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Naturalist Journeys, LLC
Texas Hill Country Nature and Birding
Tour Report

A Daily Narrative by Bob Behrstock

April 14 – 19, 2013

Guide Bob Behrstock, with six participants: Mary, Neil, Regina, Bill, Brenda, and Jim

Sun., April 14 Arrival in San Antonio / On to the Hill Country and Lodgings at Neal's in Concan

After picking up my rental van, I collected several participants at the San Antonio Airport and we had lunch at Jim's, a family restaurant just a short distance from the terminal. We then returned to the airport for the next set of arrivals and we were off to Concan by 1:45, picking up a sighting of Loggerhead Shrike as we left the airport.

Driving westward on flat Route 90, we could see the low limestone ridges of the "Hill Country" in the distance.



Scissor-tailed Flycatchers foraged along the road and a stop for wine and beer (Concan is in a dry county) provided us with our first kingbirds.

A quick pause at a feedlot in Sabinal was minimally useful due to the angle of the sun, so we continued to Neal's for a bit of feeder watching that included a Field Sparrow.



At 5:30 p.m. we met for a brief organizational meeting and a sip of wine, and then had dinner at after checking out the hummers at the restaurant feeders.



Mon., April 15 Kerr Wildlife Management Area / Rio Frio at Concan

After our 6:30 breakfast (the norm for the rest of the tour), we departed northward for Kerr Wildlife Management Area. A quick gas stop in Leaky provided us with an Eastern Bluebird and a stunning Cecropia Moth perched by the gas pumps. En route to Kerr, we saw a Greater Roadrunner and our first Wild Turkeys, as well as some of the Texotics introduced for hunting such as Blackbuck Antelope.

We had to rearrange our itinerary a bit as Kerr hosts a turkey hunt most days



this week, but on this Monday, we were out of harm's way and had much more of the area available for birding than would have been possible on a hunt day. As usual, Kerr was productive, affording us good looks at endangered Black-capped Vireos (the target--aside from turkeys--bird there). This vireo can often be difficult to see, as it's small and often hidden in the vegetation but Kerr has a large population of them and persistence there is generally rewarded. Eventually, we had nice looks at several of the vireos and heard a few more.

We also saw our first Golden-cheeked Warbler, the "other" specialty bird of the Hill Country along with Black-capped Vireos, Summer Tanagers, Rufous-crowned Sparrows, more turkeys, and a number of other species. While at Kerr, we enjoyed a picnic lunch under a shelter, and then returned to Neal's with a few





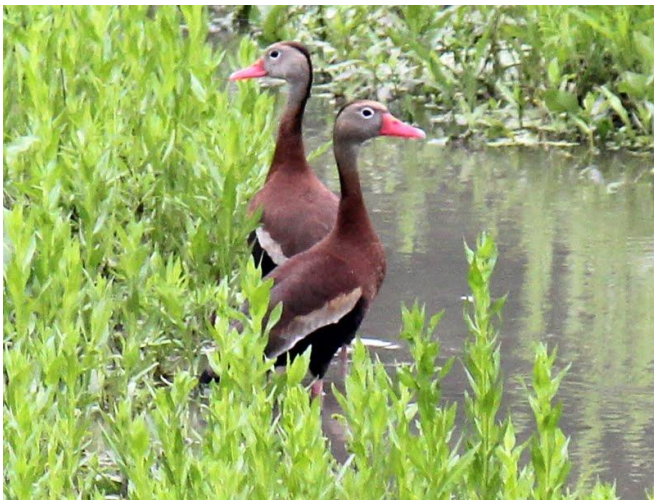
quick wildflower stops on the way.



Back at Neal's, the Pecan Grove feeding station produced Carolina Chickadees, a Black-crested Titmouse, Lesser Goldfinches, Pine Siskins, and a few other common species. After a bit of a break, we reconvened for a walk along the Frio River at Neal's. A Yellow-throated Warbler gave us nice views, as did Bewick's Wrens, several migrating Clay-colored Sparrows, and the resident Black Phoebe. Dinner was at Neal's.

