

Texas' Big Bend National Park

with Naturalist Journeys



Apr. 24 – May 1, 2023

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“It’s a totally different world and fascinating. A new set of everything — climate, birds, mammals, geology, history”

— *Franni Tourtellot*



Immerse yourself in the big, bold landscape of Big Bend National Park, home to the stunningly eroded Chisos Mountain range and the elusive Colima Warbler. A playground of light, the rugged mountains, rolling hills, and deep canyons glow with rich, red and orange hues. Life forms of the Chihuahuan Desert are fascinating and abound.

Experience the rhythm of spring bird migration, as Eastern, Western, Mexican, and Rocky Mountain birds converge — nearly 450 species, many rare or vagrant. Big Bend also has its share of mammals, from Kangaroo Rat, skunks, Badger, and Javelina, to Mountain Lion and Black Bear. And of course, plentiful reptiles.

In addition to wildlife watching and geological and ecological interpretation, we spend time at lovely accommodations and enjoy delicious meals along the way ... and of course, good company.

Tour Highlights

- Visit two of Texas' three Sky Island mountain ranges
- Search for the rare Colima Warbler on its only US breeding territory
- Catch the peak of migration — every day brings new arrivals!
- Travel along some of the most ruggedly beautiful roads in west Texas
- Gaze up at the stunning stars in a premier dark sky region
- Slow down and live life more slowly, the “Texas Way”

Tour Summary

8-Day / 7-Night Big Bend Birding, Nature & Natural History Tour

\$2990, from El Paso, TX

Airport is El Paso International (ELP)

Day-to-Day Itinerary

Mon., Apr. 24 Meet in El Paso, Texas

Please plan to arrive in El Paso on April 23 and overnight at an airport hotel. The group assembles this morning at 9:00 AM. Your guide meets you at baggage claim at the airport; we plan to do some birding en route to Fort Davis and the Davis Mountains, so be sure your binoculars are handy and your shoes are good for walking. We drive east about two hours to Van Horn where we take a break and then continue to Balmorhea State Park, a lush oasis. The park is located at the northern end of the Davis Mountains. Here 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 migrating birds, with such beauties as Painted Buntings sometimes coming in to the feeders. We look for Bullock's Oriole, Western Kingbird, Pied-billed Grebe, and two species of rare desert fish. As time permits, we continue a short way to one of the larger reservoirs in this area, Balmorhea Lake. Here we may find a variety of ducks and shorebirds, and with luck, a flock of magnificent American White Pelican.

Our afternoon drive of 30 miles or so down to Fort Davis is timed for good wildlife viewing hours, with a chance of seeing Mule Deer, Javelinas, Coyotes, or Wild Boar. This scenic route reveals tall cliffs of columnar volcanic rocks. Settle into your accommodations at the delightful Hotel Limpia and enjoy a first group dinner at the hotel. *Accommodations at the Hotel Limpia, Fort Davis (D)*

Tues., Apr. 25 The Davis Mountains

Today we explore the Davis Mountains, a Sky Island mountain range in Texas. Learn more about the ecological

significance of the Davis Mountains as a link between Mexico and the Rocky Mountains. In the morning we visit The Nature Conservancy's outstanding preserve, high in the Davis Mountains. For many years the higher elevations of this range have been inaccessible as private land. Since the preserve was established, limited public access is allowed, and a number of very exciting birds have been recorded. Those familiar with the Chiricahua Mountains of Arizona recognize Olive Warbler, Buff-breasted Flycatcher, Painted Redstart, and Dusky-capped Flycatcher, found there in similar habitat.

Enjoy a walk amid large Ponderosa Pines, with a view of the highest peak in the Davis Mountains, Mt. Livermore. Permission to visit this area varies by the year, and if for reasons of fire restriction or other, we cannot visit, we have several other great Davis Mountain areas as alternatives.

Returning by mid-afternoon, we offer an optional visit to historic Fort Davis, one of the best preserved post-Civil War forts in our National Park system. The volcanic geology of its setting is quite spectacular.

Dinner is at the Blue Mountain Bistro tonight.

