

South Texas Birding & Nature | Jan. 26 – Feb. 3, 2024 | Trip Report | by Michael Marsden



Guides James Petersen and Michael Marsden with participants Lesley, Garry, Maryann, Lorna, Cliff, Shannon, Mary, and Bill



Fri., Jan. 26

Arrivals Corpus Christi | Rockport

Most of us met in Corpus Christi on what was for Texas an uncharacteristically gray, drizzly afternoon. Mary and Bill were to join us at the Inn at Fulton Harbor so we opted, instead of birding on our way north, to drive straight to the Inn and then explore some of the birding areas around Rockport. Whilst in Corpus, however, it was impossible to resist the temptation to spend at least a little time trying to locate a Cattle Tyrant, a first record for the U.S. that had extraordinarily established a feeding territory in the downtown area. Sadly, we dipped out – but more on that later!



Rockport was put firmly on the birding map in the 1930s and 40s by the indefatigable Connie Hagar, who drove a circular tour of the area just about daily and kept a detailed record of her sightings. The numbers and variety of the birds she reported met with initial skepticism (not least because they came from a woman!) but eventually Roger Tory Peterson, Ludlow Griscom, and other birding luminaries of the time visited Rockport, stayed at the Hagar cottages, and were able to attest to the accuracy of her IDs.

By the time we met Mary and Bill, the rain had stopped so we had at least a couple of hours to devote to birding, following part of the Hagar route. Our first stop was at Moore's Pond, where we came across Gadwall, Green-winged Teal, American Wigeon, and Mottled Ducks, as well as a small group of American Pipits. The extensive brackish marshes at Cape Valero gave us close views of Short-billed Dowitchers, Little Blue Herons, Snowy and Great Egrets in nuptial plumage, colorful Roseate Spoonbills, and a variety of other shorebirds and waders. From there we visited freshwater wetlands at the Live Oak Country Club with their rather different array of species - Sandhill Cranes, Snow Geese, White-faced Ibis, and Golden-fronted Woodpecker, our first South Texas specialty of the trip. We finished our birding in fading light at Rockport Beach Park, where several pairs of Great Blue Herons already had well established nests. Other birds here included Long-billed Curlew, Royal Tern, and both Brown and American White Pelicans. We concluded our day with a welcome dinner of local seafood at Charlotte Plummer's, a favorite restaurant with both local and visiting birders and conveniently situated just across the road from our hotel.

Sat., Jan. 27 Bay boat tour | Lamar Peninsula

This was the morning we were to go on one of the *Skimmer's* celebrated Whooping Crane tours. It wasn't scheduled to leave until 10:30 am so we had a little time to visit Rockport's Hummingbird Demonstration Garden first. No hummers in January, but we did enjoy views of Mottled Duck and Red-shouldered Hawk. The weather had thankfully improved overnight and we were greeted by blue skies and moderate though still at times cold winds for our boat trip across Aransas and Dunham Bays. We had a great time as we sailed through several Whooping Crane territories and Captain Tommy was able to maneuver the boat to give us memorable views of birds both feeding and in flight. We saw some 16 Whooping Cranes during the trip, as well as both white and dark-morph Reddish Egrets, strikingly black and white American Oystercatchers and Avocets, and for some of the time enjoyed the company of Bottle-nosed Dolphins gambolling in the boat's wake. As we sailed several flocks of American White Pelicans flew high over the boat, all heading north. The Captain thought these were wintering birds leaving for their breeding grounds, and it did seem that many other wetland species had already left – we came across good numbers of Redheads, but fewer Northern Pintails and Buffleheads than



might normally be expected in late January, no Lesser Scaups or Red-breasted Mergansers, and just a single Eared Grebe and Common Loon. A surprise was seeing 3 Lesser Black-backed Gulls, until very recently a rarity in the Coastal Bend. After lunch, we drove north across the Copano Bay causeway to the Lamar Peninsula, the location of Goose Island State Park and other productive sites. We started birding at the freshwater wetlands at Fourth and Eighth Street, where we came across about as many Whooping Cranes as we'd seen from the Skimmer! There were also Sandhill Cranes on the pastures with the Whoopers (both taking advantage of grain supplied by a nearby rancher), together with White Ibises, Anhingas, Black-crowned Night-Herons, scores of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks and, out dazzling even them in the brilliant light, 16 colorful Roseate Spoonbills.

