

# Texas Hill Country April 26 - May 1, 2024 | Trip Report by Lena Moser



With guides Bryan Calk and Lena Moser and Dianne, Bob, Arlana, Arden, Carol, Gisela, Judy, Betsy, Ray, Michelle, and Marie



Wow, what a tour! The quantity and quality of wildlife encountered in five days' time was nothing less than superb. This short tour packed a punch and over-delivered with close, eye-level views of Golden-cheeked Warbler, a Black-capped Vireo seen well by *nearly* everyone, a Great Horned Owl hunting down a Mexican Free-tailed Bat, twenty five species of butterflies, ancient Montezuma cypress trees, singing male Painted Buntings in all their glory, and inspiring landscapes carved of limestone. Everywhere we turned there was something new to discover and appreciate. We're all so happy we went on this Texas birding rodeo.

## Fri., Apr. 26

## Arrivals in San Antonio | Uvalde

Some participants arrived early to explore the city of San Antonio on their own, but we all got together in the late afternoon and made our way 1.5 hours west to Uvalde. On our way, we had a rest stop at a Circle K in Castroville, where we had great looks at a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher perched on a utility wire. A couple of Western Kingbirds showed off for us, too, and a little while later, a beautiful Swainson's Hawk sailed overhead. Not too bad for a pit stop!

Back on the highway, we saw a Crested Caracara flying low over the road. (Fun fact: this long-legged falcon is the national bird of Mexico.) Once in Uvalde, we passed a giant billboard cutout of the famed actor, Matthew McConaughey, for this is his hometown. After a satisfying dinner at Jack's Steak House, we returned to the hotel. The evening air was so scrumptious that some decided to take a short walk on the road behind our hotel and saw a pair of flyby Black-bellied Whistling Ducks against the pastel-pink sunset.



**Sat., Apr. 27**

## **Kickapoo Cavern State Park | Fort Clark Springs**

As we gathered by the vans in the morning, we were treated to a show: a Cactus Wren flew right up to the hotel, captured a Mediterranean Gecko sitting on the hotel wall, and proceeded to dismember the gecko on the walkway, swallowing one limb at a time. It was a full-on Attenborough drama!

After the cinematic start to the day, we made our way to Kickapoo Cavern State Park, spotting a Crested Caracara, Harris's Hawk, and Chihuahuan Raven along the road. At Kickapoo, we were greeted by a delectable dawn chorus as the songs of Yellow-breasted Chat, Blue Grosbeak, Canyon Wren, and Painted Bunting filled the misty air. We all hungered for views of a male Painted Bunting (a much-desired bird on this tour), and he did not disappoint, perching up for us several times so that everyone could get great looks in the scope. An unexpected White-tailed Kite sailed past our heads while we were still in the parking lot. Later on, another unexpected bird pleasantly surprised us: male Western Tanager! What a beauty! Both Ash-throated and Brown-crested Flycatchers presented good comparison opportunities, as did Chipping and Clay-colored Sparrows. Nearby Canyon Towhees and dapper Lark Sparrows also afforded excellent scope views, while a Hooded and Scott's Orioles were less cooperative, granting only quick glimpses (for now).

We moved a short distance up the park road to an area of drier, scrubby vegetation, where we mounted a search for vireos. A Gray Vireo, the most nondescript vireo ever (sorry, birdie, but it's true), stunned us all by cooperatively perching nearby, gifting us unobstructed, lengthy views—a highly atypical behavior of this skulky species (we even got photos!). Then we got the next species on the list: Bell's Vireo. Check! Finally, we hunted with difficulty for the most elusive vireo of all—the Black-capped—which is notorious for staying hidden in dense thickets, even while vocalizing loudly. This bird gives the sense of “so close yet so far” because, try as we might, only a few of us caught glimpses of this unique vireo. Thankfully, other birds didn't disappoint, like the soaring Zone-tailed Hawk whose field marks we enjoyed comparing to the nearby Turkey Vultures'.

A delicious picnic lunch at our next destination of Fort Clark Springs was a welcome respite during the heat of the day. Fort Clark Springs is an old U.S. military fort that operated for about 100 years and shut down shortly after World War II. Now this location serves as a guest resort and leisure-living community, though it's largely abandoned due to a 10-year drought gripping the Southwest. Sadly, only a small amount of mud was found at the bottom of the spring pools, with a sole Rio Grande Cooter turtle stranded near the mud puddle. Nevertheless, our picnic spot yielded a Great Kiskadee, Black Phoebe, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, and the only Common Grackle of the trip, go figure! We appreciated a pleasant, meandering walk on the trails shaded by







When we arrived at Neal’s Lodges, we admired the cute Black-crested Titmice visiting the feeders outside the main office and then settled into our rooms. After unpacking, we went on a leisurely walk along the Rio Frio, and boy, what an exciting walk it was! In the canopy of the towering Montezuma cypress trees that lined the river banks, we gazed up with delight at a singing, showy Yellow-throated Warbler. We were also thrilled to get great looks at a Tropical Parula, a Neotropical species that recently expanded its breeding range into Texas. Shortly thereafter, a Northern Parula showed himself for comparison, as did a Yellow-throated Vireo.

