

# South Texas Birding & Nature | Trip Report

## Nov. 13-21, 2023 | by Robert Gallardo



**With Naturalist Journeys guides Bryan Calk and Robert Gallardo, and participants: Steve, Mary, Lisa, Ken, Paul, Victor, Babs and Dennis**



### **Texas: One BIG state**

Every state in the U.S. is different, each having its own unique set of natural qualities. Texas, however, is in a league of its own. Being the second largest state in the union, while abutting Mexico and a large body of water, lend it the good fortune of harboring an incredible diversity of flora and fauna. During this trip, eight participants from Canada and the U.S. would explore a small section of the southern coastline, enjoying the diverse array of birds, butterflies, and other wildlife along the way. Many sites were visited and various habitats explored, starting in Corpus Christi, and finishing in McAllen. All this, combined with a varied and tasty cuisine and fun companions, would make this a memorable trip.

### **Mon., Nov. 13                      Arrivals | Corpus Christi | Fulton**

Today the adventure began for the eight guests. No sooner than everyone had arrived were we off on the chase. Yesterday, during the Rio Grande Bird Festival (which ended the previous day), someone found a country record bird; a Cattle Tyrant. It is an odd flycatcher which looks and behaves like a Tropical Kingbird and Wagtail. It is a



resident of South America and is believed to have been a stowaway on a ship. Regardless of what it looked like and how it got to Texas, it was our intention to go look for it. We arrived at the spot where it was reported to feed on bugs around a large, blue trash bin. There was already a group of birders hanging around waiting. The bird did not show up so Robert headed around the block to see if he could find it. Voila. It was on the other side of the block skulking around other trash bins. He waved over to Bryan and our group was the first to get on the bird. There was also a Peregrine Falcon perched on a bank sign on the side of an adjacent building. What a way to start the trip!

There was also a report of another mega rare bird that should be on its wintering grounds half-way around the world. It was a Bar-tailed Godwit that took residence in a city park alongside other shorebirds. In a short drive we reached the park and there it was. Numerous Long-billed Curlews and Marbled Godwits were also present; the latter providing for a good comparison. We then headed off to Indian Point to start to dive into one of many visits to coastal areas. In an estuary we saw a couple of large flocks of Redhead, a few Pintail, American Wigeon, and Lesser Scaup. Other good sightings at that spot were Reddish Egret, a Snowy Plover, several Piping Plovers, and Ruddy Turnstone. Tucked away against a rock jetty was a flock of Black Skimmer that were resting. It was a great way to start the journey. We made our way to our lodging at Fulton harbor and got settled in. After a tasty seafood dinner across the street, we called it a day.

## **Tues., Nov. 14      Lamar Peninsula | Live Oak Country Club | Goose Island**

Today our group would visit numerous sites around Lamar Peninsula and encounter some wonderful birds and other wildlife. A drive around the edge of a wetland would reveal a small flock of American White Pelican and an assortment of waterfowl. Various species of ducks, herons, shorebirds, gulls, and terns were encountered. We began to see Osprey and would be a constant companion during most of the trip. On several occasions we would observe them diving into bodies of water as they attempted to catch fish. We also saw several Crested Caracara which would also be constant companions during the trip.





We did another loop drive and found another wetland. We found both species of Yellowlegs together which made for a good comparison. We would also see the first Vermillion Flycatcher of the trip. Although much more abundant in other states, we would see several while in Texas. At the end of a short road, we found a bird that would be a Lifer for most everyone, a Seaside Sparrow. It showed itself well several times and we were afforded excellent views of this otherwise secretive bird.

As we were driving to our lunch spot, Robert noticed two large birds descending from the sky. We pulled over and found a nice group of Sandhill Cranes along the backside of a large field. These giants were making their way south to their wintering grounds. As we were getting ready to leave, we noticed two massive flocks of birds soaring in the distance. There was an estimated 1,200 American White Pelicans and was an impressive sight to see.

