



Texas Big Bend and the Davis Mountains

Participants: Anne, Craig, David, Frank, Hilary, Jan, Joan, Judith, Lori, Linda, Neil, Skip and Stephen

April 22-29, 2017

GUIDES

Woody Wheeler and Lynn Tennefoss



Sunset through "The Window" at Chisos Basin, Big Bend National Park

Day One: El Paso to McNary Reservoir, Balmorhea State Park and Fort Davis

Appropriately, we started this journey on Earth Day. We departed from El Paso on an unusually cool but sunny day – ideal for travelling.

El Paso and its suburbs swiftly gave way to the vast expanses of the Chihuahuan Desert. An hour east, and well into the desert, we exited off the freeway at McNary Reservoir. At the exit underpass, we found a small colony of Cave Swallows searching for nest sites. This was a life bird for many in our group.





Gambel's Quail

Nearby, we pulled into the completely unassuming McNary Reservoir. From below it appears to be a scrubby, degraded bank. Upon cresting the bank, however, there is a sizeable reservoir. Here we found Clark's Grebes performing a small portion of their spectacular mating dance that resembles a synchronized water ballet. Western Grebes were also nearby, as were a variety of wintering waterfowl and an unexpected flock of Willet. Gambel's Quail perched conspicuously and called loudly from the shore. Just as we were about to depart, Lynn spotted a lone Ruddy Duck bringing our total to 17 species of birds at our first stop.

We stopped for lunch at a colorful Mexican restaurant in Van Horn that has hosted a number of celebrities over the years. Then we continued eastward to Balmorhea State Park. Our group was immediately captivated by these miraculous springs that occur in North America's driest desert. Say's Phoebe and Ash-throated Flycatchers alternately perched and made short fly-catching forays. Multiple species of swallows flitted by.

Texas Spiny Soft-shell Turtles put on an impressive, and especially for turtles, animated show. They swam swiftly through the crystal-clear spring waters, surfacing amid schools of rare Pecos Gambusia (Mosquito Fish), looked toward us, and then paddled off swiftly.



Texas Spiny Soft Shell Turtle



Vermilion Flycatcher

As we continued our walk in this extraordinary oasis, two Scaled Quail trotted through the picnic area. Eye-popping Vermilion Flycatchers perched at eye-level in nearby trees. A Bullock's Oriole chattered prior to making a brilliant appearance in the tree canopy. Meanwhile on ground level a Desert Cottontail paused in a hyper-alert state, while a Mexican Ground Squirrel passed by. Stephen spotted a Greater Roadrunner moving slowly (they are not always speedy) through the grass -- our first good look at this iconic species.

Our drive to Fort Davis was also eventful. Jan alertly spotted a roadside Burrowing Owl perched beside its nest burrow. Eagle-eye Dave saw several Loggerhead Shrikes and a Western Meadowlark. Everyone enjoyed the beautiful mountain scenery with basalt cliffs and tall cottonwood trees lining the canyon that is the grand entrance to the town of Fort Davis.

Once at the historic Limpia Hotel in Fort Davis, we reconvened to the hotel patio to tally the many sightings we had on our first day. Black-chinned Hummingbirds occasionally visited the patio fountain. It was already evident on our first day that this group had good spotters who also appreciated the surprisingly rugged West Texas landscape. A sumptuous meal at the Blue Mountain Bistro concluded a productive, enjoyable first day together.

Day 2: Madera Canyon Hike, McDonald Observatory, Davis Mountains State Park, Fort Davis National Historic Monument, Elf-owling at Davis Mountains State Park

Cool, clear weather prevailed as we started our second day in the picturesque historic town of Fort Davis. After a simple yet delicious breakfast at Stone Market, we headed for our first hike in Madera Canyon. As is often the case in outstanding natural areas like the Davis Mountains, there were multiple roadside attractions along the way including several small groups of Mule and White-tailed Deer.

