

# South Texas Birding & Nature January 21 – 29, 2026 | Trip Report by Sharon Goldwasser



**Naturalist Journeys Tour Leaders Sharon Goldwasser and Robert Petty, and Julie, Janet, Diane, Vicki, Deborah, Ed, Lori, Gary, Toni, Linda and Eileen**



## **January 21: Arrivals in Corpus Christi | Cattle Tyrant | Bayfront Park | Suter Wildlife Refuge**

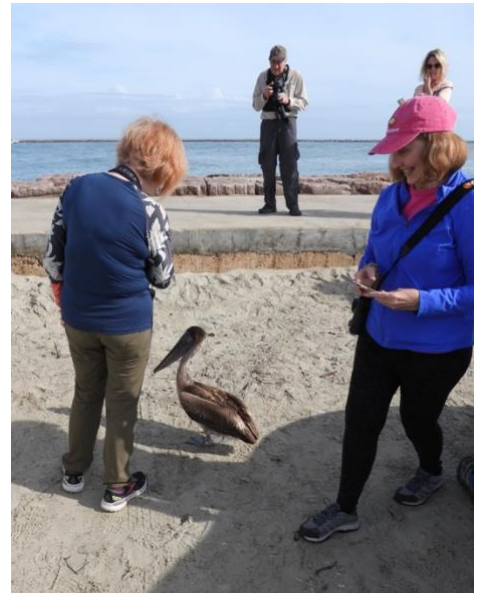
After gathering our group members from the airport and hotels, we headed to our first destination: a parking lot behind a restaurant in downtown Corpus Christi. We were seeking an unusual visitor from South America, a Cattle Tyrant. Normally found foraging among cattle in dry regions of South America, the bird has been seen in downtown Corpus Christi since 2023 picking off insects from a bright blue dumpster which is where we found it almost immediately. It was very cooperative as it snapped up flies attracted to the refuse!

Less than a mile away, we visited Bayfront Park where the star attraction was a Red-footed Booby which turned up in late fall of 2025. It was a life bird for most of the group and we enjoyed clear but distant views as it flew back and forth between several islands created by dredging in Corpus Christi Bay.



Before heading north toward Rockport, we visited Suter Wildlife Refuge in Corpus Christi. There we spotted a variety of herons and egrets, Black Skimmers, Forster’s Terns, and American White Pelicans, plus a selection of numerous ducks and shorebirds. A Cinnamon Teal was a good find by Robert, since they are much less regular than Blue-winged Teal in the region.

As we headed north on FM 1039 towards Rockport, we made a short stop at Bee Road Reservoir. Sharp-eyed observers in the vans spotted a few raptors along the way. An Osprey kept watch over the lake as we viewed assorted diving and dabbling ducks, several shorebirds, a flyover group of Sandhill Cranes, a Belted Kingfisher and a group of American White Pelicans. As we passed Live Oak Country Club Road, one of the vans spotted a flock of Snow Geese in the fields, but we were too short on time to drive in to get a closer look.



After getting settled at the Inn at Fulton Harbor, we enjoyed a delicious dinner at the Old Fulton Seafood Cafe.

## January 22: Aransas Bay and Aransas NWR by Boat | Goose Island State Park

We ventured out after breakfast to the docks across from our hotel to board *The Skimmer* for a morning of birding by boat. Patchy fog accompanied us for the first part of the tour as Captain Tommy kept us entertained and informed with his witty and knowledgeable commentary. Whooping Cranes were the star of the show, but we were able to observe nearly 40 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, three species of gulls, including an adult Lesser Black-backed Gull, herons, and a variety of ducks. We saw numerous Ospreys and a Northern Harrier, but the identity of a distant dark-colored raptor initially perplexed us. When it took to the air, we were thrilled as it revealed itself to be a Merlin as it sped away across the marsh.

After sinking our teeth into Texas barbecue at Lew’s Barbecue Kitchen for lunch, we headed for an afternoon at Goose Island State Park. We started at the “Big Tree” in Lamar, where we admired the huge Southern Live Oak and looked for birds in the surrounding brush and woods. We found an Eastern Meadowlark, several Northern Cardinals, an Eastern Phoebe, and watched our first Great Kiskadee flycatcher as it vocalized frequently atop a tall tree. Our progress toward the main portion of Goose Island was paused frequently as we encountered



numerous distractions. A flock of more than 30 Whooping Cranes in a roadside field dwarfed a group of Sandhill Cranes, and 20 Roseate Spoonbills stood nearby at the edge of a pond. Our attention was diverted again when we spotted our first two alligators in a pond along the drive.