Tues., April 16 Uvalde / Fort Inge / Fish Hatchery / Ice Cream / A River of Twelve Million Bats!!

After breakfast, we departed southward toward Uvalde. As the road dropped off the plateau and the habitat became more desert-like, we made a couple stops that netted us very close looks at two of the area's special raptors: a fine adult Harris's Hawk and the first of many Crested Caracaras.



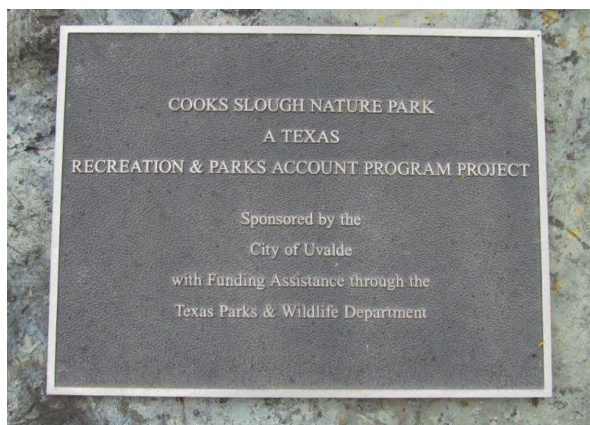
In Uvalde, we visited Ft. Inge, or really, the historic site where Ft. Inge once stood. Near the front gate, we enjoyed looks at noisy Great Kiskadees (here near the northern edge of their range), a singing male Pyrrhuloxia, and a Cactus Wren. In more lush vegetation closer to the Leona River were dozens of flashy Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, both Hooded

and Orchard orioles, and a cooperative Olive Sparrow--another South Texas bird specialty that ranges north to the Hill Country.

There were numbers of visible Yellow-breasted Chats, and perhaps the highlight of the morning, a Yellow-billed Cuckoo that sat in the open for



perhaps 10 minutes while we enjoyed it in the spotting 'scope and Jim photographed it.



Leaving Ft. Inge, we made a quick restroom stop in town then visited Cook's Slough, a nature park that was developed adjacent to the city's wastewater facility. Lakes filled with treated water provided us with Neotropic Cormorants, a Spotted Sandpiper, and several species of ducks and herons, but not the pair of Green Kingfishers I'd seen a couple days earlier. A displaying Bronzed Cowbird was a nice addition, as was spotting a dark-morph Swainson's Hawk that flew over.

As the morning warmed, we stopped for lunch at a restaurant in Uvalde, eating with the farmers, ranchers, bikers, and other locals.

After lunch, we visited the federal fish hatchery on the west side of town, a site I'd scouted for one of the Hill Country birding trails many years ago. There were a couple of Couch's Kingbirds--another South Texas species--along the entrance road, and they turned out to be the only ones for the trip. A close look at a Golden-fronted Woodpecker was nice--even though it's a locally common species, and there were several more Scissor-tailed Flycatchers. Although none of the hatchery ponds had been drawn down--which would have been better for shorebirds-- we saw a Solitary Sandpiper and Greater Yellowlegs, as well as several species of ducks including a splendid drake Cinnamon Teal.

Leaving the hatchery, we made the obligatory stop at the Uvalde Rexall Drugstore's ice cream counter for cones, shakes and sundaes. We were back at Neal's at about 3:15 and had an early dinner at 5:30.



After dinner, we made the short drive to the Frio Bat Cave, sighting a Nine-banded Armadillo on the entrance road. Along with about 25 other folks--mostly birders--we viewed one of the State's most stunning wildlife spectacles. As the sky began to darken, some twelve million Mexican Free-tailed Bats began their several hour-long departure from the cave to forage on flying insects. A local naturalist associated with the cave provided us with information on the bats

and the cave's history. These bats provide a considerable economic benefit to the area. Not only are they of importance to the local ecotourism trade, but thousands of pounds of their guano is harvested for fertilizer, and they eat tons of destructive moths that do not have to be killed with harmful crop insecticides. Sitting with the bats fluttering right over our heads then heading off across the countryside like a ribbon of smoke is a very magical experience and always one of my highlights of this trip.



