

# Texas' Big Bend: Monsoon Madness With Naturalist Journeys & Caligo Ventures



**July 20 – 27, 2019**

866.900.1146

800.426.7781

520.558.1146

[naturalistjourneys@gmail.com](mailto:naturalistjourneys@gmail.com)

[www.naturalistjourneys.com](http://www.naturalistjourneys.com) or find us on

Facebook at

Naturalist Journeys, LLC



Naturalist Journeys, LLC | Caligo Ventures PO Box 16545 Portal, AZ 85632 PH: 520.558.1146 | 800.426.7781 Fax 650.471.7667  
[naturalistjourneys.com](http://naturalistjourneys.com) | [caligo.com](http://caligo.com) | [info@caligo.com](mailto:info@caligo.com) | [naturalistjourneys@gmail.com](mailto:naturalistjourneys@gmail.com)



## Tour Summary

9-Day / 8-Night Big Bend Wildlife Tour with Michael Marsden  
\$2390 from El Paso, TX  
Airport is El Paso International (ELP)

## Tour Highlights

- ✓ Take a break! Slow down and take life more slowly, the rural “Texas Way”
- ✓ Visit two of the three Sky Island mountain ranges in the state of Texas
- ✓ See beautiful, rugged west Texas mountains in their greenest season during Big Bend’s “second spring”
- ✓ Experience blooming agave, which attracts Lucifer Hummingbird
- ✓ Travel along some of the most ruggedly beautiful roads in west Texas
- ✓ Find Pronghorn and Scaled Quail in desert grasslands
- ✓ Experience amazingly clear desert night skies; listen for Elf Owl calling
- ✓ Spot many of the 70 border specialty butterflies, including Poling’s and Sandia Hairstreaks, Hepburn’s and “Chisos” Nais Metalmarks, Chinati Checkerspot, Chisos Banded-Skipper, and Chisos Skipperling

Immerse yourself in the bold landscape of Big Bend National Park, home to the stunningly-eroded Chisos Mountains, a treasure in the midst of North American’s Chihuahuan Desert region.

Our summer trip takes place in July. Why go to Texas in summer? This is ecologically a most exciting time, the monsoon season, when summer rains bring a burst of biodiversity and ignite a seasonally-lush desert landscape. In summer the desert can be green! The rugged mountains, rolling hills, and deep canyons glow in red and orange hues, as waterfalls cascade over cliffs.

Experience the rhythm of monsoon season for a very different look at Big Bend and the Davis Mountains. Resident birds are still active. They have fledged young are now busy teaching them to survive. First migrants, particularly shorebirds, may even be heading back through. A number of showy wildflowers bloom only in this season and waterfalls can stream from the cliffs in Chisos Basin! Monsoon season is also the season for reptiles, many of which are colorful and unique to the region. Search for mammals like kangaroo rats, jackrabbits, Coyote, Badger, Javelina, and even Mountain Lion or Black Bear. A bonus? In July you can still find the Colima Warbler. which may even come down to lower elevations in the Basin. We find summer a fascinating time and great for blooming agaves, which attract bats and breeding Lucifer Hummingbird.

We enjoy lovely accommodations and some fun West Texas cuisine along the way ... and of course, good company.

## Itinerary

### Sat., July 20 Arrive in El Paso | Alpine

Please plan to arrive in El Paso, Texas no later than Noon today. Many come in the evening before to rest up from travel and be ready to go.





Meet your guide at the airport and plan on a scenic trip with birding en route to the Davis Mountains; make sure your binoculars are handy! We drive east about two hours to Van Horn where we take a break, then continue through lush grassland — this cattle country is home to Chihuahuan Raven, Black-tailed Jackrabbit, and Golden Eagle. We pass through Marfa, a contemporary art mecca in remote West Texas. The final half hour drive to Alpine is very scenic, with rocky outcrops above which we may see Zone-tailed Hawk. Our dinner is at a very popular western steak house that specializes in creative cowboy cuisine.

