

South Texas Birding & Wildlife

With Naturalist Journeys & Caligo Ventures



February 21 –28, 2021

866.900.1146

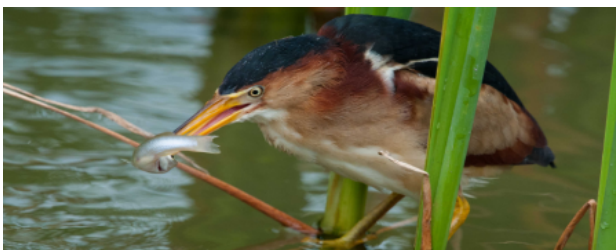
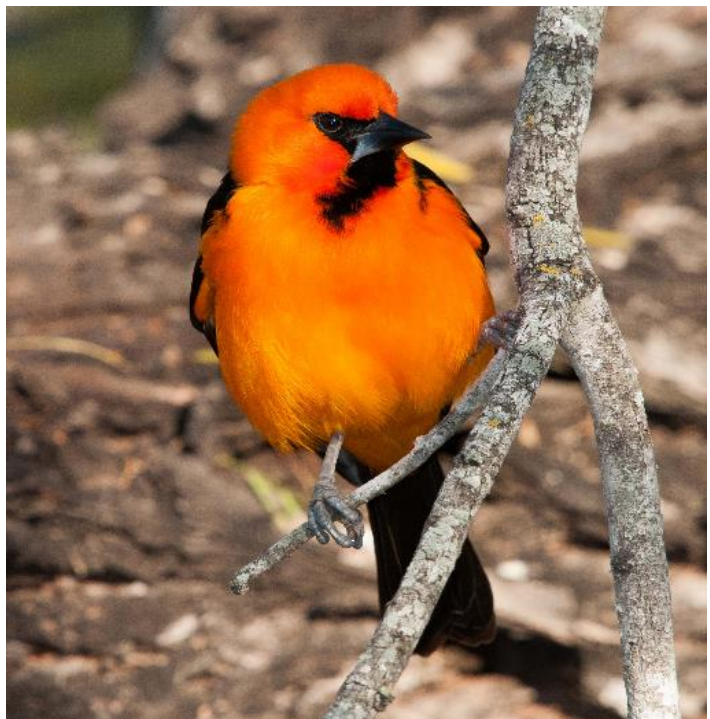
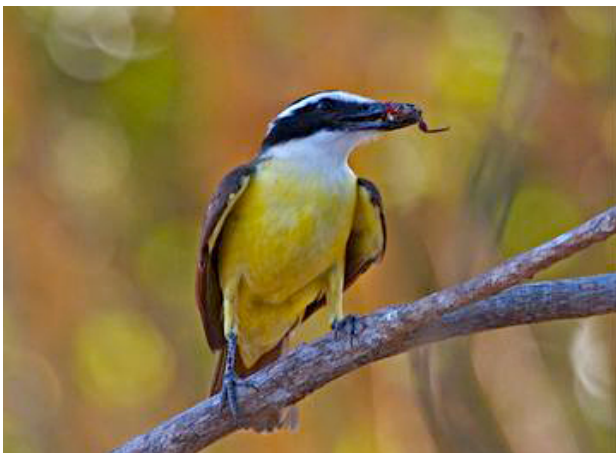
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Tour Highlights

- Enjoy a boat tour at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge to witness the wintering grounds of the only self-sustaining population of Whooping Cranes
- Bird along Paradise Pond, the Birding Center in Port Aransas, Mustang Island, and Corpus Christi
- Search for Least Grebe, Anhinga, Gray Hawk, Altamira Oriole, and with luck both Green and Ringed Kingfishers at Sabal Palm Sanctuary
- Spot Green Jay, Long-billed Thrasher, Olive Sparrow, and perhaps a herd of Javelina at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge
- Bird at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, one of the gems of our US refuge system.
- See birding hotspots such as Falcon Dam, Roma Bluffs, Estero Llano Grande State Park, Anzalduas, Rancho Lomitas, and more
- Learn about local history at Brownsville and Rancho Lomitas
- Explore the World Birding Center site at Edinburg Scenic Wetlands in search of ducks, wading birds, kingfishers, wintering warblers, and Buff-bellied and other hummingbirds