The Big Tree, part of Goose Island State Park, is the largest Live Oak in Texas and reputedly a thousand years old. Remarkably it survived Hurricane Harvey unscathed. The highlights at the Park's feeders were Black-crested Titmouse, a South Texas specialty, and Field Sparrow, a rarity further south in the Rio Grande Valley and not to be seen again on the trip. Perhaps the most memorable image from the visit, however, was that of dozens of dead Cabbage Head Jellyfish washed up along the edges of St. Charles's Bay. We enjoyed another gulf seafood dinner in the evening, this time at the Old Fulton Seafood Café.

Sun., Jan. 28 Mustang Island | Hazel Bazemore Park

This was the day for our long drive south to the Rio Grande Valley, travelling through some of the richest birding areas in the U.S. Our first birding stop was at Port Aransas, after having taken the ferry there from the mainland. We briefly visited Paradise Pond and the beach, but almost all our time was spent at the renowned Port Aransas Birding Center. The attraction here is an elaborate series of boardwalks (now fully restored and much improved after the devastation on Hurricane Harvey in 2017) over extensive freshwater wetlands, which are themselves surrounded by vast areas of mudflats and tidal marshes. The wetlands were teeming with birds – flocks of Green-winged & Blue-winged Teal, American White Pelicans, Black-necked Stilts, American Avocets, and Long-billed Dowitchers – all seemingly oblivious to the birders and photographers on the boardwalks. Other birds we had wonderful views of here included Sora, Swamp Sparrow, and yet two more Lesser Black-backed Gulls and two more Whooping Cranes.

We then drove south along Mustang Island towards Corpus Christi, stopping only for roadside views of a pair of Aplomado Falcons in their favorite bluestem prairie habitat. These handsome birds were extirpated in the U.S. in the 1930s. Present populations are the result of a re-introduction scheme in South Texas by the Peregrine Fund



in the 1980s and 90s. This has been hugely successful and there are probably now at least 30 pairs in the region. After lunch at Snoopy's, another birders' favorite, we again succumbed to the temptation to try for the Cattle Tyrant. We could only give it 20 minutes or so, but just as our time was expiring Shannon spotted it ("What's that yellow bird?") perched on a girder high above an outdoor market and we all enjoyed prolonged, unforgettable views of it. It really is a mystery how this bird, a denizen of South American grasslands (with a range no further north than eastern Panama), not only found its way so far north but has seemingly lived very contentedly since November in the midst of some of the busiest streets in downtown Corpus. After that any birding was going to seem anti-climactic, but we did make time to visit Hazel Bazemore Park, the site of the famous Corpus Christi hawk watch (and at which James had spent a season as an official counter for HawkWatch International). Here we came across three more South Texas specialties – Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Great Kiskadee, and Olive Sparrow – and a more unexpected Rufous Hummingbird.

From Hazel Bazemore we drove straight south on US 77 through the historic King and Kenedy ranchlands to our Brownsville hotel and dinner at Gazpacho's. There was little time for birding but we did get passing views of Harris's Hawks and Crested Caracaras, as well as the disjunct flock of Brewer's Blackbirds that has for several years adopted the Sarita Rest Stop as its winter home.

