

# South Texas Birding Tour | March 10-18, 2023

## Trip Report | by Bryan Shirley



With guides Bryan Shirley and Michael Marsden, and participants Bill, George, Kate, Larry, Marian, Maureen, Merle, Michelle, Roger, Sydney, and Vicky



Group Birding (Bryan Shirley), Eastern Screech Owl (Bryan Shirley), Altamira Oriole (Bryan Shirley), Green Jay (Bryan Shirley)

### **Fri., Mar. 10 Arrivals | Rockport**

Finally, the start of our Texas tour! Many of us (ok mostly me!) had traveled in from snowy areas and the heat in Corpus Christi was a great change. We met at the airport at 1:00 PM and drove north to the Fulton Inn, our home for the next few days, where we met up with part of the group that drove there. After checking in and getting settled, we headed to the Rockport Beach Park to do our first birding, and it was wonderful! There were lots of people enjoying the heat at the beach, so the birding there wasn't productive, but the opposite side was packed with gulls, pelicans, terns and a variety of herons. We had our first Roseate Spoonbills here and couldn't believe how many Reddish Egrets were on the islands in the bay, preparing to nest. A couple of American Oystercatchers just a few feet from our vans were a great find (one was banded and after reporting the band, we learned that it was banded five years ago about 50 miles north of where we saw it). One of the most exciting birds of the day was a rare Sooty Tern that provided great scope views and then put on quite a performance flying around the bay. We only had two hours to bird, yet we recorded more than 40 species – not a bad start to the trip! Dinner was at a local seafood restaurant, Charlotte Plumbers, within walking distance of the hotel.



American Oystercatchers (Bryan Shirley), Red-winged Blackbird (Bryan Shirley), Tricolored Heron (Bryan Shirley)

## **Sat., Mar. 11**                      **Aransas Boat Trip | Goose Island State Park**

In the morning we met Captain Tommy and boarded the *Skimmer* to look for endangered Whooping Cranes on their wintering grounds at Aransas NWR. Most of the waterfowl that would have wintered here had moved out recently, replaced by lots of herons setting up shop on the rookery islands. As usual, Captain Tommy gave us a good show, and we ended up with over 20 whoopers plus lots of terns and shorebirds. The wind really picked up in the afternoon and we were lucky it was nice for us in the morning. In the afternoon we visited Goose Island State Park. The wind made the coastal areas tough to bird, but the feeders had a few interesting birds including Lincoln's Sparrow. Dinner was another wonderful seafood restaurant.

## **Sun., Mar. 12**                      **Port Aransas | Hazel Bazemore | Parrot Roost**

Today was a travel day, but we enjoyed lots of good birding on the way. We started with a short ferry ride at Port Aransas, then birded at the first of several of Texas's wonderful "World Birding Centers," called Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Center. It was fabulous. Hundreds of ducks, herons and shorebirds were visible from the boardwalk. We even had a Clapper Rail poke its head out of the reeds and give us all a view. A family group of four Whooping Cranes was a surprise treat, since they are normally only found in the Aransas area. Our persistence checking all the gulls and terns paid off with a few nice finds including Bonaparte's Gulls and one Gull-billed Tern. A ginormous American Alligator was napping on the mud just next to the boardwalk, and we had a flock of close to 200 Long-billed Dowitchers fly in and land right next to us. Eventually we left the park and started our drive south down Mustang Island. We picked up our first White-tailed Hawk on this route and had great looks at Aplomado Falcons on a tower. From there we carried on through Corpus Christi to Hazel Bazemore Park, stopping to pick up sandwiches for a picnic at the park. We didn't have a lot of time to bird here, plus it was the heat of the afternoon so not really birdy, but we did get our first Great Kiskadee and Ladder-backed Woodpecker, both of which we would see many more of in the Rio Grande Valley. After leaving Hazel Bazemore, we continued south to our hotel in Brownsville, just a few miles from the Texas border. We had an early dinner at a Mexican restaurant that left time for us to look for parrots coming into their roosts. Wow, what



Black-bellied Whistling Ducks (Bryan Shirley), Mottled Duck (Bryan Shirley)

a spectacle! Several hundred Red-crowned Parrots and about 30 White-fronted Parrots invaded the trees above us. It was deafening! We watched them until almost dark and then headed back to our hotel.

