



Naturalist Journeys, LLC and Sunrise Birding, LLC

Big Bend & Davis Mountains, 20 April - 28 April 2012

Guide: Woody Wheeler, with six participants: Robert, Charlotte, Emily, Rosina, Frances and Gail

TRIP REPORT

Day 1 – El Paso to Van Horn



Yellow-rumped Warbler on Ocotillo



Texas Rainbow Cactus

The airline gods were smiling today. Everyone arrived in El Paso on schedule allowing sufficient time to visit the El Paso Archaeological museum with its native habitat grounds and trails. Seconds after pulling into the museum parking lot, Gail spotted a Greater Roadrunner. Then a Black-chinned Hummingbird perched atop a Lechuguilla stalk. Several Black-throated Sparrows perched on Mesquite Trees as numerous White-winged Doves flew by. Western Kingbirds chattered like audio tapes on fast forward between bouts of fly-catching. A Yellow-rumped Warbler and Pyrrhuloxia called as they foraged through Ocotillo, Mesquite and Mormon Tea. The weather was a relatively comfortable 85 degrees with a nice breeze. We were off to a good start.

Half-way to Van Horn, we stopped to visit McNary Reservoir, but first checked an underpass for Cave Swallows. It appeared to have few nests, but after lingering for a while, we saw swallows fly under it. Soon we enjoyed good looks at Cave Swallows on their nests.

From here we drove a short distance on a rustic Texas highway to McNary Reservoir. Prior to ascending the dike to the reservoir, four Black-necked Stilts flew overhead. Once we climbed the dike, we came

upon a view of hundreds of waterfowl, shorebirds, waders and more. Northern Shovelers were the most numerous species, followed by Wilson's Phalaropes and Eared Grebes in beautiful breeding plumage. Clark's Grebes, White Pelicans, Ruddy Ducks, and American Coots paddled by. Snowy Egrets were perched on the far shore, along with Double-crested Cormorants and a Belted Kingfisher. After this productive stop we motored on to Van Horn and the beautifully restored historic El Capitan Hotel.

Day 2 – Van Horn to Ft. Davis – Balmorhea State Park and Lake Balmorhea

This morning, we headed east directly into the rising sun. Soon after exiting on the rural highway leading to Balmorhea State Park, the action began in an ungrazed area with healthy desert vegetation. A beautiful male Swainson's Hawk perched on a fence post alongside the road. His mate was on a nest on the other side of the road. A Black-tailed Jackrabbit appeared along the road and froze there in apparent fear while we photographed it. Four mule deer browsed on desert foliage, and a beautiful male American Kestrel perched on a round hay bale.



Black-tailed Jackrabbit



Swainson's Hawk

At Balmorhea State Park the action intensified. An accommodating Park Ranger took us to see a **Great Horned Owl (below)** with one downy owlet in its nest. Several Bullock's Orioles sang and scrapped for territory in adjacent cottonwood trees.



An eye-popping Vermilion Flycatcher perched conspicuously (right). How could they not? Meanwhile Scaled Quail trotted through the picnic area, their white head tufts held aloft.



Bob spotted a pair of Ladder-backed Woodpeckers going in and out of their nest hole on a Century Plant stalk.

Franni found two species of turtles basking on the shore of a small pond with one swimming close by: Texas Spiny Soft Shell and Painted Turtles.

As we walked to the Cienega, a Spanish word for a wetland area, Cave, Cliff and Barn Swallows soared overhead. A Northern Cardinal sang shrub. We attempted to call out Cienega. At first, our efforts yielded often happens when birding, just one appears – in this case a Sora –

On the way back to the van, **Water Snake (right)** in a canal, with Ranger told us that the schools of park entrance represented some of the Endangered Comanche Pupfish.

All of this exciting birding and hungry for the excellent Mexican oasis village of Balmorhea. A pair of perched on wires was visible from our courtyard table while Western Kingbirds chattered noisily above.



loudly, and then perched on a Virginia Rail and Sora near the neither species. Then as so when you are about to give up, a life bird for Bob!