*Accommodations at the Holland Hotel in Alpine, TX (D)*

### **Sun., July 21 The Post at Marathon | Prairie Dogs | Big Bend National Park**

This morning we make a quick visit to Sul Ross University's cactus garden, created by the famous botanist Barton Warnock. Then, passing through grassland habitat as we leave Alpine we are likely to see Scaled Quail and Scissortail Flycatcher. This morning we also visit a lush birding oasis at the Post, a well-watered park that once housed the U.S. Cavalry. Large cottonwood trees and a small reservoir attract a variety of birds such as Vermilion Flycatcher, Summer Tanager, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, and a good possibility at this time of year: Yellow-billed Cuckoo.

Next, we visit an active Prairie Dog town to observe their lively and often-comical behavior. With luck, a Golden Eagle may be spotted here on patrol and Burrowing Owl may be sunning on the colony's mounds. Keep an eye out for Pronghorn, as well as migrating Long-billed Curlew or other water birds.

We then turn south towards Big Bend National Park, interpreting intriguing geologic features along the way. We pass through low Chihuahuan desert that was once so covered by Tobosa grass that the early settlers could cut it as hay!

Our destination is Chisos Mountain Lodge, nestled into the rocks at Chisos Basin in the heart of the national park. We stay cool and comfortable here at 5,400 feet, and our backyard for four nights is the rugged Chisos Mountains, eastern most of the U.S. sky islands. It is the southernmost mountain range in the mainland United States, and the only mountain range fully-contained within the boundary of a national park.

Relax, settle in, and enjoy dinner with fellow travelers in the lodge's dining room. We admire the amazingly dark skies of the park if the night is clear!

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

### **Mon., July 22 Big Bend National Park | Rio Grande Village**



We get an early start this morning to explore the cottonwood groves and wetland habitats of the Rio Grande. We want to get to the area early enough for prime bird activity. Painted Bunting often steal the show, but other species command attention as well: Greater Roadrunner, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Inca Dove, Yellow Warbler, Indigo Bunting, and Blue Grosbeak.

Along the campground's brushy edges, listen for the unique songs of Yellow-breasted Chat, and the scratchy delivery of Bell's Vireo. Common Black Hawk has nested here for several years, and Black Vulture can be seen along the river, sunning with wings spread. Along the nature trail, which is a boardwalk through a beaver pond, the blend of lush cattails and rushes, colorful dragonflies, desert scrub, and distant views of the Chisos is striking!

Enjoy a picnic lunch with a view of Mexico's Sierra del Carmen Mountains. A siesta under shade of the cottonwoods is a possibility 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 (B,L,D)*

## **Tues., July 23 Big Bend National Park | Boot Springs**

Enjoy a full day of short walks or longer hikes in Chisos Basin. Those with energy can scale the nine-mile loop trail high into the Chisos where we are most likely to see breeding Colima Warbler, now fledged and feeding their families. We should also find early migrants: Scott's Oriole, Black-chinned Sparrow, and both Blue-throated and Rufous Hummingbirds. The entire hike is fascinating, though some may want to only do a portion of it. We should encounter migrant hummingbirds near the top in abundant Salvia flowers, and the lizard activity, including predatory Alligator Lizards is high. And, we have all day to do this hike, so many can participate.

We climb steadily through scenic oak and juniper woodland, finding an abundance of Mexican plant species like Evergreen Sumac and Drooping Juniper. Texas Madrones are magnets for warblers, some of which are already on the move south. The rains of the monsoon season produce many colorful wildflowers and scores of fascinating large insects such as Praying Mantis, walking sticks, huge and colorful Lubber Grasshoppers, and katydids. Butterflies abound!

