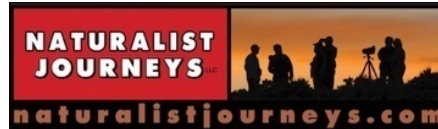
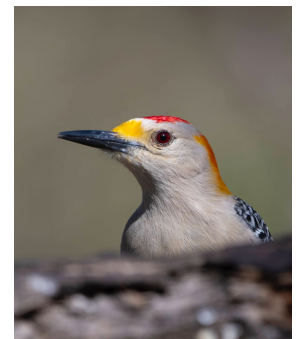
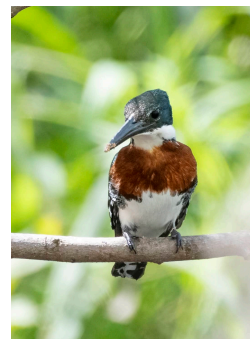


South Texas Birding & Nature December 2nd – 10th, 2023 | Trip Report by James P. Smith



With Natural Journeys leader James P. Smith and seven awesome participants; Cecelia, Claire, Gene, Kathy, Lee, Linda and Ruth.



Saturday December 2nd | Arrivals | Corpus Christi | Mustang Island | Fulton Harbor

Blue skies and warm sunshine greeted Naturalist Journeys as we gathered at the incredibly small Corpus Christie airport on the Texas Gulf Coast. Gene, Linda and Claire arrived a day or two early and Cecelia, Kathy, Linda and Ruth all flew in on the start date of the tour. Thankfully there were no delays and we were soon on our way leaving the airport at 1pm. Under normal circumstances we'd drive straight to Fulton and settle into to our harbor side hotel but this year, 2023, was not normal! A mere 12 minutes' drive from the airport a Cattle Tyrant, one of the rarest birds ever to be reported in the USA, had settled in the incongruous setting of downtown Corpus Christi. Since it was more or less on our way to Fulton we could hardly miss the opportunity and at least give it a try! We arrived at a restaurant parking lot in the middle of a concrete jungle. The setting was urban, very urban in fact and initially seemed to hold little promise with only Feral Pigeons, European Starlings and

House Sparrows on view as one might expect. But it wasn't too long before a Golden-fronted Woodpecker was found in the palms across the street, a good start since it was one of the key species for a visit to Southern Texas. The calls of Laughing Gulls echoed between the buildings and Great-tailed Grackles scavenged on the side of the street. There was, however, no sign of the Cattle Tyrant and as the minutes passed by, an anxious wait ensued for us and the gathering of other birders present. Luckily, Gene and Linda has seen the tyrant earlier in the day and felt confident that it would eventually appear. In the meantime, we couldn't help but wonder if any of the local predators had developed a taste for Cattle Tyrant! A marauding juvenile Cooper's Hawk made several appearances and we watched a huge female Peregrine pluck a Feral Pigeon out of the sky with consummate ease!

Then Kathy spotted something really interesting and kingbird-like perched on top of a street light. It was the Cattle Tyrant and within seconds it dropped down to a dumpster and remained there for many minutes fly catching before all its admirers. The photographers had a field day and the tyrant seemed oblivious to the birders and delivery trucks alike! It put on the most incredible show before disappearing into one of the nearby palms to rest. Had we just witnessed the highlight of the tour before suitcases had even been unpacked?! We could only speculate how on earth a South American flycatcher had reached downtown Corpus? It's mostly a resident species within its range and the closest breeding population is in Panama but even there it's uncommon and sporadically distributed. In truth, Corpus Christi being a port city n'all, it had most likely jumped ship.

Pleased with the success we continued the journey north but hadn't gone too far before our next stop, the Cos-Way bait and tackle shop along JFK Blvd, effectively a small island in the middle of a vast saline wetland. Brown and American White Pelicans could be seen quite easily and our first diving ducks out in the bay included Greater and Lesser Scaups, Red-breasted Merganser and a couple of Buffleheads. But it was the gulls that drew most of our attention. A Thayer's Gull reported via ebird was found quite easily resting and feeding along the muddy shore, neatly lined up between one Ring-billed Gull and one immature Herring Gull. The Thayer's was a beautiful adult and part of the Iceland Gull complex, all 'Iceland Gulls' being rare in Texas. We didn't linger as we still had places to visit and traveled north across the prairie-like habitat of Mustang Island until a couple of large raptors proved to be White-tailed Hawks which gave fabulous views as they soared in the blustery winds.