Accommodations at Hotel Limpia (B,L,D)

Wed., Apr. 26 The Post at Marathon | Prairie Dogs | Big Bend National Park

This morning we visit Davis Mountains State Park, where in some years Montezuma Quail come into feeders along with Scrub Jay, Acorn Woodpecker, and Green-tailed Towhee. It's hard to tear ourselves away from this idyllic sit-down birding!

However, adventure and Big Bend call us, so by mid-morning we head on. Passing through grassland habitat, we are likely to see Pronghorns and possibly Scaled Quail. We enjoy lunch at one of our favorite local restaurants in Alpine, then visit a lush birding oasis at a creek-side park that once housed the U.S. Cavalry. Today it is known as The Post, and its large cottonwood trees and small reservoir attract a good number and variety of birds like Vermilion Flycatcher, Summer Tanager, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, and possibly Yellow-billed Cuckoo. Driving back into extensive grasslands we visit an active Prairie Dog town to observe these animals' lively and sometimes comical behavior. With luck a Coyote or Golden Eagle may be here on patrol.

Then we turn south to Big Bend National Park, interpreting the geologic features on the way. We pass through low desert that was once so rich in Tobosa grass that the early settlers could cut it as hay. Our destination is Chisos Basin, which sits at a comfortable 5,400 feet, surrounded by mountain peaks. Here, we keep an eye out for Zone-tailed Hawk and other birds of prey. Relax, settle in, and enjoy dinner in the lodge's dining room. A Say's Phoebe may have a nest by the door; at night, Gray Fox and Javelina are sometimes seen from the balconies.

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

Thurs., Apr. 27 Big Bend National Park | Rio Grande Village

We get an early start this morning with a field breakfast in tow, so we can get to Rio Grande Village early enough for prime bird activity. Ro Wauer, author of *The Birds of Big Bend*, regards this as the most consistent location in the park to see good numbers of species, and today should be no exception. Painted Bunting often steal the show, but there is stiff competition from Greater Roadrunner, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Inca Dove, Indigo Bunting, and Blue Grosbeak.

Take time to learn some of the calls so you can be aware of Yellow-breasted Chat and Bell's Vireo; with luck, you hear the scream of a Gray Hawk. Common Black Hawk have nested here for several years, and Black Vulture can be seen along the river. Along the nature trail — a boardwalk through a beaver pond — the blend of lush cattails

and rushes, desert scrub, and distant views of the Chisos is striking! Enjoy a picnic lunch with a view of the Sierra del Carmen Mountains. A siesta under the shade of the cottonwoods is a must 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. *Accommodations at Chisos Mountain Lodge, Big Bend National Park (B,L,D)*

Fri., Apr. 28 Big Bend National Park | Boot Springs

Enjoy a full day of walks and hikes in Chisos Basin. Those with energy can scale the nine-mile loop trail high into the Chisos, where we find nesting Colima Warbler. The entire hike is fascinating, and we have all day to do it, so many can participate. We climb steadily through oak and juniper woodland, finding an abundance of Mexican species such as Evergreen Sumacs and Drooping Junipers. Fresh-flowering Texas Madrones are magnets for warblers. We often find Townsend's, Hermit, Yellow-rumped, and sometimes Orange-crowned and MacGillivray's Warblers. Wildflowers and brilliant cactus blooms brighten the trail.

In sheltered Boot Canyon we find huge pines and Arizona Cypress, a Mexican relict species. The route down through Laguna Meadows opens up to great vistas and more birding. Listen for calls of Hutton's Vireo and Bewick's Wren, as well as the trill of Broad-tailed Hummingbird during courtship displays.

Those who do not wish to scale the mountain can enjoy a very special hike to a place where orchids and Cardinal Flower grow at a backcountry desert spring (if we have a large enough group for two guides). This oasis is great for birding and affords a visit to the Old Sam Nail Ranch, one of the best birding spots in Big Bend. If we have a small group, those not on the long hike can walk partway with us, or enjoy free time in the basin where the park may have activities scheduled. Dinner is once again at your leisure. On this, or another evening, your guide offers an optional drive out to a location where we have a great chance of observing Elf Owl, Common Poorwill, and possibly Lesser Nighthawk.

