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Naturalist Journeys, LLC: Birding & Nature
South Texas Rio Grande
with Whooping Crane Extension

February 18-23, extension 23-26, 2012

With Bob Behrstock, Guide and eight participants: Robert, Bev, Chase, Susi, Robin, Mary, Johanne, and Kay.



SOUTH TEXAS TRIP REPORT
Report and Photos by Bob Behrstock

Sat., Feb. 18 Arrivals / Estero Llano Grande State Park

As all the participants had arrived early, it was a simple matter to round up everyone mid-day, have a quick sandwich at the Alamo Inn, and hit the trail with what amounted to a bonus afternoon of birding. Estero Llano Grande State Park isn't mentioned in our tour itinerary, and by having most of the afternoon to bird there, we were able to begin with visit to what has become one of the favorite parks in South Texas. Just a few years ago, this site was a mesquite thicket with a few hidden wet spots. After some creative bulldozer work, a series of ponds connected by trails and boardwalks attracts a huge variety of waterfowl, as well as grebes, kingfishers, shorebirds, and quite a diversity of land birds. From the deck overlooking the first pond, we were treated to many species of puddle ducks mixed with Canvasbacks, Ring-necks, and Least Grebes. Continuing to Alligator Lake and a near-by overlook, we saw, among many species, a huge American Alligator, Texas Spiny Softshell Turtle, our only Peregrine Falcon, Anhingas, both night-herons, both of the local cormorants, Harris's and Red-shouldered hawks, the first of many Great Kiskadees, Eastern Phoebe, Roseate Spoonbills, and very close Common Pauragues (photo, below), a staple of the park. Dinner was at the Blue Onion for Valley eclectic cuisine.



Sun., Feb. 19 Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge / Frontera Audubon Sanctuary

A 6:50 departure got us to nearby Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge as the action started to pick up. A leisurely stroll to Pintail Lake produced all three local kingfishers, our first Green Jays-an iconic bird of the lower Valley, hordes of waterfowl, and a few of the less common wintering shorebirds such as Solitary and Stilt sandpipers. Continuing to Willow Lake, we got into some attractive Cedar Elm-Ebony woodland festooned with Spanish moss and got close looks at one of several singing Long-billed Thrashers and, from the blinds, a variety of waterbirds. Lunch was back at the Alamo Inn followed by a short break. At 2:00 PM, we visited Frontera Audubon's sanctuary where the visiting Golden-crowned Warbler eluded us but we had close looks at such Valley specialties as White-tipped Dove and Clay-colored Thrush. A stop at La Mina Rd. just to the south netted us Eastern Meadowlark. Continuing a bit further south to Progresso, we cruised a grain storage facility just north of the Mexican border. The road was good for raptors (Cooper's, Red-tailed, and Red-shouldered hawks, Merlin, and White-tailed Kite), and, among the thousands of Red-winged Blackbirds and Great-tailed Grackles, Bronzed Cowbird, and our targeted Yellow-headed Blackbirds. Dinner was at Luby's in Weslaco and nobody went to bed hungry.

Mon., Feb. 20 South Padre Island / Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge

At 6:30 we left for South Padre Island. En route, we had nice looks at several lovely White-tailed Hawks and the first of a zillion Ospreys. The Convention Center boardwalk and the nearby flats

were as birdy as always although the anticipated Clapper Rails failed to cooperate. Gulls, terns, ducks, pelicans, herons and sandpipers were studied at close range and the photographers had plenty to point their cameras at. The Center's butterfly garden had a few species including Great Southern White, Queen, Red Admiral, Tropical Buckeye, and Fiery Skipper. At the Valley Land Fund's South Padre Island Migratory Bird Sanctuary on West Sheepshead Street, we added a Cedar Waxwing, and a couple Field Sparrows—always a good bird in South Texas. Continuing south on the island, we cruised the KOA campground and found a Gull-billed Tern and a dark morph Reddish Egret. Lunch was at Dirty Al's, where the tourists, fishermen, bikers, and, seemingly, everyone else, was eating seafood. After lunch, we drove north to Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. Situated at the western edge of the Laguna Madre, this site hosts most of the continent's population of Redheads and we saw many of them, as well as Mottled Ducks,



Northern Pintails, Crested Caracaras, Little Blue Herons, and four Coyotes. After returning to Alamo, we had a bite of Mexican food at El Dorado across from the Alamo Inn.

