

South Texas Birding & Nature with Naturalist Journeys



February 15 – 23, 2023

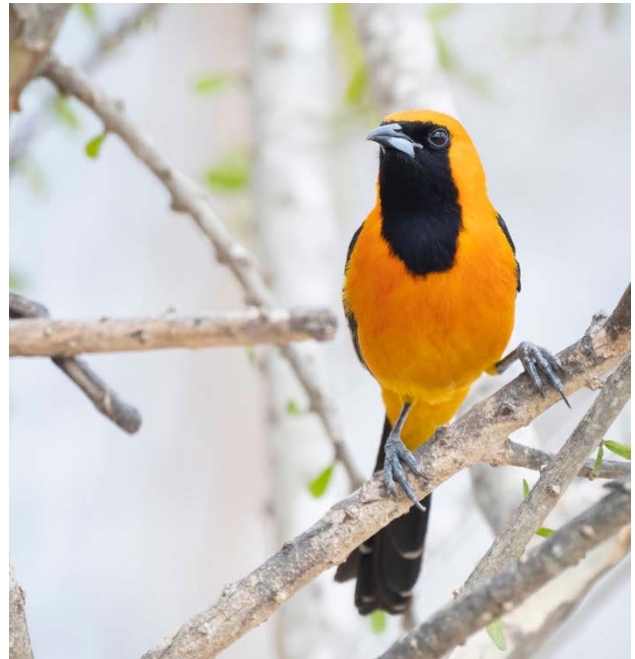
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South Texas is one of the great birding destinations in the United States, and for good reason. Due to its proximity to the humid tropics of Mexico, the subtropical woodlands of the Rio Grande Valley boast over two dozen tropical bird species that spill across the border, from chachalacas to pauragues. 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 their decidedly tropical species of birds, butterflies and other wildlife.

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, where 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.

Tour Highlights

- Enjoy a boat tour of Aransas Bay to view the only wild populations of Whooping Cranes on their wintering grounds, while being entertained by dolphins playing in the wake of the boat
- Visit premier birding sites of the Texas Coastal Bend in Port Aransas, Rockport, and Corpus Christi
- Search for Pauraque, Clay-colored Thrush, Long-billed Thrasher, Olive Sparrow, and other regional specialties at Laguna-Atascosa and Santa Ana NWRs and the World Birding Centers at Estero Llano Grande SP, Quinta Mazatlan, Edinburg Scenic Wetlands, and Bentsen-Rio Grande SP
- Delight in close views of Green Jay, Great Kiskadee, Altamira Oriole and other avian gems at feeders
- Experience the sight and sounds of hundreds of Red-crowned Parrot as they roost in Brownsville
- Visit the wetlands and coastal grasslands of Cameron County for shorebirds, waders, Least Grebe, Green and Ringed Kingfishers, White-tailed Hawk, and Aplomado Falcon
- Marvel at some of the 300+ butterfly species recorded in the valley at the National Butterfly Center and the Valley's butterfly gardens
- Learn about the fascinating history of South Texas while travelling through the historic ranchlands King and Kenedy Counties and visiting ethno-botanist Benito Trevino's Rancho Lomitas

Tour Summary

9-Day / 8-Night South Texas Birding & Nature Tour

\$2990, from Corpus Christi, Departing McAllen

Arrival Airport is Corpus Christi International (CRP); Departure Airport is McAllen Miller International (MFE)

Day-to-Day Itinerary

Wed., Feb. 15 Arrival in Corpus Christi | Hans Suter Wildlife Refuge | Mustang Island | Port Aransas | Rockport Beach Park

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. From the airport, we head north to Rockport with some productive birding stops on Mustang Island 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)

Thurs., Feb. 16 Whooping Crane Boat Tour | Lamar & Goose Island State Park

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. 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 Common Loon, as well as a number of other waterfowl and shorebirds

After lunch in Rockport, we drive north to the Lamar Peninsula and Goose Island State Park with their Live Oak woodlands, grasslands, and coastal and freshwater wetlands. Here we should get close views of Brown and American White Pelicans competing for food at the fish-cleaning stands, Roseate Spoonbill and Black-bellied Whistling-Duck on the 8th Street pastures, and Black-crested Titmouse, Long-billed Thrasher, and other species at the feeding stations. Non-avian species we may encounter include American Alligator, White-tailed Deer, Javelina (Peccary) and perhaps even a Bobcat. Tonight we enjoy dinner at another great local restaurant.

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

Fri., Feb. 17 Rockport | Indian Point Park | Hazel Bazemore County Park, Corpus Christi | South Texas Ranchlands

After an early breakfast we enjoy morning birding around the Rockport area, including Cape Valero in search of ducks, shorebirds, and waders. Then we drive inland back to Corpus Christi where at Hazel Bazemore County Park we start to come across more and more of the valley specialties such as White-tipped Dove, Great Kiskadee, and Green Jay.