The Madera Canyon trail abuts a 33,000-acre Nature Conservancy preserve in the heart of the Davis Mountains. We started hiking this 2.4-mile loop trail in delightful conditions: a light breeze, temperatures in the 60's and a bluebird sky. At the trailhead, we saw a small flock of Dark-eyed Juncos and the first of what were to be many Woodhouse Jays (formerly Western Scrub Jays but recently split into a new species in this region). White-breasted Nuthatches were vocal and visible, as was an Acorn Woodpecker perched atop a snag, its red crest illuminated by the morning sun.

Our hike began through Alligator Junipers and Pinyon Pines, crossing a creek bed and then reaching an open hillside with views across a dry stream bed. Here we saw a Wild Turkey that broke into a full-fledged trot. An Eastern Kingbird appeared briefly, the first of the trip. We then began to search in earnest for the rare Buff-breasted Flycatcher that breeds only in one very

small area in Texas – precisely the area we were hiking through. Our first attempts were thwarted, neither hearing nor seeing this bird.

We moved on, pausing at a small pond known as Chico Tank. Violet-green Swallows picked insects off of the surface of the pond as House Finches serenaded us.



Birding at Chico Tank - photo by David Armstrong

After a respite at the “Tank” we opted to complete the 2.4 loop hike. This was a good decision.

Just ¼-mile into the return loop, Dave and Woody spotted a small flycatcher, then in unison said “That’s it!” The Buff-breasted Flycatcher reinforced our I.D. by singing its signature “chew-lick” song. We all saw this rare bird perched on top of a Pinyon Pine



We encountered two more Buff-breasted Flycatchers on the way out. As we departed, a Western Bluebird and a Yellow-rumped Warbler made colorful appearances.



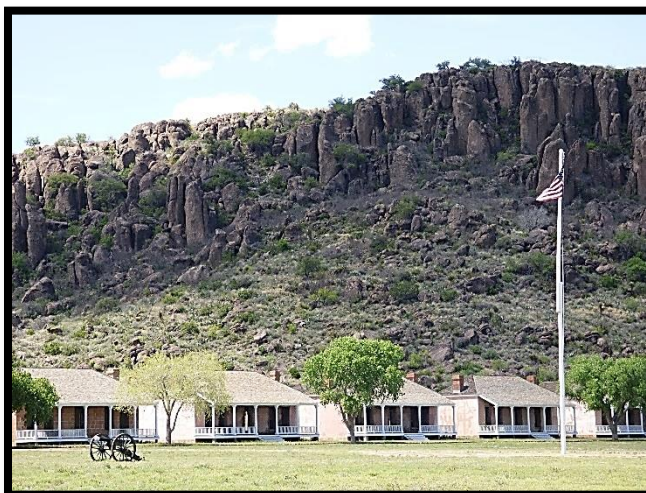
We then had a picnic lunch six miles down the road at McDonald Observatory visitor center. Afterward, we drove to the top of one of the twin peaks where observatory telescopes are stationed to enjoy a panoramic view of the Davis Mountains. We were joined on top by a Rock Squirrel, Scaled Quail, Yellow-rumped Warblers and Bushtits.

On the way back to Fort Davis, we stopped at the feeding station at Davis Mountains State Park. It was a lively scene that

prompted our group to start calling out multiple bird species names simultaneously. Skip facetiously dubbed the experience “ornithological overload.” Among the species seen on feeders and the flowing water feature were: Scott’s Oriole, Summer Tanager, Black-headed Grosbeak, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Canyon Towhee, Ladderback Woodpecker and Lesser Goldfinch. As we departed, a pair of Summer Tanagers flew off in hot pursuit of one-another, just a few feet above our heads.



Summer Tanager



It was time to take a break from natural history and focus on human history. Fort Davis is a fine place to do this. This well-preserved 1853 fort lies in a picturesque basalt canyon. It is where Buffalo Soldiers were stationed for two years to deal with the Native American/U.S. settler conflicts. An informative short movie shown at the fort and narrated by Kareem Abdul Jabbar tells the story well.

