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Texas Big Bend Birding and Wildlife Tour

Birding and Nature Tours with Naturalist Journeys

April 19-26, 2014

Trip Report

Woody Wheeler, guide, with participants: Susie, Camille, Kathy, Les, Trina, and Michael

Saturday, April 19

Arrivals – Travel from El Paso to Ft. Davis; Stop at McNary Reservoir



On an unusually cool and cloudy day in El Paso, all guests arrived on time. As we headed east from El Paso into the vast Chihuahuan Desert, a strange thing happened; it started raining. The rain eased off as we exited at McNary Reservoir to search for Cave Swallows and other birds on the reservoir. We were pleased to find great looks not only at Cave Swallows, but also at a Great Horned Owl that Kathy spotted. Its ear tufts were blowing in the wind as it kept a wary eye on us.

As we drove along McNary Reservoir, several Snowy Egrets flew directly in front of us, one of them perching on a farm gate. As soon as we got out of the van two Blue-winged Teal flew toward the reservoir, enticing us to take a look at this desert watering hole. When we climbed up the small embankment, the reservoir was swarming with birds by the hundreds: Red-winged and Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Great Egrets, Double-crested Cormorants; Ruddy Ducks in their impressive breeding plumage; three species of swallows; a Green Heron, four kinds of grebes and a flock of White Pelicans were among them. The birds appeared to be on a feeding frenzy in between storm events.



Soon after departing the reservoir it became clear why. Extremely dark clouds loomed in the eastern direction in which we were headed. Several bolts of lightning pierced the sky. One of us received a flash flood warning on a cell phone. As we drove toward Van Horn, the rain started up again with intensity. We stopped briefly for a gas and rest break near Van Horn and saw both kinds (Turkey and Black) Vultures that inhabit the area.

Then the rains came down with a vengeance after years of drought conditions. Standing water accumulated on the road and on the ground throughout the desert. Draws became creeks; roadside ditches became streams. Although it was exciting, we were safe and sound in our 15-person van, taking it easy through a torrential downpour in one of the driest places in the U.S.

As we turned south toward Ft. Davis, the storm broke and the Davis Mountains became illuminated with dynamic post-storm back-lighting. We enjoyed the scenic drive into Ft. Davis through Basalt Formations, and a newly watered desert landscape. When we arrived in Ft. Davis, there were accumulations of hail that resembled patches of snow on the ground and on rooftops. The coolest city in Texas was living up to its reputation tonight, with hailstones on the ground and temperatures in the low 50s.

We celebrated our exciting, productive and beautiful first half-day with a sumptuous meal at the Hotel Limpia Bistro. Then we checked into our rooms in the lovely, cozy and historic hotel for the night.

Sunday, April 20 – Davis Mountains

The storms of yesterday gave way to a clear, cool Easter morning. Following a delicious breakfast buffet at the hotel bistro, we departed for the Davis Mountains. On the way we paused for good views of our first trip Scrub Jays and several White-tailed Deer. Then we turned into Davis Mountains State Park to visit the feeding station. There we found a diversity of bird species including Pine Siskins, Lesser Goldfinch, Canyon Towhee, Summer Tanager, two Hepatic Tanagers and a Black-crested Titmouse. Acorn Woodpeckers stored food in their “granaries” on utility poles, and we saw White-crowned, Lincoln and many Savannah Sparrows around the campground. Our first mule deer were spotted by Mike on the hillside.

In the mid-morning, we continued up the road to the Nature Conservancy’s Madera Canyon trail. At the trailhead we saw and heard Ash-throated Flycatchers. Heading into the canyon we came upon a small pond where two Blue-winged Teal and two Mexican Ducks were alternately resting on a log and dabbling for food in the pond. Mike spotted an American Pipit probing the muddy shoreline. While watching this pond performance, Woody heard the call of the rare Buff-breasted Flycatcher. We all looked upslope where the call originated



and soon found one calling from the top of a Pinyon Pine. It moved several times, affording good but distant looks, singing often. It was a treat to see one individual from the rare population of these flycatchers. Soon after, Susie found our first trip Bushtit. We ambled back down to the picnic area and ate a hearty lunch from Ft. Davis’s excellent whole foods grocery. An Acorn Woodpecker and a Plumbeous Vireo spotted by Kathy enhanced our lunch experience. Prior to departing, a pair of Western Bluebirds perched close by in Ponderosa Pines, affording excellent views and photo opportunities.



