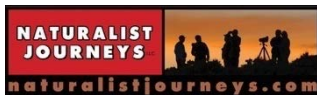


# South Texas Birding & Nature | Feb. 12-20, 2025

## Trip Report | by Sharon Goldwasser



**Naturalist Journeys Tour Leaders Sharon Goldwasser and Troy Corman with: Alex, Marsha, Carol, Carolyn, Jennifer, Patty, Freddie, Jay and Mary Lynn.**

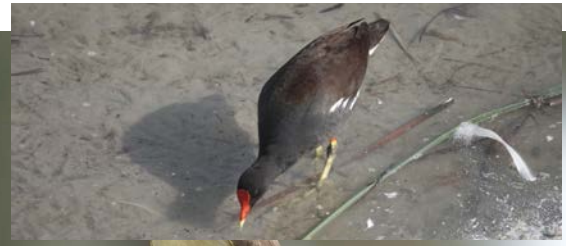
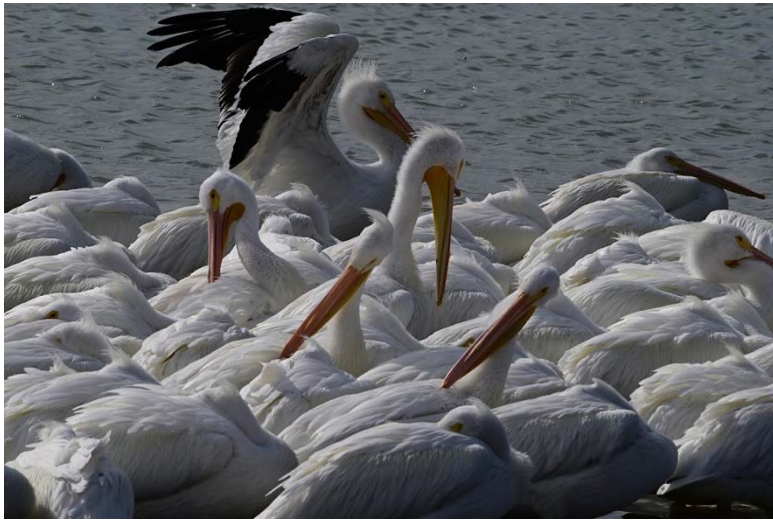


### **Wednesday, February 12: Arrivals in Corpus Christi | Cattle Tyrant | Indian Point Park | Rockport Area**

After our group was settled into the vans, we headed nearby to a slightly unusual first destination: a neighborhood in downtown Corpus Christi. We were seeking a Cattle Tyrant, a flycatcher normally found in South America that has been seen foraging in dumpsters, courtyards and parking lots. It wasn't instantaneous, but after completing a circle once around the block, we spotted the very cooperative tyrant showing off on a fence on the edge of a parking lot, affording excellent views for all.

As we traveled north toward Rockport, we stopped at Indian Point Park for views of a good selection of shorebirds including Long-billed Curlew, Semipalmated Plover, Dunlin, both dowitcher species, Sanderling and Ruddy Turnstone. This spot hosted a nice variety of herons and egrets, Roseate Spoonbills, White Ibises, Caspian and Forster's Terns, Common Loons and other water birds.

Continuing north near Rockport, on FM 1039, we stopped at Bee Road Reservoir. Several Ospreys soared overhead as we looked over assorted ducks, cormorants and American White Pelicans. We found a brilliant male Vermilion Flycatcher just a short distance further, on Live Oak Country Club Road, where we also spotted a Crested Caracara, a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and nearly 100 Sandhill Cranes. Nearby, some from our group were surprised to see a flock of Snow Geese out in a field as we continued northward. Finally, we stopped at



Port Bay Road where we viewed Little Blue and Tricolored Herons, Reddish Egret and glimpses of Savannah Sparrows ducking into the vegetation as the chilly, gusty winds increased.

After arriving at The Inn at Fulton Harbor, everyone enjoyed dining on fresh seafood and getting acquainted during dinner at the Fulton Seafood Cafe.

### **Thursday, February 13: Goose Island State Park | Mustang Island | Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Center**

Unfavorable weather conditions postponed our scheduled boat trip to view the Whooping Cranes at Aransas NWR. We woke to the sights and sounds of blustery winds buffeting the palm trees across from the hotel. But in spite of the chilly, overcast and strong windy conditions, we ended up with an excellent day of birding. For starters, we found Eastern Phoebe, Orange-crowned Warblers and other small birds actively foraging in the oaks near "The Big Tree" in Lamar. However, those sightings were quickly eclipsed by the thrill of seeing small groups for a total of 25 Whooping Cranes, some foraging nearby, flying low overhead, and once even calling; plus, big flocks of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks were seen along Lamar Beach Road. After admiring the cranes, we visited Goose Island State Park and then explored a small section of Aransas NWR. A small, hidden pond on a back road turned out to be sheltering (likely from the wind) a remarkable roosting group of over 70 Anhingas!