By late afternoon it was overcast and a little breezy but warm enough to encourage a bunch of pesky mosquitoes to come out and play! As the light started to fade we had one last outing in mind. Charlie's Pasture at the north end of Mustang Island was hosting three American Flamingos, ironically deposited by Hurricane Idalia several months prior. These were genuinely wild vagrants from the Yucatan Peninsula and a potential life bird for everyone in the group. Charlie's Pasture proved to be a sizeable area of coastal flats, a mix of salt and brackish water and coastal scrub. Seeing the flamingos involved a speedy trail walk to an on observation tower way out in the marsh. Along the trail we observed many birds, some of them close including a 'dancing' white morph Reddish Egret, close and cooperative Willets, a chuntering Sedge Wren, Savannah Sparrows and Northern Mockingbirds as well as absolutely stunning views of Loggerhead Shrikes!

On reaching the tower we could only marvel at the vast numbers of birds resting out in the flats. In fact, there were large numbers of birds all around us. The atmosphere was grand as we shared the platform with other

birders and picked out three American Flamingos surrounded by hundreds of waterbirds; Northern Pintail, American Avocets, Marbled Godwits, and a wonderful flock of 75 American White Pelicans looking sharp in the crisp afternoon light! Behind the tower a small freshwater lake held 18 Lesser Scaup and 3 Ruddy Ducks, and just before we left two Mottled Ducks flew by. To the north, uncountable (literally) numbers of Redheads rested on another wetland, something to return to on another day later in the week. We birded until dusk serenaded by yelping Coyotes with Crested Caracara and Wilson's Snipe among the last birds of the day before the dusk eventually surrendered to darkness. Heading north towards Rockport as night approached, there still was enough ambient light to see a small group of Bottle-nosed Dolphins frolicking in the channel at the ferry crossing in Port Aransas.

So much had been packed into the first afternoon it was understandably late when we checked into the lovely Fulton Harbor Inn where we received a warm reception and soon settled into our spacious, well-appointed rooms. Fortunately we didn't have far to travel for dinner and simply walked across the street to the seafood restaurant overlooking the harbor. The hotel lobby served as an excellent spot to go through the day's sightings and checklist as an extra-ordinary first day came to a close.

Sunday December 3rd | Goose Island SP and Lamar Peninsula | Indian Point State Park | Sunset Lake, Portland

The new day brought mixed news at breakfast. Despite a great deal of effort behind the scenes, the scheduled boat tour of Aransas Bay for endangered Whooping Cranes had been canceled. Long story short, the boat that should have taken us out was not up to Coast Guard standards and was in the 'shop' for repairs. Initially the news seemed disappointing but plan B turned out to be a good alternative as we drove towards the local airport to meet with Paityn, an outreach biologist with the International Crane Foundation. She gave a fascinating fact-filled talk on Whooping Cranes and even dispelled a few local myths. It turns out that Whooping Cranes are doing pretty well thanks to immense conservation efforts and it came as a great surprise to learn that around 550 Whooping Cranes are now at large in the wild. Afterwards Paityn escorted us to Goose Island where we unexpectedly came across a small flock of Whooping Cranes straight away! The Whoopers, 15 in all, were joined by 24 Sandhill Cranes, pretty unique in itself to see flocks of both species alongside each other in the same meadow. As if that wasn't enough, 26 stunning Roseate Spoonbills flew over and an incredibly approachable Long-billed Curlew posed for photos at the edge of the same meadow - birding at its very best on the Texas Coastal Bend!

We couldn't really leave the area without a visit to the "Big Tree", a giant Live Oak vaguely reminiscent of the 'Major Oak' in Sherwood Forest in the UK. We found a few migrants around the 'Big Tree' including Eastern Phoebe and a couple of Ruby-crowned Kinglets, and Gene spotted the first of many Orange-crowned Warblers.