### **Mon., Mar. 13                      South Padre Island | Laguna Atascosa NWR**

This morning we started off with a bang when Bryan spotted a small flock of Green Parakeets near the hotel parking lot! Everybody quickly jumped out and we all got good looks before we set out for the day. Our first stop was at the Zapata Boat Ramp on our way to South Padre Island. There were hundreds of birds here, and we had a great time sorting through them all. We were excited to finally see Black Skimmers, plus a Marbled Godwit and a Common Tern were good finds here, and we saw a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron posing on the far side of the bay. Next stop was the South Padre Island Nature Center where we enjoyed the walk around the boardwalk. As usual, there were many birds here that kept things hopping! We had good looks at many of the same species we have seen over the last few days, but it never gets old to see beautiful birds just a few feet away. A couple “Mangrove” Yellow Warblers were a fun find, and it was amazing to have a flock of about 50 Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks just off the boardwalk. We enjoyed another picnic lunch (pulled pork sandwiches from the food truck) surrounded by Yellow-rumped Warblers and a few butterflies including Queen and Monarch. After we left South Padre Island, we picked up a few Harris’ Hawks as we drove toward Laguna Atascosa NWR. The feeders here were a bit slow, but there was enough activity to keep us interested and we eventually got good looks at a bunch of Rio Grande Valley specialties like Green Jay, Long-billed Thrasher, Golden-fronted Woodpecker and a couple of skulking Olive Sparrows.

### **Tues., Mar. 14                      Sabal Palms | University of Texas RGV**

A cloudy morning provided a nice break from the heat as we explored Sabal Palm Sanctuary. The birding was uncharacteristically slow, but we enjoyed our walk through this unique habitat. Great Kiskadees were vocal as usual, and a few White-tipped Doves teased us with very brief views, but not so with a gorgeous Altamira Oriole! Texas has many exotic species, both birds and mammals, and it was interesting to learn that the dung piles we saw were how the introduced Nilgai marks its territory. After lunch in historic downtown Brownsville, we took a short walk on the beautiful campus of University of Texas RGV. Good numbers of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks were found in the resaca, a Least Grebe was displaying and we finally got a good look at a Little Blue Heron.



Paraque (Bryan Shirley), Clay-colored Thrush (Bryan Shirley), Long-billed Thrasher (Bryan Shirley), Great Kiskadee (Bryan Shirley), American Alligator (Bryan Shirley)

## **Wed., Mar. 15                      Santa Ana NWR | Estero Llano Grande SP**

This morning we checked out of our Brownsville hotel and headed east toward McAllen. We were excited to get to Santa Ana NWR, but good birds kept jumping out in front of the vans, forcing us to stop! We paused to admire a beautiful White-tailed Kite, and then stopped for a Ringed Kingfisher. A small pond held a variety of waterfowl and shorebirds including Solitary Sandpiper, a flock of Least Sandpipers, and several Ruddy Ducks.

Eventually we arrived at Santa Ana NWR and walked along Willow Lake that held good numbers of ducks including our first Cinnamon Teal, though no sign of the recently reported Fulvous Whistling-Duck. The trees were draped in Spanish moss giving the landscape a mysterious air. Birding was a bit slow, but we managed to find a few Couch’s Kingbirds and another stunning Altamira Oriole. After lunch we visited Estero Llano Grande State Park. After scoping waterfowl from the deck overlooking the lake, we headed down to the camping area where a helpful ranger pointed out two roosting “McCall’s” Eastern Screech-Owls, a subspecies that may soon be recognized as a full species. A brief rain shower sent us scrambling for the covered deck at the visitor’s center, but luckily it wasn’t long before we were back on the trail. Another ranger helped us find a Common Pauraque, perfectly camouflaged on the leaf litter. It rained lightly on the way back. We paused for scope views of a flock of Stilt Sandpipers in the river along with a variety of more common birds. After birding we checked into the area’s famous birding lodge: the Alamo Inn.

