

Trip Report: **ULTIMATE TEXAS BIG BEND/DAVIS MOUNTAINS** – April 21-29, 2011

Guide: Woody Wheeler, with five participants

Of note: many companies are making their Big Bend trips shorter, and while we considered this to keep trip cost down, we can't think of a moment to cut as we travel the West Texas Region. We plan to offer our Ultimate Texas Big Bend / Davis Mountains again next year. We think it's the way to go!

Thursday, April 21: Arrival/El Paso/Franklin Mountains to Van Horn



Ocotillo in full bloom



Black-throated Sparrow

Our first arrivals, Jane, Pauline and John, enjoyed a short jaunt to the El Paso Archaeological Museum, complete with nature trails and a native plant exhibit. The Black-throated Sparrow, Canyon Wren and a Black-chinned Hummingbird took turns posing and/or drinking nectar from the Ocotillo's spectacular red flowers. Nearby Franklin Mountains State Park beckoned us, so with a little extra time to spare, we drove to the pass through this range overlooking El Paso. The park is home to Texas' oldest rocks, and is the largest urban park in the U.S.

Back at the El Paso airport, we met up with Sylvia and Mary, fresh off the Texas Hill Country Naturalist Journey adventure with Bob Behrstock. We loaded the van for the drive to Van Horn. En route, we took in the expansive views of the Chihuahuan Desert where Jane spotted a Swainson's Hawk, and John noted two Chihuahuan Ravens soaring.

At sundown, we arrived at the picturesque and newly restored El Capitan Hotel in Van Horn to find a pair of Eurasian Collared Doves perched on wires near the parking lot spotted by Sylvia. Then we relaxed over a fine meal in this historic hotel.

Friday, April 22 - Van Horn to Balmorhea State Park, Lake Balmorhea & Fort Davis

Our day started auspiciously when only minutes from our hotel, we encountered 20 or so Cave Swallows nesting under the Freeway Bridge in Van Horn. We all got terrific looks at these beautiful swallows and their nests, and heard their "wit-witty" chatter.

Heading into the morning sun, we drove to Balmorhea State Park. In this drought year, the park's clear spring water looked especially inviting. We soon found Snowy Egrets in the pond near the park entrance that also had American Coot and a huge Snapping Turtle. John spotted a Ladder-backed Woodpecker peering out of a nest hole in a Century Plant.

Near the park's famously huge natural spring swimming pool, where Mexican Ground Squirrels were scampering across the grass, we all had close-up looks at a nesting Great-horned Owl. Our group generously shared scope views of this with a curious family that was mightily impressed. Who knows what experience will ignite future birders, naturalists and conservationists?



Great-Horned Owl, Balmorhea State Park

Next we walked to the Cienega where things were quiet until Sylvia played a Sora call from her Ipod. Although a Sora did not answer the call, a Virginia Rail did. It emerged from the reeds in plain view for everyone to see – a great look at a reclusive bird.

Following a fine Mexican Lunch at the atmospheric Cuevo de Oso café in Balmorhea, we headed to Lake Balmorhea. At first, things were quiet from a bird perspective, but then they just kept getting better and better: Western, Clark's and Eared Grebes; Northern Shoveler; Gadwall; Ruddy and Mexican (Mallard) Duck; Green and Blue-winged Teal; Forster Terns; Great Egrets; White-faced Ibis', Long-billed Dowitchers, Greater Yellowlegs, Black-necked Stilts, Lark Buntings, Swainson's Hawks, Northern Harriers and much more. Mary identified several Vesper Sparrows as they flew ahead of the van. In sum, we had a splendid afternoon of birding at this lake climaxed by the sighting of a rare Piping Plover.

From here we drove through the recently fire-scarred landscape to the quaint, historic town of Fort Davis. Everyone enjoyed reminiscing about the day and meeting Carol Edwards, our guide for tomorrow. She regaled us with stories about the recent fires and life in Fort Davis.

Saturday, April 23 - Davis Mountains



Our group with local expert, Carol Edwards (third from left), in the Davis Mountains

Due to recent fire damage, two of our favorite birding spots were unavailable. Fortunately, our local guide knew two others which proved to be outstanding. On the way to the first site, we did some roadside birding near the site of a Black Hawk nest. Although the hawks were not present, we heard a Western Wood Pewee and saw a Cassin's Kingbird.

Next stop was Madera Canyon Park adjacent to The Nature Conservancy's 18,000-acre preserve. Wild Turkeys greeted us as we pulled into the picnic area. When we opened the van doors, Yellow-rumped and Wilson's Warblers were moving through the Pinyon Pines along with a Black-crested Titmouse and White-breasted Nuthatches. Western and Hepatic Tanagers put on a colorful show in the top of a Ponderosa Pine. Nearby, we encountered Gray Flycatchers, Plumbeous Vireos, and a Rock Wren. A Western Bluebird couple went in and out of their nest hole only 20 yards distant. Jane spotted a Pyrrhuloxia and John found two Rocky Mountain Elk in the distance running through an open grassland area.