On the way back to Ft. Davis we drove up to the McDonald Observatory to take in the panoramic views of the Davis Mountains and eye-level looks at Turkey Vultures and one Red-tailed Hawk. Our last stop for the afternoon was a roadside area with impressive rock outcroppings. Here we had another fine look at a Black-crested Titmouse, along with our first look at a Canyon Wren

whose song we had been hearing throughout the morning from several individual birds. Les also spotted a Pyrrhuloxia and heard it singing its cardinal-esque song.

Pulling into the quaint historic town of Ft. Davis in the late afternoon, we found a few additional species in the elementary school yard: Yellow-rumped Warbler and Lark Sparrow. At this point we took a break before dinner and an evening owl and quail excursion.

Given that it was Easter and no restaurants were open in Ft. Davis, we took a picnic dinner out to Davis Mountains State Park. This worked out extremely well from a culinary as well as nature experience perspective.

We picnicked near the feeding station at the park, which provided frequent distractions as various members of our group ran over to look at birds on the feeders. The new one this evening was a Black-headed Grosbeak. While combing the grassy draws for Montezuma Quail, we turned up a Summer Tanager, a Wild Turkey and a small group of Javelina that passed by just five feet away.



At nightfall, an Elf Owl appeared at the entrance of its hole and began calling. It then flew off to hunt bugs to bring back to the nest. Five minutes later it returned and called persistently from the surrounding trees and its cavity entrance into a wooden utility pole. Everyone in our group as well as a group of curious campers got good looks and enjoyed the show. Meanwhile a Common Poorwill called from the hillside, and a brilliant display of stars and planets appeared in the night sky. Once it became too dark for owl-watching, we shifted our scopes to the planets: Jupiter and Mars. This was the finale of a spectacular spring night in the Davis Mountains.

Monday, April 21 – Davis Mountains, Marathon Post, Big Bend National Park

A fine breakfast at the Limpia Hotel Bistro fortified us for our day's travels. We set out for Limpia Creek to bird after breakfast. A Greater Roadrunner with lizard in mouth greeted us to the area. This bird later literally ran down a gravel road toward us, stopping periodically to raise its tail and gaze at us. We were impressed by the grace, speed and fluidity of the roadrunners gait.

Scoping the tree line, Mike found a Hepatic Tanager with its deep red tones contrasted by grayish wash on the wings and face. He and Kathy also encountered a Rufous-crowned Sparrow on a scenic Cliffside trail along Limpia Creek.



We then headed to Ft. Davis to view the impressive historic exhibits and for some, to bird its scenic grounds bordered by basalt cliffs and a small canyon. Camille

was particularly impressed by the historic interpretation of the Buffalo Soldiers at Ft. Davis. An excellent video, narrated by Kareem Abdul Jabbar, tells the story of these African American soldiers that were stationed in this unlikely spot in the 1850s.

Hoping to obtain a good look at Rock Wrens, we only had to step out of our van to find one within 15 yards of us. Soon afterward we saw them again on historic building foundations and old barracks rooftops. At the entrance to the box canyon behind the fort we encountered a Phainopepla in brilliant sunlight. This provided a gorgeous scope view!

Our next stop was the Mesquite roadside ponds between Ft. Davis and Alpine. Here we found Green-winged Teal and Osprey, along with an Ash-throated Flycatcher and a pair of Vermillion Flycatchers nest-building with Cottonwood down.



A short distance later we entered the college town of Alpine. There we stopped to savor the fantastic Tex-Mex cuisine at Café Reatta. We ate underneath a trellis with a blooming Wisteria overhead inhabited by nesting House Sparrows singing their one-note song. The waitress took photos of us in front of an impressive old western movie scene mural.

From Alpine we headed east through historic cattle drive country to the small town of Marathon. Here we exited from the main highway onto a small county road and drove south to Marathon Post County Park. Even though it was mid-afternoon and hot, this migrant trap of a park delivered many new bird species. One of the first was a pair of Bullock's Orioles noisily "chucking" in the Cottonwood trees. Then we found four Blue Grosbeak foraging in the grassy picnic area. In the riparian vegetation bordering the park's ponds, we saw a Wilson's Warbler and a Bell's Vireo. Our trip's first Golden-fronted Woodpeckers churred noisily as they worked up and down the park's sizeable tree trunks. Mike found a furtive Swamp Sparrow only a few yards away from us.

We reluctantly left the Marathon Post to carry on to Big Bend National Park. Soon after entering the park, we marveled at its mountain grandeur and desert vegetation, including many blooming cacti. Les was particularly impressed by the tall Yucca plants. He selected an appropriate one to stop and photograph along the road. As soon as he got out of the van to walk to the Yucca he flushed a large Black-tailed Jackrabbit. A short distance further, Woody saw Scaled Quail dart into the desert vegetation. Everyone got out of the van to see them. They were rewarded with good looks at a dozen of these distinctive quail with impressive top knots.

