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Texas Big Bend: Birding and Wildlife

April 18 – 25, 2015

Guide: Woody Wheeler

Participants: Tish, Brendan, Rebecca, Kathy, Judy, Gerhard, Kathleen and Lionel

Saturday, April 18 El Paso / Ft. Davis via McNary Reservoir and Balmorhea State Park



In pleasantly cool and breezy 70-degree temperatures, our group met and headed east from El Paso through agricultural landscapes along the Rio Grande, that gradually gave way to the Chihuahuan Desert. This year, due to above-average rainfall, the desert was greener than usual and carpeted with wildflowers and cactus blooms.

Our first stop was a freeway underpass to search for nesting Cave Swallows. Although these swallows were not near their nests, they were flying about, and gave us good looks at their cinnamon rumps and necks as they circled by in bright lighting.

We continued on to McNary Reservoir, but first encountered a traffic delay: a herd of goats and sheep coming down the farm highway in our direction. We yielded and watched an interesting parade of young and old goats with a few sheep mixed in being herded by a few dogs and men in vehicles. This farm scene provided a complete transition from urban El Paso to the wide-open countryside of west Texas.

When the farm animals had passed, we gazed up toward the reservoir and were greeted by a flock of White-faced Ibis. We then crested the earthen wall of the reservoir and saw that the lake had many birds on it including Ruddy Duck, Northern Shoveler, Snowy Egret, Western, Clark's and Pied-billed Grebe, Double-crested Cormorant and a Belted Kingfisher. There was a lot of head bobbing going on among the waterfowl. We got lucky and saw a pair of Clark's Grebes perform a small portion of their famous backward synchronized ballet dance.

As we continued on through the Van Horn Mountains, we pulled into the tiny town of Balmorhea and just beyond to Balmorhea State Park. Soon after arriving at this natural spring that emerges in the middle of the Chihuahuan Desert, we spotted several Blue-winged Teal courting in a small pond, while a Lesser Scaup lounged on the shoreline. A Green Heron fished along a small side channel of the springs, and at one point plunged into the water to no avail, then shook off his feathers back on land and walked with a determined gait to prepare for another attempt.



Green Heron fishing at Balmorhea State Park

On the path to Solomon Springs Cienega, a Curve-billed Thrasher perched conspicuously. Yellow-rumped Warblers flitted through the tall grasses, as did a Common Yellowthroat and a Lincoln's Sparrow that Kathleen spotted.

At the Cienega Overlook, turtles stole the show. The Texas Spiny Soft-shelled and Red-slider Turtles drifted and paddled lazily in front of us and hoped we would drop food to them. Despite their considerable charm, we opted not to and instead headed toward *our* food (dinner) in Fort Davis.

On the 37-mile drive to Fort Davis through scenic basalt canyons, Judy called out. She saw animals working their way up the steep basalt cliffs:



Texas Spiny Softshell Turtle



Desert Bighorn Sheep

seven Barbary Sheep with young! This was a real thrill for everyone, but had added value when Woody spotted a Common Black Hawk in the same general area. It soared amid the riparian vegetation below us and perched on a dead limb of a Cottonwood Tree. We enjoyed excellent scope views of sheep and the hawk while we were serenaded by both Canyon and Rock Wrens. At this point we were late for dinner, but had no regrets.

Sunday, April 19 Exploring the Davis Mountains

We awoke to a pleasantly cool and clear morning. While waiting for breakfast in the attractive courtyard between the hotel and bistro, we were visited by two Acorn Woodpeckers, a Cassin's Kingbird and Lesser Goldfinch. After a country-style buffet breakfast and gathering our sack lunch at Ft. Davis' version of Whole Foods Market — Stone Market — we headed into the Davis Mountains. Just a few miles up the road, Woody spotted a Wild Turkey feeding at a roadside park area. At the entrance to Davis Mountains State Park the group found a Black-throated Sparrow next to a clump of Long-leaved Phlox.