Charlotte found a **Blotched** a mouth full of Catfish. The fish we were seeing near the the only remaining population of

wildlife-watching made us lunch we enjoyed in the sleepy Scissor-tailed Flycatchers

After lunch we headed to Lake Balmorhea, where locals tipped us off to the presence of an Osprey and Belted Kingfisher. We saw both within the first hour of our near circumnavigation of the lake, along with many other species, including: Franklins Gull, White-faced Ibis, Western and Least Sandpiper, American Avocet and American Pipit. The latter was a Life Bird for Gail. Both Western and Clark's Grebes plied the lake, and as we departed two Chihuahuan Ravens perched on a phone pole where the wind exposed their whitish feathers about their necks – an extraordinary look at a species that can be tough to identify. We felt a sense of accomplishment as we drove south through a scenic river valley lined by steep basalt cliffs to the charming western town of Fort Davis.

As soon as we exited the van at the Hotel Limpia parking lot, a Cassin's Kingbird called above and perched at very close range. Tuxedo, the unofficial hotel cat ambassador, welcomed us to the historic, homey atmosphere of the Limpia Hotel.

Day 3 – Davis Mountains

Today we met with Pete Szilagyi, volunteer for The Nature Conservancy, who hosted our tour of their 30,000-acre preserve high in the Davis Mountains. In addition to serving as a Conservancy volunteer, Pete is an NPR radio host in Marfa and writes a newspaper science column. Later on the trip we listened to him on the radio.

A Wild Turkey, Western Bluebird and Say's Phoebe greeted us at the Conservancy headquarters building. We drove several miles into the preserve and hiked with Pete through the Ponderosa and Pinyon Pine Forest. Soon we encountered Grace's Warbler, singing from its perch in the Pinyon Pine above us. A Cooper's Hawk flew with a twig to add to its already large nest. Nearby, a Plumbeous Vireo, with its questioning song and spectacles illuminated by the brilliant sun, perched in a shrub. Bob found a Rufous-crested Sparrow that obliged us with a long look through the scope. Soon the road we were hiking on gave way to a trail. A short distance down the trail, we heard the two note "Chidip" song of the Buff-breasted Flycatcher. Then we saw it flitting about high in a large Ponderosa Pine branch. This was a particularly good find – especially after the fires and drought that had occurred over the past two years. Further up trail, we encountered Acorn Woodpeckers working noisily on large snags they were using for both nesting holes and as granaries to store acorns.

In a rocky area, Woody came upon a Rock Rattlesnake too close for comfort alongside the trail. We took photos, and then gave the snake a wide berth. It was unperturbed. Toward the end of the hike, we found a leaf of a Chisos Red Oak to bring to Emily, collector of oak leaves. For her, this was a Life Oak!



Group at Davis Mountains Conservancy preserve



Rock Rattler

After a fond farewell to Pete and the Nature Conservancy Preserve, we had a picnic lunch at a scenic forested roadside park, and then drove to the top of the 6,400 foot high McDonald Observatory. Here we enjoyed spectacular views of the Davis Mountains and beyond, and found three new species. Gail spotted Black-tufted Titmouse, and Wilson's Warbler, and Franni, a Canyon Towhee.

Our last stop of the day was at Fort Davis, a historical site where the Buffalo Soldiers were stationed to protect settlers from Indians in the post-Civil War era. We also managed to walk the scenic grounds to a box canyon with sheer basalt canyon walls. Bob and Woody had an incredibly close and beautiful look at a Canyon Wren, while another was singing its haunting, descending song that echoed off the cliffs. Rock Wrens sang their multi-phrased songs from rocky rubble areas and even from the chimney atop the old Fort. Franni and Gail found a Lark Sparrow in the Fort's front yard. Afterward, back at the **Limpia**

Hotel's shady patio (below left), we toasted another fine day as we brought our bird list up to date.



Day 4 – Davis Mountains to Big Bend National Park

We arose early to a traditional Texas breakfast in a well-preserved drugstore/café in Fort Davis. Our first stop was a famous birding spot: Davis Mountains State Park. Here we headed directly to the feeding station. A procession of colorful birds came by, up to five species at a time, along with nine Javelina that vacuumed up the seeds on the ground. Among the wonderful

close-up sightings here were: Summer Tanager; Black-headed Grosbeak; Scott's Oriole; Northern Cardinal; and Rufous-capped Sparrow. One of our group was so taken by this spot that she said "this is better than sex!"



