

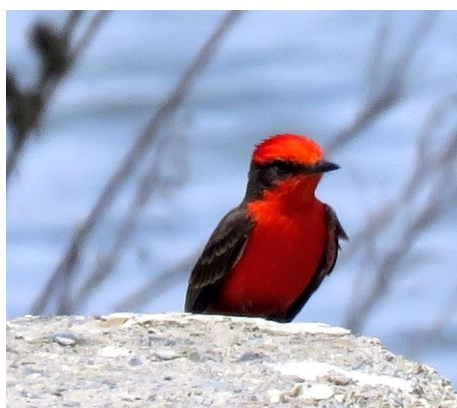
TEXAS' BIG BEND:

Monsoons & Hummingbird Migration

August 18 – 26, 2018 | Written by Michael Marsden



With guide Michael Marsden and seven participants: Jeff, Eileen, Lawson, Deborah, Paula, Maggie and Mark



Saturday, Aug. 18: Alpine

With a later start than usual, we decided to drive directly to Alpine. There wasn't much time for birding as we were hoping to visit the cactus gardens on the campus of Sul Ross State University before dinner. But we did get memorable views of a group of Chihuahuan Raven (showing off their white-based neck feathers!) at Van Horn and both Swainson's and Red-tailed Hawk along the way. The latter all had the creamy, largely unmarked underparts characteristic of the southwestern *fuertesi* subspecies. At Sul Ross we not only viewed the many species of cacti and other native plants but also enjoyed close views of some of the characteristic birds of the area, including Curve-billed Thrasher, Lesser Goldfinch, Inca Dove and, best of all, a young male Vermilion Flycatcher in, almost full, breeding plumage. Then we headed on to our lodgings in the historic Holland Hotel and the delectable food of the Reata restaurant.



Sunday, Aug. 19: Marathon & Chisos Mountains

After an early breakfast at the Holland Hotel, we headed towards Marathon to start our birding at the Post, a former military outpost established in 1879 as protection against marauding Apaches. It's a wonderful birding spot with a pond and lots of mature cottonwoods. Birds in the area included Scaled Quail, Greater Roadrunner, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Western Kingbird, Scissor-tailed & Olive-sided Flycatchers, Western Wood-Pewee, lots of Vermilion Flycatchers, Say's Phoebe, Bell's Vireo, Yellow Warbler and Blue Grosbeak. Jeff came across a female-type Varied Bunting and also spotted, and got us all onto a Hog-nosed Skunk on one of the hillsides, an uncommon species here. We all enjoyed views of a family of Wild Hogs rooting about in the mesquite scrub.



After lunch at the V6 in Marathon (with the best coffee in the area!), we headed for the grasslands just north of town, the site of an extensive Black-tailed Prairie Dog village and the summer home of Burrowing Owls. We were very lucky and managed to get great views of at least eight owls among the scores of mounds. We also had close views of Texas Antelope Squirrels and a group of Pronghorns in the grasslands.

We broke our long afternoon drive to Chisos Mountains Lodge, where we are to stay for the next four nights, by visiting the new Fossil Discovery Exhibit, highlighting the 130 million years of geologic time represented in Big Bend National Park. One of the striking displays is a reconstruction of the skeleton of the giant pterosaur Quetzalcoatlus, the largest flying creature ever, with a weight of 550 lbs and length of 36 feet!

Monday, Aug. 20: Chisos Mountains

After a hearty breakfast, we collected our packed lunches and headed off to Rio Grande Village, where we had a memorably close encounter with a particularly fat and contented Western Diamondback Rattlesnake on the way! Our main target was Common Black Hawk, since a pair has been nesting in the cottonwoods along the river here for the last few years. The nest was easy to locate but there was no sign of any hawks so we drove to the Rio Grande Village Nature Trail. This trail crosses a wetland, with swimming Blotched Water Snake (a rarity in the Park) and Nutria, and ends on the banks of the Rio Grande where we were greeted by a group of at least 30 Black Vultures.

From there, we headed back towards Daniel's Ranch where we were to have our picnic lunch. The settlement ponds there were particularly productive with a trio of somewhat unexpected shorebirds - Spotted and Solitary Sandpipers and, best of all, an Upland Sandpiper that gave us memorable views as it called and flew around us. Our next scheduled stop was Boquillas, and to get there we had to drive past the cottonwoods where we'd looked for the hawk earlier. As we did so, Lawson mentioned to





Mark that he'd just seen a large black bird and Mark, realizing its possible significance, shouted to stop the van. It was indeed a Common Black Hawk, perched fairly close to us, low in the cottonwoods and allowed wonderful prolonged views!

We drove on to Boquillas but by then it was getting extraordinarily hot, even by West Texas standards – at least 110° F and probably higher – so everyone agreed that hiking the canyon wasn't the most sensible way to spend the mid-afternoon. Instead, we birded Dugout Wells, a little oasis of water and mature trees surrounded by expanses of desert shrubland. Birds seen here included Scott's Oriole and Bronzed Cowbird, while Queen butterflies and Gulf Fritillaries fed on the flowering shrubs.



