



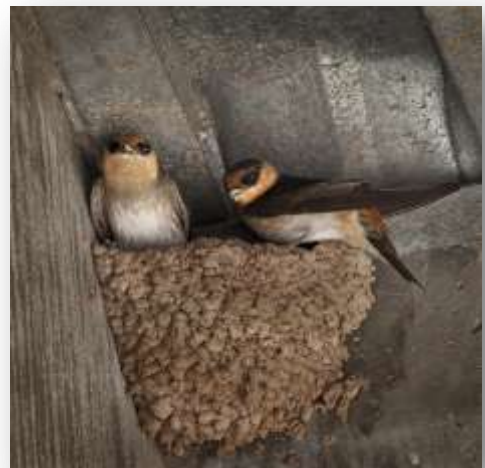
Texas Big Bend: Birding and Wildlife
Guide, Woody Wheeler, with 8 participants: Gail, Barry, Pat, David,
Judi, Phil, Eli and Lori
April 23-30, 2016



Day One: Arrive to El Paso/ head to Ft. Davis via McNary Reservoir and Balmorhea State Park

Moderate temperatures with a refreshing breeze eased us in to the start of this year's Texas Davis Mountains and Big Bend journey. As we drove east from El Paso along the Rio Grande Valley we started seeing Swainson's Hawks soaring in the thermals. At our first stop, McNary, we checked the highway bridge underpass for Cave Swallows and soon found at least 20 of them in flight and on their adobe mud nests. This was a life bird for most in our group.

Once at the reservoir, David spotted a Snowy Egret. Then Woody heard the call and soon found a Gambel's Quail perching on a small mound. When we finally reached the shore of McNary Reservoir, it was full of activity: American Coots, Northern Shovelers, Clark's and Western and Pied-billed Grebes, Snowy and Great Egrets, and Gadwalls were among the birds found here.



Phil found Western Kingbirds perched on power lines, occasionally uttering their rapid-fire "Pip-pip-pip-pip" calls. As we drove into the farm country, Lark Sparrows perched on the barbed wire fence.

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We continued eastward through the Chihuahua Desert and several mountain ranges to the oasis town of Balmorhea. Thanks to the presence of San Solomon Springs, this state park has lush vegetation, flowing streams, and a lake. It is a magnet for birds and wildlife.



In our brief visit here, Lori found a Vermilion Flycatcher that provided everyone with eye-popping scope views. Woody found our first pair of Scaled Quail. Then Eli spotted two Greater Roadrunners that were close enough to view clearly and photograph. In the wetland cienega, we all enjoyed close views of the Spiny Softshell Turtles feeding, a Green Heron and a flock of Cedar Waxwing. A few Desert Cottontail Rabbits and a Mexican Ground Squirrel joined the party. Balmorhea is a true desert oasis, loaded with thirsty birds and wildlife.

At dusk we pulled into the scenic mountain town of Ft. Davis and enjoyed a fine meal at Blue Mountain Bistro where a country music party for local ranchers was in full swing. We checked into our rooms in the charming Limpia Hotel and called

it a night.

Day 2: Exploring the Davis Mountains

A cool breeze greeted us today as we met for breakfast in the courtyard at Hotel Limpia. A Broad-tailed Hummingbird perched majestically atop the decorative fountain for a drink. After a breakfast buffet and coffee, we headed into the Davis Mountains. As we passed by the Limpia Creek Natural Area, Woody pulled the van onto the shoulder so everyone could see our first Phainopepla. We continued on to Madera Canyon trailhead at The Nature Conservancy preserve, noting a few Mule and White-tailed Deer.

As we gathered to start our hike, Judi spotted several Black-crested Titmouse flitting through the Alligator Juniper trees. Soon afterward, we saw several Western Bluebirds and the first trip Acorn Woodpecker perched on a large Ponderosa Pine snag. As we started hiking, we encountered a brilliant Yellow-rumped Warbler, several Ash-throated Flycatchers, and a Northern Flicker. Scrub Jays were abundant, seemingly following us along the trail. As we neared the Hueco Tank pond, we heard the song we were hoping for: the Buff-breasted Flycatcher. This small Mexican flycatcher barely makes it into the southwestern edge of the United States in what is the northernmost extension of its range. It perched in several junipers 20 yards away and



sang multiple times. We all had opportunities to see and photograph this bird – one of the rarest and hardest to find—on the journey.