Wed., April 17

Lost Maples State Natural Area / Utopia / Scrumptious Pie



After breakfast, we departed northward on what turned out to be an overcast and windy morning. Because of highway construction, we drove east out of Leaky, winding through the cloud-shrouded hills to Vanderpool, then northward to Lost Maples State



Natural Area. Lost Maples is one of the area's finest parks and even without rare birds and plants would make for a fine day's visit.



We started by walking along the Maples Trail which showcases a relict population of Bigtooth Maples. We saw the endangered Golden-cheeked Warblers a number of times, as well as other species such as Red-eyed Vireos, Indigo Buntings, Black-and-white, Orange-crowned, and Nashville warblers, Carolina Wrens, and a couple of very low Zone-tailed Hawks. We spent quite a bit of time with a well-hidden Yellow-throated Vireo but we'd have to wait a day more to see that species.

Some of the interesting plants included the rather local yellow morph of Red Buckeye, Scarlet Leather

Flower—endemic to just a few counties in the Hill Country, and the lovely deep red Hill Country Penstemon, but many more common species such as Mealy Sage and the ubiquitous prickly pear cactus were flowering. Several kinds of butterflies found these blossoms to their liking, as well as a huge (and rather uncommon) black and orange *Campsomeris* wasp.



After our walk, we had a pleasant picnic lunch at the shaded picnic tables provided by the park. Luncheon music was provided by a serenade of Northern Cardinals, Summer Tanagers, chickadees, and titmice. After lunch we drove a short distance to the feeding station at the East Trail, where a Lazuli Bunting was a nice surprise. The ladies opted to feeder watch, netting them views of a Painted Bunting, as well as Lincoln's, Chipping, Clay-colored, and Rufous-crowned sparrows and several Blue Grosbeaks. The men hiked the East Trail through the woods



and up to set of ponds. En route, we had additional, excellent looks at Golden-cheeked Warblers, and a few of the more common species.



At that point, everyone seemed ready for a break so we drove south to the town of Utopia and stopped for a while at Utopia Park. There, we added the trip's only Blue Jays, Myrtle Warblers (which, strangely, had eluded us 'till then), and heard a distant Barred Owl. A stop at the park's washrooms delivered an Eight-spotted Forester Moth, a stunning blue, orange, and white creature, as well as some unusually ornate plumbing in the men's room that had to be shared with the rest of the group (sorry, I didn't take a photo). From the park, we went to the Lost Maples Café in Utopia for dinner. The café is well known for its selection of

tasty pies and did not disappoint. When we got back to Neal's Lodges, we were greeted by a male Hooded Oriole—glowing rich orange in the low-angle light—a nice bird with which to end the day.



Thurs., April 18

Park Chalk Bluff / Nueces River / A Two Kingfisher Day



Before breakfast, I stepped outside, finding myself in a rain storm and high wind. Would today be a disaster? After breakfast, we drove south to Uvalde then west to Park Chalk Bluff on the Nueces River. As we arrived at the park, it was blowing like the Devil along the entrance road. Nonetheless, we managed to see a very close Cassin's Sparrow as well as Lark and White-crowned sparrows, Blue Grosbeaks, our only White-tailed Kite, a Bell's Vireo, and a dandy male Painted Bunting. Maybe things would work out after all?



throated Vireos.

Moving to the eastern portion of the property, we spent a few minutes in desert scrub where a couple of Black-throated Sparrows gave us quick looks.

Color was provided in this gray-green patch by blooming cenizo (Texas Ranger), wine cups, and lots of flowering prickly pear. We then birded a Pecan bottom, seeing Eastern Wood-Pewees, Black-throated-green, Nashville, and Orange-crowned warblers and had a look at a rather early Mourning Warbler that raised some eyebrows when I reported it, an early-season sighting. Happily, some other birders were able to see and document this particular individual.