In sheltered Boot Canyon we find huge pines and Arizona Cypress, a Mexican relict species. Here is perhaps our best opportunity to see birds like Blue-throated Hummingbird, Mexican Jay, Hutton's Vireo, and Acorn Woodpecker. We watch the sky for Peregrine Falcon and other raptors, and listen for the chatter of White-throated Swift. The route down through Laguna Meadows opens to great vistas and more birding. Look for



soaring Zone-tailed Hawk at (or even below!) eye level. Listen for the trill of Broad-tailed Hummingbird as they whistle by, and watch the rocky slopes for both Black-chinned and Rufous-crowned Sparrows. Those who do not wish to scale the mountain can enjoy a day at leisure. On this, or another evening, your guide offers an optional drive out to a location where we have a great chance of observing reptiles, tarantulas, Elf Owl, Poorwill, and possibly Lesser or migrating Greater Nighthawk.

Summer is a great time to enjoy other taxa, including ornately-decorated Southern Earless Lizard, several species of whiptails, crevice spiny lizards, and tree lizards. One of the most commonly seen snakes in the park is the rosy-hued Western Coachwhip.

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

### **Wed., July 24 Big Bend National Park | Burro Mesa Pouroff | Santa Elena Canyon | Blue Creek Canyon**

Today we head west towards magnificent Santa Elena Canyon. Our first stop is at the Old Sam Nail Ranch, where the windmill provides water that attracts Varied Bunting, warblers, orioles, tanagers, and a variety of other songbirds, including the spelling bee nightmares Pyrrhuloxia and Phainopepla. Late July might give us a peek at early migrants and we never know what we'll find!

A highlight today is a walk to Burro Mesa Pouroff, a unique geologic feature where unusual plants like the Texas Persimmon and Texas Buckeye bear fruit that attracts both mammals and birds. The surrounding arid hills provide good habitat for Black-chinned Sparrow, and the canyon walls often 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 and residents, alike. This area is home to some of the easternmost occurrences of Lucy's Warbler in the U.S. and we watch for them in Honey Mesquites near the campground entrance.

In the afternoon, we may visit the historic ghost town of Castolon where the only surviving business is the Castolon store; ice cream or a cold drink can be enjoyed on the shaded porch. If time allows, we may also visit the beautiful Blue Creek Canyon, where Lucifer Hummingbird eats nectar at towering agaves and wild, red Chuparosa flowers.





At Santa Elena Canyon, we enjoy a walk along a trail in the shade of 1,000-foot limestone walls laid down during the Cretaceous Period. This is one of the park's most impressive sites.

From here we take a back road north along the west side of the park and enjoy dinner in Terlingua at a restaurant as unique as its desert surroundings. The ride home gives us a chance to pull over in a particularly dark sky area to admire the stars and listen for calls of Coyote.

*Accommodations at Hotel Limpia, Fort Davis (B,L,D)*

### **Thurs., July 25 Christmas Mountains | Fort Davis | McDonald Observatory**

This morning we say our goodbyes to Big Bend National Park and head back north to Fort Davis. En route we visit Carolyn Ohl-Johnson's unique Christmas Mountains home and oasis. While there, we can hike along a cactus-studded hillside on a trail she cleared herself, or admire a host of birds that visit the ponds and feeders in her wonderful yard. Lucifer Hummingbird is her most common hummer and Varied Bunting are regular visitors; many rarities have shown up here as well.

We arrive at Fort Davis, a small town located at the junction of two flowing streams, excellent for birding and very scenic. There is a historic fort to explore here, and a state park known for good chances of seeing Montezuma Quail at the feeders. Enjoy dinner tonight in the cozy dining room of our hotel.

*Accommodations at Hotel Limpia (B,L,D)*

### **Fri., July 26 Davis Mountain State Park | TNC Reserve | Balmorhea State Park**

The Davis Mountains, a sky island mountain range, is our backyard to explore as we learn more about the region and its hummingbirds. Through talks, walks, and demonstrations we begin to understand the ecological significance of these mountains and their link between Mexico's Sierra Madre Oriental, the Chisos, and the Rocky Mountains.

