

Texas Hill Country Birding & Nature | April 25-30, 2025 | Trip Report by Bryan Calk



Bryan Calk with Karen, Mary, Jane, Lois, and Adrienne



Fri. April 25

Arrivals and travel to Uvalde

Today we met at the San Antonio Airport as participants trickled in, and once everyone had arrived, we hit the road heading west. As we drove, the landscape began to shift into classic South Texas Brush Country with its flat terrain dotted with mesquite, huisache, and sprawling ranchland.

Our first informal birding stop was a gas station, where we were greeted by a few Scissor-tailed Flycatchers perched along the wires with their sleek, long-tailed silhouettes glowing against the open sky. These iconic birds followed us most of the way, fluttering along fence lines and telephone poles, adding a touch of elegance to the roadside scenery. We also spotted some Texas Spotted Whiptail lizards darting across the gravel, our first herps of the trip.



Sun. April 27

Cook's Slough | Arrival in Concan

The day began with a visit to Memorial Park in the heart of Uvalde, where Inca Doves perched quietly among the trees and a Nutria swam up the creek and into the pond. A Green Heron flew overhead, and a cooperative Couch's Kingbird gave good looks, offering a nice comparison with nearby Western Kingbirds.

The next stop was Cook's Slough Nature Park, one of Uvalde County's premier birding sites for brush country species. This unique spot combines arid South Texas brush with lush riparian wetlands, thanks to its water treatment ponds. Bird diversity reflected the blend of habitats, with standouts like Audubon's Oriole, Green Jay, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, and Long-billed Thrasher. Along the trails, both White-tailed Deer and Axis Deer made appearances, the latter an introduced species from India known for retaining their beautiful spots into adulthood. As the morning wrapped up, Dickcissels sang energetically from an agricultural field on the drive out, a cheerful sendoff from the brush country.

After checking out of the hotel, the group headed north to Concan for lunch at Hippy Chic's, a lively outdoor café serving wood-fired pizzas. Northern Parula provided a musical backdrop as it sang from the trees above, and a Ruby-throated Hummingbird visited the feeders amidst the small swarm of Black-chinned, both species at the edge of their breeding range here.

Once we checked into Neal's Lodges, the afternoon was spent settling in and enjoying a bit of downtime before an early evening bird walk along the Frio River. The river, with its limestone bed and towering Montezuma Bald Cypress trees, offered plenty of shade from the warm sun. Families of visiting folks splashed in the clear water while birdsong filled the air. A gorgeous adult male Tropical Parula sang from the canopy before dropping in to give us point-blank views, a White-eyed Vireo gathered spiderwebs for its nest, and a Canyon Wren's beautiful song echoed from the rocky banks. Cliff Swallows were busy plastering their mud nests under the bridge, providing a look at their incredible nest-building skills. Along the river trail, both Blue Grosbeak and Indigo Bunting serenaded the evening crowd.

A short break followed before everyone gathered for checklist time and dinner at the lodge, winding down a full and beautiful day.

Mon. April 28

Neal's Lodge | Frio Bat Flight

We met at the dining room before sunrise to a lively chorus of birdsong. A hot breakfast of pancakes, eggs, and bacon served by the kind staff gave everyone a warm start to the day. After breakfast, the group hit the trails



around the lodge, spending the entire morning birding on foot. Neal's Lodges offers so much to explore — ponds, water features, bird feeders, and a variety of habitats. Hillsides covered in ashe-juniper, open grassy meadows, oak groves, and a blooming pecan grove created a rich mosaic for birds and birders alike. Even just stepping outside of the dining hall, a flock of gorgeous Cedar Waxwings sat at the tops of the trees, elegant as ever.

The pecan blooms, thick with bugs, attracted plenty of other bird activity, and the morning's pleasant overcast skies made for an enjoyable walk. Highlights included our first Golden-cheeked Warbler, one of Texas's most iconic species — every single one a native Texan by birthright. Migration was in full swing, with American Redstart, Black-throated Green, Wilson's, and other warblers moving through. Large flocks of sparrows filled the grassy areas, including Clay-colored and Lark Sparrows, along with a Cassin's Sparrow singing in the fields. Indigo Bunting showed well, and there were brief views of a Lazuli Bunting too.