Tuesday, Aug. 21: Chisos Mountains

This was the day scheduled for our 9+ miles hike to Boot Springs but, in view of the scarcely bearable heat of the previous day, we opted instead for the Lost Mine Trail, about half the length but still giving us access to high elevation habitat. The views from the trail were spectacular even if we did miss some of the species that we might have come across at Boot Spring. Nevertheless, Townsend's Warbler, Western Tanager and a probable Dusky Flycatcher were notable.



As it happened, the afternoon was nowhere near as hot as we'd feared, and most of us spent at least part of it birding around the Lodge. We could hardly have hoped for better views of Mexican Jays, Cactus Wrens, Canyon Towhees, Acorn Woodpeckers and Say's Phoebes. The best sighting, though, was not a bird, but a young Black Bear that Lawson and Debbie watched from their cabin, climbing a tree just a few yards away! A brief evening hike to the Chisos Mountains Settling Ponds was enjoyable and added a lovely caper to the day.

Wednesday, Aug. 22: Big Bend!

Today we headed towards the southwestern corner of Big Bend with our first stop at the old Sam Nail Ranch with similar habitat to Dugout Wells. We walked the trail at Lower Mesa Burro Pour-off with its exciting combination of spectacular scenery and wildlife-rich habitats. Here just about everyone at last got good views of Varied Bunting and Black-chinned Sparrow. Other birds included Canyon Wren, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher and Black-throated Sparrow. Then we headed on to the Cottonwood Campground for our picnic lunch.



By chance, we parked the van under a cottonwood where a juvenile Gray Hawk was perched on a branch just above our heads! We were lucky enough to see a second juvenile and an adult bird here later. After lunch, we drove down to the Rio Grande at Santa Elena. The scenery here is awesome with the sheer limestone walls of the canyon towering 1500' above us. But, Terlingua Creek was in flood so even had we the inclination to hike the canyon, there was no way of entering it.

After a stop for ice cream in Castalon, we started the long drive to dinner at the inimitable Starlight Theater in Terlingua. We arrived early so we had time for a detour to view the Texas Longhorn Museum in Lajitas and its collection of hundreds of longhorn heads and horns, including the world champion 'Anglo Yates' with a horn spread of just over 8' 9". After that, we enjoyed the warm hospitality of the eclectic bunch of folk who call Terlingua home and the wonderful food of the Starlight Theater – not excepting one of their signature dishes, chicken-fried wild boar!



Thursday, Aug. 23: On to Fort Davis

This morning, on the way from Big Bend to Fort Davis, we spent a couple of pleasant hours at Christmas Mountain Oasis in the company of Carolyn Ohl-Johnson, who has, through unimaginably hard work, created a birding paradise and a comfortable home in the unpromising creosote desert that surrounds her land. The target here was Lucifer Hummingbird and we saw no less than a dozen, including some adult males, at her feeders! Other species included Black-chinned and Rufous Hummingbird along with a breeding-plumaged male Varied Bunting.



After an enjoyable lunch at Guzzi Up in Alpine, we drove to our hotel in Fort Davis, passing a freshly road-killed Yellow-billed Cuckoo on the way (one of Jeff's target species!), and then on to some birding at Davis Mountains State Park. This area gets more rainfall than Big Bend. The landscape is softer and greener with grasslands, wooded pinyon-oak-juniper mountain slopes and cottonwood-lined creeks, than the more rugged and austere Chisos Mountains. And, to top it off, the birds are plentiful. On this

preliminary visit, we came across Phainopepla, Cassin's Kingbird, Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay and White-breasted Nuthatch – all new species for the trip.

Then we headed back to Fort Davis for the first of our two evenings of wonderful dinners at the Blue Mountain Bistro.

Friday, Aug. 24: Fort Davis

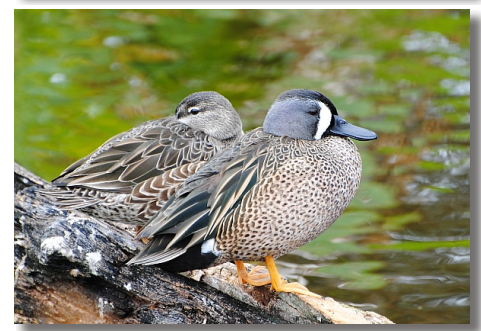
Our stay in Fort Davis coincided with the 2018 Davis Mountains Hummingbird Celebration with its headquarters at the Hotel Limpia, where we were staying. This morning we were fortunate enough to join one of the festival's field trips to the Miller Ranch in the foothills of the Sierra Vieja Mountains to the southwest of Valentine. And surprisingly, Michael was particularly happy to see that the trip was led by two old friends: Willie Sekula and David Sarkozi.

