

Texas Hill Country | April 22-27, 2023

Trip Report | by Pat Lueders



With guides Pat Lueders and Kirsten Hines and participants Bill, Billie, Dan, Dick, Jean, Jon, Kathy, Maggie, Marty, Rebecca and Tamara



Sat., Apr. 22

Meet-up at San Antonio Airport | drive to Concan

Many arrived a few days early to enjoy the delightful and historical city of San Antonio with its Riverfront restaurants and numerous activities. We gathered at the airport and drove to the small city of Concan, Texas, and Neal's Lodges, our home for the next week. Along the roadside, we spotted Scissor-tailed Flycatchers perched on the utility wires along the agricultural fields. After checking into our spacious cabins, we gathered at Neal's Restaurant for our welcome dinner and introductions all around.



Sun., Apr 23 **Uvalde | Cook's Slough Nature Center | Chalk Bluff Park**

Our first day in Hill Country was spent south of Concan in Uvalde County. While driving the county roads, we stopped for Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, a large flock of Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Savannah Sparrows and colorful Lark Sparrows. We walked around the ponds at Cook's Slough and had scope views of Neotropical and Double-crested Cormorants for a good comparison, Blue-winged Teal and Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks. A flyover of four interacting Crested Caracaras was exciting as were our first Golden-fronted Woodpeckers and Western Kingbirds. After our picnic, we walked the forested trail where, to the thrill of all, we found a vocalizing Painted Bunting! A pair of Summer Tanagers was also vocalizing, providing good looks, and Vermilion Flycatchers were feeding over the trails. What a great start to our week!

We spent the afternoon at Chalk Bluff Park, named for the beautiful cliffs overlooking the Nueces River. Here we spotted Harris's Hawks and Common Ravens on our drive, and we kept watch for sparrows on the entrance road, finding Lark, White-crowned and White-throated Sparrows as well as Bell's Vireos, Blue Grosbeaks and Hooded Orioles. An odd assortment of exotic animals was housed at the headquarters including Zebras, Camels and an Emu. Vermilion Flycatchers were everywhere, and we had good looks at Bronzed Cowbirds, scoped Canyon Wrens on the cliffs and heard a Couch's Kingbird. We ended our first productive day of birding at Neal's Restaurant and tallied our sightings, anxiously looking forward to tomorrow's adventure.

Mon., Apr. 24 **Neal's Lodges | Garner State Park | Pecan Grove | Rio Frio Bat Cave**

We spent today birding the productive area around Neal's Lodges. To our delight, the previously reported Tropical Parulas were heard vocalizing in the restaurant parking area, and we were thrilled to see this rare species for the U.S. We also found Northern Parula, Yellow-throated Warbler, Yellow-throated Vireo and enjoyed our first looks at the cute Black-crested Titmouse. Near the cabins, an Olive Sparrow was singing in a tree for good looks by all, and a Yellow-breasted Chat was seen in the same area. A visit to the nearby Garner State Park was very productive with Indigo Buntings and Blue Grosbeaks in the field as well as a Nashville and Yellow-throated Warbler, and Lincoln Sparrows at the feeders. We followed a pair of Clay-colored Sparrows, but only had quick looks at this lovely sparrow. After lunch, we visited the local Pecan Grove, finding Ash-throated and Brown-crested Flycatchers, two more Painted Buntings and a surprise Grasshopper Sparrow.



We had an early dinner and traveled the short distance to enjoy one of the highlights of this tour, the visit to the Rio Frio Bat Cave, to watch an estimated 5+ million Mexican Free-tailed Bats emerge from their cave nearby. Cave Swallows began entering the cave before the bats emerged, and a pair of Great Horned Owls was spotted waiting for the spectacle to begin. As we walked to the cave entrance, we had good looks at a Pyrrhuloxia. The local bat biologist explained the phenomena as we waited for it to begin. Wow! The bats suddenly emerged in a wide, steady stream on this calm night, and we were surrounded by vocalizing bats and the sounds of their wings. Thousands at time flew over us, and they all turned together towards San Antonio to feed over the agricultural fields to the east. A spectacle of nature we would never forget!

Tues., April 25 Lost Maples State Natural Area

This morning we drove northeast on the winding, scenic hill country roads to the wonderful Lost Maples Natural Area, a 2,200-acre protected site straddling the serene Sabinal River. Upon arrival, as we waited in the parking area, we heard a Golden-cheeked Warbler and quickly found it low in a tree for close looks by all. What great luck! We drove to the bird feeding blind and the entrance to the Maple Trail, spending some time at the feeders to see Inca, White-tipped and White-winged Doves; Black-crested Titmouse; Olive, Chipping, Lark, White-crowned and Lincoln's Sparrows and Lazuli and Indigo Buntings. Some stayed at the feeders and others walked the Maple Trail, which runs along the Sabinal River. Yellow-throated, Black-throated Green, Orange-crowned and Black-and-white Warblers were seen as well as a vocalizing Louisiana Waterthrush perched above the water. After a picnic lunch, we stopped at the park host's feeders and found Painted Buntings, Summer Tanager, Blue Grosbeak and a Scott's Oriole. What a wonderful variety of bird species was provided by this truly magical natural area! We stopped for dinner at a local Mexican restaurant in Leakey to celebrate our successful day of birding at Lost Maples!

Wed., April 26 Kerr Wildlife Management Area

Our route to Kerr Wildlife Management Area traveled through an area of large Texas ranches, many of them specializing in hunting exotic wildlife, and we identified Blackbuck, Scimitar-horned Oryx, American Bison and Fringe-eared Oryx with help from Dan, our zoo expert. Located in the Guadalupe River Basin, the habitat is perfect for Black-capped Vireo and Golden-cheeked Warblers. The management staff directed us to a reliable area for the vireo, and we heard White-eyed, Bell's, Yellow-throated, and Red-eyed Vireos there. Waiting patiently, we eventually heard a Black-capped Vireo close to the road and followed it through the brush, but not everyone was able to get good looks. We tried a different area and had good looks at a Golden-cheeked Warbler, always happy to see this lovely warbler again! We returned to our original area and again heard and followed a Black-capped Vireo until all had good looks that we had definitely earned!

We stopped for lunch at the Hunt Store, and many enjoyed their delicious ice cream to celebrate our success! An afternoon walk along the Rio Frio River below Neal's Lodges provided good looks at another Tropical Parula along with Summer Tanager, Hooded Oriole, Bewick's Wren and Spotted Sandpiper. After our final dinner at the lodge, some went out for a night walk and had good looks at a pair of Eastern Screech-Owls, heard a Chuck-will's-widow and finally found the minute Leopard Frog! A striped bark scorpion was found using an ultra-violet light. What a nice ending to a delightful visit to the Texas Hill Country!

Thur., April 27 Departure to San Antonio

We had our last delicious breakfast with Mary, our server for the week, and reluctantly returned to San Antonio, taking with us memories of the new friends we had met, and the many experiences we had enjoyed, during our week in the Hill Country of Central Texas!

Photos by Kirsten Hines: Group with Bats Overhead, Tropical Parula, Clay-colored Sparrow, Painted Bunting, Black-throated Sparrow, Vermillion Flycatcher, House Finch, Lark Sparrow, Frio Bat Cave, Pyrrhuloxia