After lunch at the Tropical Smoothie Cafe, we took the short Port Aransas Ferry to Mustang Island. From the ferry we noted three species of gulls actively foraging, Brown Pelicans and a few Bottlenose Dolphins! We then explored the Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Center near Port Aransas. Hidden by the railing as we approached, suddenly an array of American White Pelicans, flocks of dabbling ducks and hundreds of shorebirds appeared below us as we crested the sloping boardwalk path and looked over the wetland. The high boardwalk and observation platforms apparently offered some shelter from the wind. Two Stilt Sandpipers were a nice addition to our growing list of shorebirds and we had numerous pairs of Blue-winged Teals and other ducks in perfect light.

As we proceeded along Mustang Island, our final notable sighting of the day was an adult Aplomado Falcon perched on a hacking platform. Although too distant and in rather low light conditions for good photos, everyone enjoyed excellent scope views of this rare and handsome falcon.

We strolled across the street from our hotel to enjoy another great seafood dinner at Charlotte Plummer's Seafare Restaurant.



## **Friday, February 14: Aransas Bay and Aransas NWR by Boat | Brownsville | Oliviera Park**

Weather continued to be a big part of our birding adventure. Although it was overcast with cold, gusty winds, we were able to board the Skimmer for the trip into Aransas NWR with Captain Tommy. He shared his comprehensive knowledge of the Whooping Cranes, other local birds and wildlife, and the ecology of the region. We noted an even dozen of Whooping Cranes, including a pair with their single young of the year. The juvenile was heard constantly begging as its parents continued to find and provide blue crabs from the saltmarsh pond. Although the primary focus of the trip was to view the cranes, we were able to observe nearly 50 species in total as we traveled from the dock to the marshes and back again. Among the many birds we saw were Common Loons floating in the harbor, four species of gulls including an adult Lesser Black-backed Gull, Roseate Spoonbills, six species of herons and a variety of ducks, including Mottled Duck and Red-breasted Mergansers. Of the 12 species of shorebirds, highlights included American Oystercatchers and Black-bellied Plovers.

We undertook the long drive to Brownsville, noting roadside Red-tailed and Harris's Hawks, and increasing numbers of Crested Caracara. After checking in to our lodgings, we visited a known parrot roost at Oliviera Park in Brownsville. As the daylight waned, scores of parrots arrived to roost. Their raucous calls were nearly deafening at times. We estimated that we observed over 150 Red-crowned Amazons (naturalized), with lesser numbers of Red-lored and White-fronted Amazons (both with a status considered "exotic, provisional"). We also spotted a lone Yellow-headed Amazon; considered to be an escapee. As the parrots finally quieted down for the night, we departed for our evening dinner at Cobbleheads Bar & Grill.

## **Saturday, February 15: Old Port Isabel Road | Laguna Atascosa NWR | South Padre Island**

Our morning was once again cool and windy as we visited Old Port Isabel Road with its pastures, wetlands and arid scrub vegetation. We were able to see or hear several species typical of thorny, dry habitats such as Curve-billed Thrasher, Verdin and Cactus Wren, along with our first Couch's Kingbird and glimpses of a Golden-fronted Woodpecker. The wetlands were populated by numerous Long-billed Curlews, White ibises, and dabbling ducks and shorebirds. Overhead, we glimpsed a distant White-tailed Hawk, but hoped for a better look.

We continued on to the feeders at Laguna Atascosa NWR, where we got some of our first looks at some of the south Texas specialties, such as Plain Chachalaca, White-tipped Dove, Long-billed Thrasher, Olive Sparrows, Black-crested Titmice and flocks of fancy, tropical-looking Green Jays. We walked a few trails close to the headquarters, but given the increasing winds, we opted to take the vans along the loop drive rather than walk on longer trails. We got closer views of a pair of White-tailed Hawks soaring over us and found White-faced



Ibises feeding along with White Ibises in the wetlands, plus our only Gull-billed Tern for our trip. We were impressed by the numbers of Redheads on Pelican Lake, which we estimated at about 2000! We also observed our first American Alligator here!

After lunch, we visited South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center and the mudflats adjacent to the South Padre Island convention center. We added to our growing list of herons with a white morph Reddish Egret, a Cattle Egret, a couple Green Herons and both species of night herons. From the boardwalk that meanders through the mangroves and then onto the mudflats near the convention, we observed Royal, Forster's and Caspian Terns, Black-bellied Plovers, a Marbled Godwit, numerous Black Skimmers and over a thousand Laughing Gulls.

