



**Texas Big Bend
Birding & Wildlife Tour
April 22 - 29, 2017**



"I loved the trip! Woody as guide, a very sympatico group, fabulous birds, mammals, etc. ... Javelinas and birds, birds, birds."
— Franni Tourtellot

"Accommodations — wow all the way around. Love those funky old hotels that leave doors open and treat people as friends."

— Gail Kohl

Immerse yourself in the big, bold landscape of Big Bend National Park, home to the stunningly eroded Chisos Mountain range and the elusive Colima Warbler. A playground of light, the rugged mountains, rolling hills, and deep canyons glow with rich, red and orange hues. Life forms of the Chihuahuan Desert are fascinating and abound.

Experience the rhythm of spring bird migration, as Eastern, Western, Mexican, and Rocky Mountain birds converge — nearly 450 species, many rare or vagrant. Big Bend also has its share of mammals, from Kangaroo Rat, skunks, Badger, and Javelina, to Mountain Lion and Black Bear. And of course, plentiful reptiles.

In addition to wildlife watching and geological and ecological interpretation, we spend time at lovely accommodations and enjoy delicious meals along the way ... and of course, good company.

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Tour Highlights

- Visit two of Texas' three Sky Island mountain ranges
- Search for the rare Colima Warbler on its only U.S. breeding territory
- Catch the peak of migration — every day brings new arrivals!
- Travel along some of the most ruggedly beautiful roads in west Texas
- Gaze up at the stunning stars in a premier dark sky region
- Slow down and live life more slowly, the "Texas Way"



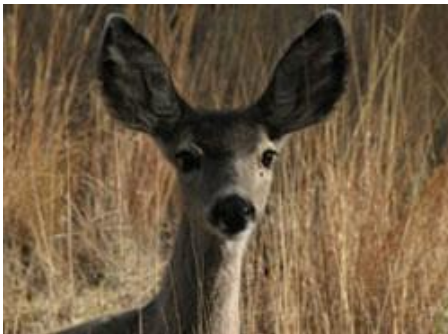
Tour Summary

8-Day / 7-Night Big Bend Birding, Nature & Natural History Tour with Woody Wheeler
\$2290 from El Paso, TX
Airport is El Paso International (ELP)

Itinerary

Sat., Apr. 22 Arrival in El Paso, Texas

Welcome to Texas! We start early today, with a 9:00 AM pick up at your hotel, so please plan to come in the day before (Friday, April 21 — we can recommend hotels), then it's off to do some birding en route to Fort Davis and the Davis Mountains. We drive east for about two hours to Van Horn, where we take a break, and then continue to Balmorhea State Park, a lush oasis at the northern end of the Davis Mountains. Here an artisan spring pours forth millions of gallons of water, encouraging the growth of tall trees and marsh vegetation. The park is a haven for migrating birds, with beauties like Painted Bunting sometimes coming in to



the feeders. We look for Bullock's Oriole, Western Kingbird, Pied-billed Grebe, and two species of rare desert fish. As time permits, we continue a short way to Balmorhea Lake, one of the larger reservoirs in the area. Here we may find a variety of ducks and shorebirds, and with luck a flock of magnificent White Pelican.

Our 30-mile afternoon drive down to Fort Davis is timed for good wildlife viewing hours, with the chance of seeing Mule Deer, Javelina, Coyote, and Wild Boar. This scenic route reveals tall cliffs of columnar volcanic rocks. We then settle into our accommodations at the delightful Hotel Limpia and

enjoy a group dinner in the hotel.

Accommodations at the Hotel Limpia, Fort Davis (D)

Sun., Apr. 23 The Davis Mountains

Today we explore the Davis Mountains, a Sky Island mountain range, where we learn more about the range's ecological significance as a link between Mexico and the Rocky Mountains. In the morning we visit The Nature Conservancy's outstanding preserve. For many years the higher elevations of this range were private land and inaccessible. Since the preserve was established, limited public access is allowed, and a number of very exciting birds have been recorded. Those familiar with Arizona's Chiricahua Mountains recognize Olive Warbler, Buff-breasted Flycatcher, Painted Redstart, and Dusky-capped Flycatcher. We enjoy a walk amid large

Ponderosa Pines with a view of Mt. Livermore, the highest peak in the range. Enjoy a picnic lunch as we walk the trails and explore this important reserve.