At Hueco Tank, we sat along the shore and watched the action around the pond. There was plenty. A Black Phoebe alternately perched on low shrubs or fence posts and sallied forth to catch bugs. Ash-throated Flycatchers skirmished over the best perching and fly-catching locations. Violet-green Swallows circled the lake, occasionally flying low and directly overhead. A Bushtit chattered at us and Chipping Sparrows came to the shoreline to drink and feed

Eventually we pried ourselves away from this fine birding spot and headed back down the trail where we found a Canyon Towhee and amazingly, right near the parking lot at Lawrence Wood picnic area, another Buff-breasted Flycatcher. Barry spotted a Desert Grassland Whiptail lizard and Gail, an Acmon Blue butterfly. Many commented on what a beautiful hike it was through the Davis Mountains, adjacent to 33,000 acres of protected lands, including the 18,000-acre Nature Conservancy preserve.



For lunch we found a prime spot behind the McDonald Observatory Visitor Center in a shady courtyard with hummingbird feeders. Black-chinned and Broad-tailed Hummingbirds buzzed around as we enjoyed a nicely-prepared sack lunch by Ft. Davis' excellent Stone Village market.

After lunch we continued up the mountain and took in the sweeping views of the Davis Mountain range and beyond. A Canyon Wren serenaded us with its distinctive song magnified because he was singing next to a large telescope installation that served as an echo chamber. At one point the Canyon Wren hopped on top of the telescope as if to remind us all that this was his (not the U. of Texas') territory! ☺



On the way back to Ft. Davis we decided to find a shady birding spot in Davis Mountains State Park. What better place than their feeding area? Here we experienced lots of mid-day bird traffic including Summer Tanager, Lesser Goldfinch, Scott's Oriole and a Cedar Waxwing near the water feature. A Western Fence Lizard scampered along the face of the sheltered viewing area.

Our last stop of the day was at Fort Davis, where everyone took in the historic fort's displays and interpretive film. This was a remarkable chapter in U.S. history. African

American "Buffalo" soldiers were sent to a remote post in Ft. Davis to defend settlers from Indians.

Fortunately, the Buffalo Soldiers were not called upon to engage the Indians, and instead experienced a lonely, isolated stay at the fort. Mostly, they were called upon for patrol work and maintaining a presence, which they did.

The fort itself lies in a picturesque setting, nestled into a volcanic rock canyon. Several species of wrens: Rock, Canyon and Cactus were all vocalizing and at times, visible here. A Rock Wren methodically visited each car in the parking lot, pecking insects off of the front grilles.

In the late afternoon we took a siesta in our cool and comfortable Inn prior to enjoying another fine meal at the adjacent Blue Mountain Bistro. In the early evening we returned to Davis Mountains State Park in search of quail and owls. While looking for Montezuma Quail, we found a Northern Cardinal and a Black-throated Sparrow. Then we watched and waited for an Elf Owl to emerge from its hole nest in a tree snag along a wash. A Common Nighthawk fluttered by and a Cassin's Kingbird uttered its noisy "Peerrrt!" call several times as we waited.

Just as the sun set, and night began to set in, an owl face filled one of the nest holes. The owl remained in this position for about five minutes while we enjoyed terrific views. Eventually it flew, returning several minutes later and re-entering the hole. A few minutes later, it once again positioned its face squarely in the hole and started chattering in tones that reminded Judi of squirrel scolding sounds. We kept watching until it was too difficult to see and then returned under starry skies to our cozy hotel.



Day 3: Davis Mountains State Park/ Alpine, Marathon Post/Prairie Dog Colony/Big Bend NP

We set out shortly after sunrise and enjoyed an informal but tasty breakfast at Ft. Davis' surprisingly good small grocery and deli. We entered the park and combed the areas where Montezuma Quail had been seen lately but did not find them. We did find, however, a pair of Summer Tanagers, a Ladder-backed Woodpecker, a Scott's Oriole that Judi spotted and a Pipevine Swallowtail Butterfly found by Pat.

North of Alpine we stopped at the roadside ponds. Normally we find swallows here, but this year we found a variety of other interesting species, including Vermilion Flycatcher, Belted Kingfisher, Osprey (with a fish), Great Blue Heron, Ring-necked Duck and a Curve-billed Thrasher.





In Alpine we had a delicious Southwest-style lunch at Reatta Restaurant.