We continued on to Chisos Basin over Panther Pass in the golden afternoon lighting. The views of the mountains in all directions were spectacular. We then pulled into the magical setting of Chisos Basin Lodge and checked into our respective rooms. A Scott's Oriole made a dramatic appearance on a flowering Ocotillo.





We then enjoyed an excellent dinner in the lodge while watching nesting Say's Phoebes with young under the eaves as the sun went down in spectacular fashion over and through the Windows Rock Formation. Kathy, a well-travelled person, spoke for all of us when she expressed just how amazing this place was and is. Lucky for us, we had only just arrived!

Tuesday, April 22 – Rio Grande Village, Dugout Wells

At first light, we picked up our picnic breakfasts and lunches to head for the Rio Grande River. As the walls of the east-facing Chisos Mountains were lit by the morning sun, we drove the 20-mile downhill grade from the visitor center to Rio Grande Village. This drive takes you through incredibly dry, Chihuahuan Desert vegetation, including areas of bare rock and sands that transition abruptly to a lush green belt of riparian vegetation, including large Lance leaf Cottonwoods along the Rio Grande River. Here we enjoyed a picnic breakfast that was frequently interrupted by bird and wildlife sightings all around us: Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, Vermilion Flycatchers, Orchard Orioles and Eastern Cottontail Rabbits were among our distracters.

After breakfast, we walked along the river in a downstream direction. A Neotropical Cormorant and Green Heron flew overhead. Bell's Vireos chatted noisily in the Mesquite Bushes, and a Brown-crested Flycatcher perched majestically in perfect lighting. Just as we headed toward the river at a boat ramp, Trina and Woody looked back and spotted a Bobcat trotting nonchalantly across the very picnic area we had just departed. This was a totally unanticipated sighting, but not surprising given the abundance of rabbits here. We later learned that a family of Bobcats frequents this area.

As we continued along the river to the nature trail area across wetland ponds, we found two basking Big Bend Slider turtles along with Yellow-breasted Chat, Common Yellowthroat and another Green Heron that perched in a low snag, clearly visible.



On our hike up the Rio Grande overlook trail, Kathy spotted a distant Common Black Hawk perched on a snag alongside the river. Everyone saw this bird that is not at all common in the scope. While stopping for a brief rest break at the little Rio Grande Village store, a Broad-winged Hawk soared in lazy circles directly above us. We all had great looks at this bird that graced us with its presence on its migration to Canada and the upper Midwestern U.S.



We continued east to the Common Black Hawk nest. Fortunately, a juvenile hawk was sitting upright in the nest, occasionally stretching out its wings and preening. Just a little farther down the road at Daniel's



Ranch, Mike found yet another hawk soaring above us appearing somewhat like a Turkey Vulture, except it had white undersides of its wings and a banded tail: a Zone-tailed Hawk!

As we strolled around the grassy areas under the big Lanceleaf Cottonwood trees, we had a beautiful close encounter with a male Summer Tanager that perched in several places within 20 yards of us. A Verdin flitted through the same Cottonwood Tree. Down by the river, we had another, clearer view of a Yellow-breasted Chat. On our way out, Woody and Mike spotted yet another hawk to complete a four-hawk morning: A Gray Hawk perched on a limb of a snag. Most of us had good looks at this rare hawk that eventually flew off toward the river.

At mid-day, we departed Rio Grande Village to take in the splendid views of the Rio Grande River, the Santa Clara del Carmen Mountains and Boquillas Canyon from Boquillas overlook. Then we stopped for lunch in a cool shady spot in the desert oasis of Dugout Wells. Once again it was hard to eat, especially while a Hooded Oriole was staring at us from a giant Cottonwood Tree. The flowering cacti were stunning here against the backdrop of the Chisos Mountains.

On our way back to the lodge we stopped at Panther Junction Visitor Center, which has a fine collection of natural history guide books and a log of recent bird and wildlife sightings. We added our Broad-winged Hawk sighting to the log, and heard encouraging news about what we might find on our hike in the Chisos Mountains the following day.



A relaxing late afternoon at picturesque Chisos Basin Lodge followed, including a fine meal and another breath-taking sunset.

Wednesday, April 23 – Hike to Boot Springs



Everyone in this intrepid group was up for the big hike to search for Colima Warblers along with the many other species of flora and fauna and world-class scenery of the high Chisos. We embarked soon after breakfast on an unusually cool, windy morning. Some were concerned that the strong winds might have an adverse effect on the birding. This proved not to be the case as the winds abated, and the birds became quite active.