Mon., Jan. 29 Resaca de la Palma SP | Laguna Atascosa NWR | South Padre Birding & Nature Center

A change of plan this morning: Resaca de la Palma in Brownsville with its 1,700 acres of Tamaulipan thornscrub and mesquite thickets is by far the largest and yet, partly because of its size and relatively uniform habitat, normally the least birded of all the state parks in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. That changed in November with the sighting of a Roadside Hawk there and, in a dramatic demonstration of the Patagonia Picnic Table Effect, the resultant influx of visiting birders turned up a series of other rarities, most notably a Gray-collared Becard. Given that our hotel was just a few miles from the Park, we had to squeeze in a visit! In the time we had, neither of the mega rarities showed themselves, but we were more than compensated by spectacular views of a Rose-throated Becard and a Dusky-capped Flycatcher.

On the way to Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge we had roadside views of White-tailed Kites and Lark Sparrow, and were lucky enough to come across a Ringed Kingfisher on one of the Bayview resacas (the local name for the freshwater oxbow lakes, remnants of former tributaries of the Rio Grande, that are one of the delights of Cameron County birding). At the Refuge we had special permission to drive along part of the Steve Thompson Wildlife Drive (normally closed to vehicles) which enabled us to get wonderful views of Laguna



Madre, the hypersaline bay between South Padre Island and the mainland. The water in the bay is only about 3' in depth but rich in sea grasses, and teeming with an array of ducks, pelicans, waders, and shorebirds. Perhaps even more memorable, though, was our sighting several Nilgai, massive antelopes that were imported into Texas as game animals, escaped from the ranches, and now have a free-roaming population of many hundreds. In their native range in India and Pakistan they are, ironically, an endangered species. Other highlights at Laguna included Greater Roadrunner and our only Canvasbacks, Gull-billed Terns, and Marbled Godwits of the trip.

After a late but delicious seafood lunch at Joe's Oyster Bar in Port Isabel, we drove across the causeway over Laguna Madre to the Birding and Nature Center on South Padre Island. Not unlike the Center at Port Aransas, but on a smaller scale, the boardwalks over the wetlands here gave our photographers wonderful opportunities with ducks and waders seemingly unconcerned by people. Highlights included close views of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, Little Blue and Tricolored Herons, both Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons and, a bit of a surprise, a small group of Bonaparte's Gulls resting on the mudflats. A specialty in the Black Mangrove habitat here is the "Mangrove Warbler", a resident subspecies of Yellow Warbler that many think merits full species status. We managed to get particularly close views of an adult male with his distinctive chestnut head.

Tues., Jan. 30 Sabal Palm Sanctuary | University Resaca | Oliveira Park

The heart of Sabal Palm Sanctuary is part of the very last remnant (shared with an adjoining Nature Conservancy preserve) of native Sabal Palm forest along the Rio Grande. With its inimitable tropical atmosphere it was reputedly the setting for one of the Tarzan movies of the 30s! It's now managed by the charitable Gorgas Science Foundation, which has done an admirable job of improving the habitat and restoring the Rabb House, the only example of a plantation house in South Texas and now the imposing headquarters for the Sanctuary. We spent most of the morning walking the trails here and enjoying a variety of wildlife including butterflies such as Phaon Crescent and Teleus Longtail (a LRGV specialty), a Collared Peccary, and a handful of new birds for the trip – Red-crowned Parrots, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Eastern Phoebe, Clay-colored Thrush, and Nashville Warbler. The wetlands at the Sanctuary are usually one of the highlights of any visit, but unhappily Texas is in the midst of a prolonged drought and just about the only water we came across was in the Rio Grande itself. Lunch was at Lola's Bistro, where our outdoors table overlooked a small resaca, so we were able to enjoy the birding, including our only Vermilion Flycatcher of the trip, as well as the delightful food.