Western Bluebird at nest hole

After such a fine morning, we settled in for a picnic lunch at Madge Lindsay's beautiful home perched on a slope with a majestic mountain vista complimented by beautiful landscaping and artwork. Adding to this already impressive setting were at least a dozen hummingbird feeders along with half a dozen other feeders that attracted numerous hummers and other species of birds. Along with multiple Black-chinned Hummingbirds, we had terrific looks at Rufous-crowned Sparrows, Curve-billed Thrashers, Canyon Towhees, Cactus Wrens, Say's Phoebes and Pine Siskins. As we left Madge's place, several Javelinas scampered across the gravel road.

The rest of the day was spent at Fort Davis Park, taking in the historical display and birding around the edge of the Fort's grounds. Surprisingly for a hot mid-afternoon stroll, we found Western Meadowlarks, Green-tailed Towhees and Vermillion Flycatchers.

Over dinner, we tallied up our bird and fauna lists and were amazed to find out that we already had 100 species of birds, and had not yet entered Big Bend Park.

Easter Sunday, April 24 - Fort Davis to Big Bend Park

As the sun rose through rosy, slightly smoky skies, we enjoyed a simple but healthy picnic breakfast outside the Stone Market in Fort Davis. Afterward we headed to Davis Mountain State Park, hoping to see birds around the edges of the closed park. Early on, we found a Phainopepla perched in a shrub in Limpia Canyon. Then we made the fortuitous decision of stopping at a roadside picnic place surrounded by huge basalt rock formations. Only a few feet up the short trail, we found a Black-chinned Hummingbird nest. The male and female flew in regularly bringing in nesting material -- all at very close range. While watching the hummer, a Rock Wren flew in along with a Hermit Thrush. John told Woody to look upslope at the bird watching him. John scoped it, and

it turned out to be a female Montezuma Quail perched on a rock with the wind ruffling its feathers. Everyone got prolonged looks at this rare bird, a Life Bird for all!



Female Montezuma Quail, Davis Mountains

Buoyed by this extraordinary find, we walked around this roadside treasure trove a bit longer and soon Sylvia called out a Canyon Wren that put on a spectacular show singing and asserting its territory from the top of a Yucca. On the way back to the van, a Summer Tanager flew by providing several good looks.

On the way to Alpine, we paused at a roadside pond where a swallow and swift show took place featuring Barn, Violet-green, Cliff, Northern Rough-winged, and Tree Swallows accompanied by White-throated Swifts. Several Cinnamon Teals cruised across the pond in perfect lighting – our first of the trip.

Following a delicious Easter lunch at the Reata Restaurant in Alpine, we drove to Marathon, where a juvenile Golden Eagle perched photogenically on a phone pole.



Lunch at the Reata Restaurant



Golden Eagle

On the way to our next stop, Pauline found a herd of Pronghorns in the dry grasslands. Soon afterward, a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher flew by as we entered Marathon Post County Park. Then we encountered Indigo and Lazuli Buntings, a reclusive Orchard Oriole that Jane found, and a rare migrant Black-throated Blue Warbler that Sylvia spotted. It was time to go to Big Bend Park; we hoped to return later to the Post.

As we entered Big Bend Park, Sylvia found a Loggerhead Shrike (one of her specialties, along with finding bird nests) that we looped back to see, and as so often happens, found other noteworthy birds in the same area, including Curve-billed Thrashers and Yellow-headed Blackbirds.

You would think that all these amazing sightings would be enough for one day, but Mary and Sylvia found a Magnificent Hummingbird behind their room at Chisos Basin, and later heard a nighttime Cougar shriek, capping off a memorable Easter Sunday.

April 25 – Rio Grande Village/Dugout Wells, Big Bend National Park

At first light, we headed for Rio Grande Village to maximize the cool and best birding time of the day. Several coveys of Scaled Quail scurried off the road as we drove by.

At Rio Grande Village, we were greeted by the buzzy, chattery song of Bell's Vireo, a song we would hear all day long. While listening to this and searching for this small, hyper vireo, a Crissal Thrasher flew up onto a dead branch in plain site of our entire group. He returned for an encore performance, flashing his rufous under tail coverts.

As we strolled through the campgrounds and picnic areas, a splash of vibrant colors greeted us in the forms of Indigo and Painted Buntings, along with Vermillion Flycatchers, Summer Tanagers and Wilson's Warblers. Black-tailed Gnatcatchers buzzed and flitted in the Mesquite near the river's edge. The beautiful nature trail boardwalk was home to Yellow-breasted Chats, Common Yellowthroats and a Green Heron.