On the fort’s grounds, and at times on the old fort itself, were several Rock Wrens, a Canyon Wren and a few Black-throated

Sparrows. Behind the fort is a nice canyon with riparian habitat where Green Towhees and a

variety of other interesting birds have been seen in the past. After a full day in the Davis Mountains, it was time to return to the peaceful, comfortable Limpia Hotel for drinks, list-tallying and dinner.

In the evening, we returned to Davis Mountains State Park to search for Elf Owls. While we were waiting, we heard the repetitive chatter of a Summer Tanager, restlessly swaying back and forth on a small tree limb while uttering the chattering sound. At nightfall the smallest owl in the world appeared in its nest hole entrance. All of us saw the Elf Owl well before it took flight in search of insects, lizards, and other food for its nestlings. We lingered after it flew, watching fire flies and gazing at Jupiter's four visible moons through the spotting scope. What a fantastic night to be in the Davis Mountains!



Day 3: Davis Mountains State Park, Alpine Ponds, Alpine, Marathon Post, Prairie Dog colony, Big Bend National Park, Chisos Basin Lodge



Rufous-crowned Sparrow

A brilliant sunrise with Canyon Wrens singing in the town square greeted us at the start of the day. Once again, we had breakfast at Stone Market, a place that became such a group favorite that some mused that we should hitch it to our van and tow it with us on the rest of our journey.

After breakfast we re-entered the Davis Mountains State Park to search for the elusive Montezuma Quail. Although we did not see one, we heard one emit its descending call at least three times. The search yielded other delights including a singing Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Hutton's Vireo and a Rock Wren family.

We bid farewell to the quaint town of Ft. Davis and its biologically-rich surroundings. On the way to our next stop, Alpine, we paused to check out roadside ponds near Alpine. In addition to having more stunning looks at Vermillion Flycatchers, Skip spotted a flock of a dozen Blue-winged Teal in flight. An Osprey hovered over these bodies of water that were sizeable for West Texas. Once in the small town of Alpine, we were treated to a gourmet Mex/Tex lunch at Café Reata. We all had "life tamales" made with pecan mash – absolutely delicious!

Fortified by an excellent lunch, we continued east to Marathon, where we turned south to visit Marathon Post. This park is a migrant trap due to its pond and the lush vegetation surrounding it. Summer Tanagers moved through the cottonwood trees uttering their “chid-up” call. A Mexican Duck swam to shore, climbed onto the grass and waddled toward us. Our first Golden-fronted Woodpecker made a dramatic appearance, dropping from the trees to land in the grass in plain sight. Lastly, we encountered a mixed flock of Lark and White-crowned Sparrow feeding on the ground. Skip found a lone Blue Grosbeak among them.



Drawn by the lure of mammals ahead we moved on to search for Prairie Dogs. On the drive to the Prairie Dog town, Scissor-tailed Flycatchers appeared with regularity along the roadside fences. We were able to scope three of these elegant birds with their salmon-pink flanks and graceful long forked tails. Meanwhile, Prairie Dogs with young were standing sentry as Turkey Vultures hovered overhead and a menacing Red-tailed Hawk kept a wary eye on them from across the highway. Pronghorns loafed in the background.

From here we made the final drive to Big Bend National Park. Our group was captivated by the majestic landscape and its relative lushness compared to the heavily grazed lands we had seen earlier near Alpine and Marathon. The Santiago, Chisos and Sierra del Carmen Mountain ranges were illuminated by the late-afternoon light. As we wound up the road into the Chisos Mountains and climbed over Panther Pass, the idyllic setting of Chisos Basin came into view.





Mexican Jays formed an impromptu welcoming committee as we exited the vans and checked in at Chisos Basin Lodge. We arrived in time to witness one of the truly great sunsets in North America through the Window formation. We watched this lovely scene while dining at the lodge, occasionally jumping up to take yet another picture as the sunset unfolded. Cactus Wrens churred; Say's Phoebes flew into their nests in the eaves of the lodge building. As night fell, several of us looked at Jupiter and its four moons again through spotting scopes. On the way back to his room, Woody almost walked into a Gray Fox. These magical moments routinely occur in Big Bend National Park.