Gourmet southwestern-style cuisine at Reatta Café in Alpine, Texas

We checked another roadside area for Montezuma Quail, and finding none, headed down-valley back to Fort Davis and on to Alpine. In Alpine we ate a sumptuous gourmet southwestern-style lunch at Café Reatta, and then headed east to Marathon and The Post County Park. At this desert oasis with pond and wetlands we found Golden Fronted Woodpeckers, their heads glinting in the bright sunlight; several Vermilion Flycatchers; our first Blue Grosbeak, Common Yellowthroat and Brewer's Blackbird.



Mural in Alpine, Texas depicting historic Big Bend Country
Photo by Robert White



Our drive to Big Bend N.P. featured spectacular scenery, with Yuccas in full bloom. Loggerhead Shrikes perched on wires and fence posts along the road, and Emily shared her geologic expertise with us at Persimmon Gap, where on one single mountain, **Persimmon Mountain (right)**, has two distinct faults visible with its strata heading in two different directions at 90 degree angles from one-another – a remarkable site!

At the park visitor's center, we marveled at the flowering cholla and prickly pear cacti, and reviewed the recent sightings in the park. Then we drove over Panther Pass and descended into Chisos basin, our home for the next four days, as the sun set into the Window formation below two steep mountains. To call this basin spectacular would be an understatement.



Day 5 – At Rio Grande Village

At sunrise, we headed down to the Rio Grande Valley for a picnic breakfast at the “village”, which consists of one store/gas station/laundry. Once you step away from the store in any direction, you are in the riparian splendor of the Rio Grande valley, dominated by Tornillo Mesquite and Arizona Cottonwood. As we strolled through the picnic grounds and campsites along the river, we encountered many new species of birds. A Tropical Kingbird perched high in a tree gave its trademark vocalization of closely connected “pips.” At our first good river view, Bob found a flock of Mexican Mallard Ducks. Soon after, Gail found a calling Verdin, and Rosina, a Black-tailed Gnatcatcher. In the nature trail over a beaver pond by the river, we saw a Green Heron perched on a snag, followed by a good look at Yellow-breasted Chat and a Yellow-headed Blackbird. Marsh Wrens, Bell’s Vireo and Common Yellowthroats all sang incessantly.

Several of the group hiked to the top of an arid rocky summit where a stunning view of the river valley and Boquillas canyon could be had. We then drove a short distance to the Black Hawk nesting area, which had no visible activity but we later learned was being used by at least one pair of hawks this year that were apparently out foraging. At Daniel’s Ranch, we walked down to the river access area. While enjoying an excellent view of a Yellow-breasted Chat that Gail found, an aggressive male Hepatic Tanager swooped only inches over Bob’s head, serving notice that we were apparently too close to its nest. Later while eating lunch, the female Hepatic made an appearance, validating the presence of a nesting pair. Another nesting species flew into a nest in a large cottonwood: Gray Hawks. We watched them soar and perch, a rare treat!

After a picnic lunch in the shade, we drove to Boquillas overlook, a spectacular vista above the Rio Grande. Our last stop of the afternoon was a return visit to Panther Junction Visitor Center to more thoroughly take in the interpretive displays and to shop for books and gifts. Immediately outside the center, Rosina spotted a Curve-billed Thrasher perched atop a Century Plant stalk.



Curve-billed Thrasher



Greater Roadrunner proudly displays lizard

After an afternoon siesta and a fine dinner at Chisos Basin Lodge, at sunset we went owling at Dugout Wells oasis. Once there, we soon located Elf Owl holes, but after watching and listening for about an hour saw nothing. Then Woody noticed that a group of Brewer's Blackbirds and Brown-headed Cowbirds had suddenly fled their roost in a large cottonwood tree. Soon after their departure, he saw the culprit – a squat brownish bird – an Elf Owl. He called the group over just as the owl flew back into its nest hole. We all staked out this new nest hole for 30 minutes as the evening turned to night. Most of us shifted our focus to the Lesser Nighthawks fluttering through the oasis, and the beautiful afterglow above the Chisos Mountains. Meanwhile, Rosina kept a silent vigil at the owl tree. Suddenly she called us over because the owl was out. It flew up onto a limb directly above us and gazed down upon us while emitting a series of small peeps. This was the grand finale to a great day.