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

Sat., Apr. 29

Big Bend National Park | Burro Mesa Pouroff | Santa Elena Canyon

Today we head west towards magnificent Santa Elena Canyon. Our first stop is at the Old Sam Nail Ranch, where water coming from a windmill attracts Varied Bunting and a variety of other migrant songbirds. We then walk to Burro Mesa Pouroff, a unique geologic feature where unusual plants like the Texas Persimmon and Texas Buckeye bear fruit that attracts some of the larger songbirds. The arid hills provide good habitat for Black-chinned Sparrow, while the canyon seems to 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. In some years, we see waves of birds coming through — grosbeaks and buntings seem especially fond of this area. We may also find Lucy's Warbler in the dry mesquite, and Hooded, Orchard, and Bullock's Orioles.

In the afternoon, after our siesta, we discuss the vivid geologic story of the Big Bend region. Visit historic Castolon, where ice cream is a welcome treat. In the late afternoon, the sun is off the trail into Santa Elena Canyon, so we can enjoy a walk along 1,000-foot limestone walls laid down during the Cretaceous Period. Watch swallows hunt over the river and listen for the calls of White-throated Swift. From here we take a back road north to the West Entrance of Big Bend, and enjoy dinner at a local restaurant as unique as its desert surroundings.

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

Sun., Apr. 30 Big Bend National Park | Blue Creek | Christmas Mountains

Today we say good-bye to the scenic Chisos Basin. But a great day is in store as we visit the Christmas Mountains and the home and feeders of Carolyn Ohi-Johnson, a grand finale of bird activity where difficult to find species like Lucifer Hummingbird and Varied Bunting can be found with ease. Carolyn has worked tirelessly to create a stunning oasis just north of Big Bend. This stop today is a real treat, and a fantastic way to round out our trip. By now the arid landscape, and its riches of cactus, vistas, birds, and wildlife is a part of you.

We are sure to stop and visit the wonderful Museum of the Big Bend at Sul Ross University and the local cactus garden often replete with flowers before dinner at the Reata restaurant, a perfect place to celebrate the end of our journey. Their menu is a delight and we plan to enjoy a great final dinner, reminiscing with now familiar travel companions.

Accommodations at the Hotel Paisano, Alpine, TX (B,L,D)

Mon., May 1 Departures from El Paso

Our journey comes to an end today in El Paso. We have a four-hour drive, so plan to arrive at the airport by 11:00 AM (time change works in our favor today!) for flights out NOON or later. (B)

Tour Details

Plan Ahead!

Protect yourself with Allianz Travel Insurance. Their website will show a grid of tour cost and your age category for you to make selections. As of January 2017, Naturalist Journeys pays 100% of your flight carbon offset.

Cost of the Journey

Cost of the main journey is \$2990 DBL / \$3490 SGL, per person, based on double occupancy, from El Paso, TX (ELP). This cost includes: accommodations for seven 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.

Travel Information

The airport for this journey is El Paso International Airport (ELP). Plan to arrive in El Paso on April 23 (at your own cost) and be prepared to meet as a group at 9:00 AM on April 24; your guide meets you at baggage claim. Plan to depart after NOON on May 1. 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.

Please Note

Big Bend is best experienced by those fit enough to do some hiking; the route to see the famed Colima Warbler is a nine-mile loop hike with a gain of almost 2000 feet in elevation. Our other walks average two to four miles at a leisurely pace over uneven terrain, so you may forego the Colima hike, but should be able to do the others

for full participation. Days at lower elevation can be HOT (90° plus) on occasion. Expect full field days with evenings to relax.

Photo Credits

Big Bend Sunset, Woody Wheeler (WW); Golden-fronted Woodpecker, WW; Mexican Jay, Naturalist Journeys Stock (NJS); Big Bend Hikers, Lynn Tennefoss (LT); Colima Warbler, Tom Dove; Vermillion Flycatcher, Peter Steve Gantlett, courtesy Operado Latino.

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