Nature Trail board walk, Rio Grande Village, Big Bend NP

Upon arriving at the nearby Common Black Hawk nesting site, there was no hawk activity. After about ten minutes, we heard a hawk calling, then Mary saw one swoop up over the Cottonwoods, its white tail band clear to see. Other birders pointed out a third, active nest where the female was sitting on the nest.

As the day heated up, we moved upslope, first visiting Boquillas overlook. Here we looked into Boquillas Canyon and up and down the Rio Grande Valley. Mexican crafts people left their hand made art work on rocks for sale. The wire-crafted scorpions, Roadrunners and jewelry were quite attractive glinting in the hot sun.

Next stop was lunch at Dugout Wells. A Verdin perched and sang overhead, and our first Bullock's Oriole of the trip made an appearance.



Marveling at ancient Cottonwood at Dugout Wells, Big Bend NP



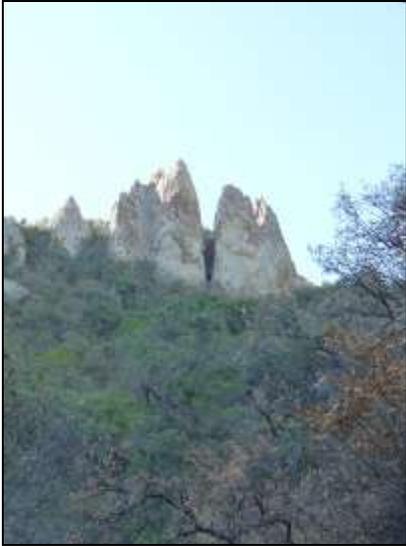
John explores a hot trail

We returned to Chisos Basin for relaxation time and dinner. After dinner, the group set off in search of an Elf Owl. On the way, we encountered groups of White-tailed Deer

and Javelinas crossing the road. At Dugout Wells, the entire Chisos range was backlit in a spectacular sunset afterglow. We waited for about a half hour until an Elf Owl finally appeared. It perched on a nearby bush then flew into its nest hole several times. This put an exclamation point on a rich and rewarding day.

April 26 - Chisos Basin/Boot Springs Trail in Search of the Colima Warbler

Today we hiked the Pinnacles Trail early to visit the only place where breeding Colima Warblers are found in the United States – in the high Chisos Mountains.



The Pinnacles



Colima Warbler watching us from above

While hiking up toward the volcanic rock towers called the Pinnacles, Jane noticed a small grayish bird that might be a flycatcher. Woody soon gave her the thumbs-up sign, indicating that our first Colima had been found! For the next five minutes, we watched it feed, at times only a few feet distance from us. To add to the excitement, this occurred in

a spectacular setting with the Pinnacles looming above while a Canyon Wren was singing. It was birding in heaven!



We continued over Toll Mountain Pass and hiked to another Oak/Juniper Woodland where Colimas are known to be found. While we waited for another one to make an appearance, we were entertained by Blue-Gray Gnatcatchers, Painted Redstarts, and a Brown Creeper. Then we found another Colima – this time a female – gleaning a Graves Oak tree for insects. We all felt extremely fortunate to have seen two in one day.

Mexican Jay

Accompanied by a band of patient and watchful Mexican Jays, we had a picnic lunch at Boot Springs. After lunch we explored this area where we had excellent looks at Hermit Thrushes and several White-tailed Deer.

Our return route was via the Colima and Laguna Meadow Trails which provided a gradual descent back to Chisos Basin. A Rock Squirrel scampered away from the trail, and a House Wren appeared briefly in the middle of a bush.

In the late afternoon heat, we all reflected upon the excellent sightings of the day – especially the Colima Warbler, and which cold drink or ice cream flavor we would enjoy upon returning to our home base.

April 27 – Sam Nail Ranch, Cottonwood Canyon, Santa Elena Canyon, Christmas Mountains Oasis, Terlingua

The day started at Sam Nail Ranch where a bench faces a windmill-fed spring surrounded by dense brush. All sorts of wildlife flock to this watering hole. During our stay, we found a variety of birds, including: Varied Buntings, Nashville Warblers and Orange-crowned Warblers. In the late morning we headed to Cottonwood Campground. There we first heard and then saw nesting Gray Hawks being mobbed by a flock of black birds. A Summer Tanager sang in a Robin-esque tone, seemingly posing for photographs.



Summer Tanager at Cottonwood Campground

Meanwhile, a Golden-fronted Woodpecker pecked viscously the rear-view mirror of a car parked at the campground, thinking he was facing a rival. It was not our car.



Following a picnic lunch we headed on to Santa Elena Canyon. Here we hiked a short distance to a spectacular view of the sheer 1700 foot walls. White-throated swifts chattered as they soared in the canyon. We were awestruck by this natural wonder.