After a healthy lunch at the Tropical Smoothie Café we headed south towards Corpus Christi where the mudflats at Indian Point Park held the promise of yet another rare bird, a Bar-tailed Godwit. This old world shorebird is a close relative of the Marbled Godwit and would take some finding, but in any case the mudflats at Indian Point were full of shorebirds and a major attraction for us. Tricolored Herons, Snowy and Reddish Egrets, and American Avocets were all on view and we had some fabulous shorebird studies in the immaculate late afternoon light with great comparisons of closely related species such as Semipalmated, Piping and Snowy

Plovers, and Least, Semipalmated and Western Sandpipers. The conditions were calm and the water surface glass-like as we enjoyed a flock of over 20 Black Skimmers 'skimming' over the shallows and a study in tern identification with Caspian, Royal and Forster's all on view together. Marbled Godwits and Long-billed Curlews were plentiful and offered wonderful views. Alas, there was no sign of the Bar-tailed Godwit but just as we conceded defeat and turned back towards the parking lot, a feisty Sedge Wren brought some cheer as it played hide n' seek in the low-lying coastal scrub.

We had an hour of reasonable daylight left, just about enough time to squeeze in one more location before heading back to Fulton. Gene suggested Sunset Lake, another spot where the Bar-tailed Godwit had been seen. The site turned out to be a longish coastal peninsula, the lake on the west side with Corpus Christi Bay on the other side. The first birds of note proved to be two beautiful American Oystercatchers to add to our ever-growing shorebird list. In fact the bay side hosted many shorebirds and it wasn't long too long, after a few heart-pounding moments viewing distant Willets, we eventually spotted the Bar-tailed Godwit! Moreover, it wasn't that far away and ultimately moved closer to our group offering wonderful photo opportunities and scope views. It was a beautiful evening on Corpus Christi bay and we had the place to ourselves sharing the moment with this long distance migrant, a species known to have recorded the longest nonstop migratory flight by any bird, a distance of some 13,560-kilometres that took 11 days to complete...nonstop! Offering respect to this amazing species was the perfect finale to yet another extra-ordinary day in Texas, and our tour was still less than 48 hours old!

Monday December 4th | Port Aransas | Mustang Island | Robstown | Sarita Rest Area | Brownsville

We departed south from Fulton including the short ferry crossing to Port Aransas which ultimately brought us to the Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Center neatly tucked away behind the Nueces County Waste Water Treatment Plant. It was the first taste of the famed Texas "World Birding Centers", a series of parks and state parks scattered over the south-eastern part of the state preserving pockets of habitat while simultaneously allowing public access. The site received a resounding thumbs-up from the group with hundreds of close-range ducks, herons and shorebirds clearly visible from the boardwalk in superb morning light. Clapper Rails were easy to see and a few in our party even saw a Virginia Rail. Careful scanning through the large flocks of ducks found a drake Cinnamon Teal amid the hordes of Blue-winged Teal and a Greater Scaup among hundreds of Redheads. The photographers were in their element. There was so much to see, close-range Green Herons and Black-crowned Night-Herons and the most enormous American Alligator napping on a mattress of reeds close to the boardwalk. Afterwards, a fortuitous 'portaloo' stop behind the center provided an opportunity to scan the nearby salt flats which held a large flock of Ring-billed and Laughing Gulls, some Killdeer and the only Stilt Sandpipers (6) of the tour.

Mustang Island again proved key for seeing White-tailed Hawks and we must have tallied half-a-dozen before James spotted a pair of Aplomado Falcons perched on a utility pole that ultimately offered fantastic scope views. The road was busy but the drivers courteous as we soaked up wonderful views of one of the most sought-after birds of the whole tour!