Black-throated Sparrow

We then proceeded to the feeding station area in the park which was buzzing with activity. The dominant species there was Pine Siskin. Others in the mix included White-winged Dove, House Finch, a Lesser Goldfinch and a pair of Summer Tanagers. We hiked a short distance up the Montezuma Quail trail hoping for a sighting of the trail's namesake. According to a park ranger, one had been seen earlier this day. Although we did not find the quail on its trail, we did have great looks at an Ash-throated Flycatcher alternately fly-catching and perching conspicuously and noisily atop shrubs. Rebecca and Kathleen found a Canyon Towhee along this stretch of trail.



Montezuma Quail

At this point, one in our party requested a restroom. We proceeded to the nearest one, which proved fortuitous, because while waiting just outside, Kathleen said the words we were all waiting to hear: Montezuma Quail. Sure enough she had found a male in all of its beautifully-patterned glory, browsing along a stretch of grasses and rocks just 30 feet away. It seemed unafraid as it slowly walked along for several minutes. The morning sun illuminated its stunning colors and gave us an unforgettable show.

Although this was a hard act to follow, at the visitor center we did have good looks at another southwest specialty that is small but high on charisma: the Black-crested Titmouse. As we re-entered our van to depart Davis Mountains State Park, we heard the unmistakable chatter of a woodpecker. In this case, it was a male Ladder-backed Woodpecker that flew overhead and perched nearby; the red nape of its neck and crisp ladder-back pattern were in full display.



Somehow, we managed to tear ourselves away from Davis Mountains State Park to head to our next stop: The Davis Mountains Nature Conservancy preserve. Our access to this 18,000-acre preserve was via Madera Canyon Trail. We set off in the mid-morning along a trail through Alligator Juniper trees, over several dry streambeds and up a slope of juniper and Pinyon Pine. In an opening, we marveled at the sight of three Golden Eagles soaring in the thermals.

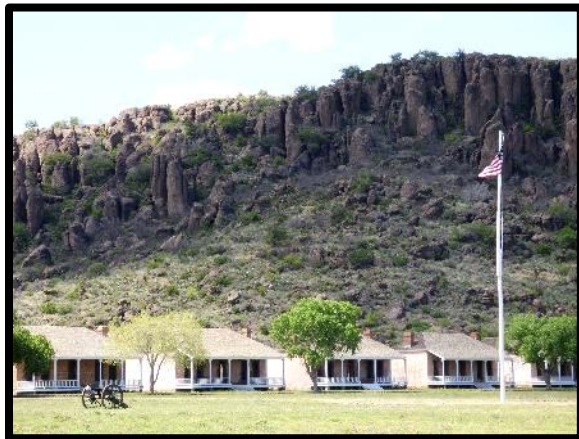
At Chico Tanks, a small series of ponds, things were quiet at first, so we sat on the shore and waited. While waiting, a Cassin's Kingbird flew in, perched and went on occasional fly-catching forays. An American Pipit flew into the mudflats and fed along the edge of the pond. Then two Violet-green Swallows soared and banked above the ponds, their deep green tones flashing in the sun. A Sagebrush Lizard climbed up the sheer rocky walls of the pond's outlet stream, showing off its blue belly.

Then Tish noticed a small flycatcher-like bird with pale colors flying across the far end of the lake. We walked along the lake to the far side where Woody found the Buff-breasted Flycatcher. The bird circled and perched around us close enough for excellent views and even photographs. It continued uttering its "chee-lick" call. Once we looked in the field guide at the tiny range this bird occupies in the Davis Mountains, we felt fortunate to have seen one.

We celebrated our great morning with a picnic lunch under the shade of a large Ponderosa Pine. After lunch we visited McDonald Observatory.



Buff-breasted Flycatcher



Fort Davis

Everyone was impressed with the 360 degree views of the Davis Mountains, as well as with the facility itself which has some of the world's largest and most powerful telescopes and hosts a regular PBS Star Date radio program that airs on 300 radio stations across the U.S. On the way back to Fort Davis, we stopped at the actual fort to learn about the history of the Buffalo Soldiers who manned the fort in the late 1800s. Everyone found this little-known chapter of history interesting, and the fort's backdrop against steep eroded rock formations, striking.