Day 4 – Rio Grande Village, Daniel's Ranch, Boquillas Overlook, Visitor Center

At daybreak, we set out for Rio Grande Village. Scaled Quail, Greater Roadrunner, and Black-tailed Jackrabbit provided roadside entertainment as we descended 3,700 feet from Chisos Basin to the Rio Grande. Lit by the morning sun, the Sierra del Carmen Mountains provided a lovely orange-colored backdrop for our journey.

Almost immediately after stepping out of our vans at Rio Grande village, a Brown-crested Flycatcher perched and sang on an exposed branch. Several Desert Cottontails bounded out into the open and a Golden-fronted Woodpecker peered out of its nest hole high in a cottonwood tree, showing its colorful head markings.



Lynn found a lone Inca Dove foraging in the campground that she led us to see. Dave spotted several Yellow-headed Blackbirds in a flooded area. Continuing down-river, we saw and heard a Bell's Vireo, Wilson's and Yellow Warblers and a Black-tailed Gnatcatcher.



As we entered the Rio Grande Village nature trail, we found, with the help of Jan and Dave, a Green Sunfish. Linda spotted a Blotched Water Snake, and Dave located several Lark Buntings on a nearby hill.

We climbed this hill to obtain a better view. Joan saw several Big Bend Red Slider Turtles in the ponds below. Our first group of Black Vultures soared

above, and Strawberry Hedgehog Cacti were in full bloom. Hilary found an uncommon Button Cactus underneath a rock outcrop



Strawberry Hedgehog Cactus



Button Cactus - photo by Hilary Hilscher

On the hill top, Skip saw White-throated Swifts flying erratically in their never-ending search for insects. The summit afforded a panoramic view of the Rio Grande, Chisos Mountains and extensive riparian vegetation on the Mexican and U.S. sides of the border. Altogether these lands form a two-million-acre bio reserve.



On the return trip to the trail head, Stephen found a Green Heron in the wetlands and Woody identified a *Pyrrhuloxia* in the campground. We continued toward Daniel's Ranch. On the way we stopped to look at a nesting female Common Blackhawk. Despite the name, these are actually rare birds, particularly in the northern portions of their range, like Texas.

A Gray Hawk spotted by Craig soared above Daniel's Ranch, and several Javelina nosed around the perimeter of the grassy area. We enjoyed a picnic lunch in this entertaining place with birds

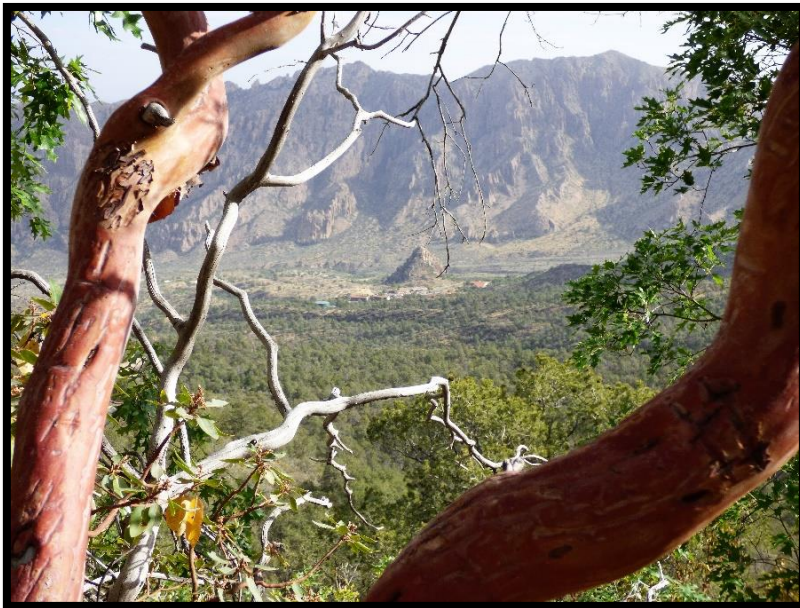
and wildlife all around. Hilary had our first confirmed sighting of a Chihuahuan Raven, its white feathers on the neck revealed when the wind ruffled them. Soon afterward, Woody, Dave and Lori had a brief but revealing look at a Painted Bunting.