After skirting around Corpus Christi we headed west towards Robstown and the Nueces café, a small family run business in a semi-rural Texas. Fortune again came our way! Not only was this a great spot for lunch but Ruth spotted several Green Jays around the back of the property. Finding Green Jays so far north of the Rio Grande Valley came as a genuine surprise as the birds put on a great show moving back and forth between a large Live Oak stashing acorns in the dense thickets and scrub behind the café. Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Eastern Phoebe and Orange-crowned Warbler were found here too but the lunch stop really belonged to Ruth's Green Jays!

After lunch we drove a myriad of farm roads in a fruitless search for a previously reported Prairie Falcon before google maps thankfully brought us back to Route 77 south. Next up was the Sarita Roadside Rest Area, a location made famous in birding circles several years ago as a good spot for seeing Tropical Parula. Though the parulas wouldn't be there in December, the rest stop itself was worthy a visit and we enjoyed our first Brewer's Blackbirds, Bronzed Cowbirds and Black-crested Titmice of the trip. Kathy skillfully picked out a Common Grackle among the blackbirds, a species far from 'common' in southern Texas.

We pressed on south along Route 77 noting quite a few raptors along the way including Red-tailed Hawks, Crested Caracaras and the first Harris's Hawks of the trip but the biggest surprise was a flock of around 120 Snow Geese in a farm field near Raymondville just before we entered the urbanization of the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

Check-in at the Courtyard Marriott in Brownsville was smooth (and festive) after which we drove a relatively short distance to a fun Mexican Restaurant down the road and rounded off another brilliant day doing the bird list in the hotel lobby replete with Christmas décor.

December 5th | Brownsville | Resaca de La Palma | Hugh Ramsey Nature Park | Resaca de La Palma

After the previous day's lengthy drive the idea of spending the morning at a World Birding Center just 20 minutes from the Marriott in Brownsville was most welcome. Resaca De La Palma was our chosen venue, a site well known for a number of key Rio Grande species that would be of great interest to us but also because the park had received an oversized helping of incredibly rare birds in the weeks prior to our visit.

We entered the park around 7:30 am having paused briefly along the back roads to watch a couple of Harris's Hawks. The morning was heavily overcast and the air slightly muggy as the first 'Rio Grande' specialties started to appear; Plain Chachalacas, a dazzling Altamira Oriole, and loads of Green Jays and Inca Doves all appeared before the visitor center opened. Many visiting birders were in the park too, no surprise given the wealth of good birds being reported, but most quickly dispersed into the park's trail system while a handful just hung around the parking lot keenly anticipating an update on the latest bird news. We spent time wandering the beautifully appointed trails and more key species appeared; Long-billed Thrasher, Clay-colored Thrush, plenty of

Altamira Orioles, furtive White-tipped Doves, numerous Great Kiskadees and a couple of Olive Sparrows. The latter could be viewed from the birding blind where numerous wintering warblers were seen coming to drink.

The first truly rare bird of the morning was a Roadside Hawk which we found at the end of the Ebony Trail. It put on the most incredible show as we watched from the boardwalk overlooking a bone-dry Resaca. Frequent travelers to Central America will be familiar with Roadside Hawk but it's an incredibly rare bird in the USA with less than a dozen national records, all of them coming from south Texas. Soon afterwards we noticed a gathering of birders jockeying for position near the observatory, a sure sign that another rare bird was being seen. This time it was a beautiful female Rose-throated Becard which showed very well for several minutes before disappearing on rapid wingbeats over the parking area. Though rather brief, it was in view long enough for members of our party to get excellent photos!

A little later we gathered at the vehicle to grab snacks, water, and discuss the next move. Suddenly there was a booming cry of "BIRD!!!". On any normal day in any normal place, such a freakish 'scream' might appear totally random but at Resaca de La Palma it could only mean one thing. An incredibly rare Gray-collared Becard, already present at the park for a couple of weeks, had just been relocated! Birders ran from all directions and it seemed like everyone in the park had squeezed into a narrow pathway between the birding blinds and the visitor center! A tense, shoulder-to-shoulder wait ensued as the becard moved around fleetingly with a feeding flock of warblers evidently oblivious to the 'goal-mouth scramble' going on below. Views were admittedly brief and challenging with our group having varying degrees of success but the Gray-collared Becard was only the third ever to be found in the USA, and the first in Texas causing quite a stir among local and visiting birders alike. The becard is a noted elevational migrant and had probably wandered north from Mexico to settle down for the winter at Resaca De La Palma.