At our final stop of the day at Goose Island, we enjoyed continued views of herons, terns and pelicans feeding in the marsh. Crossing over to the open water we found a raft of Redheads and a lone female Bufflehead just offshore.

We concluded the day with a stroll across the street from our hotel to enjoy another great seafood dinner at Charlotte Plummer's.

## **January 23: Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Center | Aransas Jetty | Mustang Island**

We loaded our luggage into the vans and departed Rockport. As we headed toward Aransas Pass, we passed a Loggerhead Shrike as it was scanning for prey. The brief ferry ride and a short drive brought us one of the birding treasures of the area: The Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Center.

A boardwalk path leads visitors up to the viewing platforms where an amazing array of ducks, shorebirds and other marsh-loving species practically glowed in perfect morning sunlight. Blue-winged Teal, Northern Shovelers and Northern Pintail rubbed shoulders with dozens of Long-billed Dowitchers, White Ibis and numerous herons. A glowing pink Roseate Spoonbill coasted overhead. A shy Sora, two Common Gallinules, and several Common Yellowthroats and Swamp Sparrows occasionally emerged from the cover of the marsh plants before disappearing again.

We took a short detour to the Aransas Jetty before traveling down the coastal road on Mustang Island. At the jetty we were met by a Brown Pelican so accustomed to humans that it allowed us to walk within a foot or so without flinching. Sanderlings, Laughing Gulls, and terns rested on the beach and we spotted several American Herring Gulls flying over the channel by the jetty.

As we proceeded down Mustang Island, we were excited to find a total of three Aplomado Falcons perched near two hacking platforms. One of the highlights for some of the group was the sight of the falcon dive-bombing a pair of White-tailed Hawks perched on a large shrub. Although the falcons were somewhat distant for high quality photos, everyone enjoyed excellent scope views of this rare and handsome falcon.

We undertook the long drive to Brownsville, noting roadside Harris's Hawks, and several Crested Caracaras. A brief stop at the Sarita Rest Area on I77 gave us our first views of the colorful Green Jay, a Texas specialty that



everyone was delighted to see. We delayed our check-in at the hotel in order to visit a well-known parrot roost at Oliviera Park in Brownsville. As the sunset approached, scores of parrots arrived and took up perches on wires and trees before finding a final spot to roost. Their raucous calls and screeches were nearly deafening at times. By far the most common species was the Red-crowned Amazon (naturalized) along with a smaller number of White-fronted Amazons and a handful of Red-lored Amazons (both with a status considered to be “exotic, provisional”). We also spotted a group of three striking Yellow-headed Amazons, considered to be escapees. As the parrots finally quieted down for the night, we departed for our evening dinner of at Gazpacho’s Restaurant, then settled in to our lodgings in Brownsville.

### **January 24: Old Port Isabel Road | Laguna Atascosa | South Padre Island**

The morning was overcast but warm as we headed out to the Old Port Isabel Road with its pastures, wetlands and arid scrub vegetation. In the thorny, dry vegetation, we heard our first Curve-billed Thrasher, calling “whit-a-wheet” from the top of a shrub. We glimpsed two different Cactus Wrens, mainly when they perched atop yucca stalks, found a Verdin nest and heard its chik-chik-chik call. The fields were drier than in on some previous visits, but seemed to be good habitat for raptors, included a hovering White-tailed Kite, several groups of Harris’s Hawks, two Crested Caracaras and a Northern Harrier.

We continued on to the headquarters of Laguna Atascosa NWR, where got our first looks at some of the south Texas specialties visiting the feeders, including Plain Chachalaca, Long-billed Thrasher, Olive Sparrow, Black-crested Titmouse and a Mexican Long-nosed Armadillo. Green Jays crowded the feeder—their improbably bold coloration looking for all the world as though it was designed by a five year old let loose with a box of crayons. We walked a few trails close to the headquarters before departing for South Padre Island.

After lunch, we visited the South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center. We added to our growing list of herons with a group of roosting Yellow-crowned Night Herons and a Green Heron. As we wandering along the boardwalk, several of the group glimpsed a Clapper Rail briefly as it emerged several times from the cover of the mangroves. Resting on the island near the visitor center were Roseate Spoonbills, Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, Little Blue Herons and our first Mottled Ducks.

We enjoyed another delightful dinner at Toscafino’s in Brownsville.