## **Thurs., Mar. 16                      Salineno | Falcon SP | Rancho Lomitas**

Today was an early departure. It was dark when we boarded the vans for the two-hour drive to Salineno. We needed to be in position at first light to have a chance of seeing our target bird: Red-billed Pigeon, known to

roost in the trees on an island in the Rio Grande. This is one of the few reliable locations to see this bird in the U.S., and although it was a bit far, we were all able to see it through the scope. We also had a fly-by Mexican



Wild Turkey (Bryan Shirley), White-tipped Dove (Bryan Shirley), Buff-bellied Hummingbird (Bryan Shirley)

Duck, clearly showing white on both sides of the speculum, a good field mark separating it from the nearly identical Mottled Duck. After a short walk along the river, we visited some nearby feeders where we had great looks at several area specialties including White-tipped Dove, Olive Sparrow, Long-billed Thrasher, Green Jay, and Great Kiskadee. From there, we drove a bit further upstream to Falcon State Park. The hot, desert environment here provided us with a few new species including Black-throated Sparrow, Ash-throated Flycatcher and Pyrrhuloxia. Our final destination for the day was Rancho Lomitas, a tiny oasis where the caretaker maintains feeders. We had hardly settled in before Inca and White-tipped Doves arrived, followed by Curve-billed Thrashers, a Hooded Oriole and the star of the show, a covey of Scaled Quail. Along the road we found Greater Roadrunners hunting in the brush.

## **Fri., Mar. 17                      Bentsen Rio Grande | National Butterfly Center | Hidalgo Pumphouse**

A cold front came through overnight. After several days of triple-digit heat, we awoke to temperatures in the 50s accompanied by strong winds. Despite the crazy weather, we arrived at Bentsen Rio Grande Valley State Park and had a great day! The action at the bird feeders was the most exciting of the trip. A steady stream of Green Jays, White-tipped Doves, Plain Chachalacas, Northern Cardinals and the ever-present Red-winged Blackbirds. Wild Turkeys were plentiful as well, and we enjoyed watching the toms in full display. We spent a few hours exploring the park and then rode the shuttle back to the visitor's center, getting good looks at a Gray Hawk from the tram. By lunchtime the weather had calmed down and a few hummers were out and about. We had several Ruby-throated Hummingbirds at the feeder just outside the window of the café, and a Buff-bellied Hummingbird teased us, flying by a few times, but not coming to the feeder. After lunch we located its perch, and everyone was able to admire this regional specialty.

Our next stop was the National Butterfly Center. After checking out the interesting displays and gift shop, we toured the gardens. The bird feeders here were quite active as well, with Plain Chachalaca, Green Jay, Altamira Oriole and our only Audubon's Oriole of the trip. We had some time to kill before dinner, so we decided to make

a brief visit to the Hidalgo Pumphouse. On the way we stopped in a neighborhood where a colony of Monk Parakeets (introduced) roost, and found a Tropical Kingbird on the wires, another bird that barely makes it into



Group Photo (Bryan Shirley), Plain Chachalaca (Bryan Shirley)

the U.S. When we arrived at the Hidalgo Pumphouse, we came upon a lavish photoshoot for a quinceañera (a celebration of a girl's 15<sup>th</sup> birthday marking her passage into womanhood) that included a regal horse and a poodle painted purple and green!

## **Sat., Mar. 18                      Quinta Mazatlan | Departures**

This was our final morning of the trip, and we visited another World Birding Center, Quinta Mazatlan, conveniently located near the airport in McAllen. After exploring the beautiful old house, which now acts a visitor center, we wandered the trails and watched the bird feeders. Even though we had seen these birds at other locations, the feeders provided a wonderful opportunity to see them once more up close. We also found a mixed flock that included several migrants like Black-and-white, Orange-crowned, and Nashville Warblers and Blue-Gray Gnatcatchers. The easy and enjoyable birding was the perfect ending to our trip.