We then drove east through the wide open spaces toward Marathon. Once there we turned south and drove on a quiet county road to Marathon Post Park. On the way we saw a female Wild Turkey.

The Post, with its small reservoir and parkland with huge Cottonwood trees and riparian vegetation on the edges is a fine oasis for birds, or a migrant “trap.” As usual for this time of year, the Post delivered.

Soon after arriving, we had a Curve-billed Thrasher in the spotting scope. Then Judi noticed a Blue Grosbeak. A family of Vermilion Flycatchers put on quite a show, including a male, female and juvenile – sporting a spectrum of flashy colors from eye-popping red to lemon yellow. Then, after a fairly long search for the woodpecker calling from high in the Cottonwood canopy, Lori found a Golden-fronted Woodpecker in clear view on a high Cottonwood branch. Meanwhile, an American Pipit and White-crowned Sparrow fed in the park lawn.



Moving on to a drier open range area, we headed to the Black-tailed Prairie Dog colony northeast of Marathon. Dozens of Prairie Dogs were visible in their mounded “town.” – some standing sentry, some uttering warning chirps, and others scurrying about. Woody found a group of resting Pronghorn, including young that led us to even more – about 15 total. A singing Meadowlark in the Prairie Dog Town had a thin, plaintive voice – an Eastern Meadowlark.

Following this experience featuring iconic western wildlife, along with an eastern bird, we headed south

to Big Bend Park. Everyone was impressed by the rugged, colorful and geologically-contorted Chisos Mountains as we approached this beautiful yet isolated national park.

Once at Chisos Basin, the picturesque lodge that originally serves as a base for the Civilian Conservation Corps, we settled into our cabins with views of the Window formation to the lowlands beyond. It was time for a pleasant meal at the lodge and a chance to compile our list of sightings for the day. In the balmy evening temperatures, we watched the sun drop through the “Window” framed by an Arizona Cypress Tree and landforms. What an enchanting place!



At sunrise, we set forth for Rio Grande Village to the song of an Eastern Meadowlark. On the way, we came across three Mexican Jays on Panther Pass. Normally we find these higher up in the Chisos Mountains. The early morning sunlight illuminated the Chisos in all of their rugged and colorful glory. A young Mule strayed near the roadside, its big ears erect.

Day 4 – Big Bend National Park/Rio Grande Village/Daniel’s Ranch/Dugout Wells

As we descended into the Rio Grande valley from Panther Junction, more roadside fauna appeared. First a Desert Cottontail sped off into the cover of various cacti, agaves and Sotol plants. Then a Black-tailed Jack Rabbit did the same. A covey of five Scaled Quail ran through the desert chaotically, as if they were in a state of panic. Perhaps they were.



At Rio Grande Village we were greeted by a Common Raven, our first Black Vultures, and two American Kestrels. Golden-fronted Woodpeckers were noisily evident as they chattered and occasionally pounded on the many Lanceleaf Cottonwoods. Their vocalizations along with the busy chatter of Bell’s Vireos, dominated the air waves.

Following a picnic breakfast in a shady area near the river, we started our walk toward the Rio Grande Nature Trails. On the way, we watched a Javelina walk across a grassy opening, ford an irrigation channel, and continue into the brush. Soon

afterward, Lori spotted a Brown-crested Flycatcher perched majestically on a dead cottonwood snag. Continuing onward, we encountered Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Wilson's, Yellow and Yellow-rumped Warblers and a Verdin.

As we entered the nature trails, Yellow-breasted Chats and Common Yellowthroats were vocalizing but never came out where we could see them. While waiting for them. A Greater Roadrunner startled us by flying up to the railing of the board walk only a few feet from Barry. There he stood for a while, sizing us up and flaring its crest, before flying further up the board walk. In just a few minutes he returned with a frog in his mouth which he proudly displayed prior to flying to the trail entrance.



The ponds in the Rio Grande wetlands area harbored two species of turtles: Big Bend Red-eared Sliders and Spiny-tailed Softshells. A Bullfrog croaked loudly and persistently.

We scaled the small hill above the wetlands for a scenic view of the Rio Grande. It provided a good perspective on the habitat that has been protected on both sides of the border, including a vast swath of riparian forest on the Mexican side. Woody found and scoped a distant White-faced Ibis on the north shore of the river. In addition to birds and mammals, Gail, Judi and Pat found Mourning Cloak, Red Admiral and Cabbage White Butterflies.