Tour Summary

8-Day / 7-Night South Texas Birding & Nature Tour with Michael Marsden
 \$2290 from Corpus Christi, TX, Departing McAllen, TX
 Arrival Airport is Corpus Christi International (CRP);
 Departure Airport is McAllen Miller International (MFE)

"Plenty of birds plus a great experienced leader equals an unequalled Rio Grande safari."

— Chase Davies

South Texas is one of the great birding destinations in the United States, and for good reason. Due to its proximity to the humid tropics of Mexico, the subtropical woodlands of the Rio Grande Valley boast over two dozen tropical bird species that spill across the border, from chachalacas to pauraques. Here, colorful Great Kiskadee and personable Green Jay mingle with temperate species. These tropical species occur nowhere else in the United States.

We explore three of South Texas' most productive regions: coastal lagoons and shallow wetlands that throng with thousands of shorebirds, herons, and waterfowl (and wintering endangered Whooping Crane); the arid inland expanse of Tamaulipan thorn-scrub, which harbors a collection of species typical of the American Southwest, like Cactus Wren and Pyrrhuloxia; and the subtropical savannas, wetlands, and riparian woodlands of the Lower Rio Grande Valley with its decidedly tropical species like Hook-billed Kite and Altamira Oriole.

Additionally, over 300 species of butterflies have been recorded in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Many sites we visit have plantings to attract these butterflies. If it is a mild winter, we may see a diversity of these delightful creatures, as well as some of the nearly 100 species of dragonflies and damselflies found in the area.

Itinerary



Sun., Feb. 21 Arrival in Corpus Christi | Texas Coastal Bend Birding

Welcome to one of America's top birding hotspots, often referred to as the Texas Tropics. If you come from winter-bound areas, warm air, fresh breezes, and brilliant blooms let you know you've reached an exotic realm without ever leaving the USA!

For a group pick-up, please plan to arrive at Corpus Christi International Airport (CRP) no later than 1:00 PM. If you must arrive later, let us know in advance so that we can make special arrangements to meet you. From the airport, we head north to Rockport, but enjoy plenty of opportunities for relaxed roadside birding along the way.

After checking into our hotel, we enjoy dinner at one of our favorite restaurants, sampling some of the wonderful local seafood. This first group meal also serves as an opportunity to get acquainted with your guide and fellow traveling companions.

Accommodations at the Inn at Fulton Harbor, Fulton, TX (D)

Mon., Feb. 22

Whooping Crane Boat Tour | Aransas National Wildlife Refuge

Although it remains one of the most endangered birds in North America, Whooping Crane populations have steadily increased from a low of fifteen birds in the early twentieth century to well over four hundred. Nonetheless, despite ongoing conservation efforts to create new populations, Aransas National Wildlife Refuge hosts the wintering grounds of the only remaining self-sustaining population. On our first morning in Texas, we take a boat trip to Aransas National Wildlife Refuge to observe these special birds. We have a good chance of seeing several family groups of Whooping Crane during our scheduled boat trip.

While on the boat we also look for several species of herons, egrets, and even Roseate Spoonbill. Captain Tommy guides us, aiming to get within close range of these remarkable creatures. With everyone alert on deck, we often find Long-billed Curlew, American Oystercatcher, Seaside Sparrow, and Black-bellied Whistling-Duck,



as well as a number of other waterfowl and shorebirds. Past trips have produced rarities such as Short-eared Owl and Greater Flamingo.