Tues., Feb. 21 Bentsen Rio Grande State Park / Anzalduas / Quinta Mazatlan

At 7:00 we left for Bentsen Rio Grande State Park south of Mission – the headquarters of the string of World Birding center sites. It was a cool, foggy morning but we quickly found a Blue-headed Vireo among the legions of Orange-crowned Warblers and then were immersed in Valley specialties such as Plain Chachalaca, White-tipped Dove, Altamira Oriole, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Green Jay, and hordes of Great Kiskadees. Walking and riding the tram, we visited lake edge, a photo blind, and the hawk tower (from which some people had better looks at Olive

Sparrow), and, just before leaving, added Diamondback Water Snake and a couple of damselflies and dragonflies. A short drive eastward took us to Anzalduas County Park where we ate our picnic lunch and saw a flying Hook-billed Kite – one of the more difficult to encounter birds in the Valley. Eastern Bluebirds here were also a welcome addition. Heading back to McAllen, we stopped at Quinta Mazatlan, another World Birding Center site. The Tropical Parula we sought had been absent for several days but the feeders and grounds were entertaining for a while with multiple Clay-colored Thrushes sharing the oranges with Great Kiskadees and several other species. We cruised McAllen for a bit, failing to encounter the usual Green Parakeet roost and settled for looks at some flying birds before returning toward Alamo. We did score on this species at another time. Dinner was at Willey's, a popular barbeque restaurant near the Alamo Inn.

Wed., Feb. 22

Salineño / Falcon State and County Parks / Roma Bluffs



At 6:30, we departed for the drive northwest and up the Valley (and very slightly uphill) to the village of Salineño. There, the Valley Land Fund maintains property at the edge of the Rio Grande where a well provisioned feeding station attracts many of the Valley's special birds. Although it seemed as if we were pretty much in the middle of nowhere, within a short time, we were joined by other birders from all over the U.S. The target bird was Brown Jay, and this was the only site in the U.S. at which the species was currently being seen. Once fairly common along the river, the entire U.S. population had dwindled to just one or two birds. Within a few

minutes, an adult was at the feeders—arguably the rarest bird in the U.S. All around us, the feeders were awash in color, populated by Northern Cardinals, Pyrrhuloxias, Great Kiskadees, Green Jays, Black-crested Titmice, Ladder-backed and Golden-fronted woodpeckers, Orange-crowned Warblers, more than a dozen Altamira Orioles and our first Hooded and Audubon's orioles. Behind the manager's trailer, an Eastern Screech-Owl sat with its head poking out of its nest hole—a new bird for a number of the participants. Leaving Salineño, we cruised the Chapeño Road which produced a lone Crested Caracara. We continued to Falcon County Park for a cooperative Cassin's Sparrow, and then Vesper, Lark, and White-crowned. Lunch was at Falcon State Park which also had a feeding station that entertained us briefly. Returning to the town of Roma, we visited the World Birding Center in the historic district at the Roma Bluffs. There, we saw our first Buff-bellied Hummingbird—which had eluded us up to that point. Stopping in McAllen, we had dinner at Poncho's, which seemed to be well received.

Thurs., Feb. 23 Return to Estero Llano Grande / Departures for Two / On to Kingsville

We packed the van and left at 7:00, opting for a return to Estero Llano Grande State Park instead of visiting Sabal Palm Grove Audubon Sanctuary—a much longer drive. The decision was a fruitful one, as we added a number of species including Rufous Hummingbird, Green Heron,



Summer Tanager, Brown Creeper, and Dusky-capped Flycatcher—the latter two quite rare in South Texas. We also had another Buff-bellied Hummingbird—a clean-up bird for those who missed it earlier, and glorious looks at a flock of Yellow-headed Blackbirds. Nobody seemed to mind seeing the Common Pauraque again, nor close looks at three species of teal, Canvasback, Harris's Hawk, Neotropic Cormorant, or Least Grebe. At 11:15, we drove to the airport in Harlingen where, with no joy at all, we were forced to bid adieu to Kay and Mary who were flying back to California. And so ended the first portion of the tour. After a quick and surprisingly democratic vote, we had lunch at a nearby Subway then continued northward. At Raymondville, we pulled over for a field of Sandhill Cranes. Then a field of white geese caught

my eye, so I drove into a ranch and asked for permission to bird just a bit. Happily, we were invited in and added, in short order, about 400 Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks roosting at the edge of a pond, hundreds of Snow Geese, a Ross's Goose, and a flock of Brewer's Blackbirds. Approaching Kingsville, we veered eastward about six miles to Kaufer-Hubert Memorial Park, a site on the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail. En route, I spotted a fine light morph Ferruginous Hawk sitting on a fence post. This is a very uncommon bird in South Texas and I was very pleased to see it. At the park, located on the edge of Baffin Bay, we saw a variety of waterbirds and discussed bird watching with the fishermen for a few minutes. In Kingsville, we had dinner at the Sirloin Stockade and, once again, nobody went to bed hungry.