After a fine lunch at Jason's deli we headed north to Hugh Ramsey Nature Park on the outskirts of Harlingen, a tiny park surrounded by urbanization but full of really good birds; Great Kiskadee, White-tipped Dove, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Clay-colored Thrush, Least Grebe, Ruby-crowned Kinglets and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers aplenty and, for some, the first Green Kingfisher of the trip. The real prize though was yet another rarity, a Golden-crowned Warbler that had probably arrived from NE Mexico to spend the winter at the park. This bird was a real skulker but eventually we all had nice views and, in the process, succeeded in having great views of Curve-billed and Long-billed Thrashers!

Fueled by good fortune we drove the short distance back to Resaca De La Palma to enjoy the most of the remaining daylight. Fewer birders were present than in the morning and there was an air of calm about the place. Eastern Fox Squirrels could be seen around the feeders and there was even a Collard Pecary near the parking area. A flurry of warbler activity around the bird blinds brought some cheer as multiple brightly colored species came to the water features to drink and bathe. Dozens of Orange-crowned and Yellow-rumped Warblers

dropped in along with such beauties as Nashville, Wilson's and Black-and-white Warblers and a single Tennessee! It seemed like the Gray-colored Becard was going to be a 'no show' in the afternoon so we had one last wander down the Ebony Trail finding the Roadside Hawk teed up on a dead snag just off the boardwalk and foraging as it flew to the ground preying on large (unidentified) bugs. It then flew along the Resaca and into the overhanging branches of a tamarisk, presumably to roost. We'd had some extra-ordinary luck with the Roadside Hawk. Apparently it had been missing all day since we'd last seen it that morning!

Meanwhile, Gene had been busy spotting brightly colored passerines perched up high in some dead branches. Though somewhat distant the wonders of digital photography revealed at least one to be a Western Tanager! In fact, there appeared to be a couple more with it and subsequent study of the photos revealed perhaps as many as five Western Tanagers in a pre-roost gathering. As we departed two Northern Raccoons raided the feeders and another extra-ordinary field day came to a close. We celebrated the day with some fine South American cuisine at Gazpacho's in Brownsville.

December 6th | Los Fresnos Nature Park | South Padre Island | San Benito | Oliveira Park, Brownsville

We planned to head over to South Padre Island, a location that had sparked a fair amount of conversation on the trip thus far. The day was a beauty, crisp and clear with a light North-westerly breeze though slightly chilly to begin with. Los Fresnos Nature Park was a timely and convenient place to stop on the journey and again we couldn't help but marvel at the Texas parks system as Los Fresnos proved to be another jewel neatly nestled amid the urbanization. After a steady start we came across a fast moving feeding flock composed mostly of Orange-crowned and Nashville Warblers but also containing a few Ruby-crowned Kinglets and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers. Claire noticed a brightly colored warbler and within a second it became pretty clear she had eyes on a male Tropical Parula, one of the rarer species we'd hope to see on the park. Tracking it was no easy matter however, as this was one of the most mobile warbler flocks we'd encountered. Confusion reigned until it became clear we had two Tropical Parulas in view, a male and a female, and a third bird that may have been a hybrid Tropical x Northern Parula! This particular flock disappeared almost as quickly as it had surfaced and instead of chasing we settled for good views of some of the park's more common species with really great looks at Carolina Wrens, Olive Sparrows and Great Kiskadees. A nearby Resaca held about 50 Black-bellied Whistling Ducks and a Western Cattle Egret. With Anhingas and a Vermilion Flycatcher on view across the street from the parking lot and a magnificent flock of 300 soaring White Pelicans overhead...it wasn't easy to leave!