After lunch, we drive north to access Aransas National Wildlife Refuge by land, where we check the visitor center with its many displays and small gift shop. Then we drive the 16-mile Loop Road, which passes through a variety of habitats including edges of open water, mudflats, freshwater and saltwater marshes, coastal prairie, oak motte, oak savanna, and grassy fields. Non-avian creatures we may encounter include Texas Coral Snake, White-tailed Deer, Javelina (Peccary), and Nine-banded Armadillo. With luck, we may see a Bobcat.

Tonight, we enjoy dinner at another great local restaurant. If the group is willing, we may visit the refuge at dusk in search of mammals and perhaps Short-eared Owl.

Accommodations at the Inn at Fulton Harbor (B,L,D)

Tues., Feb. 23 Port Aransas | Rockport | Corpus Christi | South Texas Ranchland

After an early breakfast we will enjoy morning birding around the Rockport area, including Cape Valero, where we should get close views of ducks, shorebirds, and waders. Then we drive inland back to Corpus Christi where we start to come across more and more of the valley specialties such as White-tipped Dove, Great Kiskadee, and Green Jay. We will have lunch in Corpus Christi.

After lunch, we head for Kingsville and visit the bird feeders at the King Ranch Visitor Center where Curve-billed Thrasher and Pyrrhuloxia are often seen. Continuing southward, much of the journey is through the historic ranchlands of South Texas with chances of Snow Goose, Sandhill Crane, Harris's Hawk, Crested Caracara, Vermilion Flycatcher, Cave Swallow, and Brewer's Blackbird.

The Rancho Viejo Country Club and Resort is conveniently situated just west of Brownsville. Well-appointed guest rooms and delectable on-site dining options offer the chance to unwind after birding. The attractive



grounds feature number of resacas (a type of oxbow lake constituting former channels of the Rio Grande) and other great birding opportunities. Specialties in season include Black-bellied Whistling Duck, Ringed Kingfisher, and Buff-bellied Hummingbird among many other species.

Accommodations at the Rancho Viejo Country Club and Resort (B,L,D)

Wed., Feb. 24

Old Port Isabel Road | Laguna Atascosa NWR | South Padre Island

After breakfast, we drive straight to Old Port Isabel Road, Birds here include White-tailed Hawk, Aplomado Falcon, Long-billed Curlew, Cassin's Sparrow. We also try to make a stop at Bayview resacas; here we have a great chance at Anhingas, and certainly kingfishers and other water birds.

Heading north from Old Port Isabel, we visit Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. Lying on the western shore of the Laguna Madre, the refuge protects over 65,000 acres of coastal habitats. More than 410 species of birds have been recorded here, including Aplomado Falcon. Extirpated by the 1950s from much of its original range in the United States, this elegant falcon is making a comeback in this part of the world due to reintroduction efforts by the Peregrine Fund.

At the visitor center and nearby trails, we check out the feeders for close-up views of Green Jay, Long-billed Thrasher, Olive Sparrow, and perhaps a herd of Javelina (Peccary). With luck, we may also encounter Coyote, Bobcat, Nine-banded Armadillo, Texas Tortoise, or even (but very improbable!) an Ocelot.

After lunch at a local restaurant, we then head east to South Padre Island, stopping briefly on the way to bird the coastal flats along Highway 100 in search of Wilson's Plover, Gull-billed Tern, and White-tailed Hawk. At the South Padre Island Convention Center, a boardwalk provides access to wetlands along the Laguna Madre that can provide incredible views of normally secretive rails such as Clapper and Virginia.

There are also many other species to see here, including Reddish Egret, and Tricolored and Little Blue Herons, Black Skimmer, Sandwich Tern, Brown and White Pelicans, American Avocet, and various other shorebirds, terns, and waders. We also hope to find Piping Plover—one of the country's most threatened shorebirds. The Center's butterfly garden and other protected woodlands nearby provide habitat for wintering songbirds.

Following the island visit, we head back to Brownsville, which has the largest parrot roost in South Texas and if everyone's not too tired after a full day of birding, we could fit in a visit to the roost before dinner. There are sometimes as many as 300 individuals of these colorful (and noisy!) birds roosting together. Red-crowned Parrot is the most numerous, but Red-lore, White-fronted, Yellow-headed, and Lilac-crowned Parrots are all possible.

