look at the Sun without protective eyewear because the Sun, essentially, has vanished. The luminous disc with its blinding brightness is completely obscured by the Moon, and the only light visible is the Sun's corona, its outermost atmosphere, which is plasma—superheated matter that is millions of degrees but emits little visible light.

First Contact—when the Moon first touches the Sun—began shortly after Noon. For the next hour or so, the clouds intermittently parted, providing brief glimpses of a Sun with bigger and bigger bites being taken out of its





orange face by the Moon. Trying to see this eclipse, which demanded patience and hard work to find breaks in the clouds and get fleeting looks, was like stalking a skulking bird. This teaser of an eclipse gave us the same rush that you get when you catch a quick glimpse of an elusive Black-capped Vireo.

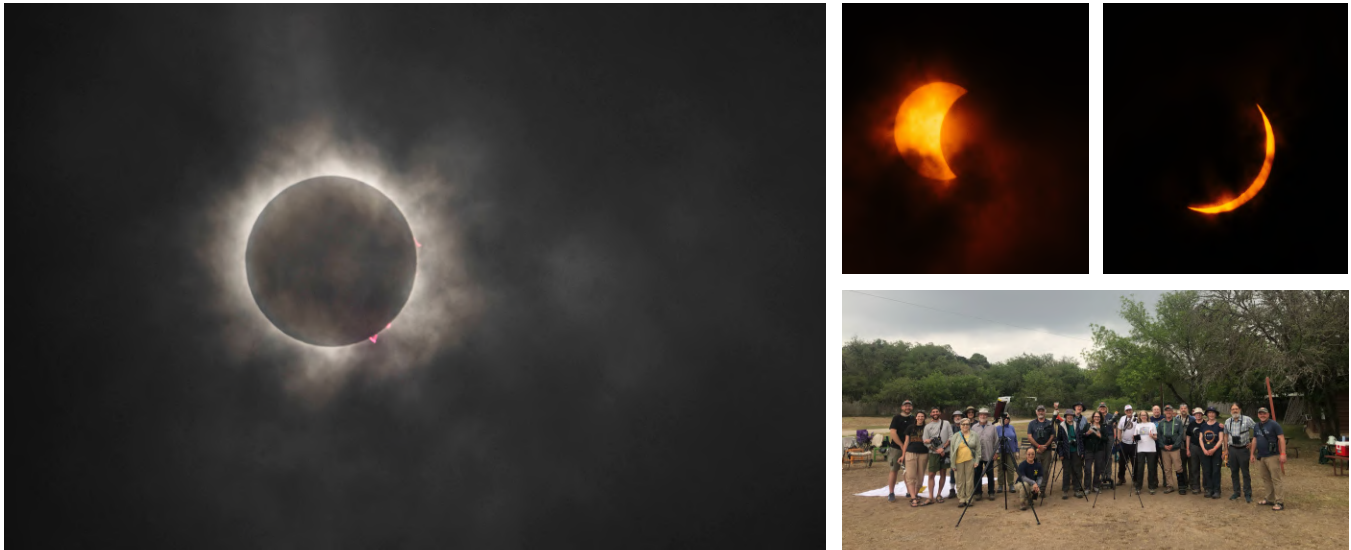
The clouds also provided fine photos, imparting an element of mystery to the crimson crescent of the partially eclipsed Sun. And the clouds created high drama and an almost unbearable tension. Would we witness totality and be elated? Or would we stare glumly at clouds?

Totality began at 1:30 PM. (Technically totality began at 1:30 and 13 seconds, but who's counting—we were!) Two minutes before totality started, songbirds fell silent. An Eastern Screech-Owl called in this false night. The temperature plummeted as light leached from the sky. Darkness engulfed our group. Faces disappeared. Only the faintest outlines of people standing nearby were visible. There was silence. There was excited murmuring. There was shouting. There was frantic yelling at the Sun and Moon, pleading with them to appear, petitioning the skies above to give us a lucky break. But we saw no corona. Only clouds. And more clouds. The clouds didn't part. They gathered and thickened.