As temperatures climbed, bird activity declined, so we headed to higher ground at Boquillas Overlook. From here, one can see the Mexican town by the same name along with artistic renditions of scorpions and roadrunners on site for sale. As the temperatures continued to climb, we opted for a break in the park's air-conditioned visitor center at Panther Junction. Here we shopped for gifts, natural history books, and reviewed recent sightings in the park.

We arrived back in Chisos Basin in the late afternoon in time to clean up, rest, compile our daily species list and have dinner as the sun set through the Window formation.



Day 5 – Hike to Boot Springs and/or Hike Window Trail and vicinity



Today our group split into two: those who opted to hike to Boot Springs in search of the Colima Warbler, and those who opted to stay in the Chisos Basin to hike the Window Trail. It was a beautiful day with a pleasant cool breeze for both groups.

The Colima crew ran into an interesting bird only a few steps into their 9-mile hike: A Hepatic Tanager. This was our best look yet at this brilliantly-colored tanager. Soon after reaching the trail, we encountered Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Mexican Jays, and a Rufous-crowned Sparrow.

Judy and Lynn saw a Broad-tailed Hummingbird, and Dave, a Black-tailed Gnatcatcher. As the day warmed up, so did the bird activity.

Looking skyward, we saw two Peregrine Falcons gliding above Casa Grande Mountain. The combination of the majestic mountain scenery with these majestic, formerly endangered birds provided a “wow!” nature experience. The abundant Claret Cup Cacti in bloom enhanced the experience.

Rounding a few more bends in the trail, we came across two unusually vocal Hutton’s Vireos seemingly engaged in a territorial vocal duel. Hilary spotted a gorgeous Arizona Sister butterfly.



As we hiked through the first of many switch-backs up Pinnacle Pass, we heard our first Colima Warbler song. The song was repeated as we continued hiking. We paused frequently to search for them, but to no avail as we reached the pass. Rock Squirrels, however, were active, vocal and visible on this stretch of the trail. One chirped at us loudly from a high rock perch above. On the pass, we took a rest break after the 1,500 foot climb. We admired the skill and tenacity of the White-throated Swifts that sailed by at high speed, propelled by strong winds.



As we descended down the east side of the pass over the crest of the Chisos Mountains, we soon heard the telltale song of the Colima Warbler again. This time, Frank and Lori caught glimpses of the bird. Frank asked if it had a rufous crest on its head. First sighting confirmed!



As we continued east, the scenery changed dramatically. Everyone marveled at the spectacular landforms below, including the famous “boot” formation. Lynn enhanced our appreciation of this landscape by interpreting the geology.

We then hiked to Boot Springs camp ground, reaching it by noon. While we ate lunch, Blue-throated Hummingbirds were in our midst – as many as four at a time – perching, peeping and scuffling with one-another at times. We

continued to hear Colima Warbler songs, along with those of a Cordilleran Flycatcher and a Warbling Vireo. Lynn spotted a Painted Redstart high in the tree canopy.

After lunch, we started our hike into Boot Springs canyon. It did not take long to hear another Colima Warbler followed by our best look yet at this iconic species as it perched and sang repeatedly from the top of a pine tree.



A short distance into Boot Springs canyon, our group had even better views of other Colima Warblers foraging through Grave's Oak trees only 25 yards away. We also spotted a Wilson's Warbler and a White-breasted Nuthatch. A Band-celled Sister Butterfly perched elegantly beside a small pool of water. We eventually departed from the lovely confines of Boot Springs and embarked upon the scenic hike back to Chisos Basin.