After lunch in Corpus Christi, 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 a number of resacas (former channels of the Rio Grande, now oxbow lakes) and other birding opportunities. Specialties include Least Grebe, Black-bellied Whistling Duck, and Buff-bellied Hummingbird among many other species.

Accommodations in Brownsville (B,L,D)

Sat., Feb. 18 Old Port Isabel Road | Bayview Resacas | Laguna Atascosa NWR | South Padre Island

After breakfast, we drive straight to Old Port Isabel Road. Birds here include White-tailed Hawk, Long-billed Curlew, Cassin's Sparrow and, with luck, 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.

From there we head towards Laguna Atascosa by way of the Bayview resacas, where we have chances of Anhinga, Least Bittern, and kingfishers among other species. Lying on the western shore of the Laguna Madre, Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge protects over 65,000 acres of coastal habitats. More than 410 species of birds have been recorded here, including Aplomado Falcon. 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. With luck, we may also encounter Coyote, Bobcat, Nine-banded Armadillo, Texas Tortoise, or even (but very improbably!) an Ocelot.

After lunch at a local restaurant, we then head east. 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, Brown and American 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. We also visit the Birding and Nature Center at South Padre with its butterfly garden and chances of "Mangrove" Yellow Warbler in its stands of Black Mangrove.

On the return to Rancho Viejo, we shall stop briefly at wetlands along Hwy 48 in search of Wilson's Plover, Gull-billed Tern, and White-tailed Hawk. We aim to get back to Rancho Viejo in good time to allow some birding on the grounds before dinner.

Accommodations in Brownsville (B,L,D)

Sun., Feb. 19 Sabal Palm Sanctuary | Brownsville Landfill | Boca Chica | University Resaca, Brownsville | Oliveira Park

After breakfast at Rancho Viejo, our first destination is Sabal Palm Sanctuary, formerly a National Audubon reserve but now managed by the non-profit Gorgas Foundation. They have done a wonderful job of enhancing the sanctuary's already outstanding habitats including wetlands and one of the two last remnants of native Sabal Palm forest in the U.S. There are also bird feeding areas which attract several of the valley specialties, including Olive Sparrow, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, and both Altamira and Hooded Orioles. The variety of other wildlife here is outstanding, with butterflies such as Mexican Blue and Zebra Heliconia, and the endangered Speckled Racer among the many reptiles.

We shall then make a brief visit to the iconic (at least among birders) Brownsville Landfill. This became renowned as the only regular site for Tamaulipas Crow in the U.S., but numbers plummeted in the early years of the century and there have been few subsequent records until very recently. We keep our fingers crossed. After lunch (not at the landfill!) we drive the 18 miles of the Boca Chica TX-4 highway, which parallels the Rio Grande all the way to the Gulf of Mexico across a variety of habitats, including thorn-scrub, coastal grasslands, and salt-flats. The highway also bisects Elon Musk's Space X complex. This is a wonderful road for raptors, including White-tailed Hawk and possibly Aplomado Falcon, and the flats can hold thousands of shorebirds and dozens of Reddish Egrets. And there's always a chance of Northern Gannets from the beach.

The resaca on the University of Texas's beautiful campus in Brownsville is our next stop in the hope of Green and Ringed Kingfishers. Anhinga and Black Phoebe are regulars, and the trees here are a favorite haunt of interesting warblers.

Oliveira Park, the site of the largest parrot roost in Texas, is our last stop today. 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-lored, White-fronted, Yellow-headed, and Lilac-crowned Parrots are all possible.

Accommodations in Brownsville (B,L,D)

Mon., Feb. 20 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, White and White-faced Ibises, Neotropic 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)

Tues., Feb. 21

West Along the Rio Grande | Salineño | Falcon State Park | 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, 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 at the wonderful feeders maintained by Lois Hughes and Merle Ihne. 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 ethnobotanist 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 Audubon's Oriole and Scaled Quail at the feeders.

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

Wed., Feb. 22 Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park | National Butterfly Center | 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) National Butterfly Center, 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.

For lunch we enjoy a picnic from the inn, 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)

Thurs., Feb. 23 Quinta Mazatlan, McAllen | Departures

We make sure that everyone with booked flights 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 Quinta Mazatlan, an attractive area with easy walking, most of the valley specialties, a historic adobe hacienda, all less than 5 minutes from the airport—ideal for a few hours of relaxed birding before the flight home. Please make flights out after 2:00 PM (B)

Tour Details

Plan Ahead!

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

Cost of the Journey

\$2990 DBL / \$3450 SGL, based on double occupancy, from Corpus Christi, TX, departing McAllen, TX. Cost includes eight 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.

Travel Information

Please plan to arrive at Corpus Christi International Airport (CRP) no later than 1:00 PM on February 15. We plan to arrive at our departure airport, McAllen Miller International Airport (MFE), in McAllen by NOON on February 23, so please plan your flights out after 2:00 PM.

All photos by Bryan Calk.

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.

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