Monday, April 20 The Post at Marathon / Big Bend National Park

A slight overcast kept the temperatures pleasantly cool in the morning and continued throughout most of the day. After departing from the Limpia Hotel, our first stop was Limpia Canyon primitive area. While standing at the entrance gate, we were watched by a nearby Red-tailed Hawk, a Northern Mockingbird and Canyon Towhee. All were fluffed up, most likely to have kept warm during the cool night. We hiked the nature trail loop surrounded by gorgeous canyon walls.



Bell's Vireo

It did not take long to encounter our first new bird of the day, a Cactus Wren perched high on a Yucca Blossom singing its churring song, a desert sound track. A Bell's Vireo joined the chorus with its buzzy, chattery tune. Continuing down the trail we encountered several Northern Cardinals and our first Wilson's Warbler, which chirped from deep within a juniper and offered only a cameo appearance. This warbler was migrating north, and therefore not singing on its territory.

As we neared the end of our walk, several Phainopepla perched high on shrubs and offered us great looks through scope and binoculars. Some were even close enough for photographs. As we departed, a

small flock of White-crowned Sparrows flew along the edge between the scrub desert vegetation and the parking area.

We then headed south to Alpine via a set of ponds alongside the road. Anticipating waterfowl and swallows, we found instead our first Vermilion Flycatcher, spotted by Rebecca across the lake. Along the rest of the drive to Alpine, Kathleen spotted several Loggerhead Shrikes perched on roadside power lines.

It was time for a stop-over in the biggest town we would see in the next five days: the quaint college town of Alpine. Here we stopped for a delicious lunch at Café Reata, a place with outstanding southwestern food and a lovely tree-shaded courtyard decorated with old west murals. This restaurant has never failed to impress.

Driving east from Alpine to Marathon, the abundance of wildflowers was impressive. Due to ample spring rains, the landscape was carpeted with them. Once in the sleepy town of Marathon, we headed south to the Marathon Post County Park. At this desert oasis with a small pond surrounded by tall marsh grasses and huge cottonwood trees, we immediately found interesting birds. A pair of Vermilion Flycatchers perched just ahead of our van before we were even able to get out. Once out, we saw our first Blue Grosbeak walking in the grass. Soon afterward, a Golden-fronted Woodpecker flew from one large cottonwood snag to another and provided a stunning scope view for everyone.



Wildflowers galore

Our first Red-winged Blackbird perched and sang from the tall marsh grasses, and a Belted Kingfisher perched just behind. Kathleen alertly spotted a Scott's Oriole atop a Cottonwood tree, and Woody, a Black Phoebe. As we headed out, Vermilion Flycatcher kept perching and fly-catching in front of us, giving us eye-popping views of their shockingly crimson plumage. One gets the impression that the longer you linger at the Post the more species you will see, but alas we had miles yet to cover to reach our destination: Big Bend National Park.



Torrey Yucca

As we approached Big Bend NP, the concentration of wildflowers intensified. Texas Bluebonnets, aka Lupines, lined the roadway for several miles and formed a grand entrance to the park. Suddenly a Greater Roadrunner crossed the highway more often. Scaled Quail flew across too, dove into the brush and scampered off as their tufted heads bobbed and weaved.

The combination of abundant wildflowers with numerous cacti and yucca in bloom made Big Bend's already spectacular landscape even more breathtaking. We drove into the Chisos Mountains and marveled at Casa Grande and the other mountains surrounding Chisos Basin. Our view included Emory

Peak, the highest in this range at just over 7,800 feet. What an idyllic setting in which to spend our next four days!



Cactus Wren

As we parked our van at Chisos Basin, two Rock Squirrels scrambled on a scree slope directly in front of us and then quickly vanished into crevices. Cactus

Wrens perched along the walkway

that lead to the Lodge where Say's Phoebe nest under the eaves above the restaurant windows. As we finished our dinner, a picture-perfect sunset through the Windows rock formation climaxed another great day in West Texas.



Tuesday, April 21 Big Bend National Park / Rio Grande Village / Dugout Wells

On this cool and clear morning, we awoke to the singing of a Scott's Oriole. We departed early to maximize birding opportunities at Rio Grande Village. Along the way Greater Roadrunner were active. One ran off the road into the brush, but instead of vanishing as most do, hopped on top of the bush and started preening. As it preened, small clouds of dust came off its feathers — what a spectacle!