## **Sunday, February 16: Resaca de la Palma State Park | University of Texas Resaca**

We opted to visit Resaca de la Palma State Park and had a brief respite from the windy weather. Although the breeze picked up as the day wore on, it was definitely an improvement over the previous days. The feeders at the visitor center offered an entertaining display of non-stop visits by scolding Green Jays, brilliant Altamira Orioles, White-tipped Doves, Plain Chachalacas, Olive Sparrows and nearly two dozen Northern Cardinals. It was quite the spectacle of colors! White-eyed Vireos and Carolina Wrens were vocal and, except for offering an occasional glimpse, stayed mostly hidden in dense scrub. The trails were quiet at times, but we were charmed by a little Nine-banded Armadillo as it was most likely digging for grubs alongside the tram road. And at last, we finally had our first views of a Great Kiskadee.

After enjoying lunch at Lola's Urban Bistro, before loading into the vans, we scanned an adjacent pond. It paid off - a single Fulvous Whistling-Duck was mixed in among over 150 Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks!

Our afternoon birding destination was the campus of UTRGV Brownsville. After scouring the brushy edges of the resaca and wandering through the campus, we encountered a nice selection of warblers, including numerous Yellow-rumped and Orange-crowned, two Yellow (rare in winter), Wilson's, and a Yellow-throated. Black-bellied Whistling Ducks were abundant here in the resaca. With the taller buildings blocking some of the wind, it was just warm enough that we were able to spot a few butterflies at the pollinator gardens, including a Queen, Red Admirals, a Brown Longtail and a Julia Skipper. We also encountered our first Eastern Fox Squirrel.



## **Monday, February 17: Santa Ana NWR | Estero Llano Grande State Park**

The morning was partly cloudy, with reduced winds and it was little warmer than the previous days, which was much appreciated. We departed Brownsville and headed for Santa Ana NWR where we managed to note 65 species for the morning. The feeders at the visitor center hosted a Clay-colored Thrush, many Inca Doves, Long-billed Thrasher, numerous Great Kiskadees, and the now ubiquitous Green Jays, but we came up empty for hummingbirds. Although the water levels were reduced (many ponds were dry) compared to some previous years, the large ponds at the refuge produced views of Least Grebe, Cinnamon Teal, Tropical and Couch's Kingbirds, and an active flock of Cave Swallows. We walked trails around the wetlands and down to the banks of the Rio Grande River. Several Ladder-backed Woodpeckers showed well, and we came across a few mixed species flocks including Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Yellow-rumped Warblers and our only Pine Warbler of the trip. A highlight of our morning walk came when two Common Pauragues flushed from the underbrush just back from the trail. They fluttered back to where we were able to barely view one with the spotting scope in spite of its remarkably camouflaged plumage.

After lunch, our destination was Estero Llano Grande State Park. We finally encountered some hummingbirds at the feeders: an immature Rufous, a Black-chinned and Buff-bellied (a Rio Grande Valley specialty). The trail to Alligator Lake led us to a known location for close up views of a ground roosting Common Pauraque, located just a few feet from the trail. After ascending the trail to the dike that overlooks the Estero, we found find a pair of White-tailed Kites. In the water below, we spotted common waterfowl such Green-winged Teal and Gadwall, herons, egrets and flocks of Stilt Sandpipers and Long-billed Dowitchers. We met the campground host at his feeders to get another look at the Buff-bellied Hummingbird and orioles. He kindly took us to see a roosting Eastern Screech-Owl, which turned out to be our only owl of the entire trip.

We checked in to the Alamo Inn and then walked just across the street for Mexican food at the El Dorado restaurant.

## **Tuesday, February 18: Salineño | Falcon State Park | Rancho Lomitas**

Weather was defining feature of this tour, but for one day, we appreciated mostly sunny skies and temperatures that shifted into the warmer range (70's-80's) that so many of us had expected to find in south Texas! We had a long drive west to the Salineño Wildlife Preserve and trails along the Rio Grande River. As we drove through the hamlet of Salineño, everyone had great looks at a pair each of Greater Roadrunners and Pyrrhuloxias. A walk along the trails gave us views of a Ringed Kingfisher, many Neotropic Cormorants, soaring White Pelicans, a Bewick's Wren, Crested Caracara, a pair of Black Phoebe, and eventually a few of the group spotted a soaring Gray Hawk. We added Black-throated, Lincoln's and White-crowned Sparrows to our list as well. The busy



feeding station provided superb views of Audubon's and Altamira Orioles, and many of the other resident species of the Rio Grande Valley, such as Great Kiskadees, Green Jays, Olive Sparrows and Golden-fronted Woodpeckers. With temperatures rising into the 80's, the flowering shrubs in the sanctuary attracted a number of butterflies, including a Golden-headed Scallopwing, Northern Sicklewing and Texan Crescent. We also had great view of many Rio Grande Cooters and Texas Spiny Softshells basking on the exposed river rocks.