Meanwhile, the other group that remained in Chisos Basin had hiked the Window Trail. They too had an extraordinary day. Among their sightings were: Black-chinned Sparrow, Varied Bunting and remarkably, an endangered Black-capped Vireo! Neil had a close encounter with several White-tailed deer that were frightened to the point that one fell over – perhaps due to the presence of an unseen predator.

It's hard to imagine a more complete natural history experience than can be had on the two trails that our group hiked today. We all slept soundly that night, tired from the exertion of long hikes, and satisfied to see extraordinary species in a spectacular setting.



Black-chinned Sparrow

Day 6 – Window Trail, Cottonwood Campground, Castolon, Santa Elena Canyon, Terlingua

Based on the terrific sightings made yesterday by the Chisos Basin group, we all decided to walk a portion of the Windows trail today.



Three migrant species passed by including Hermit Thrush, Wilson's Warbler and an Olive-sided Flycatcher. Farther downhill, we began finding Varied Buntings. Each sighting seemed to improve upon the last one, and we heard them singing often. A Scott's Oriole perched and sang, and we watched Blue-gray Gnatcatchers flying to their nest.



By mid-morning, we departed for the Rio Grande on the southwest side of the park. On the way, we stopped in a complex geological zone. Lynn explained how these formations were created from the ancient sea floor, via volcanism, uplifting and erosion.



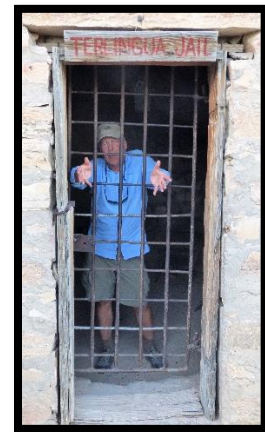
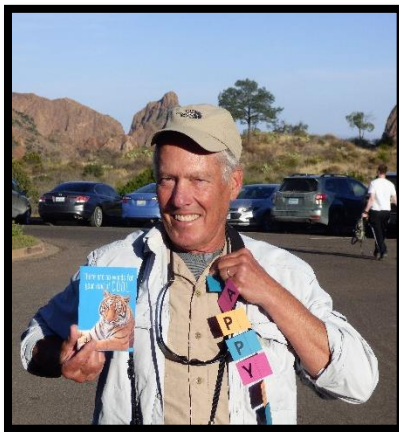
Once at Cottonwood Canyon, we enjoyed a picnic lunch in the shade of the namesake trees. While we were finishing, a Gray Hawk perched conspicuously on an exposed limb. Summer Tanagers also perched at close range, and our first Orchard Oriole appeared in the Mesquite Trees on the edge of the park. At this point we took a break from the mid-day heat by stopping at the historic Castolon store for ice cream and cold drinks. We also spent time in the small but informative historical museum.

Our next stop was Santa Elena Canyon where temperatures were high but the views, exquisite. We hiked to a canyon overlook where we could watch Northern Rough-winged Swallows and Turkey Vultures fly below us. This 18-mile canyon of with 1,500 feet walls cut through by the Rio Grande River is absolutely spectacular.



Santa Elena Canyon

Our final stop proved to be memorable in another way. We shopped, dined and two of our group performed music at the quirky alternative town of Terlingua. David's birthday happened to be on this day. He not only had Happy Birthday sung to him by the house band, but they invited him to play a song with them on stage. As an accomplished musician, Dave obliged, singing a delightful version of *Pancho and Lefty* with the band. Stephen joined in on harmonica. What an unforgettable birthday!



The drive home was unforgettable too. Desert Cottontails and Black-tailed Jackrabbits darted across the road. On the top of Panther Pass, two Mexican Black Bear cubs walked along the road and climbed over a rock retaining wall. This once extirpated species is now some 25 strong in Big Bend National Park – a testimony to having habitat corridors connecting to Mexico, and to tolerant, conservation-minded management practices. We arrived back “home” at Chisos Basin to a sliver of moon and a sky full of stars and planets.



