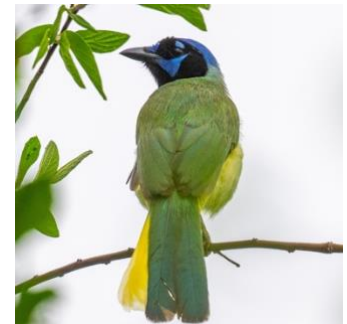
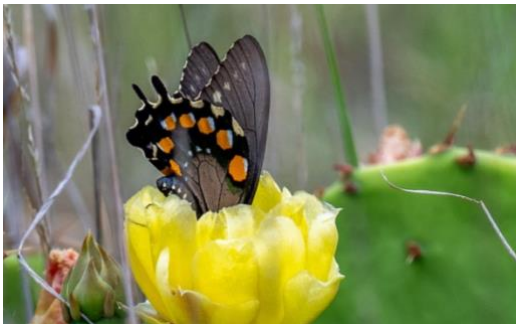


Texas Hill Country April 24 – 29, 2026 | Trip Report by Bryan Calk



Guides Bryan Calk and James Smith with Moya, Ellen, Kate, Mike, Dawn, Marilyn, Ed, Terry, Joan, Mary, and Bill



Fri., April 24

Arrivals in San Antonio | Travel to Uvalde

Arrivals took place in the San Antonio area, where everyone met at the airport before loading into the vans and heading west along Highway 90. The drive crossed classic South Texas brush country, with the Hill Country rising off to the north, just out of view but already shaping the feel of the trip. The focus was mostly on getting to Uvalde and getting settled, though Scissor-tailed Flycatchers were seen out the windows along the way. After checking into the hotel, there was a bit of casual birding around the grounds, with Western Kingbirds among the first species noted.

The evening was spent at dinner in town, where introductions were made over welcome drinks. It was fun getting to know each other and settling into the rhythm of the trip while adjusting to the warm, humid spring conditions.



Sat., April 25

Kickapoo Cavern State Park | Fort Clark Springs

An early start came under overcast skies as the drive headed west toward Kickapoo Cavern State Park. This marked the first full morning in Hill Country habitat, with juniper, oak, and scattered pines, along with a variety of spring wildflower blooms adding color across the landscape. Birding around the headquarters and along the park road was excellent from the start. A pair of Hooded Orioles moved through the trees, Canyon Towhees called nearby, and a Blue Grosbeak sang from an exposed perch. Northern Bobwhite called from the brush, while Bewick's Wrens were active and gave great views. Sparrows were a highlight, with Black-throated Sparrow, Field Sparrow, and Lark Sparrow all seen well, along with a Cassin's Sparrow perched up and singing. A striking male Scott's Oriole showed high in an oak, while Summer Tanagers were common throughout the morning.

Farther along the road, a singing Gray Vireo was found, followed by hard-earned but rewarding views of Black-capped Vireo. Shortly after, a male Painted Bunting in full color was singing and moving between perches with prolonged scope views. A Zone-tailed Hawk drifted over a nearby ridge in the low clouds.

Lunch was taken at Fort Clark Springs under large oaks beside a blooming Magnolia, where a nesting pair of Great Kiskadees was active. Vermilion Flycatchers moved through the area, and a pair of Clay-colored Thrushes showed well, along with a Couch's Kingbird nearby. The afternoon was spent at Fort Clark along Las Moras Creek, which was flowing nicely. Towering Pecan and Live Oak trees lined the water, and blooming plants added to the setting. Birds were active all day, with Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, Orchard Orioles, and a mix of White-eyed, Red-eyed, and Yellow-throated Vireos. A pair of parulas stood out, the male showing pure Tropical traits while the female appeared more ambiguous, reflecting the overlap zone between Tropical and Northern forms in this region. Inca Dove showed well near the end of the trail.

On logs in the creek, Rio Grande Cooters were basking alongside a Diamondback Water Snake, and butterflies were active along the paths.

After returning to Uvalde, there was some downtime before gathering for the checklist and heading to dinner at Hangar 6 Air Cafe, an aviation-themed restaurant at the local airfield that reflects the area's ties to regional flight and serves as a casual community gathering spot. Dinner took place with a soft sunset and a steady breeze across the open space. Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, Purple Martins, and Barn Swallows moved through the air



The drive continued north to Concan, stopping for lunch at Hippie Chic's River Shack, a relaxed outdoor spot with a welcoming atmosphere that made for a great break in the day. In the afternoon, time was spent at Garner State Park in classic Hill Country habitat of Ashe Juniper and oak slopes. Right after arriving, a very active mixed flock moved through, with birds dropping in close, including Yellow-throated Warbler, Black-and-white Warbler, Carolina Chickadee, Black-crested Titmouse, Yellow-throated Vireo, and Chipping Sparrow. However, Golden-cheeked Warbler was the highlight, with several individuals seen well, including both males and females. Time was spent discussing their dependence on Ashe Juniper for nesting material and the importance of habitat management for this endangered species. Seeing multiple birds so quickly and clearly was a standout moment.