After lunch we visited the campus of the University of Texas in Brownsville. The university's buildings are in an attractive park-like setting centered on an extensive resaca which has become a major birding spot in recent



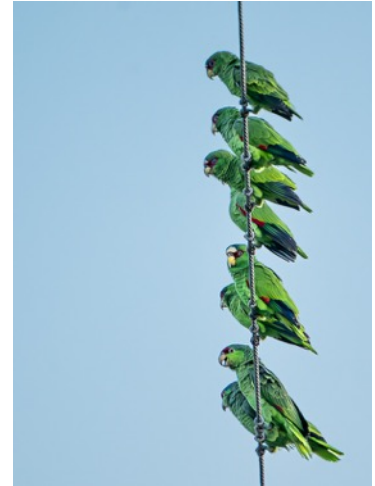
years. The resaca gave us great views of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, White Ibises, Anhingas, as well as a Black Phoebe, but the most interesting birding was in the surrounding trees and bushes, where we came across an array of wintering passerines - Blue-headed Vireo and Orange-crowned, Wilson's, Yellow-rumped and Yellow-throated Warblers. This is also where we bumped into Cameron Cox, author of the just published Princeton guide "Terns of North America" (highly recommended!).

It was by now late afternoon, so we headed towards Oliveira Park which has for several years been the principal roost for the many parrots in the Brownsville area. It's so well known, and the local people are so proud of their birds, that the Red-crowned Parrot has been adopted as Brownsville's official mascot and has been given special legal protection by city ordinance. The problem for birders is that each evening is never the same - the parrots sometimes arrive by different routes or at different times and don't always settle in the same section of the Park. On this evening things started well and we even had a fairly unusual fly-by of Green Parakeets (which tend to roost in downtown Brownsville) soon after we arrived. There was then a quiet period before a flock of 30 or so parrots flew in from the south but then veered away to the south-west. It was another 15 minutes later that the main roosting flock again came in from the south and again turned (perhaps because of a Cooper's Hawk we had seen in the Park) and seemed to settle in trees well to the south-west. We were starting to get a bit anxious and decided to drive towards where we thought they had landed. We hadn't got far, however, when just about all the parrots flew back over us in the direction of the Park. Everything then turned out wonderfully: we were able to park our vans right under the trees where they were all settling. It could hardly have worked out better as we enjoyed the brilliant sight and cacophonous sounds of some 350 parrots around us. They were almost all Red-crowned Parrots, but we were also able to pick out a few Red-loreds, with their distinctive yellow cheeks, and some smaller White-fronteds.

We stayed until the light faded and then headed for a celebratory dinner at the nearby Cobbleheads Grill.

Wed., Jan. 31 Santa Ana NWR | Estero Llano Grande State Park

Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, with its over 2000 acres of riparian forest, thornscrub, and wetlands, is one of the gems of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. We had already seen many of the birds there, but this was an opportunity to meet them in as pristine an environment as can now be found in Hidalgo County. A welcome surprise, after the dearth of water at Sabal Palms, was to see all the pumps gushing with water and all the ponds at normal levels. As a result, we enjoyed some of the best birding in the Valley with particularly memorable views of Least Grebe, Cinnamon Teal, and Green Kingfishers. Other birds included Wilson's Snipe, White-faced



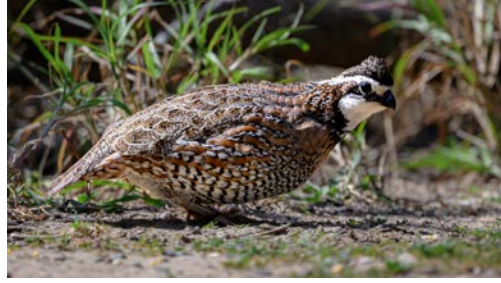
Ibis, our only Merlin of the trip and, more unexpectedly, an Eared Grebe and a small flock of Buffleheads, both more usually habitués of the bays during their winters in South Texas.