By late morning we'd crossed the causeway to South Padre Island, beginning at the Birding and Nature Center Wetlands and its impressive network of boardwalks. A Yellow-bellied Sapsucker was a nice find in the gnarled mesquite trees in the parking lot and out front of the main building there was a fine mix of species including some interesting identification challenges such as separating Mottled Duck from the recently split Mexican Duck, a species formerly lumped with the humble Mallard! A varied selection could be seen from the boardwalk and at times it was difficult to know where to look; Roseate Spoonbills, Caspian Terns and Yellow-crowned Night-herons all vied for attention. An immense flock of Redheads gave a dramatic fly-past on the bayside and a Reddish Egret performed at point-blank range just off the boardwalk, a photographer's dream! Ruth mentioned a

desire to see bitterns and it didn't take too long before we came upon one, a bird kindly pointed out to us by a British couple who'd scoped out a tiny Least Bittern wonderfully camouflaged as it caught minnows at the base of the reeds. We finished off the boardwalk loop with great views of Vermilion Flycatchers and vocalizing Tropical Kingbirds before heading off to Yummies Bistro for a fine late lunch.

Later we headed west as Brown Pelicans shadowed our vehicle along the causeway as we left South Padre Island. A previously reported Burrowing Owl was the main interest though the slightly obscure directions led us to a small attractive hotspot at the San Benito wetlands with Anhinga, a juvenile Hooded Merganser and several Eastern Meadowlarks being among the birds of interest. Gene spotted a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher out in the fields, a new bird for the trip and James noticed an American Bittern slink away from the wetlands, fly low over the fields and out of view. As for the Burrowing Owl, well we did eventually find it resting on an upturned concrete pipe beside a busy road as well as a number of Crested Caracaras and a White-tailed Hawk in the nearby fields.

As the evening approached we headed south to Oliveira Park in Brownsville, popular for local recreational activities and equally popular among birders for its known parrot roost. Things were a little quiet at first and we even wondered if we were in the right spot! But, White-crowned Parrots were the first to arrive and actually came in quite good numbers, many of them in pairs. Back towards where we'd parked the van...hundreds of noisy Red-crowned Parrots arrived and sparred around creating a wonderfully noisy, colorful spectacle. By carefully going through them we managed to pick out a few Red-ored Parrots as well. It was quite the scene and a sensational way to end the day.

Dinner at Toscafino Ristorante was pretty exceptional and we wrapped another brilliant day in Texas by reflecting on the day's observations in the hotel lobby.

December 7th | Resaca de La Palma | Estero Llano Grande | Frontera Audubon Thicket | Alamo

A most enjoyable spell in Brownsville came to an end this morning. We enjoyed one last buffet breakfast at the Marriot before heading west along the Rio Grande Valley to our final base in Alamo. Since it was on the way, we made one more visit to the wonderful Resaca de La Palma enjoying more Green Jays, Inca Doves, Altamira Orioles and other species for which the Rio Grande Valley is justly renowned. On the whole though, it was pretty quiet and after an hour or so, Dusky-capped and Least Flycatchers were the only new birds we added so we moved on, but only as far as another World Birding Center at Estero Llano Grande!

The staff at Estero mentioned that water levels were critically low after months of drought but a walk around the reserve was bound to be worthwhile and productive. At the feeders we found Ruby-throated, Black-chinned and Buff-bellied Hummingbirds. A couple of White-tailed kites hovered over the refuge and the study of a fairly large flock of 'peeps' revealed mostly Least Sandpipers though we did find several Western Sandpipers mixed with them. Alligator Lake was simply full of night-herons! We counted at least 18 Yellow-crowned and five Black-crowned Night-Herons in the reeds and marveled at the camouflage of a Common Pauraque roosting only

inches from the footpath in the mesquite scrub. A Merlin passed by without stopping and a Black Phoebe was found fly-catching from a nearby drain.

After a marvelous lunch at the Blue Onion, we ventured to Frontera Audubon Thicket, a tiny reserve in Weslaco with a big reputation for attracting some very good birds. The habitat was dense, the trail system compact and many of the birds close, most of them easily identified without binoculars! Clay-colored Thrush was plentiful as was Orange-crowned Warbler and while there was no sign of the 'hoped-for' Crimson-collared Grosbeak we stumbled across another Golden-crowned Warbler, our second of the tour and this one gave point-blank views at eye-level in the dense Tamaulipas Thorn Scrub.