By late afternoon, arrival into Concan led to check-in at Neal's Lodges. After settling in, the evening wrapped up with dinner in the lodge dining room. The day ended on the porch with the checklist, watching Black-chinned and Ruby-throated Hummingbirds coming to the feeders.

Mon., April 27

Neal's Lodges | Frio Bat Flight

The day began at Neal's Lodges with breakfast, and stepping outside revealed a strong dawn chorus already underway. Parulas sang overhead, joined by Yellow-throated Warblers and Ash-throated Flycatchers, the latter giving especially nice looks. The morning air was full of sound, a classic Hill Country start with birds active in every direction.

After breakfast, we walked a loop road that carried through a mix of scrub, more open areas, and eventually into a large pecan grove filled with towering, shaded trees. Wildflowers were abundant throughout the walk, with Mealy Blue Sage, Mexican Hats, White Prickly Poppies, and a variety of others adding color and texture across the landscape. Butterflies were active as well, including Pipevine Swallowtails, American Lady, and Sleepy Orange drifting through the vegetation.

Birding took some effort at times, but the rewards were steady. Indigo Buntings showed well, singing and feeding at feeders along the path. About halfway through the loop, time was spent relaxing at a shaded pond with chairs, a welcome pause in the morning. Here, a calling parula drew attention, and after walking over, excellent views were had of a Tropical Parula as it came down into view. In this area, Northern Parula, Tropical Parula, and hybrids are all possible, so each individual requires careful confirmation.

Continuing along the trail, Blue Grosbeaks, Lark Sparrows, and Clay-colored Sparrows were all seen. A pair of Verdins moved through the vegetation, and in the juniper and scrubby sections, Hutton's Vireos were singing and circling through the area, giving repeated views. A pair of Common Ravens had built a nest high in a large pecan tree. Painted Buntings continued to be a highlight, singing and showing well, while Ladder-backed and Golden-fronted Woodpeckers both gave nice looks.



After returning to the lodge for lunch, the afternoon split between a bit of rest and continued birding. At one of the feeders on the property, a Black-headed Grosbeak made an appearance, an uncommon migrant in the area, joined by Painted Buntings and other regular visitors. Later in the afternoon, attention turned to the riverfront along the Frio River. The walk followed a beautiful stretch of clear, flowing water lined with towering Montezuma Bald Cypress and a variety of other plants, including blooming Snapdragon Vine with its small purple flowers.

Under a nearby bridge, a Cliff Swallow colony was active, with birds swarming around their mud nests while observations were made of their nesting behavior. A Black Vulture was watched descending to the river to drink. Birding along the river produced several highlights. A Rufous-crowned Sparrow came down into the open and gave exceptional views, singing and showing from multiple angles. Canyon Wrens called from the rocky slopes, their descending whistles echoing through the canyon. A Yellow-throated Warbler was seen bathing in a small seep feeding into the river.

One of the biggest surprises of the trip came with a Prothonotary Warbler along the river's edge. The bird showed well and sang, moving along the boulders and edges of the water and offering prolonged views. Continuing along, a Rock Squirrel was seen, notably a dark, nearly black individual typical of this region. Near the end of the trail, another Tropical Parula was found, reinforcing how this species is becoming increasingly regular.

Time was spent along the river simply taking in the setting, clear water flowing over limestone, and learning about the geology and hydrology that sustain the Frio River and its importance to the surrounding ecosystem. After returning for an early dinner and completing the daily checklist, the evening continued with a visit to Frio Bat Cave. This site hosts an enormous maternity colony of Mexican Free-tailed Bats, estimated at 10 to 12 million individuals.

Before the bats emerged, Cave Swallows filled the sky, swirling around the entrance before diving back into the cave. As dusk deepened, the bats began to pour out in massive numbers. Raptors soon appeared, including Harris's Hawks, Swainson's Hawks, and Red-tailed Hawks, actively hunting the bats. At least six individuals were observed, with Red-tailed Hawks carrying prey away, likely back to their nestlings.



The scale of the spectacle was remarkable, millions of bats streaming into the evening sky, the sound of wings and faint chirping overhead, and dramatic predator interactions. From the hilltop vantage point, sweeping views of the Hill Country stretched out under a colorful sunset.