The road to Daniel's Ranch passes by a sensitive nesting area for the Common Black Hawk, that once again has at least one nesting pair of hawks. We saw the male soaring and perching; the female gathering sticks for the nest and at least one chick moving in the nest.

At Daniel's Ranch we proceeded to the Rio Grande where Barry spotted an Orchard Oriole. In the grassy area overhung by massive cottonwoods, we found multiple

Vermillion Flycatchers, Northern Cardinals, Yellow-rumped Warblers, Chipping Sparrows, and thanks to an alert spot from Phil, a soaring Gray Hawk!



We took in the view from Boquillas Overlook, including the self-service homemade desert art items for sale on top courtesy of Mexicans who ride horses across to display their wares. Woody found and scoped a distant White-faced Ibis on the north shore of the river. A Couch's Kingbird perched below.

Our final stop was Dugout Wells where Prickly Pear cacti had sprouted yellow and orange blossoms. Phil and Eli saw a Scott's Oriole here, and on the way out, we all saw a Western Wood Pewee.

At Panther Junction Visitor Center everyone took in the interpretive displays and obtained information about recent sightings. Woody led Phil, Eli and Lori on a successful quest to see a pair of Cactus Wrens. Lori found their nest in the eaves of the building. Their churring sound is iconic for the SW desert.

We returned to Chisos Basin and its spectacular setting for an afternoon siesta, dinner and relaxation prior to our big hike the next day in the high Chisos. To put an exclamation point on the day, Barry saw two Gray Foxes outside of the Chisos Basin Lodge at dusk. This is a place where you can expect the unexpected wildlife encounter.

Day 5 – Hike to Boot Springs in Search of Colima Warbler/Or hike local Chisos Basin Trails

Today about half of our group opted for the Boot Springs/Colima Warbler hike and the other half stayed in Chisos Basin to relax and walk the local trails. Among other sightings, the latter group had good looks at a group of Scaled Quail, Wilson's Warblers and several White-tailed Deer.



The Boot Springs hikers departed at dawn in relatively cool, breezy conditions. On the way up we met up with various species, including: Mexican Jay, Hutton's Vireo, Bushtit, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher and a singing Rufous-crowned Sparrow. As we reached the Pinnacles rock formations near the pass, we entered prime Colima Warbler territory. We heard two Colimas singing so we knew that they were around but were not able to see any yet.

We did have a fine look at a Rock Squirrel, who actually hopped a few strides toward us before retreating to his rocky domain.

On top of the pass between Emory Mountain, the largest in the Chisos Range, and Toll Mountain, we saw several White-throated Swifts. As we



descended from the pass toward Boot Springs on the east side of the Chisos, we heard a Colima Warbler at relatively close range. Although we could see the foliage in the Grave's Oaks moving where the bird was, we never saw it. We continued hiking down the east side of the pass alongside the iconic "boot" formation in the high Chisos

The quest for this small Mexican warbler continued as we approached Boot Spring, passing through another Grave's Oak grove- the favored habitat of nesting Colima Warblers. While taking a rest here, several Acorn Woodpeckers along with a vibrantly colorful Painted Redstart. Things were picking up in the avian category.

We hiked on to Boot Springs where we saw a lot of bird activity down at the creek bed in the lushly forested canyon. We decided to descend and check it out. This proved to be a good decision. One of the first birds we saw, spotted by Pat, was as Cordilleran Flycatcher. It called and perched in various locations around us, seemingly keeping tabs on us. Then the Acorn Woodpeckers and Mexican Jays chimed in, hammering in the case of the woodpeckers, and chattering in hopes of a picnic in the case of the jays. There was a persistent peeping in the air, the call of the Blue-throated Hummingbird. This relatively large hummingbird made frequent forays to the creek bottom and flew up alongside the rocks. At times it would perch on tree limbs, providing great looks.



Then we heard the Colima Warbler for the fourth time that day. All of us searched the oak canopy as it continued singing repeatedly. Finally, Judi spotted one high in a Grave's Oak Tree. Most of us were able to see it as it foraged there.

At this point, we decided that Boot Springs would make a fine lunch stop. Here we could enjoy the cool, shady atmosphere of the Springs and let the birds come to us, which they did. A Black-headed Grosbeak flew in, singing short phrases from its expressive song. A Hermit Thrush hopped across the rocks and the oak leaves. Another

Painted Redstart made a colorful appearance.