Fri., Feb. 24 King Ranch / Indian Point Park Near Corpus Christi / Rockport-Fulton

At 6:30, we left with guides from the King Ranch (Jim and Barbara) for the Norias Division on the southeastern portion of the ranch. A wicked cold front had blown in during the night and, frustratingly, there was virtually no bird activity. Well, OK, we saw Wild Turkeys, and Green Jays, and Vesper, Savannah, and Field sparrows, and there were White-tailed Deer and our first Collared Peccaries, and introduced game mammals such as Nilgai and Impala. The best bird we encountered was a Sprague's Pipit, skillfully approached with the ranch van by Jim. The ranch provided lunch for us, which we ate at a field camp among the oaks. It was only the second time in 12 years that Jim failed to even hear a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, so he was exasperated. This weather was atypical and we could only be stoic. Nothing is ever guaranteed — especially the weather. Leaving the ranch, we picked up our van in Kingsville and drove to Rockport-Fulton. En route, we cruised Indian Point Park across from Corpus Christi for a few shorebirds, gulls and terns. We drove to Fulton via the Rockport waterfront—a continuous stretch of water bird habitat. Dinner was at Charlotte Plummer Seafare and it must have been good.

Many thanks to Keith and the staff of Alamo Inn who provided us with a friendly and efficient home base for the main tour. We loved the hospitality, attention to detail and NOT having to pack-up and move!

Next year, Naturalist Journeys, with guide Bob Behrstock, will offer TWO South Texas departures in February. Please see our website for details.



Sat., Feb. 25 Aransas National Wildlife Refuge & Whooping Cranes Galore!

We departed our hotel in Fulton in the teeth of a cold, windy storm. We were originally scheduled to take the boat trip to see Whooping Cranes this morning but were rescheduled due to crane festival participants filling the boat. For once, the birding gods were smiling down on us, because that morning's boat trip was, by all accounts, fairly miserable. Heading northward, we visited Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. There was little point in birding in the rain, but we walked to the top of their wonderful, new observation tower where we were rewarded with distant looks at our first Whooping Cranes. Driving the tour loop, we were entertained with Chase's theatrical readings of the roadside interpretive signs. Who ever thought that gopher mounds could be so entertaining? Returning to Fulton, we saw another Ferruginous Hawk and..WHAT'S THAT? Four Whooping Cranes right alongside the highway eating grain at a wildlife feeder someone's yard. Yikes! These were much closer looks than we were likely to get during the boat trip. Lunch was, again by popular demand, at Subway. At 12:30, we assembled at our tour boat, the *Skimmer*, conveniently located across the street from our hotel. While waiting, we enjoyed clearing skies and a Common Loon feeding alongside the dock. The balance of the afternoon was spent in comparatively glorious weather conditions, culminating with patchy blue sky. We saw approximately 41 endangered Whooping Cranes—quite a chunk of the world's population. We also saw Common Goldeneye, Piping and Snowy plovers, American Oystercatchers, Boat-tailed Grackles, scads of Common Loons, flocks of Bufflehead and Red-breasted Mergansers, and a host of various terns, gulls, sandpipers, and raptors. Needless to say, the trip was a success and had to be celebrated with a return to Charlotte Plummer's.

Sun., Feb. 26 Goose Island State Park / Departures from Corpus Christi

For our final morning we had a 7:05 departure and drove to the Big Tree, the State Champion Coastal Live Oak near the entrance to Goose Island State Park. There, we had better looks at White-eyed Vireo, Carolina Wren, and our only Hermit Thrush. Once inside the park, we were told by another birder of 10 Whooping Cranes in a yard just outside the park. Beating a hasty retreat, we quickly found the cranes, adults and immatures, where they were feeding in a large backyard with a nice pond. After getting our fill of cranes (we'd now seen about 60 Whooping Cranes), we returned to the park. Woodland birds were slow, so we cruised the edge of the flats looking at White Ibis, dowitchers, and other shore things. We also saw a Western Pygmy-Blue, the country's smallest butterfly. At 11:15, we drove to the airport in Corpus Christi where we added several obliging Black-tailed Jackrabbits to the trip list. Sadly, I had to say good-bye to a very nice group of people with whom I had enjoyed the last nine days. I was very pleased with the trip and, despite a couple of weather glitches, we did very well with birds, and managed to see some mammals, reptiles, butterflies, dragonflies, and other life forms. I look forward to returning to South Texas.