Overhead, a Zone-tailed Hawk soared past, trying to sneak by as another of the Turkey Vultures, and Field and Chipping Sparrows sang sweetly from the scrub — a special sight, since their populations here in the western Hill Country are somewhat isolated. This part of Texas brings together a fascinating mix of eastern and western species, giving a unique birding flavor. We also took time to appreciate the local plant life, even sampling the tart red berries of Agarita shrubs, a favorite food for birds and local people alike. After a long and productive morning on foot, the group returned to the lodge headquarters for a sit-down lunch, then took the afternoon off to rest — a well-deserved break before another full day ahead of us tomorrow.

An early dinner and checklist session followed, allowing time to make it out for the evening's main event: the Rio Frio Bat Flight. Always a favorite stop, the Bat Flight showcases one of nature's great spectacles, with millions of Mexican Free-tailed Bats emerging from a hidden cave. As everyone settled in to wait, a thunderstorm began to build on the horizon. Distant flashes of lightning lit up the clouds, and low rumbles of thunder rolled across the landscape, adding a layer of tension and drama to the evening. Even before the bats appeared, the sky itself was putting on a show.

Finally, the first few bats began to emerge, quickly growing into a steady, swirling stream. This colony holds between 10 and 12 million bats at its peak — so many that it takes hours for them all to exit, hundred by the second. Sitting quietly, the group watched and listened to the incredible sound of millions of tiny wings slicing through the air, a sound not unlike ocean waves crashing on a beach. The chittering of the bats filled the evening air, adding an ethereal and mesmerizing soundtrack to the spectacle.

Raptors soon appeared, taking advantage of the feast. Red-tailed Hawks and Harris's Hawks darted through the swirling clouds of bats, sometimes snagging one right out of the sky. Watching the precision and agility of the



hunters against the backdrop of millions of flying mammals was nothing short of breathtaking. Few places in the world offer a sight like this — a true wildlife spectacle on the scale of the great migrations in Africa. Seeing millions of mammals in one place is one of those rare, unforgettable experiences, and the group soaked it all in, despite the distant threat of storm clouds. It was a fitting, awe-inspiring end to the day.

Tue. April 29

Lost Maples SNA | Finale evening at Neal's

The day began with Great Horned Owls duetting from the trees – an early morning conversation between a male and female pair echoing through the soft light. After breakfast, the group loaded into the van and headed deeper into the Hill Country, winding north and east of Concan toward Lost Maples State Natural Area.

This park sits tucked into a limestone canyon system carved by millennia of flowing water, and it's home to relic stands of Uvalde bigtooth maple, a species left behind from the last glacial period. The cool, shaded canyons and spring-fed tributaries provide a rare, moist microclimate in otherwise dry surroundings, which allows not only the maples but an array of unique flora and fauna to thrive. The blend of elevation, geology, and moisture makes Lost Maples a biological crossroads – one of the Hill Country's most beloved birding locations.

After crossing a tributary of the Sabinal River, the group hiked up into the canyon, shaded by bigtooth maples, sycamores, and chinkapin oaks. Even without birds, it would be a stunning walk – scarlet clematis tangled through the undergrowth, cedar sage in bloom, and Two-tailed Tiger Swallowtails drifting down the trail. But the birding was equally rich. A Tropical Parula gave brief but satisfying views, and a Louisiana Waterthrush sang its wild, metallic song along the river. Golden-cheeked Warblers were active all morning, with several offering excellent views and photo opportunities. An Acadian Flycatcher finally revealed itself after a patient search, singing on territory near the stream. Black-capped and White-eyed Vireos chimed in from the understory, and Red-eyed Vireos gave their steady, rolling phrases from the canopy.

Lunch was enjoyed at shaded picnic tables near the trailhead, where a pair of cardinals and even an Olive Sparrow came up to investigate, bold as ever. It's rare to see an Olive Sparrow act so curious – normally they're skulking and shy – but this one lingered at the edge of the bushes by the table, clearly hoping for a crumb or two!

Just as we were wrapping up, a final stop at the visitor center turned into an unexpected highlight. In the parking lot, a very recently fledged family of Golden-cheeked Warblers was bouncing around low in the branches – adults foraging feverishly while the young called constantly, begging for food! One of the chicks fluttered down and landed on the ground unable to fly back up into the tree, wide-eyed and calling as the parents continued tending from above. Watching this endangered species at such close range, actively raising young, was a powerful and moving sight. Golden-cheeked Warblers are found nowhere else in the world except the Texas Hill



Country. They require mature Ashe-juniper trees for nesting, where the females use the bark to construct their nests. Their breeding range is entirely within Texas, making them not only a conservation priority but a true symbol of this region's biological uniqueness.