Pauline at Santa Elena Canyon



Jane and Sylvia survey Rio Grande River

Following a timely ice cream break at historic Castolon, we drove to Christmas Mountains Oasis, a truly remarkable place set in the Sotol Grasslands north of Study Butte. There, a hard-working woman, Carolyn Ohl, has converted her 1,000 acre ranch into a bird and wildlife refuge. To encourage eco-tourists, she has set up multiple hummingbird and other feeders in her landscaped native plant oasis. Here, with her help, we saw Varied Buntings again; Clay-colored Sparrows and Lucifer Hummingbirds. Carolyn, who is also an accomplished painter, then toured us through her earth-sheltered home with her beautiful paintings on display. This combined experience was one our group will not soon forget.



Birding at Christmas Mountains Oasis

To cap off the day, we dined in Terlingua and enjoyed the fine live music of the Whitmores, a husband and wife team who sang Happy Birthday to Sylvia. We celebrated with cake, a card and gift from the group then drove home under clear starry skies.

April 28 – Chisos Basin to Marathon/Gage Hotel

Our final morning in Chisos Basin was full of surprises. When we first started hiking through the Chisos Basin campground, it was very still. Then a small thrush-like bird darted under a fence across the trail – an Ovenbird! Most in the group got to see this rare migrant. As we came upon the Basin filtration pond, it was full of bird life. It was also full of large mammal life: a family of four Black Bears! The sow and her cubs, hustled out of the pond in single file when they noticed us. We departed so as not to alarm them.



Later, we drove to Marathon for a refreshing soda fountain lunch, checked into the historic Gage Hotel, and then headed north to Prairie Dog town. Enroute, Jane ordered us to stop immediately and look skyward for a hawk that resembles a vulture: a Zone-tailed Hawk! We watched it soar for several minutes, and then moved on to see several Black-tailed Prairie Dog towns, complete with Prairie Dogs performing sentinel duty. John and Jane spotted an American Badger running in a not-so-graceful gait with its tail raised.



After this outstanding hawk and dog show, we still had time to pay a second visit to the Post County Park and were glad we did. While driving into the entrance, a Cordilleran Flycatcher perched on a power pole, its yellow belly and two wing bars illuminated by the sun. As soon as we parked at the Post, Sylvia saw four Blue Grosbeaks in the grass. Soon afterward, we heard Sora and John found our first Belted Kingfisher.

As we returned to the Gage Hotel, Pauline spotted another sizeable group of Pronghorns resting in the desert grassland. They were emblematic of the wildlife-rich day we had.

In the evening, we finalized our list of birds and other fauna, and savored a delicious dinner at the Gage Hotel. Woody presented a Texas Trivia quiz complete with prizes, a fun way to wrap up an amazing and productive Naturalist Journey in Big Bend Country.

April 29 - Marathon to El Paso and home

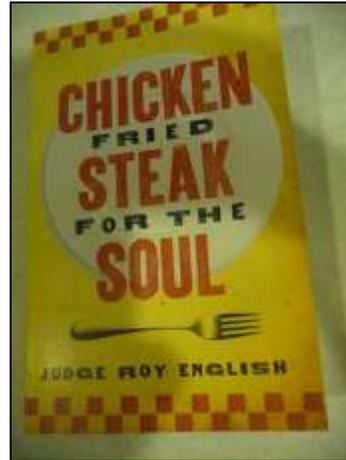
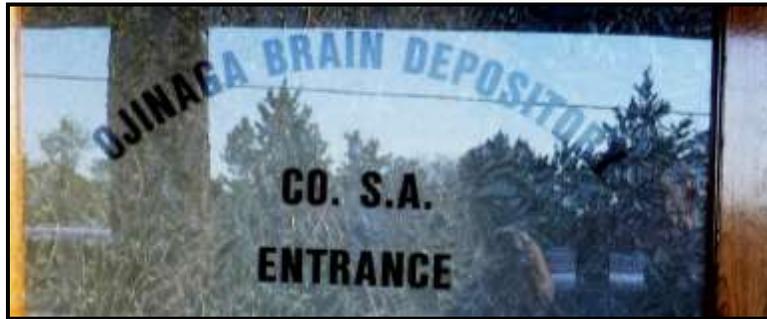
Our intrepid group got off to an early start to El Paso, which came in handy later. This group never stopped combing the landscape for living things, so naturally they found a few more on our drive to the airport. The first was a full-bodied, russet-colored Coyote that John spotted sprinting across Interstate 10 south of Van Horn.

The second was a Burrowing Owl perched on a slab of cement construction debris. This was our final bird/wildlife sighting of the trip, the 166th bird species, and the capstone event of a trip that Jane called “magical.” Indeed it was!



Burrowing Owl

Addendum... Lest we forget the weird, wacky and whimsical side of West Texas ...



- All photos in this report taken by Woody Wheeler -