We birded three areas of the ranch: the grasslands and trees around the ranch house itself, an oak/juniper-lined creek, and high ground around Camp Holland, built in 1918 in response to incursions from Mexico during their civil war. It was all wonderfully productive with lots of new birds for the trip: Gambel's Quail, Bushtit, Rock Wren, Painted Bunting, Warbling Vireo, Wilson's Warbler, Orchard Oriole and, most memorably - a Calliope Hummingbird at the ranch's feeders and a Barn Owl roosting in a tree in the front yard!

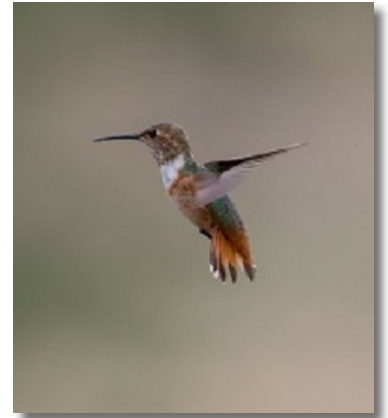
After lunch at the Water Stop in Marfa, we visited the Marfa Settling Ponds, where even with low water, we happened upon a mixed flock of Mexican Ducks and Blue-winged Teal, and a beautiful White-faced Ibis. We drove back to Fort Davis and spent the late afternoon on the grounds of the Chihuahuan Desert Research Institute where we enjoyed close-up views of Black-chinned and Rufous hummingbirds at the feeders.

Saturday, Aug. 25: Madera Canyon & Balmorhea

We joined another festival event this morning: a buffet breakfast at the McDonald Observatory followed by hummingbird banding demonstrations on the Observatory grounds and at the Nature Conservancy in Madera Canyon. On the way, we made a pre-breakfast stop at Davis Mountains State Park. The highlight here was the sight of yet another Black Bear as we were driving by Indian Lodge. The park staff were a bit skeptical, but Maggie and others had had clear views of the bear and had no doubts as to its identity.



The Nature Conservancy banding demonstration was particularly memorable. It was under the supervision of the genial Kelly Bryan, who not only has an encyclopedic knowledge of hummingbirds, but an enthusiasm that's infectious. Among the many birds we watched him band were both Calliope and Broad-tailed Hummingbirds. Other species we saw that morning included Violet-green Swallow, Western Bluebird and a family party of Javelinas.



We'd decided to spend our last afternoon in the Balmorhea area so we picked up sandwiches at Stone Village Market for a picnic lunch at the state park. Unfortunately, when we arrived, we found that most of the park, including the resaca, was closed to the public. Happily, the picnic area was still accessible and we enjoyed our lunch there in the company of a feeding Gray Flycatcher.



After lunch we drove to Balmorhea Lake with its Western and Clark's Grebes - and hybrids of the two! This was a new habitat for the trip and gave us several new species. As we drove along the spillway, we could see a large flock of shorebirds flying over the water which Michael identified, from their size, as Stilt Sandpipers or Wilson's Phalaropes, going eventually, for the former, as they seemed to have dull underparts. Fortunately, Lawson managed to photograph them, which showed beyond doubt that they were (of course!) the latter. Other birds included Tricolored Heron and two handsome Lark Buntings.



From there, we visited the Sandia Wetlands, where we found a short section of the roadway edged by seeding grasses and a few trees hopping with lots of Lark, Chipping & Savannah Sparrow, at least 20 Western Kingbirds and ones or twos of Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Western Wood-Pewee, Orchard Oriole, Lesser Goldfinch and Dickcissel!

On the drive back to Fort Davis we came across a family group of Barbary Sheep feeding on one of the hillsides. These natives of North Africa, also known as Aoudads, now have a firmly established wild population in the mountains of the Trans-Pecos.

That evening we attended the festival's celebration banquet. There were over 250 people there for the buffet-style meal. All the tables seemed to be taken and we were a bit apprehensive as to how it was all

going to work out. But (entirely thanks to Eileen – we’re still not sure how she managed it!) everything was fine. We secured a table in an optimal position, all to ourselves, and we seemed always to be at the head of the queue for each course of the surprisingly delicious meal! And we came a creditable joint second in the evening’s trivia quiz!

Sunday, Aug. 26: Departure

We had to get back from Fort Davis to El Paso by 10:30AM so that really only left us time for breakfast at Stone Village Market, a break at Van Horn and fond farewells at the airport. We did, however, pass road-killed Northern Raccoon and Striped Skunk on the way - which brought our combined, live (17), and dead (2), mammal list to a record 19 species!



Photo credits: Vermillion Flycatcher: Terry Peterson (TP); Greater Roadrunner, Lawson Frazier (LF); Bell's Vireo, LF; Pronghorn, Peg Abbott (PA); Chisos Mountain Lodge, PA; Common Black Hawk, LF; Black-throated Sparrow, LF; Black Bear, LF; Group shot, LF; Lucifer Hummingbird, Mark Cavallo (MC); Gambel's Quail, Sandy Sorkin (SS); Barn Owl, LF; Blue-winged Teal, Carlos Sanchez (CS); Rufous Hummingbird, LF; Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, TP; Landscape, MC.