The seconds of totality ticked into minutes, and still we had no view of the Sun completely eclipsed by the Moon. Totality was slipping away from us. We started counting down the remaining minute of total solar eclipse before the Moon would move away from the Sun. After that, centuries would pass before someone could stand in that field at Neal's and have another chance to witness totality in the heart of Texas Hill Country.

More seconds elapsed, more clouds. Just eerie blackness. People were on the verge of panic at missing one of nature's grandest shows. Then, from perhaps a quarter of a mile away, a mob of eclipse watchers started shouting. Why were they excited to see clouds and no eclipse?

Later, we realized that an opening in the clouds had passed over their heads just before it reached us. Soon we were shouting, our voices joining in unison as we celebrated our good fortune. Sheer exhilaration made us scream. We shouted from a sense of relief at finally witnessing this event that we had worked so hard to see, and we shouted because we were bowled over by a sense of awe at seeing this spectacle in the sky above.



There was no Sun where the Sun should be. Only the Moon. From the edges of the Moon streamed a pearly halo. This ethereal glow was the Sun's corona, invisible to human eyes always and forever, with the sole exception of a total solar eclipse.

Time is difficult to judge when your mind is being blown wide open by the wondrous universe in which we live. Later, when we compared our experiences, we came to a consensus that we had clearly viewed the total eclipse for about 30 seconds. It had seemed that eternity was packed into that half minute of witnessing one of the most astonishing astronomical events conceivable.

Bryan Calk captured a remarkable image that tells the story. His photo shows "prominences," vast arcs of glowing plasma suspended from the Sun. These prominences are lifted far from its surface and held in place by the star's magnetic field. With our naked eyes, and through binoculars and spotting scopes, we witnessed the mysterious workings of this star upon which all life on this planet depends—from the Ashe Juniper that the Golden-cheeked Warbler uses to weave its nest bound with gossamer strands of spiderweb, to the Guadalupe Bass that fins its body through the cold currents of the Rio Frio, to the Roseate Skimmer Dragonfly that astonishes NASA engineers with its aeronautical maneuvers, to the Ringtail that lives in darkness and rarely strays into the light, to the human multitudes now transforming this planet's climate and rearranging the flora and fauna of the Earth's continents and seas. All that we know, all that we love, depends on this star 93 million miles away sending its light and warmth to every living thing on Earth.

Among our group were some serious eclipse chasers. This eclipse was Christine's seventh experience with totality. When we got our lucky break with the clouds and finally saw it, she literally leapt for joy—jumping off the ground with her fists raised in the air. We all understood. Many of us started discussing where we could see our next total solar eclipse. We were ready to chase totality to the ends of the Earth.

Seeing the cosmic coincidence of the Moon passing with perfect alignment in front of the Sun, sending a shadow speeding thousands of miles an hour to cast a narrow strip of night across this planet, helps us understand our place on Earth, and the precarious nature of all life. We are at the mercy of an orb that pulses with the power of countless trillions of atomic explosions every second of every day. We exist on a world blessed with oceans and birds and countless other wonders, a planet endlessly spinning on its axis as it hurls through a fathomless void, captured by the Sun's gravity.



After totality ended at Third Contact, the Moon started to slide past the face of the Sun, providing the additional spectacle of another partial eclipse. When the Moon touched the Sun for a final second at Fourth Contact and then vanished, many of us walked the grounds of Neal's in search of birds.

In this strange morning, this second sunrise in the early afternoon, songbirds began a dawn chorus. The world had been temporarily taken from us, from all of us, from all living things, for 4 minutes and 24 seconds. And the world had been given back. The birds resumed singing, and we returned to listening to them and watching them, marveling at their beauty.