We continued on and had lunch at a nearby café. Afterwards, we drove a short distance to the local office of the International Crane Foundation. Due to repairs on the boat that Naturalist Journeys typically hires, we were unable to do the boat ride. However, Bryan had a backup plan as knew staff at the foundation. We were given a nice presentation on cranes, the threats they face, and what organizations are doing to study and protect them. We learned that sadly, most species of crane in the world are threatened. The foundations' outreach program aims to teach people about the importance of saving these magnificent creatures.

We then headed out to search for the Whooping Crane which is something we all wanted to see. While crossing over a long bridge we spotted several Bottlenose Dolphin. We then found a spot where three of these cranes were standing in the middle of a large field, not far from a row of houses in the back. It was all fenced off, so apparently, they felt safe there. We enjoyed seeing these stately birds. Three Sandhill Cranes also appeared and would end up having a faceoff with the Whoopings who, despite their larger size, ended up getting chased off.

We departed that spot and found a nice flock of Roseate Spoonbills resting in a pond. Many of them would end up flying off and showing their wonderful colors. Nearby was a nice park that boasted one of the oldest oak trees in Texas. There were paths so we walked and bird watched there. We encountered a Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Blue-headed Vireo, Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Savannah Sparrows, Pine Warbler, and Yellow-rumped Warbler. Our first full day in Texas was a big success.



## Wed., Nov. 15      Port Aransas Nature Reserve | Brownsville

This morning we first headed out to the Port Aransas Nature Reserve to look for yet another rarity. A hurricane had brought up some flamingoes which had spread around the eastern U.S. There were still a few around so we were on a quest to look for them. After a good walk along a boardwalk we reached a small tower and climbed it. There they were, very far away, but at least they were still there. Other species we saw there include large quantities of Redhead, a few Dunlin, American White Pelican, Reddish Egret, White Ibis, Roseate Spoonbill, and many Savannah Sparrows.

We continued on to the nearby Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Center where we would indulge ourselves in great numbers of birds. There was a huge flotilla of ducks that consisted mostly of Redheads, but also present were Blue-winged and Green-winged Teal, American Wigeon, Northern Pintail, and Northern Shoveler. A giant alligator rested, partially hidden, amidst the cattails. Osprey passed to and fro. Near the parking lot were Common Yellowthroat, Yellow-rumped Warbler, and Orange-crowned Warbler.

We had lunch nearby then started down the highway to our next lodging destination. A bit down the road, however, we stopped to admire a pair of Aplomado Falcon that had taken residence atop a man-made nesting platform. They were far, but with the aid of the scopes we got better views. Along the highway we stopped at a rest area for a stretch and to pick up the Brewer's Blackbird which would be the only sighting of the trip.

We made our way to the hotel and got checked in. After a short rest, we headed out for a pre-dinner treat; to witness the roosting site of hundreds of parrots. As we approached Oliveira Park, we could hear many parrots originating from a nearby neighborhood. We parked, and amidst a small apartment complex, were many Red-crowned Parrots feeding on oak acorns just above the roofs. It was a lot of fun seeing this feeding frenzy. We then darted over to the park where the flocks were amassing to roost. Several hundred Red-crowned Parrots were looking for roosting sites and some landed atop the electrical wires. There were also at least fifty White-fronted Parrots, all lined up in a long row on the lines. After some careful searching, and listening, we spotted three Red-ored Parrots. We left there and went straight to dinner. We closed the day with those colorful, tropical birds and a belly full of delicious food.