As we continued down the long hill from Panther Junction to the Rio Grande, a lone Scaled Quail perched atop a shrub long enough for us to see it well. Many others flew across and scampered to hiding places beneath Creosote Bushes, Mesquite Trees and Yucca in the scrub desert.



At Rio Grande Village, it was still surprisingly cool. We enjoyed a simple picnic breakfast as Golden-crowned Woodpecker, Vermilion Flycatcher and the occasional Desert Cottontail

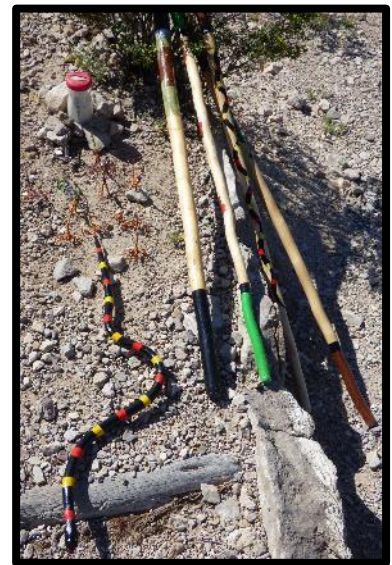


Vermilion Flycatcher

Rabbit passed by. After breakfast we walked across a picnic table that was used as a temporary bridge across a full aqueduct that ran through the park — an amusing site for a group photo.

We walked along the Rio Grande searching for birds and wildlife. An Eastern Phoebe perched in brilliant sunlight atop a snag. As we entered the nature trail boardwalk through wetlands, a Great Blue Heron waded and fished in front of us, all the while it uttered-grumpy sounding croaks. Two Common Yellowthroat came to the water's edge where they perched on tall grasses. Yellow-breasted Chat sang from several directions, and finally one emerged from the brush for a brief, colorful appearance.

We then hiked up the overlook, which provided a spectacular view of the Rio Grande, its riparian corridor spanning sizeable portions of two countries. Artisans from Mexico had arranged several self-service markets along the trail featuring colorful wood and wire wildlife figures. Scorpion and Greater Roadrunner were their most common creations.



We then descended and hiked back to the car, serenaded by Chats all the way. Just as we were about to climb into the van, a Greater Roadrunner walked toward us with a lizard hanging from its bill. What a send-off!

From here we headed toward Daniel's Ranch via the protected Common Black Hawk nesting area. As soon as we pulled up to the edge of this area, Woody spotted an adult Black Hawk perched on a partially dead tree in clear view. Great scope, binocular and camera views ensued.



Common Black Hawk



Gray Hawk

When we continued on to Daniel's Ranch area, a large raptor perched in a distant tree. A scope view revealed that it was a Gray Hawk. We were fortunate to have this good look at a rare tropical hawk that breeds in a small part of West Texas, but it was not our only encounter. Soon after we arrived in the former ranch area, another Gray Hawk soared into the central park area and perched high in a Cottonwood Tree. Here we could all see it well, but the best was yet to come. A second Gray Hawk perched behind us and then flew to another tree providing an even closer view of its exquisite gray, patterned plumage. We surmised that a nest was nearby and the adults were on patrol duty. To respect their concern over nest protection, we walked away and had a picnic lunch. In addition to a Golden-fronted Woodpecker and a Vermilion Flycatcher, a Turkey Vulture lingered nearby while we ate, waiting for table scraps.

After lunch we drove to the top of Boquillas Overlook where we spotted a flock of Northern Shoveler at rest on the mudflats of the Rio Grande. We took in the great views all around and watched two horses cross the river from Mexico to Texas, nearly having to swim through belly-high water. Nearby, we could see a farmer in Mexico tilling his soil with a horse-drawn plow. Although our border with Mexico provides a sharp contrast between cultures and economic well-being, it also provides great riparian habitat and protected areas on both sides of the border/river. These lands, combined with Big Bend State Park and the national park, add up to more than one-million contiguous acres of protected lands, which has a lot to do with Big Bend's abundance of birds, wildlife and other natural wonders.