Accommodations at the Rancho Viejo Country Club and Resort (B,L,D)



Thurs., Feb. 25 Santa Ana NWR | Estero Llano Grande State Park

This morning we head towards Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, which protects 2,000 acres in the heart of the Rio Grande Valley Wildlife Corridor. With well over 300 species of birds recorded, many birders regard this reserve as the highlight of a South Texas visit. Extensive trails allow exploration of wetlands, fields, and Tamaulipan thorn-scrub habitats. We listen for the boisterous calls of Couch's Kingbird and Great Kiskadee, as well as the repeated whistle of the diminutive Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet. To get eye-level views of Gray Hawk and a chance at seeing the rare Hook-billed Kite, there is the option of going up the hawk watch tower. Santa Ana is also a great site to see all three North American kingfishers, although their day-to-day presence depends on water levels at the various impoundments. At red-flowering shrimp plants we check for Buff-bellied and other hummingbirds. Least Grebe may cruise the small ponds and we keep our eyes open for Sora, ibis, Neotropical Cormorant, and wintering shorebirds.

From one of the oldest reserves in the valley, we then visit one of the newest: Estero Llano Grande State Park in Weslaco. Amazingly, it has already accrued a bird list almost as impressive as that of its older cousin. It offers a wonderful variety of wetland and woodland habitats with plenty of easy walking trails that attract more birders than just about anywhere else in the valley. Some of the species we look for here include Cinnamon Teal, Fulvous Whistling Duck, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, Common Pauraque, Green Kingfisher, Yellow-headed Blackbird, and Clay-colored Thrush. We then continue west to our lodgings for the next three nights at the delightful Alamo Inn.

Accommodations at Alamo Inn (B,L,D)

Fri., Feb. 26 Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park | Anzalduas County Park | Edinburg Scenic Wetlands

Today we visit Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park, one of the valley's World Birding Center sites. Bentsen protects an array of habitats that support most of the valley's special birds. By walking short trails, we explore the riverine forest, ponds, thorn-scrub, and mesquite. We hope to see most of the South Texas specialties here including Plain Chachalaca, Altamira Oriole, White-tipped Dove, Green Jay, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, Clay-colored Thrush, and Great Kiskadee.

If there is interest, we could visit the gardens at the North American Butterfly Association's (NABA) International Butterfly Park, only a few minutes from Bentsen. During its short existence this site has already produced a huge number of butterfly species, including several first U.S. records. A feeding station at the Park often produces chachalacas, Altamira Oriole, Olive Sparrow, Long-billed Thrasher, and Clay-colored Thrush. In late 2018, the Park provided birders with multiple sightings of a Roadside Hawk.

For lunch we will enjoy a picnic prepared by the Inn, then visit Anzalduas County Park, where Spanish moss-clad live oak trees often host Tropical Parula and a variety of wintering warblers. In fields near the entrance road, we can try for Sprague's Pipit, a very local and rare wintering bird.

We then head for the World Birding Center site at Edinburg Scenic Wetlands where two major ponds draw in ducks and wading birds by the score, as well as kingfishers of all three species. The extensive native-plant gardens are a haven for wintering warblers, and the feeders attract Buff-bellied and other hummingbirds. Nearby McAllen has a regular evening roost of Green Parakeet that sometimes number in the hundreds; we may visit their roosting area before dinner.

Accommodations at the Alamo Inn (B,L,D)

Sat., Feb. 27

West Along the Rio Grande | Salineño | Falcon | Rancho Lomitas

Today we venture into higher and more arid lands to the west, following the Rio Grande River. We pass through Rio Grande City and Roma—once the most inland port for steamship traffic on the Rio Grande. We are likely to find a number of desert birds, which could include Verdin, Cactus Wren, Black-throated Sparrow, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Bewick's Wren, and Pyrrhuloxia.