As we hiked up the incredibly scenic Pinnacles Trail, we had frequent trail companions like Black-crested Titmice, Blue-Gray Gnatcatchers and Mexican Jays. The cacti were in stunning full bloom. Lemon yellow prickly pear blossoms and brilliant red Claret Cup Cacti created natural trailside gardens.

As we ascended the switchbacks leading to the summit of Pinnacle Pass, we heard our first Colima Warbler song. This created considerable anticipation of seeing one, but this bird ceased singing. Then two young men came down the trail loudly singing and playing a guitar. Things were not looking up for finding a Colima Warbler, or any other birds on the pass for that matter.



Fortunately, our luck changed for the better. A few switchbacks higher, we heard another Colima song. This time Trina saw movement in a Texas Madrone tree. Soon all of us were looking at this iconic warbler as it flitted through a Texas Madrone. Then we heard another Colima song coming from the uphill side of the trail. This time Woody first heard then saw one perched on a bare branch 25 feet high where all of us could see it in good lighting.



As we hiked up to the pass summit, we found two species with Townsend's in their name: a Solitaire and Warbler. White throated Swifts chattered and soared around the summit and a pair of Hepatic Tanagers perched majestically atop the pinnacles. We paused for a rest break on the pass and then continued on to Boot Springs.

At the Springs, we stopped for a picnic lunch under the shade of oaks and maples, surrounded by huge boulders. Two Painted Redstarts foraged their way up the creek bed passing right by us as they continued upstream. We all got close looks, heard their "up and down" song, and saw them fan out their white-banded tails. A Black-crested Titmouse gathered a large beak-full of nesting material and brought it into its whole nest. It repeated this process twice while we watched 20 yards away.

After lunch we walked the short distance to the springs where a tremendous amount of bird life awaited. A Broad-tailed Hummingbird flew noisily by and perched on top of a short snag. At the largest pool of the springs, which were all shallow, we noticed a greenish bird bathing. Upon closer investigation, we noticed that this bird had a long eye stripe and a blue throat – a Blue-throated Hummingbird!



As we turned around to head back, one Maple Tree was filled with bird activity, including another Colima Warbler, a Wilson's and Virginia Warbler. A Black-headed Grosbeak sung merrily from the Pinyon Pines as a Cordilleran Flycatcher alternately perched on the tops of dead snags and took short flights to catch bugs in the air. At one point in the mid-afternoon, Les commented that the birds should just "park it for a while" so we could tear ourselves away to make the five-mile hike back to the Chisos Basin. Reluctantly, we departed from Boot Springs and started the long, scenic hike back to the lodge with wildflowers and blooming cacti galore.

All agreed that this was an amazing hike and all saw “Life Birds.” We toasted this banner day in the high Chisos over a fine dinner at the lodge.

Thursday, April 24 – Sam Nail Ranch, Cottonwood Campground, Santa Elena Canyon, Castalon, Christmas Mountains Oasis, Terlingua

Today the weather warmed and the winds calmed as we set out for famous birding and scenic destinations within and just outside the park. Our first stop was Sam Nail Ranch. Here we encountered Summer Tanagers, Yellow-breasted Chats, Northern Cardinals and Bell’s Vireos at close range. Mike found a Nashville’s warbler in the dense vegetation on the edge of the former ranch.

Then we plunged down the steep grade, past the mule ears rock formation, through the bizarre, moon-like landscape caused by former volcanic events, to Cottonwood Canyon. It did not take our alert group long before to find a Gray Hawk nest high in the Cottonwood trees with one juvenile gazing at us. One of the parents called in the distance, and appeared briefly in flight. When we exited this campground, the adult was perched on an open branch.

Susie spotted a Great Horned Owl perched high on another Cottonwood Tree. Along the edge of the campground, we found Green Towhee, Inca Doves, and Yellow-rumped Warblers. We had a nice picnic lunch in a shady spot with tanagers, woodpeckers and warblers surrounding us.

After lunch and a short van drive, we hiked into Santa Elena Canyon. The Rio Grande somehow cut through 1,500 foot high walls of rock here, creating a sheer and narrow canyon. In addition to its breathtaking scenery, this canyon had abundant Northern Rough-winged Swallow, Rock and Canyon Wrens.