After lunch at Weslaco's Blue Onion, we spent the rest of the afternoon birding Estero Llano Grande State Park. Although only established in the 1990s, this has become the most popular refuge in the Valley with both local residents and visiting birders and now has a bird list equaling that of Santa Ana. But sadly we weren't able to see it at its best – Estero (unlike Santa Ana) has no legal rights to water from the Rio Grande and during the drought has been prohibited by the State from pumping water. As a result, its wetlands, including the lake by the Visitors Center, usually one of the glories of the refuge, were dry and overgrown with scrub. Fortunately the levee along the southern boundary of the refuge overlooks a particularly birdy part of the Arroyo Colorado, the main agricultural irrigation canal (historically a distributary of the Rio Grande) that runs all the way to the coast and discharges into Laguna Madre. There was plenty of water here, graced by Long-billed Dowitchers, Stilt Sandpipers, Black-necked Stilts, American Avocets, and an array of waterfowl.

One of the targets of every visit to Estero is the Pauraque, a bird notoriously difficult to spot as it roosts well camouflaged among the dead leaves of the woodland floor. We started our search at a traditional roost by Alligator Pond. All the birding guides know about it and have happily shown it to many hundreds of visitors. This time, though, it wasn't there and no-one had seen it that day. Luckily, we later bumped into Susan, one of the wonderful docents at Estero, and she very kindly went out of her way not only to show us two Pauraques in another part of the Park, but also a roosting "McCall's" Eastern Screech-Owl (or at least the tiny part of the owl's head that was all that could be seen!), a distinctive subspecies found only in the Rio Grande Valley and NE Mexico. Then on to the Alamo Inn, where we were to spend the last three nights of our trip, and a TexMex dinner at Alamo's El Dorado.

Thurs., Feb. 1 Salineño | Falcon State Park | Rancho Lomitas

Today we headed west to Starr County and its vast expanses of Tamaulipan thornscrub. Our first birding stop was on the banks of the Rio Grande at Salineño, where we watched Ospreys fishing in the river and Black & Turkey Vultures high overhead. There was a surprising variety of ducks on the river - Gadwall, American Wigeon, Ring-neckeds, Redheads, and fly-by Mexican Ducks showing their white-edged speculums nicely in the brilliant light. Other birds included Green Kingfishers, Marsh Wren, a calling Couch's Kingbird and, best of all, an overhead Red-billed Pigeon picked out by James. We tried with other visiting birders for Morelet's Seed eaters but were out of luck.



At the feeders, we as always enjoyed the combination of the warm hospitality of the hosts and unforgettable views of all the regular visitors - Green Jays, Great Kiskadees, White-tipped Doves, Long-billed Thrashers, Olive Sparrows, and both Altamira and Hooded Orioles. An Eastern Screech-Owl peering at us from his nest box and an overhead Gray Hawk were welcome bonuses.

From there we drove over to Falcon State Park, where volunteers at the Community Center kindly let us use their tables for our picnic lunch – and provided us with coffee and cookies! We were welcomed by Michael Emenaker, the Park's winter birding host, to view his set of feeders. These are in thornscrub habitat and so attract a different suite of more typically western species than those at Salineño, most notably during our visit White-crowned Sparrow and Green-tailed Towhee. Here we also enjoyed our only sighting for the trip of Clay-colored Sparrows and a covey of Northern Bobwhites.

We then headed out for Rancho Lomitas to the north of Rio Grande City - and yet more bird-feeding stations! The owners, Benito & Toni Trevino, were not at home, but we soon met up with Anna, the resident birding guide, who looked after us splendidly. The two really special birds at Rancho are Scaled Quail and Audubon's Oriole. Anna and the quail have developed a close relationship and, by her gentle coaxing and the prospect of food, we were soon privileged with wonderful views of these normally shy birds. The oriole proved a little more difficult but eventually deigned to visit the feeders to the particular delight of our photographers. We broke our long drive back to Alamo by stopping for dinner at Casa de Adobe in Rio Grande City.