## **Thurs., Nov. 16      South Padre Island | Laguna Atascosa W.R.**

Today we headed out across the bay to visit a couple of different sites before a big adventure in the afternoon. We arrived at the South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center. We planned on spending much of the morning at this beautiful place and would leave highly satisfied. In the front ponds there were Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, Mottled Duck, and other species. A bit further down the boardwalk we could see (through the scope) a large assortment of many species of shorebirds and other waterfowl. We saw Black-necked Stilt, American Oystercatcher, Piping Plover, Marbled Godwit, Dunlin, and other species. From a nearby roofed structure we could hear the tell-tale sounds of a real skulker, the Clapper Rail. It took some patience, but one crossed a small patch of water right below us in plain view. What a treat! Nearby, a very confiding Reddish Egret also graced us with its presence. An adult Yellow-crowned Night-Heron was asleep, tucked away in a nearby channel. However, the biggest show was yet to come. Toward the end of the boardwalk Bryan spotted something that slipped away like a ghost. A few minutes later the apparition reappeared. It was a Least Bittern. This, the tiniest of herons in North America, put on an incredible show as it hunted from the edges of the cattails, often times coming into plain view. That, along with the rail, would steal the show (at least for the morning!). Outside the front door some of us enjoyed a small butterfly garden where a handsome female Black Swallowtail was feeding. What a way to start the day. Nearby, there was a small, wooded lot that often harbors birds and we checked it out before going to lunch. There wasn't much action, less a few Inca Doves. Then, Mary spotted something. It was a large Cooper's Hawk, sitting low and deep inside the trees. No wonder not many birds were around! We took a break and had lunch at a nearby diner.

We then made our way to the Laguna Atascosa W.R. We went to the visitor center to check in and do a short walk. Green Jays were common there and would be a constant companion the remainder of the trip. We would also get our first look at Long-billed Thrasher. Much to our surprise, and liking, the NJ office staff said we had permission and access to a large part of the reserve that is not open to the public. We had the key to the reserve! On the way there we spotted several Greater Roadrunners that were hunting along the road. We made our way into the reserve and it wasn't long before we spotted a large mammal. It was a Nilgai (introduced from Asia) and then more in another field. Wild boar with young also came sauntering in. It felt as if we were on a wild game drive in an animal park. Further down the road we came across a very cooperative armadillo and everyone got their share of photos. We also spotted a Merlin, Loggerhead Shrike, Northern Bobwhite, Chipping Sparrow, and Grasshopper Sparrow. As we were leaving the reserve we found a handsome White-tailed Hawk and Lark Bunting.



It was a spectacular way to end a great day of wildlife viewing in southern Texas.

## **Fri., Nov. 17                      Sabal Palms Sanctuary | Resaca de la Palma**

This morning we set out to cover two different destinations. The first was Sabal Palms Sanctuary which harbors the largest stand of this once widespread palm. So little of the original habitats remain in southern Texas, so each reserve is cherished. After checking in at the old house, we visited a feeding station. Green Jays dominated the scene, but everyone was happy taking photos of this sprite bird. We walked down the trail and came across a Buff-bellied Hummingbird that was foraging at a patch of Turk's Cap flowers. It paused to sun itself in full view and even spread its tail. A nice show! Nearby we also spotted our first White-eyed Vireos of the trip as well as the adorable Black-crested Titmouse. At a secluded, weed-filled pond we found four Least Grebe and they approached quite close for some great photo opportunities. Toward the end of the walk, we found a bunch of Clay-colored Thrush that were feeding on fruiting hackberries. The typically shy Olive Sparrow popped out of a nearby shrub and posed nicely for everyone. At a little artificial pond, a Gulf Coast Ribbon Snake was spotted, then disappeared into the water. It turned out to be quite the productive morning.

We had lunch at a nearby Bistro then headed out to our last destination. We went to Resaca de la Palma State Park and World Birding Center. It was quite warm, and the bird activity was slow. Bryan went off down one trail with some of the clients while Robert stayed behind in the butterfly garden with others. Various Sulphurs and Skippers dominated the garden flowers, including the Northern Sicklewing. A White-tipped Dove strolled through under some feeders.

We returned to the hotel for a bit of downtime before having a tasty dinner and calling it a day.