Following a refreshing ice cream stop and an interesting visit to the historical museum at Castalon, we continued northwest, heading outside of the park to the Christmas Mountains. Here we met with Carolyn Ohl-Johnson to the Christmas Mountains Oasis, a private refuge she created and manages. Soon after greeting us, she pointed out several Varied Bunting at close range by one of her viewing stations. Black-chinned Hummingbirds buzzed around the feeders, and a Phainopepla perched in bright sunlight. Mike saw his first Lucifer Hummingbird, and Kathy saw her first Brewer’s Sparrow.



As is customary for Carolyn Ohl-Johnson, she then took our group on a tour of her earth-sheltered home, festooned with her own artwork. It was a rich, rewarding and inspiring visit with a remarkable woman. To cap off this diverse and interesting day, we had dinner at Starlight Café in the historic and character-rich town of Terlingua. The live music and delicious food in a uniquely hospitable atmosphere charmed everyone. On the drive home through the dark we watched as multiple Black-tailed Jackrabbits and Desert Cottontails crossed the road and gathered at the road edges. We looked forward to a good night’s sleep – our last at Chisos Basin Lodge this year.

Friday, April 25 – Chisos Basin Campground, Prairie Dog Town, Marathon, Gage Hotel



We arose to another warm desert morning. Casa Grande, the mountain peak that looms over Chisos Basin, had a crescent moon accenting its upper right side. To prolong our departure from the Chisos Basin, we walked a short trail down a nearby creek bed to search for birds, wildlife and to savor the majestic Chisos mountain vistas one more time. Soon after descending into the creek bottom, we all had our first unobstructed look at a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher illuminated by the bright morning sun. Then, Trina spotted a Scott's Oriole that sang in similar fashion to a Meadowlark. Acorn Woodpeckers were ever-present

on this trail, giving us their full vocal and visual repertoire. Camille found a Rock Squirrel slowly climbing up a steep talus slope leading to its colony of squirrel burrows on the Cliffside. Once it arrived at its home burrow, it paused there and stared down at us for some time.

Farther down at the wetland area, we found the most unusual bird of the day: a Cassin's Vireo. It repeated its short, distinctive song over and over as it foraged below. Several Wilson's Warblers made appearances, as did Summer Tanagers.

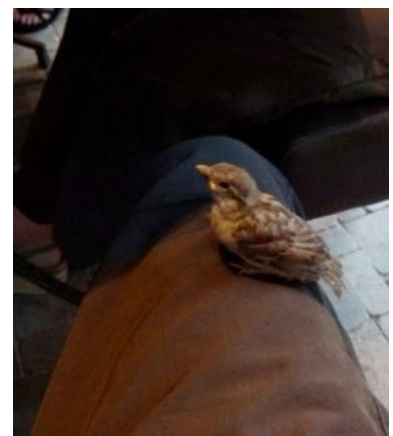
On the way out of the park, we stopped once again at Panther Junction Visitor Center where the group watched an inspiring video presentation about the natural history of Big Bend. The show had impressive photography and touched on the highlights of the park's flora, fauna and geology. We reported our Colima Warbler sightings at the visitor center as well as our black squirrel sighting. The ranger and education staffer came to the conclusion that we saw a black-phase Rock Squirrel.



En route to Marathon, we found a roadside Curve-billed Thrasher and our first Swallowtail Flycatcher of the trip. In Marathon, we indulged in the town café's excellent milk shakes and Mexican Food. Afterward most of us went to see the Black-tailed Prairie Dog colony just 6 miles from town. Les found a Burrowing Owl in their midst. Once he found one, he found at least two more owls utilizing prairie dog burrows. While scanning the horizon, Susie spotted seven Pronghorn.

Meanwhile, closer in, Mike and Kathy focused in on sparrows, including lots of Lark Sparrows and a two quite dark and patterned Vesper Sparrows.

Then it was back to the beautiful Gage Hotel for a celebration last dinner. After recounting our personal trip highlights, Woody felt something land on his leg. Incredibly, a baby sparrow had perched on his leg. There it sat calmly for 15 minutes until Susie moved it to a place where it could huddle up for the night.



Saturday, April 26 - Marathon to El Paso, Departures



Although we had to drive with a sense of determination to make certain that everyone met their respective planes on time, we did pause to watch a Pronghorn pause to consider how to cross a barbed wire fence (they do not jump over them). We also took a brief sojourn through the quirky, eclectic, historically-preserved town of Marfa. This was yet another small Texan town oozing with character. These small towns and the biologically and scenically-rich landscapes surrounding them will undoubtedly haunt trip participants for a long time in a pleasing, nostalgic way.

- Photos by Woody Wheeler and participant Mike Weaver