Eventually, we tore ourselves away from this prime birding spot and walked along Boot Spring Canyon. Here we had several more looks at Colima Warblers that were in closer proximity and easier to see.

At this point, it was time for the long, scenic and hot hike out. We made it back to Chisos Basin in a few hours, pausing to photograph the incredible scenery and the occasional bird or lizard sighting. A few beers were shared in honor of the Colimas and other species we found today. While we sat on the sheltered walkway outside our rooms, we were joined by a White-winged Dove, Say's Phoebe and a Greater Roadrunner who all passed by in close proximity, seemingly without worry, hunting for food as they went. These are the kind of experiences that make Big Bend such a magical place.

Day 6 – Big Bend National Park/ Sam Nail Ranch/Blue Creek Canyon/Santa Elena Canyon/Terlingua

The day began with the uniformly blue skies we have enjoyed the entire trip. Our first stop was a short walk into Sam Nail Ranch where a historic windmill pumps water into the landscape creating a riparian vegetation oasis. This is a magnet for birds and wildlife in the otherwise parched Chihuahuan Desert. A perched Pyrrhuloxia greeted us to the ranch.



As we walked in to the former ranch, a Lazuli Bunting perched briefly, sporting its turquoise blue and peachy colors. Soon after we had our first clear look at a Yellow-breasted Chat, courtesy of Phil's good spot. Then, further down toward the windmill, we had a nice look at a Varied Bunting. Judi found a Blue Grosbeak and we all enjoyed another exceptional look at a perched Varied Bunting, illuminated by the morning sun. Barry remarked that this was the best place we had been to yet.



A short distance south, we embarked upon a hike to the former Homer Wilson sheep ranch and the Blue Creek Canyon trail. As we descended to the ranch, Black-throated and Rufous-crowned Sparrows made brief appearances. A light-morph Red-tailed Hawk flew overhead and perched on a cliff providing a sharp contrast with the rock and a great view. Continuing up the wash we worked hard to find the first of two Gray Vireos, along with another Verdin. On the way back a Southwest Earless lizard at first stood still only five feet away along the trail and then hopped on a rock and did push-ups.





From Blue Creek we drove through the volcanic Tuff area which Barry, a professional geologist elaborated upon. The tuff was a by-product of violent volcanic eruptions long ago in the Big Bend area. We got out and felt this relatively soft (for rocks), chalky rock in an area that resembles a moonscape.

We then descended to the Rio Grande River and enjoyed a picnic lunch under the tall Cottonwoods at the campground by the same name. Our lunch was frequently interrupted by bird sightings: an Indigo

Bunting flying up to a perch to our east; a Great Horned Owl partially hidden by leafy vegetation to our west; Inca Doves to the north and a Tropical Kingbird and Summer Tanager to the South. One young man who was fond of Great Horned Owls displayed a tattoo of his favorite bird near the spot where the actual bird was perched.

After lunch we walked the perimeter of the campground where the vegetation edge attracts multiple species. We first noticed a Tropical



Kingbird in good lighting, occasionally making forays to catch bugs; and then a large Red-tailed Hawk perched in the same tree. Just a few minutes after putting the spotting scope on the hawk, it soared down from its perch and snatched a White-winged dove only 20 yards away from us on a fence post, its red tail flashing in the bright sun. It then flew with the dove in its talons back to its perch to eat its meal. This display of raw animal power left us in awe.

In the early afternoon we headed to Santa Elena Canyon, a geologic feature of epic proportions. Its



limestone walls rise 1,500 feet above the Rio Grande Canyon. As we hiked in Northern Rough-winged Swallows flew erratically overhead in search of insects. A Common Yellowthroat sang and was seen by Lori and several others. Lori also spotted a Cactus Wren.

By the time we reached Castolon, a historic military post and later, a ranch that has since been restored and still has an old-time general store, the temperature had reached 100 degrees. It was time for ice cream, which really hit the spot. Our group also enjoyed the small but well-done historical display that traced the human origins of the area from Chisos to Apache and Comanche Indians, to a prolonged Spanish conquest, to eventual U.S. settlement and governance. It was not a peaceful transition, including the relatively recent Mexican-American war a century ago.

On the way back to the lodge, we first stopped at the park visitor center to purchase Colima Warbler hats, and then cleaned up, changed clothes, and headed for dinner in Terlingua. The off-beat charms of Terlingua were appreciated by all, including the store with its huge selection of arts, crafts, books, rocks toys and southwest items, and the Starlight Café with its uniquely Texan atmosphere and delicious food and drink. This was a memorable evening for everyone.