Fri., Feb. 2 Bentsen-Rio Grande SP | National Butterfly Center | Hidalgo

The land on which Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park was developed was donated to the state in 1944 by the family of the late Senator Lloyd Bentsen. It comprises some 760 acres, primarily mesquite woodland, with butterfly gardens, trails, birding blinds, a resaca, and a particularly impressive hawk tower. After a little birding around the Visitors Center, we walked the main trail to the feeders by the Nature Center and then on to Kingfisher Overlook by the resaca and two of the nearby blinds. There were Wild Turkeys by the Visitors Center, Plain Chachalacas and Altamira Orioles at the Nature Center, Anhingas and Green Kingfisher on the resaca, and White-tipped Doves and Hooded Oriole at the blinds. A non-birding highlight, as the sun came out, was the emergence of several Blue Spiny Lizards, a particularly handsome species found only the Valley and NE Mexico. We then took advantage of the park's trams to take us to the Hawk Tower and then complete the return route. This proved worthwhile and allowed us brilliant scope views of an immaculate adult Gray Hawk (one of whose



favorite foods is spiny lizard!). After lunch at Bentsen’s own Le Chez Bleu, we visited the nearby National Butterfly Center. This is now the largest native-plant botanical garden in the U.S., as well as having the greatest number of wild free-flying butterflies. Our visit was neither at the most favorable time of the year nor with the most propitious weather for butterflies, but we did see a nice variety (some of which we were even able to identify!) including such essentially tropical species as Lyside Sulphur, White Peacock, Phaon Crescent, Fatal Metalmark, and Laviana White Skipper. And there were birds, most memorably a Rufous Hummingbird and side by side views of Curve-billed and Long-billed Thrashers. We concluded our day’s birding by visiting the Monk Parakeets of Hidalgo with their unique (among parrots) stick nests. When we arrived, we drove from nest to nest but could neither see nor hear any birds. It wasn’t for another 20 minutes or so, just as we were on the point of leaving for dinner, that one or two small groups began to trickle in. We were then blessed by some wonderful views of these delightful birds both in and around their nests and feeding on the grass just across from where we stood. Our final dinner of the trip was at McAllen’s Republic of the Rio Grande, where our meals were much more of a success than the restaurant’s namesake (which survived just 10 months in 1840).

Sat., Feb. 3 Quinta Mazatlan | Departures

Quinta Mazatlan is an impressive adobe mansion built in the 1930s by Jason Matthews, a somewhat eccentric poet and explorer. It is set in 20 acres of woodland trails, ponds and bird-feeding areas close to McAllen airport – ideally situated for a couple of hours of relaxed birding before departure. We spent most of our time sitting by the feeders and enjoyed the best views of Clay-colored Thrushes, White-eyed Vireo, and Carolina Wren we’d yet had. And we even came across a couple of new species for the trip - a Bronzed Cowbird and a Great Horned Owl that John Brush, Quinta’s naturalist, had earlier heard calling but had been unable to locate until it was spotted by eagle-eyed Shannon! Just as we were leaving a Gray Hawk flew over us – an appropriate last bird and last memory of what James and I hope was a productive and enjoyable tour for everyone.

Group (James Peterson -JP), Crested Caracara (Cliff Rader), Green Jay (CR), Black-necked Stilt (CR), Cattle Tyrant (JP), Roseate Spoonbill (CR), Whooping Crane (JP), Tricolored Heron (CR), Double-crested Cormorants (CR), Northern Harrier (CR), Common Gallinule (CR), Ladder-backed Woodpecker (CR), White Ibis (CR), Group (JP), Great Kiskadee (CR), Dusky-capped Flycatcher (CR), Ringed Kingfisher (CR), Greater Yellowlegs (CR), Northern Pintail (CR), Reddish Egret (CR), Sunset (CR), Birding (CR), Eastern Phoebe (CR), Group Birding (JP), Group Dinner (JP), Olive Sparrow (CR), Green Kingfisher (CR), Red-crowned Parrot (CR), Great Blue Heron (CR), Northern Bobwhite (CR), Eastern Screech-Owl (CR), Least Grebe (CR), Monk Parakeets (CR), Ruby-throated Hummingbird (CR), Alligator (JP), Great Kiskadee (JP), Little Blue Heron (JP), Cactus Wren (CR)