After a bit of downtime during the hottest part of the afternoon, a handful of folks regrouped for a relaxed walk around the Neal's property. Several feeding stations offered good looks at common species – female-type Painted Buntings glowed green in the brush, and a fuzzy fledgling House Finch showed off its comical feather tufts. Clay-colored Sparrows gave close views, perfect for comparing subtle field marks, and sparrow ID became the topic of choice for a while.

Down by the river, a different access point revealed some new herps – Blanchard's Cricket Frogs calling and hopping along the banks instead of staying hidden, and a Texas Spiny Lizard and an Ornate Tree Lizard soaking in the warm rocks along the path. It was a peaceful and quiet afternoon, but still full of good sightings and conversation.

Dinner brought everyone back together in the dining hall for a final group meal. Stories and highlights flowed easily – favorite birds, unexpected moments, new friendships. Joy filled the room as everyone reflected on just how full and rewarding the week had been.

As the sun dipped behind the hills, a few folks settled into the rocking chairs on the lodge's front deck, watching the colors fade from gold to lavender across the sky. Evening quiet settled over the property, save for a few late birds calling in the distance. Then, right on cue, the first notes of a Chuck-will's-widow floated in from the far side of the property.

That kicked off the final outing of the trip. The group moved in the direction of the sound, which grew louder with each step. Just as the call seemed to peak, a shape glided across the road low and silent – a Chuck-will's-widow in flight. For such a secretive species, a flyby like that is a treat. Most of the time, they're only heard. While the Chuck continued its rhythmic chant from the shadows, a bit of whistling into the trees eventually stirred a reply. An Eastern Screech-Owl called back, followed shortly by a second one – its mate. Both perched up at eye-level and offered beautiful, satisfying looks in the flashlight beam, unconcerned by the quiet human observers. Their calls echoed through the trees in soft, overlapping trills.

A peaceful and intimate ending to the day, and a fitting close to the last evening of the trip. Quiet skies, owls in the trees, and the low, looping call of a nightjar – Texas Hill Country at its finest.



Wed. April 30

Farewell

The final morning delivered the richest dawn [chorus](#) of the entire trip. As the group walked to breakfast in the early light, birdsong filled the air in every direction. Many of the familiar voices from the past few days were back in full force – Tropical Parula trilling from the canopy, White-eyed Vireos singing their broken phrases, and Northern Cardinals ringing out across the brush. It was a fitting sendoff, the Hill Country waking up one last time just for us.

After another hearty breakfast in the dining hall, the group said farewell to our gracious host, Mary, whose warmth and care had made Neal's feel like home all week. Then it was time for one last walk.

This final stroll took place across the river, on a quieter section of the property the group hadn't explored yet. Birds were still active, and the path offered good looks at Blue-gray Gnatcatchers flicking through the oaks, a pair of Brown-crested Flycatchers calling from the edge of the clearing, and Olive Sparrows skulking just off trail. A bright male Summer Tanager gave a parting view, and the complex whistles of Bewick's Wrens carried through the brush. A gentle, unhurried outing to close the birding chapter of the trip.

Then it was time to return to the rooms, gather bags, and check out. Some folks headed back home, while others planned to explore a bit more around San Antonio and enjoy the city's charm along the River Walk. Either way, the group parted with full hearts and shared memories.

From the dramatic skies over the bat cave to the stillness of the canyons at Lost Maples, the week had delivered everything that makes the Hill Country special – the birds, the landscapes, the stories, and the sense of place. More than just a checklist of species, it was a trip full of fun times, learning, and connection. Time spent outdoors together, tuning into the rhythm of this unique Texas region, left everyone with a deeper appreciation for both the birds and the people who chase them.

Photos: Group (Bryan Calk - BC), Black-and-white Warbler (BC), Indigo Bunting (BC), Golden-cheeked Warbler (BC), Painted Bunting (BC), Long-billed Thrasher (BC), Audubon's Oriole (BC), Mexican Free-tailed Bats (BC), Golden-cheeked Warbler (BC), Eastern Screech-Owl (BC), Dickcissel (BC), Group Birding (BC)