Based on what we have seen so far on our trip we prioritize our time to visit key birding areas. The bold geology of Fort Davis is volcanic in origin and quite spectacular to observe as we explore. We visit The Nature Conservancy's outstanding Davis Mountain Preserve, high in the Davis Mountains. Since this 33,000-acre preserve was established, a number of very exciting birds have been recorded here in habitats that include a mix of conifer trees and maples. Those familiar with Arizona's sky island range — the Chiricahua Mountains —



recognize specialty species of the region such as Montezuma Quail, Olive and Grace's Warblers, Buff-breasted Flycatcher, Painted Redstart, Western Tanager, and (rare) Dusky-capped Flycatcher.

If time allows, we visit Balmorhea State Park, a lush oasis. Set at the northern end of the Davis Mountains, an artesian spring pours forth millions of gallons of water, encouraging the growth of tall trees and marsh vegetation. The park is a haven for birds, with beauties like Painted Bunting coming to the feeders. A nearby lake attracts migrating shorebirds and waders at this time of year and we are sure to check out the shoreline. We also look for Bullock's Oriole, late-season Western Kingbird, Pied-billed Grebe, and two species of rare desert fish. Flowers near the entrance station often host the rather local Rawson's Metalmark.

*Accommodations at Hotel Limpia (B,L,D)*

## Sat., July. 27 Departures from El Paso

Our journey comes to an end today in El Paso. We have a three-hour drive, though a time change works in our favor, and we plan to arrive at the airport by approximately 11:00 AM, so plan your flights out no earlier than noon, please. (B)

## A Note About Pace

Big Bend is fascinating to visit at this time of year, but do be prepared for rains. These rains cool down the desert temperatures so July actually feels cooler than May! The trip is best experienced by those fit enough to do some hiking, with one longer hike planned mid-week up into the oak and conifer habitats of the mountains. This is a nine-mile loop, with a gain of almost 2000 feet in elevation. You *can* elect to sit this one out. 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. Days at lower elevation can be HOT (90°+) on occasion, but summer rains bring cooling cloud cover. Birding is fascinating and we emphasize other aspects of natural history, too. With the monsoon season in full force, we have bursts of wildflowers and you may see a flash flood in one of the desert washes! Expect full field days with evenings to relax.

## Cost of the Journey

### Plan Ahead!

Protect yourself with [Allianz Travel Insurance](#). As of January 2017, Naturalist Journeys pays 100% of your flight carbon offset.

### Group Size

This is a birding and wildlife trip, maximum of 12 and minimum of 4 participants.

### Travel Information

The airport is El Paso International Airport (ELP). Plan to arrive in El Paso no later than Noon on July 20, and plan to depart after Noon on July 27. If you arrive early or stay on after the trip in El Paso, 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 Microtel Inn and Suites next door to the Wyndham.

### Cost of the Journey

Cost of the journey is \$2390 DBL / \$2895 SGL, per person, based on double occupancy, from El Paso, TX (ELP). This cost includes: accommodations for 8 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 – \$300 per participant) may apply, or we may request that you pick up the cost of a few additional dinners in lieu of this surcharge.

### Photo Credits

Pronghorn, Naturalist Journeys Stock (NJS); View from Rio Grande Village, NJS; Claret Cup, NJS; Montezuma Quail, Peg Abbott (PA); Yucca Bloom, Narca Moore-Craig; Chisos Misty Morning, NJS; Golden Eagle, Greg Smith (GS); Summer Tanager, Tom Dove; Burrowing Owl, GS; Greater Roadrunner, NJS; Inca Dove, Barry Ramdass; Indigo Bunting, Doug Pratt; Chisos Mountain Lodge, NJS; Prickly Pear Bloom, NJS; Blue-throated Hummingbird, Steve Wolfe; Mexican Jay, NJS; Elf Owl, Woody Wheeler (WW); Group at Santa Elena Canyon, WW; Lucy's Warbler, PA; Lucifer Hummingbird, Bob Behrstock; Coyote, NJS; White-eared Hummingbird, NJS; Painted Redstart, PA; Big Bend Sunsets, Woody Wheeler.

*Naturalist Journeys, LLC is an equal opportunity service provider and committed to the goal of ensuring equal opportunity for all in employment and program delivery.*