## **Sat., Nov. 18                      Estero Llano Grande State Park | Edinburgh World Birding Center**

Today we headed out to another famous site, Estero Llano Grande State Park. We checked out the main lagoon at the center to see what was stirring. Present were a lot of ducks, including the Mottled, and a lone White-faced Ibis. A Black Phoebe was also spotted and was a bird that used to be rare in Texas. In some shallow wetlands there

were Least Sandpiper and several Wilson's Snipe. A bit further we came up to the spot where there is usually a



cool bird on a day roost. Dennis was the first to spot the mega-camouflaged Common Pauraque. We made our way up a short hill that overlooked a river. Present were a lot of waterfowl including a male Mallard (uncommon in that area). A White-tailed Kite was perched atop a nearby tree and provided for more photo opportunities. Down another trail we ran into another group who were looking for a Green Kingfisher that was foraging in a brush-filled ditch. We got only brief glimpses of it before disappearing.

We wrapped our visit to this great site then headed out to lunch. We then made our way to the Edinburg Scenic Wetland World Birding Center. We had high hopes of finding some new birds for the trip, and we did. We headed straight back toward the big lagoon with the intent of locating a bird that was being reported there. Upon arrival, a Green Kingfisher saw us and took off, disappearing into the thick vegetation. After a bit more of searching, the handsome Tropical Parula was spotted. A Black-and-white Warbler, the only one for the trip, was also spotted amidst a mixed flock. A Wilson's Warbler was added to the list. We strolled alongside the lagoon and spotted many ducks, most of them far away. Amongst them were some Gadwall and a good-sized group of Ruddy Ducks. Scanning the shoreline, Robert spotted a Sora preening itself under a ledge. Near the corner of the lagoon, we scanned the trees for the giant Ringed Kingfisher, and nothing. Then, out of the blue it came and landed right on cue for scope views. Wave after wave of Western Cattle Egret rolled into roost in a nearby, smaller lagoon. At that same lagoon we would get scope views of a female Green Kingfisher. It was a great way to end a spectacular day of birding. We made our way to Alamo to spend the last three nights of the trip.

## **Sun., Nov. 19                      Salineño | Falcon State Park | Rancho Lomita**

We headed out early today as we needed to reach several special destinations far to the west. Our first site was the Salineño Wildlife Preserve, located right on the Rio Grande itself. We took a short walk along a road that paralleled the river to see what we could find. A Ringed Kingfisher flew by at light speed. Then, Bryan heard another good bird, an Audubon's Oriole. It took some time to locate the secretive bird, but everyone got to see it. A vulture-like bird flew over and at the same time, Bryan and Robert saw that it was Zone-tailed Hawk. It would be the only sighting for the trip. In the distance was a Gray Hawk that soared low over the horizon then disappeared. At the end of the path, we could see a male Vermilion Flycatcher, perched atop a snag over the river. On our way back to the vans Bryan was turning over wooden debris and found a Narrow-mouthed Toad. Just as we were getting ready to move on, Robert did one last scan across the landscape. He spotted something sitting on a utility wire at a great distance. Seeing it in the scope revealed a Red-billed Pigeon, and there was another just





below it. We strolled over to the nearby facility, which is a small trailer with a feeding station. This is the area, where in 1974, Brown Jays were first documented in the U.S. They disappeared after that and there were sightings

again recently but left again. Activity at the feeders was good until everyone disappeared. We found out later that an accipiter was perched not far away. We did get great views of the Ladder-backed Woodpecker and stunning looks at the Green Jays. The sun was poking out and many Empress Leilia butterflies were landing on everyone to sun themselves; 'adopt a birder.'

We continued on our journey and went to the nearby Falcon State Park. Upon arrival, a Couch's Kingbird greeted us. This one, like many others, would soon undergo a name change imposed by the AOU. We hung around the butterfly garden awhile to bird watch and see butterflies. Although this has been considered a very 'low' year for butterflies throughout the Rio Grande Valley, we would see a nice variety at most places we visited. In the garden we saw Giant Swallowtail, Theona Checkerspot, Phaon Crescent, Southern Dogface, and a variety of skippers. Also in the garden was a pair of Green-tailed Towhee. We ate our bagged lunch there then decided to continue on. The caretaker, Michael, said he had spotted a Piping Plover down by the lakeshore, so we followed him down there. The plover had moved on, but we ended up finding a bunch of other birds. In a small stand of trees there was a Dickcissel and numerous sparrows including Vesper, Grasshopper, and Savannah. Just as we were about to leave, Bryan heard a familiar call overhead. It was a pair of Sprauge's Pipits, and they descended into a nearby field for us to see. What a treat!