Also present in the Pecan bottom to everyone's delight was a life-time supply of singing and easily seen Yellow-breasted Chats and, much to my surprise when Neil announced the first one, two Red-breasted Nuthatches, an infrequently seen species in the southern Hill Country. Two or three yellow blossoms here were Mexican Prickly Poppy, the much less common cousin of the white prickly poppy that blankets the roadsides and overgrazed fields.

We took a break for a picnic lunch that was provided by the park, and then returned to the Pecan bottom. At its extreme eastern, a wooded trail follows a narrow backwater of the Nueces River. Here, soft clicking suggested the presence of a Green Kingfisher and, indeed, this delightful creature flew up on a branch and posed as I got it in the 'scope. Finally!

As we left the Pecan bottom and were driving back toward the office, I glanced out the window and noticed a Ringed Kingfisher sitting not far away over the bank of the Nueces. Picking up the two South

We checked in at the park then did some birding among the scattered trees near the office. Here we encountered an Eastern Bluebird, several Vermilion Flycatchers, Hooded Orioles, a pair of Ash-throated Flycatchers, and another very close Zone-tailed Hawk. The wind had died down a bit and we seemed to be doing pretty well. Moving into the huge Live Oaks nearby, we encountered Red-eyed Vireos, and finally had good looks at Yellow-



Texas kingfishers was a great way to end our birding at Chalk Bluff. On the way back toward Uvalde, I stopped for a big flock of blackbirds working a farmer's field. Among them were perhaps a dozen Yellow-headed Blackbirds—a species we'd missed earlier in the tour and a nice surprise.

Dinner was at Neal's and the restaurant was full of birders including a large group from Great Britain and another from Illinois. A popular spot, indeed, and rightly so.

Fri., April 19 Departures from San Antonio / Summary Highlights



After breakfast—which we'd preordered last night to beat the crowd, we packed up the van and were on the road by 7 a.m. I had incorporated some traffic time into the drive to the airport but we got there rather briskly, despite the river of cars that is San Antonio in the morning. Everyone had plenty of time for good-byes and to make their flights.

In the end, I was very happy with the trip. We saw most of the anticipated birds and a few I didn't expect, and had great looks at a couple of endangered species. Participants got to share information on eBird and other aspects of high tech birding, see an armadillo, tell jokes, eat buttermilk pie, see an amazing example of tattoo art at the Rexall Drug Store, find some lovely wildflowers, butterflies, moths, and all in all, had a very good time. I've been doing this trip for several decades and I'd happily do it again. Watch for Naturalist Journey's next Texas Hill tour in 2015, in the meantime join me on the Texas Coast April 19-27, 2014.



PHOTO CREDITS



Pg. 1

Scissortail Flycatcher in flight, tour participant, Jim Richmond (JR)

Black-capped Vireo, Tom Dove

Wildflower close-up, JR

Wildflower group, tour participant, Brenda Richmond (BR)

Pg. 2

Neal's Lodge photos and Kerr WMA sign, BR

Golden-cheeked Warbler, Tom Dove

Pg. 3

Milkweed bloom, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, JR

Pg. 4

All photos by BR

Pg. 5

Bat Cave sign, BR

Regina with river of bats, Bob Behrstock

Pg. 6

Three Lost Maples SP scenic, BR

Golden-cheeked Warbler, Tom Dove

Pg. 7

Watching Fish at Lost Maples, Bob Behrstock

Wasp, and Indigo Bunting, JR

Lunch treats, BR

Pg. 8

Cardinal, JR

Lost Maples Café, BR

Green Kingfisher, Tom Dove

Pg. 9

Park Chalk Bluff, Yellow-throated Vireo, and turtle, JR

Pg. 10

Lark Sparrow, JR

Cecropia Moth seen going into Kerr WMA, Bob Behrstock

Other photos by BR

Pg. 11 Group picnic by Bob Behrstock.

Scarlet Leatherflower, a Hill Country endemic, JR