Day 6 – Boot Springs hike/Chisos Basin

Three of us opted to take the nine-mile round trip hike to Boot Springs while the other four stayed in the Basin. Bob and Charlotte joined me for the hike. We arose early and were on the trail by 7:30 AM. Cacti in bloom and stunning views of Casa Grande and the Pinnacles slowed our pace as we climbed the Pass. It did not take long to find Mexican Jays, who were nearly constant companions for the rest of the hike. The same was true for Blue-gray Gnatcatchers and Bewick's Wrens, whose calls and songs were part of our sound track for the day. Just below Pinnacle Pass, we started hearing several singing Colima Warblers. We paused in a shady ravine with Graves and Emory Oaks below. Although the Colimas did not appear, other interesting warblers did, including: Black and White Warbler, Painted Redstart and Yellow-rumped Warbler. Atop the pass, we watched swarms of Violet-green Swallows and White-throated Swifts fly-catching along the Chisos Mountains divide.

From here we descended into Boot Creek Canyon where we enjoyed what Charlotte said was a "spectacular view" of the **cowboy boot formation (right)**. We paused again in the oak woodlands in Boot Creek Canyon and had a fleeting glimpse at a probable Colima Warbler. Further up the trail we reached our destination of Boot Springs. While enjoying our picnic lunch among huge boulders in a deep wash overhung by large Pinyon Pines and



Oak trees, we were visited by Pygmy Nuthatch, Ash-throated Flycatcher and a Hermit Thrush.

Our return loop took us back via the scenic Colima and Laguna Meadows trail. Prickly Pear cactus was in full bloom. A pleasant breeze tempered the desert heat. We arrived at Chisos Basin in time for a well-earned siesta, having hiked ten miles and experienced the high Chisos Mountains. Meanwhile the rest of our group had a leisurely morning walking to the Pinnacles trailhead through an oak ravine; birding from their back porch, and hiking the Windows (formation) loop trail. They saw quite a few birds at Chisos Basin, including Black Grosbeak, Mexican Jay, Northern Cardinal and Song Sparrow.

Day 7 – Sam Nail Ranch, Santa Elena Canyon, Christmas Mountains Ranch and Terlingua

Today slightly overcast skies caused cooler temperatures to prevail in the morning, which made birding and hiking pleasant. Our first stop was Sam Nail Ranch where we found our Lincoln Sparrows and Townsend's Warblers, along with quite a few Yellow-breasted Chats. Emily interpreted the geology of



former lava flows and lake beds as we drove through them. She also pointed out remnants of former sea beds in the rocks **at Santa Elena Canyon** as we hiked up this natural wonder.

Everyone was impressed by the sheer beauty of this stunning 1,000 foot high gorge of the Rio Grande River. White-throated Swifts chattered overhead and Rough-legged Swallows

Emily revisiting site (left) of previous photo taken of her and her husband in Santa Elena Canyon - Photo by Rosina Stephenson

flew below, close to the river. Gail spotted and photographed a large strawberry red Western

Coachwhip Snake. From here, we had a picnic lunch at Cottonwood Campground, which lived up to its reputation as a fabulous birding spot. Couch's Kingbirds, Brown-crested Flycatchers, Inca Doves and Painted Buntings were among the new species found here. We rewarded ourselves with ice cream at Castolon.

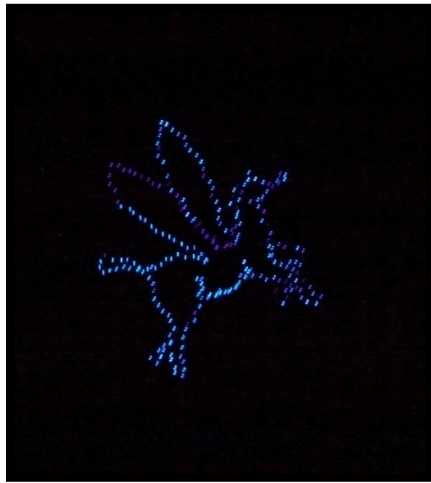


Christmas Mountains Oasis with Carolyn Ohl-Johnson



Birding at Christmas Mountains Oasis

Next we drove to Christmas Mountains Oasis, stopping along the way to admire and photograph the Mule Ears formation in the Chisos Mountains. Owned and stewarded by Carolyn Ohl-Johnson, a remarkable woman with pioneer spirit and work ethic, Christmas Mountains Oasis has been lovingly restored with native plants, water features, and numerous feeders to attract birds. Our group loved this place! Ohl-Johnson helped find two new, difficult to find species: Varied Bunting and Lucifer Hummingbird. To top it off, Ohl-Johnson took us on a tour of her earth-sheltered home adorned with her paintings. A delicious dinner at Starlight Theatre and Café in Terlingua followed. Terlingua is a restored Cinnabar mining town that oozes with character and characters.