### **January 25: Resaca de la Palma State Park | University of Texas Resaca**

We chose to start our morning at Resaca de la Palma State Park. The tram tour gave us a great introduction to some of the common or important native plant species, such as Texas Ebony (*Ebenopsis ebano*), Velvet Mesquite (*Neltuna velutina*), and Anacua (*Ehretia anacua*), sometimes called Sandpaper Tree because of its



rough leaf surfaces. Birds were relatively quiet in the chilly and breezy conditions but along the tram ride we got out several times and spotted Ladder-backed and Golden-fronted Woodpeckers. A couple of foraging flocks offered us quick views of Blue-Gray Gnatcatchers, a Black-throated Green Warbler and busy Ruby-crowned Kinglets.

The feeders at the visitor center offered entertaining displays of non-stop visits by scolding Green Jays, brilliant Altamira Orioles, Plain Chachalacas, Olive Sparrows, Black-crested Titmice and over a dozen Northern Cardinals. Quite an array of colors, shapes and sizes of birds passed through while we watched.

After enjoying lunch at Lola's Bistro, we decided to scan the group of 300 Black-bellied Whistling Ducks gathered by the adjacent pond. Our efforts were rewarded! We picked out a single Fulvous Whistling Duck lurking among the flock that was mostly huddled on the bank. After we all enjoyed clear scope views, the Fulvous Whistling Duck afforded even better looks when it flew off of the bank and landed in the pond much closer to the group.

Our afternoon birding focus was at the resacas at UTRGV campus in Brownsville. The open water and brushy vegetation surrounding the wetland gave side-by-side views of Pied-billed and Least Grebes, a very cooperative Green Kingfisher, and some of the regular herons and egrets. Some of the group had tantalizing glimpses of a Tropical Parula, a Wilson's Warbler and a Yellow-throated Warbler that exited a palm tree before we could get decent views. In spite of the continuing chilly weather, we added several new species as we toured the campus habitat.

## **January 26: Santa Ana NWR | Estero Llano Grande State Park**

The morning was quite chilly and we decided on a more relaxed departure time from Brownsville. We headed for Santa Ana NWR. The day proved to be sunny and calmer compared to the previous days, which lifted our spirits. To our surprise and dismay, Willow Lakes close to the visitor center were almost completely dry! We watched a group of Common Ground Doves as they fed and wandered in the lake bed. The feeders at the visitor center hosted a Clay-colored Thrush, many Inca Doves, numerous Great Kiskadees and the now ubiquitous Green Jays. We enjoyed stunning views of our surroundings from the Observation Towers, and watched as a Crested Caracara flew past as we stood high above refuge habitat and trails. We came across a few mixed species flocks including mostly Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Ruby-crowned Kinglets and Orange-crowned Warblers, but just ran out of time to visit the wetlands.



As we drove through Progresso on our way to lunch, several raptors caught our eye. In a stunning display, we observed at least five White-tailed Hawks from one spot, both soaring and perched. A couple of Crested Caracaras and a Red-tailed were present in the same area. Shortly afterwards, we were once again delayed by the sight of nearly 20 Long-billed Curlews strolling across a driveway and milling around yards in a residential neighborhood not far from some open field.

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 extremely close up views of a ground-roosting Common Pauraque, and then minutes later we located a second individual just a few feet from the trail. We continued up to the top of the dike for views at some distant water birds.

After checking in at the Alamo Inn, we had yet another excellent meal, this time at the Republic of the Rio Grande.

## **January 27: Salineño | Falcon State Park | Rancho Lomitas**

The cold front that arrived midway through our tour began to loosen its grip as we ventured west into the drier habitats near Falcon Dam for the day. A Greater Roadrunner greeted one van on the way into the little community of Salineño, and for those that missed it, we spotted another as we left. We enjoyed a leisurely walk along the Rio Grande River, where we spotted a Ringed Kingfisher, Bewick's Wren, a young White-eyed Vireo, Blue-gray Gnatcatchers and Yellow-rumped Warblers foraging in the vegetation along the bank. A group of egrets, ducks, cormorants and several American White Pelicans floated by or perched on exposed rocks. We spied a couple of turtles, Rio Grande Cooters, sunning themselves on the rocks on a little island. A Gray Hawk put in an appearance as it soared by and then landed in a distant tree on the far shore.

We finished our walk and returned to watch the show at the feeders at the Salineño bird sanctuary. As we ate our picnic lunches, we were entertained by many species that we had seen earlier in the week such as Green Jays, Great Kiskadees, Golden-fronted Woodpeckers and Altamira Orioles. We waited patiently until an Audubon's Oriole arrived and were happily surprised by several Northern Bobwhite as they wandered out of the brush and into view. Thanks to the caretakers of the sanctuary, everyone in our group got outstanding views of an Eastern Screech Owl peering out of a next box. As we departed Salineño, we passed more Northern Bobwhite feeding in yards.