The drive to the visitor center showcased the best flower displays we had seen yet. We stopped in several places to photograph amazing expanses of distant yellow flowers that extended up to the flanks of the Chisos Mountains.

On the way back we stopped at the visitor center to experience their outdoor and indoor displays. Some of the group watched an inspiring film about Big Bend NP, which featured scenes we could now relate to. On the way out, a Curve-billed Thrasher sang conspicuously from the top of a huge blossom on top of a Giant Dagger Yucca.



Curve-billed Thrasher

Once back at Chisos Basin, we had an afternoon siesta, followed by an early dinner at the lodge. After dinner, we headed to Dugout Wells to go owling. The drive was absolutely gorgeous with the Chisos Mountains accentuated by the golden evening light. Since we arrived at Dugout Wells before dusk, we walked the short trail through the former ranch site's massive old Cottonwood trees and into the Chihuahuan Desert on an interpretive trail. These walks showcased cacti in bloom and the Chisos Mountains in full view.

At dusk, Woody realized that the tree where the Elf Owl formerly nested had fallen in a recent storm. We did, however see several Lesser Nighthawks fly by, and on the drive home encountered a coyote sauntering down the road, unconcerned by our presence. A short distance from the coyote, Woody spotted a shape on the road that turned out to be a Common Poorwill. We pulled up beside it and it flew in front of our headlights revealing its identity. It was a two Goatsucker evening!

We made it back to Chisos Basin under a brilliant starry sky with a crescent moon. It was time for a good night's rest before the next day's hike into the mountains we had admired from afar for the past two days.

Wednesday, April 22 Big Bend National Park / Hike to Boot Springs and Colima Country



Mexican Jay

We could not have ordered better weather for our big hike. Temperatures were in the 60s with a cool breeze and a slight cloud cover. We set off after breakfast and soon encountered two new bird species with blue colors: Blue-gray Gnatcatchers and Mexican Jays. As the latter bird's name implies, Mexican Jays are a species that primarily resides in Mexico. Its range extends northward into small portions of Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. We were in one of these northern range extension "fingers." A lone Cedar Waxwing sang its dry whistling song from the top of a dead tree. Views of the Pinnacles, Emory Peak and the high Chisos inspired us to keep climbing.



As we hiked up the pass, Kathleen paused to give us a lesson on Cochineal, created by the scale insect. When crushed, it stains a deep cranberry red that was used as a dye by the Aztecs, Mayans and Incas. Kathleen spread some on the palm of her hand as a demonstration — a teachable moment!



As we neared the summit and approached dense stands of Grave's Oaks, we all got quiet and listened for the Colima Warbler's song. The first warblers to make an appearance however, were a flock of Townsend's Warblers. They put on a colorful yellow and black show as they moved through the Pinyon Pines and provided us with a sense of anticipation of things to come.

Soon afterward, we heard the telltale song of a Colima and found it foraging through the Grave's Oak leaves. Then another one came from the opposite side of the trail, eventually foraging 12 feet directly above our heads. We were thrilled with these close-up sightings of what for all participants was a Life Bird. Like the Mexican Jays, Colima Warblers are primarily a Mexican species. But in the Colima's case, their range only crosses the border in one tiny place: the high Chisos of Big Bend National Park. This is why they are such a coveted species here. Hiking up a 2,000-foot high pass on a 9-mile round trip makes the experience of finding the Colima even more gratifying.



Colima!

The fact that the hike itself is flat-out gorgeous does not hurt either. From the top of the pass we watched White-throated Swifts and Violet-green Swallows fly-catch in the gusty winds and took in the stunning views of the high Chisos. Descending to the east side of the Chisos, we encountered another singing Colima Warbler to complement the gorgeous views of the boot formation accented by lush green oaks that flourished in this rainy season for Texas.



Canyon Wren

For the rest of the afternoon, our group took in Boot Springs where we found Painted Redstart, Hutton's Vireo, Pine Siskin and a Broad-tailed Hummingbird. Tish and Brendon visited with a Cornell Lab of Ornithology crew that was recording the vocalizations of Colima Warblers — just another reminder of what a special place this is for birds and natural history.