We continued on to our final destination for the day. It was a private property located in some low, rolling hills way off the beaten path. Nonetheless, it is a great place to see some special birds. We arrived at Rancho Lomitas and were greeted by Anna. We all took a seat, and she did her thing. Soon, as if by some magical calling, the lovely Scaled Quail came crawling out of the bushes, one by one. About thirty of them came out to feed on seed and allowed for great photos. A pair of the, usually, timid White-tipped Dove also came in to feed. More Green Jays, a Curve-billed Thrasher, and several Inca Doves also partook in the feast. We were informed that the friendly roadrunner had disappeared some time ago. We took a short loop walk around the grounds to see if we could find anything. It was quiet, but we did see some interesting cacti and a Western Pygmy-Blue, the smallest butterfly in North America. Bryan found a small bark scorpion under a piece of scrap wood.

We departed and had dinner in the nearby Rio Grande City. We made the drive back to Alamo to end another fruitful day.





**Mon., Nov. 20**

## **Bentsen State Park | National Butterfly Center**

Today would mark our last full day of the trip and would end with a bang. We went to Bentsen State Park and near the visitor center we began to see a lot of birds. Cardinals were feeding on different fruits, and although a common sighting for many, they added a lot of color. A Nashville and Yellow-throated Warbler were spotted feeding amongst a mixed flock. Olive Sparrows and more Clay-colored Thrush were also seen by a water feature. A large group of Plain Chachalacas were also waiting for the feeders to be filled. We began our walk into the reserve and came across a group of Wild Turkey, the result of a past, and successful, reintroduction effort. A bit further down the road we came across another Gray Hawk, except this time it was perched and remained a bit for scope views. We got great views of several Altamira Orioles, Black-crested Titmouse, and many Blue-gray Gnatcatchers. We made the short walk out and right at a slough Mary spotted something perched very close by. It was almost too obvious, and we overlooked it. It was an immature Red-shouldered Hawk that has apparently not yet learned to fear humans.

We headed out and went to the nearby National Butterfly Center. Although there are many butterfly gardens across the U.S., this is the only center of its kind. The Rio Grande Valley harbors more butterflies than anywhere in the States and the Center, with its professionally designed flower and hostplant gardens, harbors some 200 species. It also has a nice selection of birds as well. We spent the remainder of the morning there. An Eastern Screech-Owl was spotted high up in a tree hollow and was a treat to see. Different species of butterflies included the minute Southern Skipperling, Question Mark, Soldier, Mallow Scrub-Hairstreak, Olive-clouded Skipper, amongst others.

We took a short break to have lunch at a nearby restaurant then returned to the Center. We remained near the bird feeders in the back garden and enjoyed the show of Black-crested Titmouse, Green Jays, chachalacas, orioles, Great Kiskadee, cardinal, and Long-billed Thrasher. At one point, a male Red-winged Blackbird performed a couple of showdowns with the Green Jays. It was a real colorful display to say the least. We had a great visit to this unique site then made our back to the hotel.



Cattle Tyrant  
Photo by Bryan Calk



Gulf Fritillary

We had a nice rest before heading out to dinner, but wanted to partake in one last spectacle. Everything is BIG in Texas, even with what we were about to witness. If we thought the parrot roost in Brownsville was big, we would

soon be overwhelmed. We made our way to a busy part of McAllen at the height of rush hour, but it would be worth it. We found parking spots at the grocery store and the action had already begun. Tens of thousands of grackles, Bronzed Cowbirds, and starlings were strung out on the wires as far as one could see. Amidst them were some three-hundred Green Parakeets. Each one emitted its own unique sound, but the grackles and parakeets were the nosiest. This was all set against an amazing purple-and-orange glowing sunset. It was almost unreal, and an incredible way to finish our last full day.