After a picnic lunch, we headed to Falcon State Park. At the feeders at the Butterfly Garden blind, we had close views of a little flock of Northern Bobwhites, Cactus Wrens, Long-billed Thrashers, Black-throated Sparrows and Pyrrhuloxia. Our butterfly list increased with views of Southern Dogface and Lyside Sulphur. Also, some glimpsed a Rio Grande Ground Squirrel in a busy campground.

Our final stop of the day was at Rancho Lomitas, set in the South Texas brush habitat. The ranch hosted a large covey of Scaled Quails, as well as many of the common species we had viewed elsewhere in the Rio Grande Valley, including Verdin, Curve-billed Thrasher and Black-crested Titmouse. A walk around the grounds led us to an enormous Western Diamondback Rattlesnake, coiled in a depression along the trail. We stopped for dinner in Rio Grande City before our final drive back into Alamo.

## **Wednesday, February 19: Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park | Edinburg Scenic Wetlands | McAllen Parakeet Roost**

Weather was once again a big influence on our final full day of birding. An extreme polar air mass pushed south from the central U.S., and brought unusually cold air southward. As a result, temperatures dropped drastically overnight. After the previous afternoon's temperatures in the mid-80's, we were met with temps that remained in the 40's for the entire morning, once again accompanied by full overcast skies and strong winds.

As we arrived at Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park, some of the group had a chance to see a little herd of Collared Peccaries as they crossed the road. After entering the park proper, we alternated spending our time viewing feeders from inside the warm visitor center with a walk along park trails. We ventured out to the feeders at the nature center and continued as far as the Kingfisher Overlook. Happily, we were able to spot a distant Ringed Kingfisher here. The feeders at the visitor center and the nature center proved rewarding with Wild Turkeys, Clay-colored Thrushes, an Indigo Bunting, a Hooded Oriole and close-up views of Ruby-throated, Black-chinned and Buff-bellied Hummingbirds.

We took a siesta with time to warm up before heading out to the Edinburg Scenic Wetlands, another designated World Birding Center of South Texas. The black-backed form of Lesser Goldfinch showed off at the seed feeders, and Buff-bellied Hummingbirds repeatedly visited the nectar feeders. An astounding flock of over 500





Cattle Egrets perched on the far shore of the large pond, and we were able to see a Greater Scaup as well. The feeders and trails offered more views of Plain Chachalacas, Inca Doves, and a Clay-colored Thrushes. New to our checklist were a Blue-headed Vireo and a Hermit Thrush.

Then we were off to a McAllen parakeet roost. Green Parakeets are regular here and turned up right on time for our visit at dusk, along with thousands of Great-tailed Grackles and both Bronzed and Brown-headed Cowbirds. It was a celebratory moment for several members of the group, who were especially hoping to see the parakeets on this trip. We finished the day with an excellent final dinner at the Republic of the Rio Grande restaurant.

## **Thursday, February 20: Donna Reservoir, Alamo | Final Departures**

Our final morning found us with temperatures falling to barely above freezing, and just a hardy few of our group decided to go out on a driving route. We passed a few chachalacas in a residential neighborhood, looking very cold, as we drove out to the edge of town. The Donna Reservoir and nearby fields proved to be worth the drive. A weedy field was full of Savannah and Vesper Sparrows, which scattered quickly when a Sharp-shinned Hawk and Northern Harrier made passes across the field. A lone Horned Lark, Say's Phoebe and flocks of Eastern Meadowlarks foraged along the edges of the road. Caspian Tern, Lesser Scaup, Blue-winged Teal and Ruddy Ducks were just a few of the birds in and around the lake. As a tractor plowed across a field, a flock of over 100 Long-billed Curlews followed behind, looking for morsels churned up in the dirt.

Despite the many colder and windier-than-expected days, we reached a final tally of 180 bird species for the tour, plus a good selection of mammals and even a few butterflies on our warmer afternoons.

In our week in South Texas together, we explored both freshwater and saltwater wetlands, mangroves, resacas, and remnant Tamaulipan thornscrub together. We took our leave around noon at the McAllen airport, after finding congeniality and mutual appreciation in exploring so much of the special habitats and diversity of the South Texas coast and lower Rio Grande Valley.

*Photos: Whooping Crane (Alfred Schaller - AS), Alligator (Sharon Goldwasser - SG), Roseate Spoonbill (AS), Cattle Tyrant (SG), Roseate Spoonbills (SG), White Pelicans (AS), Common Gallinule (SG), Red-crowned Parrot (AF), Group Birding (Patty Shreve - PS), Altamira Oriole (SG), Greater Roadrunner (SG), Scaled Quail (SG), Buff-bellied Hummingbird (SG), White-eyed Vireo (SG)*