On the way out, Lionel encountered a huge, 4-foot-long Black-tailed Rattlesnake slithering across the trail. It rattled to give him a warning. Three of us marveled at this big rattler from a safe distance. Meanwhile, a Canyon Wren sang its beautiful descending song from a majestic perch on Pinnacle Pass.

We descended into Chisos Basin in the late afternoon, and enjoyed (more than on most days) the creature comforts of cleaning up, putting on a fresh set of clothes and having dinner at the lodge as a

spectacular sunset unfolded just outside the giant picture windows. What a fitting end to a sensational day!

Thursday, April 23 Big Bend National Park / Sam Nail Ranch / Santa Elena Canyon / Christmas Mountains Refuge

Remarkably, we had yet another cool morning in which to explore some of the hotter portions of the park. Acorn Woodpeckers gathered on top of a pole in Chisos Basin as if to chide us for even considering to leave the area. At our first stop, Sam Nail Ranch, the slight overcast held. Here everyone had looks at Yellow-breasted Chats. Everyone enjoyed watching the largest warbler in North America perch and sing the multiple phrases and tones of its song. Kathy then found the first Varied Bunting of the trip, which most of the group saw before it flew away.



As we moved on past the striking Mule Ears volcanic rock formation, through the moonscape of the silvery-white Desert Tuff and down the steep decline to the relatively lush riparian vegetation of the Rio Grande, we entered Cottonwood Campground.



As soon as we opened the van door, a Gray Hawk came into view, perched high in one of the Cottonwoods. A Western Wood Pewee and multiple Vermilion Flycatcher alternately perched and went on fly-catching forays. Our first Hepatic Tanager perched briefly then disappeared into the Cottonwoods.

Just a short stroll through the campground revealed an Orchard Oriole, spotted by Kathleen, and a Great Horned Owl that Gerhardt found. Judy found our first Inca Doves. We all watched Audubon's and Myrtle races of Yellow-rumped Warblers foraging through the grass and savored frequent close looks at brilliant Summer Tanagers.

During our picnic lunch at the campground we were entertained by two bright red birds perched right in front of us: Vermilion Flycatcher and Summer Tanager. Golden-fronted Woodpeckers flew through on a regular basis and occasionally perched on other picnic tables, or hammered on the metal barbecue grills.

Reluctantly, we departed from this "birdy" campground to visit Santa Elena Canyon. The cooler temperatures were most welcome as we hiked into the spectacular, sheer 1,500-foot high walls of this canyon cut by the Rio Grande River. Brendon and Tish found a Black Phoebe by hiking farther into the canyon. Rock and Canyon Wren were ever-present in song, flight and on rocky perches. A Red-tailed Hawk soared among Turkey Vultures.



Flowering Prickly-Pear and other cacti were beautifully displayed on open rocky ledges, with the canyon walls and river below. This is one of America's least known, yet truly grand canyons.

We travelled on to the historic Castolon grocery and visitor center, which our group found fascinating. The small, but high-quality interpretive displays here tell the story of former settlements from Chisos, Apache and Comanche Indians, to Spanish and eventually U.S. occupation.

As we forged ahead, we drove to Study Butte and outside the park on bumpy gravel roads into the unique Christmas Mountains Oasis built and managed by a remarkable woman: Carolyn Ohl-Johnson. She was there to greet us with camera and binoculars in hand. As soon as we were out of the van and introductions were made, she hustled us over to one of her ponds to see a Spotted Sandpiper, one of the few shorebirds we had seen on the trip. She then took us on a hike through a cactus-studded hillside on a primitive trail she had cleared to gain a foothold on the steep slope.

We watched for some time as first, Scaled Quail ran by, but eventually perched for all to see. Then Tish found our first Lucifer Hummingbird. The male with its bright purple throat perched confidently for everyone to see.



Lucifer Hummingbird

On the way back to the main refuge, we all had a clear and prolonged look at a Varied Bunting. Carolyn then toured us through her amazing earth-sheltered



Carolyn Ohl-Johnson tours us through her earth-sheltered, art-adorned home.

home, adorned with multiple paintings and tile work. We thanked her profusely for her wonderful tour. As she modestly said, "I enjoy seeing the birds just as much as you do. ... The joy in life is creating things that other people enjoy."