Maybe we still had the eclipse on our minds, but the Yellow-breasted Chat that showed itself briefly in thick brush seemed especially bright—as yellow as the Sun when it slips out from behind clouds or emerges from its hiding place behind the Moon.

A celebratory dinner at Texas Cannon Brewing Company provided a perfect end to an extraordinary day and capped a remarkable tour. Again, we savored the barbeque specialties of this restaurant—but this time on a private deck far above the ground, close to the tree canopy. A Summer Tanager perched on a branch at eyelevel just before we toasted our good fortune. We raised glasses to commemorate this gathering of 24 new friends in one of the most biodiverse regions of the country. Glasses clinked. Our grins were large. Together we had witnessed the astronomical spectacle of a lifetime.

As if the universe hadn't already given us enough to marvel at, Bryan Calk called in a Barred Owl while we were doing our checklists. We joined him, walking past enormous cypress, their wide trunks flaring where they met the earth. Some of these titanic trees had been alive for centuries. After following a meandering gravel path down to the river, we watched a winged wonder perch on a branch and tilt its head toward the human calling from across the river. Two species, one mammalian, the other avian, made a fleeting connection as their paths briefly crossed in Texas Hill Country.

When we returned to the deck, Anna gave us an art show, sharing beautiful natural history paintings she'd made of subjects such as a perched Golden-cheeked Warbler, a flying Common Raven, sunlight streaming through Lost Maples on a cloudy day, and a purple Spiderwort bloom.



## Tues., Apr. 9 San Antonio

After breakfast at Neal's, we said goodbye to the members of our group who were driving on their own. The rest of us headed to San Antonio for hotels or flights. Scissor-tailed Flycatchers perched on fence wires along the highway. This species is common, but like every other bird in the world, it is a marvel worth celebrating, one of many gifts the universe has given us.

En route to the airport, we stopped at a gas station. Bruce and Brian Calk leaned over to look at the grill of one of the vans, stirring some concern. Was something wrong with the van? A mechanical issue that would put a screeching halt to the smooth logistical flow of this large and complicated tour that thus far had run with nary a hitch?

No, Bruce and Brian Calk were looking at Lyside Sulphurs and other butterflies. Lepidoptery on the front of a Ford. Wonders abound in this world, even on the grill of a passenger van.

After much handshaking and tearful hugging at the airport, everyone went safely on their separate ways to the far corners of this country. We promised each other we'd stay in touch, and perhaps even gather again to witness the next totality.

*Photos: Group (Steve Grace - SG), Vermilion Flycatcher (James Bonanno -JB), Golden-cheeked Warbler (Larry Armstrong - LA), Total Solar Eclipse (Bryan Calk - BC), Queen Butterfly (SG), Red-tailed Hawk (JB), Fly Me to the Moon (JB), Neotropical Cormorant (JB) Black-bellied Whistling Duck (JB), Western Ribbon Snake (JB), Ladder-backed Woodpecker (JB), Long-billed Thrasher (JB), Red-eared Slider (JB), Black Phoebe (JB), Summer Tanager (Elizabeth Trimble - ET), Zone-tailed Hawk (LA), Green Jay (Carrie Miller - CM), Cactus at Cook's Slough (Barbara Hamilton - BH), Vermilion Flycatcher female on nest (SG), Afternoon Rest (ET), Bewick's Wren (JB), Group Birding (TF), Vermilion Flycatcher (JB), Neal's Lodges (SG), Red-tailed Hawk and bats (JB), Blue-gray Gnatcatcher in nest (SG), Rio Frio Bat Cave viewing point (CM), Eastern Screech Owl (ET), Total Solar Eclipse viewing point (CM), Waiting for the eclipse (CM), Trivia Awards! (ET), Total Solar Eclipse (BC), Eclipse group (Bryan Shirley - BS), Pecan Grove exploring, looking at caterpillar (CM), Texas Pricklypear (SG), Queen Butterfly (SG), Tropical Parula (LA), Final Dinner (JB), Incredible field art by Anna McNaught*

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