The ride home at dusk was made eventful by the abundant wildlife on the edges of the road. We must have seen 20 Desert Cottontails scamper across. One Coyote sauntered across the road, probably hunting the Cottontails, and several Lesser Nighthawks fluttered close to the road and one, close to the car. A soft rosy light illuminated the Chisos as we crested the pass and dropped down to our lodge at dark. Stars shone above Casa Grande Peak as we returned to our rooms and called it a good night.

Day 7 – Christmas Mountains Oasis/Alpine/Museum of the Big Bend/Reatta Restaurant



On another picture-perfect morning, we departed from Big Bend National Park. As we climbed out of Chisos Basin, a grand finale was in store for us: a family of four Mexican Black Bear! They browsed unperturbed along the roadside, one of the cubs sitting on his haunches, until a car came the other direction and sent them scampering up the mountain side.

As we drove out of the park's northwest entrance through Study Butte north to the Christmas Mountains, Scaled Quail were especially active, running with their pointy heads upright. We then turned into the rugged dirt road into Carol Ohl-Johnson's private Christmas Mountains Oasis. Once you arrive in this green pocket amid the desert mountain surroundings, the charms of the place are immediately evident.



Just a few steps from the parking area lie sun-sheltered seating areas across from multiple hummingbird and seed feeders. It did not take long for the first hummingbirds to arrive. First came Black-chinned Hummingbirds, and soon after, Lucifer Hummingbirds, the latter a hard-to-find, sought after species. Indigo and Varied Buntings followed, as did a young Blue Grosbeak – the three providing a palette of blue tones. A Phainopepla perched high in a Mesquite tree against the blue sky providing the best look yet at this attractive silky flycatcher.

Eventually we moved to another station where Carolyn suggested that we look for a Green Towhee that frequented the area. It took about ten minutes of patient, quiet waiting but eventually one came in from the rear, scratching and probing for seeds on the ground, its rufous cap shining in the morning sun.

Wilson's and Nashville Warblers caught bugs and bathed in a nearby water hole, and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers flitted about, uttering their nasal "nee" sound.



At the conclusion of our visit, Carolyn showed us a variety of dragonflies she was attempting to photograph as they flew above one of the Oasis ponds including a Turquoise-tipped Darner and a Flame Skipper. She then toured us through her impressive earth-sheltered, art-adorned home. A singing Canyon Wren had built a nest in her courtyard.

We spent the better part of the morning at this wonderful spot before heading north to Alpine. Once there we had lunch at a nondescript but

very good Mexican restaurant. It did not even have the restaurant name on a sign outside. Apparently the locals knew where to find it. The food was fresh and home-cooked!

After lunch we checked into the historic and quite elegant Holland Hotel in downtown Alpine. Once everyone was settled in and had unloaded their bags, we visited the Museum of the Big Bend at Sul Ross State College campus, located on the other side of town. The excellent natural and human history exhibits at this museum complemented our week of explorations in the Trans-Pecos region of Texas.

We wound up the day by walking to the Reatta Restaurant from our hotel, where we had another outstanding meal and toasted to a fine Naturalist Journey in a seldom seen but outstanding part of the world. It felt good to come full circle and return to one of the finest restaurants in west Texas.

Day 8: Return to El Paso via Marfa Lights Visitor Center and other Roadside Attractions

The elegant Spanish-style lobby of the Holland Hotel was the scene of our final breakfast together. Bolstered by Texas-style chilli eggs, granola, fruit yoghurt and coffee, we hit the road for El Paso. On the way, we had a brief stop at the mysterious Marfa Lights interpretive center, where we saw numerous Desert Cottontail Rabbits and a large Pronghorn buck.

On the remaining drive we encountered our last new trip species, a perched Chihuahuan Raven, the prominent bulge in the upper mandible of its bill evident in the morning sun. From here we motored on, catching a laugh and photos at the faux Prada store created by Marfa artists for the amusement of travelers through this wide open stretch of Chihuahuan desert.



We made it to El Paso in time for everyone's travel connections and concluded the trip in high spirits. The charms of this outstanding natural region, spiced up by historic hotels, tasty local cuisine and the abundance of Texas character and characters made this a memorable journey.

Photos by David Regal, Woody Wheeler and Lori Cohen