The day was drawing to a close and on the way to the Alamo Inn around 20 Roseate Spoonbills lifted up from a field by the HEB supermarket in busy, urban Weslaco! After the settling in to the Alamo Inn we had dinner at the local Mexican restaurant across the street and concluded another rewarding day by going through the bird list at the Alamo Inn.

December 8th | Alamo | Bentsen Rio Grande State Park | National Butterfly Center, Mission |

Another gloriously sunny day dawned and the lucky streak of weather continued to work in our favor. We headed west from Alamo arriving at Bentsen Rio Grande State Park around 8am to be greeted by a magnificent Red-shouldered Hawk sat on one of the lights fixtures in the parking lot...and it wasn't shy at all!

With formalities taken care of (entrances fees and wrist bands) we entered the park on foot finding a large group of Plain Chachalacas including one spectacularly marked, partially leucistic individual. The habitat was pretty dense in the park composed mostly Tamaulipas Thorn Scrub but was ideal for at least one species and it wasn't long before we heard and then saw a feisty Northern Beardless Tyrannulet. Soon afterwards, a Gray Hawk gave wonderful views with several close range fly pasts and a line of about nine Wild Turkeys walked through one of the feeding stations without stopping behaving as if they had some place to be!

Amber Grove picnic area held a really nice feeding flock of about eight Ruby-crowned Kinglets and with them a couple of Golden-crowned Kinglets, pretty rare this far south. Blue-gray Gnatcatchers and Orange-crowned Warblers were included in this feeding flock too and another Northern Beardless Tyrannulet called from across the road with plaintive, descending 'pee-pee-pee' calls attracting two visiting birders who seemed very anxious to see one! We wandered over to the nearby Resaca finding plenty of roosting Anhingas and a much desired Green Kingfisher. Texas Spiny Lizards were spied on the walls of one of the shelters and a little more time spent in the thorn scrub produced good views of a Verdin, Golden-fronted and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers and yet another Northern Beardless Tyrannulet!

Having been on foot for a while, we decided to take advantage of the park's transport system and caught the tram to the hawktower where we were rewarded with a grand panorama overlooking tens of acres of thorn scrub and views south into Mexico. Patient scanning found more Gray Hawks, both perched and in flight, a

distant dark-morph Swainson's Hawk, a couple of soaring White Pelicans and, most impressive of all, a flock of 24 Sandhill Cranes flying in 'V' formation coming in from northern Mexico.

Lunch at Le Chez Bleu café at the park entrance was a little drawn out but did provide an opportunity to catch up with Black-chinned and Ruby-throated Hummingbirds and some incredibly approachable Wild Turkeys!

The afternoon was spent at the National Butterfly Center in Mission and once again, the structure and professionalism of the Texas parks system caught our attention. It was hot, easily the hottest afternoon of the trip but acting on a tip from a staff member, we wandered the trails looking for and eventually finding an Eastern Screech-Owl roosting in a tree cavity next to the trail. Moreover, this was a McCall's (Eastern) Screech-Owl, a resident of the Rio Grande Valley and Southern Texas and a potential future split from the northern population.

Despite the heat, the trails and water features within the park had been very productive offering excellent views of Inca and White-tipped Doves, Curve-billed Thrasher, Buff-bellied Hummingbirds plus Nashville and Black-and-white Warbler coming into bathe. Kathy was kind enough to point a few butterflies as well with Mexican Yellow, Painted Lady, Pygmy Blue, Southern Dogface and American Snout to mention a few of those identified. On leaving the park we had fine views of a hovering White-tailed Kite and a perched Savannah Sparrow on a fence post.

Dinner was once again at the Mexican restaurant across the street, though not by choice. Christmas festivities had brought the entire town square to a standstill in Alamo and although we'd managed to get in to our rooms the tour vehicle was blocked in until the traffic dispersed.