Returning by mid-afternoon, we offer an optional visit to historic Fort Davis, one of the best preserved post-Civil War forts in our National Park system. The volcanic geology here is quite spectacular.

Dinner is at your leisure tonight at a choice of local restaurants.
Accommodations at Hotel Limpia (B,L)



Mon., Apr. 24 The Post at Marathon / Prairie Dogs / Big Bend National Park

This morning we visit Davis Mountains State Park, where in some years Montezuma Quail come into feeders along with Scrub Jay, Acorn Woodpecker, and Green-tailed Towhee. It is hard to tear ourselves away from this idyllic sit-down birding!



However, adventure and Big Bend calls, so by mid-morning we depart. Passing through grassland habitat en route, we likely see Pronghorn and possibly Scaled Quail. Enjoy a picnic lunch at a lush birding oasis at a creek-side park that once housed the U.S. Cavalry. Today it is known as Post Park, and its large cottonwoods and small reservoir attract a good number and variety of birds like Vermilion Flycatcher, Summer Tanager, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, and

possibly Yellow-billed Cuckoo. Driving back into extensive grasslands we visit an active Prairie Dog town to observe these animals' lively and sometimes comical behavior. With luck, a Coyote or Golden Eagle may be on patrol.

Then we turn south to Big Bend National Park, interpreting the geologic features along the way. We pass through low desert that was once so rich in Tobosa grass that the early settlers could cut it as hay. Our destination is Chisos Basin, which sits at a comfortable 5,400 feet, surrounded by mountain peaks. Here,



we keep an eye out for Zone-tailed Hawk and other birds of prey. Relax, settle in, and enjoy dinner in the lodge's dining room. A Say's Phoebe may have a nest by the door; at night Gray Fox and Javelina are sometimes seen from the balconies.

Accommodations at Chisos Mountain Lodge (B,L,D)

Tues., Apr. 25 Big Bend National Park / Rio Grande Village



With a field breakfast in tow, we get an early start. We arrive at Rio Grande Village early enough for prime bird activity. Ro Wauer, author of *The Birds of Big Bend*, regards this as the most consistent spot in the park to see good numbers of species, and today should be no exception. Painted Bunting often steal the show, but there is stiff competition from Greater Roadrunner, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Inca Dove, Indigo Bunting, and Blue Grosbeak.

Take time to learn some of the calls — you become aware of

Yellow-breasted Chat and Bell's Vireo; with luck we hear the scream of a Gray Hawk. Common Black Hawk have nested here for several years, and

Black Vulture can be seen along the river. Along the nature trail — a boardwalk through a

beaver pond — the blend of lush cattails and rushes, desert scrub, and distant views of the Chisos is striking! We enjoy a picnic lunch with a view of the Sierra del Carmen Mountains. A siesta under the cottonwoods is a must before we return to the Basin. We stop at the Boquillas Canyon Overlook and Hot Springs Historic Site, as well as the park's visitor center en route.



Accommodations at Chisos Mountain Lodge, Big Bend National

Park (B,L,D)

Wed., Apr. 26 Big Bend National Park / Boot Springs

We enjoy a full day of walks and hikes in Chisos Basin today. Those with energy can scale the nine-mile loop trail high into the Chisos, where we find nesting Colima Warbler. The entire hike is fascinating, and we have all day to do it, so many can participate. We climb steadily through oak and juniper woodland, finding an abundance of Mexican species like Evergreen Sumacs and Drooping Junipers. Fresh-flowering Texas Madrones are magnets for warblers. We often find Townsend's, Hermit, Yellow-rumped, and sometimes Orange-crowned and MacGillivray's Warblers. Wildflowers and brilliant cactus blooms brighten



the trail.