Quirky charms of Terlingua, Texas

Day 8 - Chisos Basin to Marathon

We awoke to an especially clear day with great views of the Chisos Mountains. To enjoy a bit more of this splendor, we hiked near Chisos Campground in search of vireos, hummingbirds and thrashers. We were rewarded. Gail called out enthusiastically that she had a hummingbird perched on a Tree Tobacco plant. When we gathered around her, we all had good looks at a male and female Blue-throated Hummingbird! As an encore, a Varied Bunting perched high on a Century Plant Stalk in full sunlight for Bob and me to see.



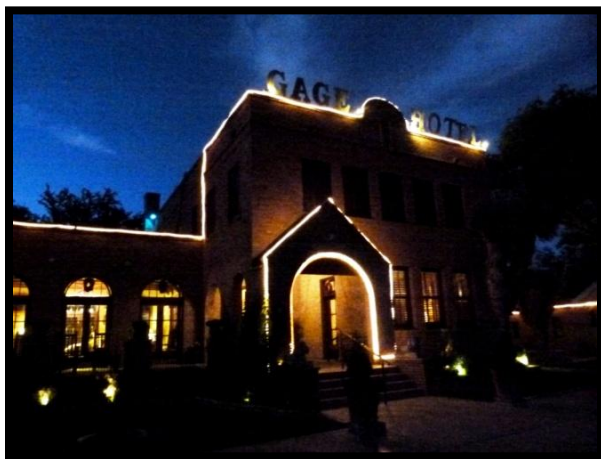
Last Day of Birding in the Chisos Basin, Big Bend National Park

We reluctantly departed from Chisos Basin and Big Bend National Park. There was much discussion in the van about the various trails we would explore if and when we return to this remarkable park. We then

drove to Marathon for a satisfying lunch at an old-timey lunch counter, complete with large homemade milk shakes and root beer floats. After checking in to the beautifully-restored Gage Hotel, we drove a short distance from town to search for Black-tailed Prairie Dogs. Even in the mid-afternoon heat, they were surprisingly active, keeping sentry on their haunches or scurrying about from one burrow to another. In this big colony we saw at least 20 Black-tailed Prairie Dogs.

On the way back, we stopped at the relatively new Gage Gardens and nature preserve in Marathon. This 30+acre site combines intensely landscaped grounds with ponds, sculptures, flowing water and walkways. Behind it is a larger area of native grasslands, another pond, and swales. Here we saw Brown-headed, Brewer's and Yellow-headed Blackbirds, a Scissor-tailed and Vermillion Flycatcher, Cliff and Barn Swallows.

Dinner at the Gage hotel's attractive open air courtyard is always a memorable experience. Long-tailed Grackles chattered noisily above while House Sparrows and Barn Swallows flew into their nests under the eaves. The food was absolutely delicious, capped off by a celebration of Bob's birthday.



Gage Hotel



Day 9 – Marathon to El Paso

On this travel day, we still managed to fit in some bird and wildlife-watching. Since part of our group was boarding a train in Alpine, we stopped there for breakfast at a place with lots of local color and great cinnamon rolls. Fortified, the rest of us drove to El Paso. Outside of Marfa we saw our first Pronghorns. West of Clint we found a Burrowing Owl, which put an exclamation point on our journey.



Black-tailed Prairie Dog Colony near Marathon

Burrowing Owl, Clint, Texas

Summary: 150 species of birds; 10 species of mammals; 5 species of reptiles; 3 fish species; 2 species of dragon flies; 1 amphibian; 1 butterfly

~ Most photos taken by Woody Wheeler; one each taken by Robert White and Rosina Stephenson~