December 9th | Salineño | Rancho Lomitas | Rio Grande City

This was the only day of the tour requiring a moderately early start and, after a lengthy drive including a gas station stop in Roma, we reached our destination of Salineño Wildlife Preserve just before 8am. The location overlooked a wide section of the Rio Grande River with good views of the thorn scrub on the opposite (Mexican) side of the river. The public boat ramp in Salineño offered a fine vantage point and we simply parked up and watched for birds passing up and down the river. Heavy mist shrouded the trees and scrub along the river and would remain with us for most of the morning. It wasn't too long before we heard the eerie, fluty songs of Audubon's Oriole and one of them sounded very close but despite much effort, including a visit to the neighboring feeders, we never did manage to catch a glimpse but did have better luck with an Altamira Oriole.

In the event, this spot proved excellent for viewing closely related species alongside each other; Neotropic Cormorants with Double-crested Cormorants, Pied-billed and Least Grebes together, and all three North American kingfishers including the mighty Ringed Kingfisher, our first of the tour! A little wandering away from the boat ramp found an incredibly cooperative Cassin's Sparrow teed up in a low mesquite while overhead Greater White-fronted Geese called unseen in the morning mist until eventually a break in the clouds brought

six into view as they flew over at fairly close range. And, Greg did well to spot three Wood Ducks flying up river our first and only sighting for the tour.

White-winged Doves seemed especially abundant along this stretch of river and they were all worth checking as eventually we started to notice larger, darker, heavier doves flying by and occasionally landing in the trees on the opposite side of the river. They were Red-billed Pigeons, yet another range restricted species found only in South Texas along the Rio Grande Valley in the US.

After lunch in Rio Grande City we drove for several miles on dirt roads across the Texas brush country before reaching Rancho Lomitas where we had a date with some feeders inside the ranch. It was hot and the shaded seating outside the casitas was welcome but the feeders were puzzlingly quiet. Even our host's dulcet tones of "here quaily, quaily" couldn't coax in a solitary quail or anything else for that matter. However, we'd been given an open invitation to wander about the property and this we did with some success finding Black and Eastern Phoebe, and a smart covey of eight Scaled (Cotton Top) Quail, the main species that we really wanted to see.

The drive out along the entrance road was neatly punctuated by a group of four or so foraging Vesper Sparrows in the fields by the track and a roadrunner bolting across the road giving only the briefest of glimpses. But fortune once again came our way just as we were about to leave town. Gene and Claire simultaneously spotted a Greater Roadrunner perched up on a fence post along the intriguingly named "Sparrow's Nest Road". A little maneuvering was all that was required for the whole group to have excellent views of the most charismatic of all desert birds! And with that we began the lengthy drive back to Alamo before enjoying a fabulous farewell dinner at the Republic of the Rio Grande.

December 10th | Alamo | Frontera Audubon Thicket | Estero Llano Grande

The final morning of the tour brought a genuine shift in weather conditions, perhaps timely because we'd enjoyed more than a week of immaculate weather. The clear blue skies and sunny conditions were certainly deceptive as a stiff northern wind with gusts of over 20 mph ripped through the Rio Grande Valley. Hummingbirds shivered and songbirds stayed low in cover. The morning was not without frustration as we found out that just about all the local birding centers and parks in the area would not be open until 12 noon, just about the time that we'd be heading to the airport!

However, we got lucky at Frontera Audubon as a flock of five White Ibis flew over and we found some refuge in the 'tropical zone' at Estero Llano Grande where Black-crested Titmouse, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Clay-colored Thrush, Black-chinned and Buff-bellied Hummingbirds put on a nice show as if to say 'bon voyage' from the Rio Grande Valley. The real prize of the visit was a bright male Pine Warbler, not a common bird in 'the valley' and furnishing the last new bird to be added to our trip.

After some last minute packing, we left the Alamo Inn in good time for flights home, and said our goodbyes at McAllen Miller International Airport. With over 190 bird species recorded, South Texas had provided a wonderful avian adventure in some of the most bird-rich environs to be found anywhere in the United States.

The group camaraderie on this tour made it especially pleasurable to lead, so thank you to a wonderful group making the tour so enjoyable.