We all also enjoyed the wonderfully eclectic atmosphere, live music and excellent food and beverages served at the Starlight Café in Terlingua. This town, its unique character and characters charmed everyone in our group and provided a

memorable last stop on a memorable day.

Friday, April 24 Big Bend National Park / Chisos Basin / Prairie Dog Town

Amazingly, the cool weather prevailed once again as we took our final walk in Big Bend. Scott's Oriole and Canyon Towhee serenaded us as we descended along a stream with tall canyon walls surrounding it. Tish spotted and Woody scoped a singing Rufus-crowned Sparrow. Rebecca heard the long scream of a Zone-tailed Hawk, and the rest of us saw it as it soared near two Turkey Vultures. On the way back up, Judy found a young Rock Squirrel perched precariously on a dead tree limb overhanging a steep slope.

As we continued up the trail a Leaf-footed Bug hopped onto Rebecca's shirt, successfully getting her attention, and then hopped to a nearby branch where we marveled at this interesting creature with yellow tipped antennae and large grasshopper-like legs. Moving on, we drove to the visitor center and after we perused the reports on bird and wildlife sightings, we felt good about the quality and quantity of ours.

We arrived in the tiny former cattle town of Marathon, named by a surveyor for whom it reminded him of Marathon, Greece. Jimmy B's Café was the perfect place to land and enjoy freshly-made Mexican foods in an old-timey atmosphere.



After lunch we checked into the beautifully-restored Gage Hotel and headed out to search for Prairie Dogs just outside of town. We soon arrived at the colony and saw multiple family groups standing in front of their burrows. This we expected, but the seven Pronghorn that Woody spotted behind them, were a bonus. Even more



unusual was the cow Rocky Mountain Elk that trotted along the ranch fence lines. We watched her try to find a way out of the maze of ranch fences. Later, Rebecca reported her to the ranchers in the area so they could release her to open country.

We then continued along the Prairie Dog colony and found a Burrowing Owl. Several Western Meadowlarks flew by and a Swainson's Hawk hovered overhead, taking a keen interest in potential stragglers at the colony. Altogether, the colony yielded more wildlife and bird sightings than anticipated.



It was time to return to our comfortable hotel and prepare for our celebratory trip-end dinner at the famous Gage Hotel Restaurant. In the southwestern-styled, open-air dining area we compiled our final species list, ate a delicious meal underneath a bison mural and shared trip highlights. By request, Woody read a few essays from his new book, *Look Up: Birds and Other Natural Wonders Just Outside Your Window*.

Together, we experienced Big Bend and the Davis Mountains in ideal conditions and saw a great sampling of its natural diversity. For this we fortunate, indeed.

Saturday, April 25 Return to El Paso via Marfa Lights Visitor Center and other Roadside Attractions

On a bright, clear morning, we departed from Marathon and the Gage Hotel. We took a quick stretch break at the Marfa Lights interpretive center, which left us with the explanation we surmised: they are a mystery. A Vesper Sparrow flew over the desert and a Brewer's Sparrow perched on a shrub and sang part of its amazing, multi-octave song as we scanned the landscape. Lights or no, this is a nice place to stop with an attractively designed building.

Past Marfa, into the open shrub desert, Woody spotted a Chihuahuan Raven perched on a power pole with its white feathers showing in the morning sun. Since this was a target bird for Rebecca, we pulled over. The raven eventually flew to join its mate at a nearby roadside pull-off. The two preened and touched bills affectionately. It was a beautiful display from this desert specialist whose range formerly extended farther north into the U.S. southwest than it does today. Thankfully, according to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, their populations seem to be stable.

We continued on to Van Horn for a rest stop. This time, the Cave Swallows were here in abundance. We could see them flying under and around the nearby overpass, even fly-catching above the service station where we gassed up the van.

The final stretch to El Paso was smooth and swift. Everyone arrived in time for their flights and said fond farewells. We experienced West Texas in a remarkably cool and wet year, which added a vast array of wildflowers to the many other qualities that make this area such an outstanding destination.



Chihuahuan Ravens

Trip Report and photos by Woody Wheeler.