Tue., April 28 **Lost Maples SNA | Neal's Lodges**

The morning began at Neal's with breakfast before loading up and heading north to Lost Maples State Natural Area. This park protects a rugged stretch of Hill Country shaped by uplift and erosion along the Balcones Escarpment, where limestone canyons and slopes hold relict stands of Bigtooth Maple, a species more typical of eastern forests that persists here in cooler, sheltered drainages. The Sabinal River, especially its spring-fed upper forks, winds through the canyon, providing clear, reliable water that supports a rich mix of plant and bird life. In spring, this combination of flowing water, mature woodland, and diverse structure makes Lost Maples one of the most attractive and productive birding locations in the region, as well as one of the most beautiful.

Birding began right in the parking lot, where one of the most unusual birds of the trip appeared almost immediately, a hybrid warbler, traditionally referred to as a Sutton's Warbler, showing characteristics of Yellow-throated Warbler crossed with a parula-type. With Northern Parula, Tropical Parula, and hybrids all occurring in the area, the exact pairing here was uncertain, adding an extra layer of interest to the sighting.

From there, the trail followed the river corridor through shaded woodland and open stretches, with water present along much of the route. The morning was filled with birdsong. Black-capped Vireos were encountered along the trail, and Acadian Flycatchers called from the riparian areas. Indigo Buntings were singing regularly, and the song of a Louisiana Waterthrush carried through the canyon. Black-and-white Warblers with their high-pitched songs were heard almost continuously, with several individuals seen well.

A Lesser Goldfinch showed nicely, and a singing Audubon's Oriole echoed through the canyon, a species continuing to expand into this region. In the distance, the call of a White-tipped Dove added another reminder of shifting ranges in South Texas and the Hill Country. Red-eyed Vireos were encountered in scattered pockets along the trail. The setting itself was just as much a highlight as the birds. The walk passed through a diversity of trees, including Bigtooth Maple, Chinkapin Oak, and Red Oak, with a variety of flowering plants along the way such as Clematis and Antelope Horns Milkweed. The trail offered continuous views of the limestone canyon and flowing water, making for a slow, immersive pace through one of the most scenic areas in the region.

A Golden-cheeked Warbler provided one of the best moments of the day, appearing suddenly along the trail and giving excellent, close views. Additional species included Blue-gray Gnatcatcher and Least Flycatcher, rounding out a very productive morning.

A picnic lunch was enjoyed under the shade of the trees within the park, with comfortable weather and a relaxed pace allowing time to fully take in the surroundings. After leaving Lost Maples, the return to Neal's Lodges provided some free time in the afternoon. Time was spent in a variety of ways, some continuing to bird around the feeders, others swimming in the river, and others exploring the meadows on the property, making the most of the final daylight hours in the Hill Country.

In the evening, we went up to Leakey for a final dinner at a local bar and grill. The setting sun and shaded outdoor seating created a relaxed atmosphere for the final checklist and a chance to reflect on the trip together, a fitting way to close out the main portion of the tour. Back at the lodge, a short night walk added a final layer to the experience. An Eastern Screech-Owl showed well, and a Chuck-will's-widow made a noisy.

Wed., April 29 **Departures**

The final morning at Neal's Lodges began with one last breakfast together, going around and sharing favorite moments from the trip, along with takeaways and some of the things that left the strongest impressions.

Certain places came up again and again. Cook's Slough Nature Park was a clear favorite, along with Kickapoo, Garner State Park, the bat flight, the Neal's Lodge walk, and Lost Maples. Favorite birds included Black-and-white Warbler, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Canyon Wren, Northern Bobwhite, Golden-cheeked Warbler, Painted Bunting, and Yellow-breasted Chat. Key takeaways included the habitat diversity, Golden-cheeked Warbler ecology, and focus on bird vocalizations. Learning extended beyond birds to include plants, geology, hydrology, and the culture of the region. Underlying all of it was the joy of shared camaraderie and experience.

After breakfast, bags were packed and the crew returned to San Antonio for departures.

Photo Credits: Group by Bryan Calk, Painted Bunting by Joan Franklin, Pipevine Swallowtail by Joan Franklin, Hooded Oriole by Michael Freeman, Green Jay by Joan Franklin, Ash-throated Flycatcher by Joan Franklin, Black-capped Vireo by Bryan Calk, Diamondback Water Snake, Red-eared Sliders by Michael Freeman, Group at Fort Clark Springs by James P Smith, Group at Cook's Slough, Nutria by Bryan Calk, Black-chinned Hummingbird by Michael Freeman, Golden-cheeked Warbler by Bryan Calk, Bats and Swainson's Hawk by Bryan Calk, James P Smith by Michael Freeman, Clematis by Joan Franklin, Black & White Warbler by Joan Franklin, Eastern Screech Owl by Joan Franklin.