In sheltered Boot Canyon we find huge pines and Arizona Cypress, a Mexican relict species. The route down through Laguna Meadows opens up to great vistas and more birding. We listen for calls of Hutton's Vireo and Bewick's Wren, as well as the trill of Broad-tailed Hummingbird during courtship displays.

Those who do not wish to scale the mountain can — if we have a large enough group for two guides — enjoy a very special hike to a place where orchids and Cardinal Flower grow at a backcountry desert spring. This oasis is great for birding and affords a visit to the Old Sam Nail Ranch, one of the best birding spots in Big Bend. If we have a small group without a second guide, those not hiking can walk partway with us, or enjoy free time in the basin

where the park may have activities scheduled. On this, or another evening, your guide offers an optional night drive in search of Elf Owl, Poorwill, and possibly Lesser Nightjar.

Accommodations at Chisos Mountain Lodge. (B,L,D)

Thurs., Apr. 27 Big Bend National Park / Burro Mesa Pouroff / Santa Elena Canyon



Today we head west toward magnificent Santa Elena Canyon. Our first stop is at Old Sam Nail Ranch, where water pumped by a windmill attracts Varied Bunting and a variety of other migrant songbirds. We then walk to Burro Mesa Pouroff, a unique geologic feature where unusual plants like the Texas Persimmon and Texas Buckeye bear fruit that attracts some of the larger songbirds. The arid hills provide good habitat for Black-chinned Sparrow, while the canyon seems to echo with the songs of Rock and Canyon Wrens.



We have lunch at Cottonwood Campground, another oasis with large trees and a Hackberry and Lotebush hedgerow that provides shelter and food for migrants. Some years we have seen waves of birds come through — grosbeaks and buntings seem especially fond of the area. We may also find Lucy's Warbler in the dry mesquite, and Hooded, Orchard, and Bullock's Orioles.



In the afternoon, after a siesta, we discuss the vivid geologic story of the Big Bend region. We also visit historic Castolon, where ice cream is a welcome treat. In the late afternoon, the sun is off the trail into Santa Elena Canyon, so we can enjoy a walk along the 1,000-foot limestone walls laid down during the Cretaceous Period. Watch swallows hunting over the river and listen for the

calls of White-throated Swift.

If the group likes hiking, we can also explore Blue Creek Canyon, taking a leisurely route along a dry stream with wonderful views, grand geology, and consistently excellent birding. Species to look for include Lucifer Hummingbird, Gray Vireo, Crissal Thrasher, and Varied Bunting. We also learn more about the history and impact of ranching in the Big Bend Region.

From here we take a back road north to the West Entrance of Big Bend and enjoy dinner at a local restaurant that is as unique as its desert surroundings.

Accommodations at Chisos Mountain Lodge (B,L,D)

Fri., Apr. 28 Big Bend National Park / Blue Creek / Christmas Mountains



Today we say good-bye to the scenic Chisos Basin. But a great day is in store as we visit the Christmas Mountains and the home and feeders of Carolyn Ohi-Johnson, a grand finale of bird activity where difficult to find species like Lucifer Hummingbird and Varied Bunting can be found with ease. Carolyn has worked tirelessly to create a stunning oasis just north of Big Bend. This stop today is a real treat, and a fantastic way to round out our trip.

By now the arid landscape, and its riches of cactus, vistas, birds, and wildlife is a part of you.



We spend our final night at the fully restored

Holland Hotel in Alpine, Texas. We are sure to stop and visit the wonderful Museum of the Big Bend at Sul Ross University and the local cactus garden often replete with flowers before dinner at the Reata restaurant, a perfect place to celebrate the end of our journey. Their menu is a delight and we plan to enjoy a great final dinner, reminiscing with now familiar traveling companions.