Day 7 – Christmas Mountains Oasis, Alpine museum, galleries, exploration

Reluctantly, we packed our bags and departed from Chisos Basin. Tales of the Gray Fox roaming the area dominated our breakfast conversations. We then drove to Christmas Mountains Oasis over a rugged stretch of gravel road. Once there, we were joined by the owner, Carolyn Ohl-Johnson, who helped us find the many birds, flowers, and dragonflies that inhabit her refuge.



Lucifer Hummingbird

One of the first new finds for the day were the many Lucifer Hummingbirds. They perched on feeders, performed aerial displays, and even strafed us at times. Black-chinned, Broad-tailed, and Ruby-throated Hummingbirds joined them on the multiple hummingbird feeders that Carolyn has set up for visitors. A Curve-billed Thrasher lurked in the shade of a Mesquite Tree behind the feeding station.



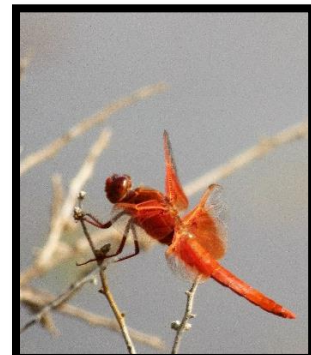
Verdin

We watched a Black-headed Grosbeak devour a large caterpillar, seemingly unconcerned by our presence. Dave found an occupied Greater Roadrunner nest. Our group found an active Verdin nest. Blue Grosbeaks moved through the Aspen Trees and around the edge of one of the shallow ponds. An Orchard Oriole perched atop an Aspen, singing and “chucking” as it foraged.



Black-headed Grosbeak

A beautiful Pipevine Swallowtail Butterfly fluttered by and a White-lined Sphinx Moth that resembled a hummingbird in its size and habits, hovered over a flower bed. A Flame Skimmer Dragonfly lit up the vegetation overhanging the pond.



These were just a few of the sights and sounds at Carolyn’s 1,000-acre reserve.

She has personally restored so much of it that it has become a major migrant bird “trap” and a residence for multiple species of West Texas flora and fauna. Carolyn stewards the reserve and maintains detailed records of sightings via photos, blogs and checklists.



Carolyn Ohl-Johnson and our group at Christmas Mountains Oasis

She also generously toured us through her lovely earth-sheltered house decorated with many of her own paintings hung on its walls. This remarkable woman practices hands-on stewardship on a remote refuge that she built by hand with the help of her late husband. It provides a wonderful experience for the many who visit each year.

Sixty miles up the road in Alpine, we had lunch in a quaint Mexican restaurant recommended by Carolyn. It served fresh, tasty food in, as the name La Casita indicates, a small house. Following lunch, we checked into the historically-restored Holland Hotel in downtown Alpine. In the afternoon, some visited the Museum of the Big Bend while others strolled the town and its half-a-dozen art galleries or just rested at the hotel.

That evening we compiled our final species list tallies then went to a celebration dinner at Café Reata. This time we ate outside in the court yard, which lent itself to group photos beside the western-styled murals.

Day 8: Return to El Paso via Marfa lights interpretive center, Marfa, and Prada Store ☺

Our last day took us westward to El Paso and our respective flights and/or car trip extensions. We stopped at the Marfa Lights interpretive center to learn about this mysterious phenomenon that has been observed by peoples dating back to the Apaches. We also took a quick drive through the town of Marfa and its historic downtown. Continuing westward, we were amused by the tiny replica of a Prada footwear store placed in a remote stretch of the Chihuahuan Desert, a whimsical installation crafted by Marfa artists.

Despite heavy rainfall between Van Horn and El Paso, we made it to the airport in time for the first flight departures. We said fond farewells to our spirited group of fellow travelers. None of us will soon forget the natural and cultural charms of Texas Big Bend Country.



Photos top to bottom: Cafe Reata, Alpine; Pinnacles Pass, Chisos Mountains; Banks of Rio Grande, Big Bend N.P.