We then headed to Falcon State Park to look for a few more of the species that prefer the arid scrub in the area. We visited at feeders located at the bird blind and the Butterfly Garden. As the group watched the numerous Northern Cardinals coming in to the feeders, a Pyrrhuloxia arrived and gave us a great opportunity to compare the two species side-by-side. Once again, we encountered Long-billed Thrashers, an Olive Sparrow, Green Jays and several Orange-crowned Warblers dining on the seeds and suet. The blind allowed us to get close up views of Black-throated Sparrows, a busy Bewick's Wren, and a Green-tailed Towhee. Perhaps the Sharp-shinned Hawk that shot over the collection of birds at the feeders considered that it was also a feeding station for hawks.

Our final stop of the day was at Rancho Lomitas, set in the South Texas brush habitat. Scattered seed attracted a large covey of Scaled Quail. The feeders brought in an Audubon's Oriole as well as many of the common species we had viewed elsewhere in the Rio Grande Valley. We learned that almost every species was a big fan of shelled or unshelled peanuts. Our stroll to the ranch pond didn't turn up any birds but we identified several species of shrubs and cacti including the charming Christmas Cactus, covered with red fruits.

We stopped for dinner in Rio Grande City before our final drive back into Alamo.

## **January 28: Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park | Edinburg Scenic Wetlands | McAllen Parrot Roost**

The morning warmed up nicely for our final full day of birding. After entering the park, we lingered around the visitor center where a Clay-colored Thrush showed off, Plain Chachalacas tackled the seed feeders, and a male Ruby-throated Hummingbird came in to sip sugar water. As we stood by the canal vainly hoping to see a Purple Gallinule, we were buzzed by a loudly calling flock of Green Parakeets, and we spotted a Hooded Oriole. We wandered into the park with a long stop by the feeders at the La Familia Nature Centers where the usual suspects were joined by a flock of Wild Turkeys. We walked along the tram road to the Kingfisher Overlook, where we rewarded with excellent scope views of a Ringed Kingfisher, a few herons and cormorants and a couple of other new species for the trip—American Pipits on the grass and Stilt Sandpipers near the water.

We continued to the National Butterfly Center for a picnic lunch at tables amidst the birds and butterflies. For a second time we were greeted by the loud calls of Green Parakeets as they passed overhead. The warmer temperatures brought out more species of butterflies including Queen, White Checkered-skipper, Lavinia White Skipper, Clouded Skipper, Tropical Checkered-skipper and a tiny Reakirt's Blue.



After lunch we visited the Edinburg Scenic Wetlands, another designated World Birding Center of South Texas. We were delighted to welcome Dr. Tim Brush, a biologist who recently retired from the UT campus in Edinburg. He summarized his history of research on nesting birds in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. At the wetlands, we were hoping to spot a rare visitor from Mexico, the Crimson-collared Grosbeak. Tim pointed out the potato leaf tree, a favorite food plant of the grosbeak. Stepping out to the parking lot, we homed in on the potato leaf tree and moments later got brief looks at the grosbeak before it disappeared back into the foliage. We finally located our first Cattle Egrets for the week, perched on the far shore of the large pond. The feeders and trails offered more views of Plain Chachalacas, Inca Doves, and thrashers. Also new to our checklist here was a Blue-headed Vireo that gave us extended views as it foraged out in the open.

Having gotten looks at the Green Parakeets earlier we opted to try a different parrot roost before dinner, however we arrived early and departed for dinner before the flocks came in for the evening. Then it was off to the Patio on Guerra for an excellent final dinner.

## **January 29: Quinta Mazatlan | Final Departures**

Our final morning delivered perfect weather for a stroll around the beautiful grounds of Quinta Mazatlan. A couple of new birds appeared—a Western Tanager, a brilliant red Summer Tanager, plus additional views of several hummingbirds. Despite the many days that were colder and windier than expected, we tallied 175 bird species during the tour as well as a good selection of mammals, several reptiles, and 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 thorn scrub together. We took our leave just before 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.

*Photo Credits: Group by Robert Petty; Group by Robert Petty; Whooping Crane by Sharon Goldwasser; Pelican Walk-By by Lori Sparagowski; Red-crowned Amazons by Deborah Hart; Armadillo by Julie Gorka; Green Jay by Deborah Hart; Orange-crowned Warbler by Deborah Hart; Roseate Spoonbill by Ed Erickson; Group by Lori Sparagowski; Group by Robert Petty; Common Parakeet by Lori Sparagowski; Mixed Flock on Water by Julie Gorka.*