Accommodations at the Holland Hotel, Alpine, TX. (B,L,D)

Sat., Apr. 29 Departures from El Paso

We depart this morning for a three-hour drive to the airport, passing through grasslands where Chihuahuan Raven and sometimes Golden Eagle can be found. We arrive at the airport by 11:00 (the time change works in our favor today!) for flights out from NOON or later. *(B)*

Pace of the Journey

Big Bend is best experienced by those fit enough to do some hiking, as the route to see the famed Colima Warbler is a 9-mile loop hike with a gain of almost 2000 feet in elevation. Our other walks average 2 – 4 miles at a leisurely pace over uneven terrain, so you may forego the “big” climb but should be able to do the others for full

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participation. Days at lower elevation can be HOT (90°+) on occasion. Birding is always incredible and in some years we also have a burst of spring wildflowers. Expect full field days with evenings to relax.

“It’s a very beautiful, untraveled part of the country with many surprises around every corner. Woody was great fun. He was flexible, always accommodating, great sense of humor, very helpful.” — Mary Deutsche

“The utter unfamiliarity of the desert ... I returned with a great appreciation for the water we take for granted — many of us watch TV weather praying to see rainclouds over the Trans-Pecos ... can’t praise Woody enough. A saint.” — Gail Kohl

“It’s a totally different world and fascinating. A new set of everything — climate, birds, mammals, geology, history, and Woody is an exceptional guide.” — Franni Tourtellot



PLAN AHEAD!

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

Offset your [Carbon Footprint](#). Show us the receipt and we'll take 50% - up to \$50.00 - of your carbon offset fee off your final payment.

COST OF THE JOURNEY

Cost of the main journey is \$2290 per person, based on double (DBL) occupancy, \$2880 SGL, from El Paso, TX (ELP). NEW! This year we include all meals, with the exception of

one free night dinner to let you explore Fort Davis.

The cost includes: accommodations for 7 nights, meals as specified in the itinerary (B=breakfast, L=lunch, D=dinner), airport welcome and transfer or hotel shuttle, land transportation during the journey, professional guide services, park and other entrance fees, and miscellaneous program expenses.

Cost does not include: round-trip airfare to and from El Paso, items of a personal nature such as laundry, telephone, drinks from the bar, gratuities for luggage handling or personal services. With fewer than 6 participants, a small-group surcharge (typically \$100 – \$200 per participant) may apply, or we may request that you pick up the cost of a few additional dinners in lieu of this surcharge.



Group Size: This is a birding and wildlife trip, maximum of 8 and minimum of 4 participants.

TRAVEL INFORMATION



Microtel Inn and Suites next door to the Wyndham.

The airport for this journey is El Paso International Airport (ELP). A good number of airlines service El Paso. Please plan to arrive on Friday, April 21 (the day *before* the tour), as we set off at 9:00 AM on April 22, and plan to depart after NOON on April 29. There are a number of motels close to the airport; we recommend the historic Camino Real Hotel downtown, which has an airport shuttle, the Wyndham Hotel at the airport, or the economical



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Photo credits:

All photos by Peg Abbott unless otherwise noted. Pg. 1: Montezuma Quail, Cactus in Bloom, View of the Window, Chisos Basin. Pg. 2: First View Chisos Mtns., Mule Deer. Pg. 3: Buff-breasted Flycatcher by Steve Wolfe, Fort Davis, Montezuma Quail, Pronghorn. Pg. 4: Rio Grande River, Rio Grande Village, Roadrunner. Pg. 5: The "Boot," Colima Warbler by Tom Dove, Santa Elena Canyon, the Road to Castalon, Gray Hawk. Pg. 6: Chihuahuan Ravens, Cactus, Black-chinned Hummingbird. Pg. 7: Goat Mountain Geology sign, Vermilion Flycatcher, Purple-tinged Prickly Pear, Javelina. Pg. 9: Tunnel en route to Rio Grande, Yucca in Bloom, Santa Elena hikers by Woody Wheeler.