## Tues., Nov. 21 La Quinta Mazatlan | Departures

We left the Alamo Inn this morning with our bags packed. A storm was coming in so it was a bit windy. We made our way to the Quinta Mazatlan World Birding Center to see what was stirring. Many of us looked at the exhibits that showed the history of this site before exploring the gardens. At the feeders there were plenty of Green Jays, a flock of Inca Dove, Orange-crowned Warbler, White-tipped Dove, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, and an obliging Carolina Wren. Robert noticed something through the thick vegetation that was walking along a path. It turned out to be a Coyote of all things. Later on, we would be surprised to see a Collared Peccary and learned that it not only got there on its own, but had found a mate and has young!

We returned to the main building and did the final checklist. From there, we made the short trip to the airport and bid farewell to each other.

We recorded a total of 182 species of birds, 12 mammals, 10 reptiles and amphibians, and 53 butterflies. The amount of Lifers for the group was large.

## Favorite sightings of the trip:

**Victor**-Hadn't seen a Kiskadee in over 50 years. Harris's Hawk, Cattle Tyrant, Green Jay, Brownsville area.

**Babs**-Cattle Tyrant, Vermilion Flycatcher, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Green Jays, Great Kiskadee, Harris's Hawk. Brownsville and Rockport areas.

**Steve**-Roosting parrots, 46 Lifers, "all exciting," nice opportunity to see and identify butterflies.

**Dennis**-Nat'l Butterfly Center. Falcon Dam, large quantity of Snout butterflies, Least Grebes and toads.

**Paul**-Cattle Tyrant, Harris's Hawk, Green Jays, Green-tailed Towhee, Sprague's Pipit, Bryan's expert guiding and having a butterfly expert.

**Ken**-Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, all warblers, Blue-headed Vireo, Blue Spiny Lizard.



**Lisa**-Visit to Nat'l Butterfly Center high on list. Mexican Bluewing, Common Pauraque, Least Bittern, both species of thrasher at the same time, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher.

**Mary**-All birds and trees. Wild Turkeys, chachalacas, Green Jays, Eastern Screech-Owl.

**Bryan**-Access to the Laguna Atascosa refuge Cattle Tyrant, American Flamingo. Quality of birds seen and seeing familiar faces.

**Robert**-Seeing the Sprague's Pipits descend. Showing everyone some nice butterflies and spotting the Red-billed Pigeons.

*Group Photo (Robert Gallardo - RG), Green Jay (Barbara Petri - BP), Great Kiskadee (BP), Vermillion Flycatcher (BP), Theona Checkerspot (RG), Golden-fronted Woodpecker (BP), Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (RG), Bar-tailed Godwit (RG), Scaled Quail (RG), Alligators (RG), Whooping Crane (RG), Loggerhead Shrike (RG), Caspian Tern (RG), Yellow-crowned Night-Heron (RG), South Padre Island (RG), Greater Roadrunner (RG), Reddish Egret (RG), Tricolored Heron (RG), Black Swallowtail (RG), Harris's Hawk (BP), Group spotting American Flamingo (RG), Buff-bellied Hummingbird (BP), Least Grebes (RB), Gulf Coast Ribbon Snake (BP), Large Orange Sulphur (RG), Snout Butterfly (BP), Group at the Rio Grande River (BP), Sprague's Pipit (BP), Green Jay (RG), Altamira Oriole (BP), Green Parakeet (RG), Eastern Screech Owl (RG), Common Checkered Skipper (RG), Black-crested Titmouse (BP), Long-billed Thrasher (BP), Cattle Tyrant (Bryan Calk), Gulf Fritillary (RG)*