During the earlier part of the morning we station ourselves along the Rio Grande, hoping for fly-by Red-billed Pigeon or perhaps Hook-billed Kite or Muscovy Duck. Hopefully, we are able to catch sight of two beautiful songbirds, Altamira and Audubon's Orioles. And there is just a chance of a White-collared Seedeater in cane beds growing along the river! Lunch is again a picnic provided by the Inn.

Continuing a short distance, we visit the 573-acre Falcon State Park adjacent to Falcon Dam, with chances of desert scrub species such as Greater Roadrunner, Curve-billed Thrasher, and even Northern Bobwhite. In the afternoon we visit Rancho Lomitas, a private ranch owned by Benito Trevino. Benito is a leading ethno-botanist and a fount of knowledge on local history and culture. An added attraction is that his land is also very birdy with good chances of both Audubon's Oriole and Scaled Quail at the feeders.

Accommodations at the Alamo Inn (B,L,D)

Sun., Feb. 28 McAllen Nature Center | Departures

We make sure that everyone who has not made other arrangements gets to the McAllen Miller International Airport (MFE) by noon. It's only a 15 minute or so drive from the Alamo Inn so there's time in the morning to do some last-minute birding at the McAllen Nature Center, an attractive area with easy walking, most of the Valley specialties, and less than 15 minutes from the airport—ideal for a few hours of birding before the flight home.

(B)

Guide Michael Marsden



Michael has been an avid birder since childhood in England but decided, for reasons that now escape him, on a career in law. Meeting Donna Knox on a birding trip, however, changed all that and, in 1996, he gave up his work as solicitor general to the Cayman Islands Government to start a new venture as a birding guide. Michael and Donna initially moved to Cayman House in Rockport, then to the San Pedro River Inn and the Paton Birders' Haven in S.E. Arizona, and are now happily back in Texas: this time in San Benito, an ideal base for Michael's interest in the wildlife and history of South Texas. As well as regular tours in the U.S./Mexico borderlands, Michael has guided birding trips to Cuba, Belize, Costa Rica, and Panama and has travelled extensively in Europe and the Americas. He met Peg Abbott being very gracious to Naturalist Journeys groups along Arizona's San Pedro River. He

now shares his guiding skills with us in Texas and beyond.

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.

Travel Information

Please plan to arrive at Corpus Christi International Airport (CRP) no later than 1:00 PM on February 21. If you must arrive later, let us know in advance so that we can make special arrangements to meet you. We plan to arrive at our departure airport, McAllen Miller International Airport (MFE), in McAllen by NOON on February 28, so please plan your flights out after 2:00 PM.

Cost of the Journey

Cost of the journey is \$2290 DBL / \$2795 SGL, based on double occupancy, from Corpus Christi, TX, departing McAllen, TX. Cost includes seven nights' accommodations, all meals as noted in the itinerary, airport transfers, ground transportation in vans, professional guide services, park and other entrance fees, and miscellaneous program expenses. Not included is round-trip airfare to Corpus Christi and from McAllen, personal expenses such as laundry, telephone, drinks from the bar, and gratuities for luggage handling or other services. Guide gratuities are at your discretion.

Photo Credits

Green Jay, Tom Dove (TD); Great Kiskadee, Bud Ferguson (BF); Least Bittern, TD; Vermilion Flycatcher, Steve Gantlett; Altamira Oriole, TD; Roseate Spoonbills, Betty Andres; Green Heron, Greg Smith (GS); American White Pelican, GS; Whooping Cranes, Robert Behrstock (RB); Green Jays, RB; Harris's Hawk, GS; Plain Chachalaca, TD; Tricolored Heron, Mike Boyce (MB); Great Kiskadee, GS; Birding Estero Llano Grande, RB; Roseate Spoonbill, Tony Beck; Rose-throated Becard, TD; Sora, Peg Abbott (PA); Buff-bellied Hummingbird, TD.

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