A large limestone boulder revealed a well-camouflaged Eastern Phoebe nest tucked inside, and another boulder sheltered a feral cat den with two adorable kittens. Speaking of nests in rocks, we looked through the scopes in sheer amazement at a Great Horned Owl far away on a limestone bluff, perfectly blended into the gray rock surrounding it. Without previous knowledge of its whereabouts, the nestling would have been impossible to find! Cliff, Northern Rough-winged, and Cave swallows zipped along the river, occasionally landing near puddles to collect some mud for their nests. A Solitary Sandpiper foraged nearby, and Bryan pounced upon, and deftly captured, a Great Plains Ground Snake for all to admire. As if this weren’t enough, a North American Porcupine crossed the path for us—what luck! This little walk left us awestruck.

For those who wanted more adventure, an optional night walk was in store. We did our best to avoid stepping on Gulf Coast Toads on the trail and were rewarded with beautiful looks at an Eastern Screech-Owl and a fly-by Chuck-will’s-widow. What a superb way to end a truly fulfilling day.

## **Mon., Apr. 29**

## **Neal’s Lodge | Rio Frio Bat Cave**

This morning, we walked to the Pecan Grove, a gorgeous site of many old-growth Texas pecan trees. On our way, we found some Cedar Waxwings feeding on mulberries, followed by a beautiful male Audubon’s Oriole, which was a highlight for many. Passing by a pond with a lone Spotted Sandpiper, we were soon among live oaks, ashe junipers, and Texas persimmons, in which we saw a Hutton’s Vireo and Black-throated Sparrows. This site was great for sparrows, and we also had Chipping, Clay-colored, Vesper, and Savannah Sparrows, along with a Canyon Towhee. Entering an opening revealed a couple of Eastern Bluebirds, Vermillion Flycatchers, and a singing Long-billed Thrasher in the distance, which everyone now got to see in a scope, hurrah! Other highlights included a Zone-tailed Hawk, Willow Flycatcher, and the dazzling Indigo Bunting.

After dinner at Neal’s, we drove to the site of the famous Rio Frio Bat Cave, out of which millions of Mexican Free-tailed Bats emerge each evening. A local biologist led us up the hill towards the mouth of the cave, where we birded in the golden glow of the setting sun and enjoyed great looks of a singing Pyrrholuxia, Cactus and





Canyon Wrens, and both male and female Blue Grosbeaks. A male Scott's Oriole also showed himself beautifully, and a Northern Harrier cruised by in the distance.

The magic began at sundown, when Cave Swallows began entering the cave as bats emerged in pulses of thousands. We walked to the top of a nearby hill where views were better and from that vantage point, we observed a Red-tailed Hawk diving into the "river of bats," plucking out a bat, and carrying it off (presumably to a nearby nest). The hawk returned and repeated this four times, taking advantage of what is truly a fast food restaurant. (Mexican Free-tailed Bats are some of the fastest-flying bats in the world, clocking in at 60 miles per hour.) The grand finale was a "lifer event" for both guides, as we witnessed a Great Horned Owl capturing a bat. The owl sat in full view in a distant tree, holding the bat in its bill for a

while before flying off with it. We were blown away! Lena wanted a different perspective on this bat spectacle and laid down upon the gravel to stare up at the bats above. Others joined her on the ground and enjoyed a unique visual experience of bats from below, soothed by the soft white noise emanating from innumerable bat wings flapping. What a wonderfully relaxing way to end an unforgettable event.

## **Tues., Apr. 30**

## **Lost Maples State Natural Area**

Today could be titled "Golden-cheeked Warbler Day." Our target bird did not let us down! Without even leaving the Lost Maples visitor's center parking lot, we all got excellent looks at this special endangered warbler, which we encountered several times more while at Lost Maples. On our way to the trail, we paused at a birdy brush pile and got nice views of Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Black-and-white Warbler, Eastern Wood Pewee, and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. Along the trail, we encountered Woodhouse's Scrub Jay, Blue Grosbeak, and Indigo Bunting. Yellow-breasted Chats were common, and some of us got a quick peek at a Louisiana Waterthrush singing in the distance.

We were in for a shock when suddenly, a Black-capped Vireo landed in some dead branches along the trail, in full view! Most of us got unbelievably good looks at this incredibly reclusive bird. This is truly unheard of—a "lifer event" if you will. We count our lucky stars.

Continuing further down the trail, we enjoyed finding both an Olive-sided and an Acadian Flycatcher. The beautiful limestone bluffs begged to be admired, and we lingered by the water while observing a Ladder-backed Woodpecker. As we made our way back to the parking lot, we marveled at some showy butterflies like the Juniper Hairstreak, Sleepy Orange Sulphur, and Two-tailed Swallowtail on the antelope-horns (a species of

