



PO Box 16545 Portal, AZ 85632  
Phone 520.558.1146 Toll free 866.900.1146 Fax 650.471.7667  
Email [info@naturalistjourneys.com](mailto:info@naturalistjourneys.com)

**Naturalist Journeys Trip Report: South Texas Birding and  
Wildlife with Whooping Crane Extension  
February 22 - March 2, 2014  
Leader: Bob Behrstock, with 8 participants: Amy, Art, Sylvia,  
Rich, Terry, Lyle, Barbara, and Carol**

**2014 TRIP REPORT**

**Sat., Feb. 22 (pre-tour extension) Arrival in South Texas / Goose Island State Park**



After a quick airport pick-up and another at a near-by hotel, we headed northeast over the Nueces Bay Causeway to Portland. There, we stopped at Indian Point to check out some tidal ponds and the bay's edge. Taking our cue from the direction other birders were pointing their 'scopes, we saw a roost of Roseate Spoonbills, their colors glowing, despite the somewhat misty conditions. We also saw our only Piping Plover for the tour, as well as more expected birds such as Redhead, Red-breasted Merganser, (Western) Willet, Long-billed Curlew, Forster's Tern, and a number of other typically coastal species.

Continuing north, we worked the waterfront at Rockport, seeing Black Skimmer, both local cormorants, Mottled Duck, White and Brown pelicans, and the trip's only Canvasback. As we still had plenty of daylight, we decided to put off checking in and continued north about six miles to the vicinity of Goose Island State Park. There we stopped at a field where nine stunning Whooping Cranes were loafing along with about 15 Sandhill Cranes. Having

both New World cranes in the 'scope before we'd unpacked the luggage was a nice way to begin the trip (and took some of the pressure off tomorrow's boat trip).

Peg Abbott, owner of Naturalist Journeys and a foodie at heart had suggested we have dinner at Latitude 2802 in Rockport. It was a lifer restaurant for me and we all enjoyed the meal very much.

### **Sun., Feb. 23 Aboard the Skimmer for a Day with Whooping Cranes**

After a 6:30 breakfast at the hotel, we simply walked across the street to meet the Skimmer, the boat that would take us out for the morning. The Skimmer consistently produces good trips, as Captain Tommy tries very hard to take good care of the birders on board. Today would prove to be a challenge, as it was very foggy for most of the morning and not an optimal day for the folks who were toting long lenses. Nonetheless, we had excellent and close looks at Whooping Cranes feeding on Blue Crabs, and great looks at two Seaside Sparrows, as well as a number of shorebirds, large waders, ducks, gulls, terns, and other more expected species. At the last moment, an Atlantic Bottlenose Dolphin followed us right to the boat's mooring area, affording us excellent looks in just a few feet of water.

After the trip, we stopped at the local Subway, grabbed sandwiches and drove to Aransas National Wildlife Refuge for a picnic and our afternoon birding. Aransas has been rather dry but we found some monster American Alligators, (young) white and (adult) dark Little Blue Herons, a stunning White-tailed Hawk, the only American Robin of the trip, and nice looks at two Soras.

On the drive back to the hotel, we saw our only Boat-tailed Grackles for the trip. Dinner was at Charlotte Plummer's Seafare Restaurant, also across the street from our hotel. Dinner there has always been good and tonight was no exception.

### **Mon., Feb. 24 Goose Island / the Journey South to McAllen / Local BBQ and more...**

Today's activity was described in the itinerary as a driving day, as this was the end of the brief extension and other folks would be meeting us in McAllen. However, that didn't mean we wouldn't be looking at birds. After a 6:30 breakfast at the hotel, we drove north about seven miles to Goose Island State Park. En route, we all chuckled at the plastic owl on the fence at the end of the local airstrip. Arriving early at the park, we took a stroll along the entrance road, getting looks at Carolina and House wrens, Black-crested Titmouse, and a point-blank Grasshopper Sparrow. After the park opened, we drove in to the edge of the bay, picking up a Common Tern, Sedge Wren, and getting a look at just how quickly fire ants can run up the leg of a tour participant. Happily, there was no associated trauma, as we were able to brush them off before they could do any damage.

After looking at waterbirds a bit longer and taking a drive through the wooded campground (where we had long looks at Lincoln's Sparrows), we returned to the hotel, noting with some chagrin that the "plastic" owl at the end of the airstrip was no longer there.

After packing up, we headed South. Driving through Corpus Christi to Riviera, we turned west toward Falfurrias. En route, we saw large flocks of Snow Geese but they were too far away to pick out a Ross's Goose. There were also Caracaras, and some very close Sandhill Cranes. Arriving in Falfurrias at lunch time (surprise!), we had barbecue at Strickland's, a local institution. After dining on ribs, brisket, and chicken, the participants would probably have been perfectly happy to sleep all the way to McAllen; but that was not my plan. Fourteen miles down the road, we stopped at the TxDot Brooks County rest stop, where a vagrant Painted Redstart had been present for several months. In short order, we had excellent looks at that local rarity (far from its home in the [www.naturalistjourneys.com](http://www.naturalistjourneys.com) [info@naturalistjourneys.com](mailto:info@naturalistjourneys.com) [www.facebook.com/NaturalistJourneysLLC](http://www.facebook.com/NaturalistJourneysLLC)

mountains of the Sierra Madre), as well as Couch's Kingbird, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Eastern Bluebird, and our first Green Jays--which I had promised to Barbara--but sometimes those promises can come back to haunt you.

Continuing southward, we stopped at the Edinburg Scenic Wetlands, one of the World Birding Centers associated with the Lower Rio Grande Valley. It was cool and had been spitting rain so the center's massive butterfly garden had little activity. Happily, the adjacent lake and dragonfly pond produced a number of species including Tropical Kingbird, Least Grebe, Black-bellied Whistling Duck, a variety of large waders, both local cormorants, and, as it turned out, the trip's only Green Kingfisher. South of the center, a house trailer had been put on its side precisely at the intersection of two Interstate highways. Maneuvering around this mess required some creative driving (well, OK, a lot of creative driving by hundreds of motorists across areas that hadn't been designed as roadways), and, when I found myself in a totally unfamiliar neighborhood, some helpful cell phone navigation by Rich got us back on track. Soon, we arrived at the Alamo Inn, got settled in, and had dinner nearby at El Dorado.

**Tues., Feb. 25 Mission Nature Park / Estero Llano Grande State Park**



Joined by Amy who had arrived late the previous night, we had breakfast at 7 a.m. then spent the first part of the morning at the Mission Nature Park searching for Hook-billed Kites. Although we, like many others, left kiteless, we did see a number of species in the mesquite brushland including Cactus Wren, Harris's Hawk, Curve-billed Thrasher, and Greater Roadrunner, as well as a number of Great Kiskadees sitting on power poles.

Continuing east a bit, we saw a Burrowing Owl that had returned for the winter, a rather uncommon bird in extreme south Texas.

Next, we spent a little while at Anzalduas County Park, getting a quick look at a Zone-tailed Hawk, and then drove to the McAllen Airport to pick up Carol, our final participant to join the Main tour. After being at the airport for perhaps 90 seconds, we continued to the Alamo Inn where Carol checked in and we all assembled some lunch from the well-stocked larder.

Driving east a bit, we went to Estero Llano Grande State Park. The newest State Park in the Valley, Estero is a favorite of locals and travelers alike and we did well there seeing a variety of species including Eastern Screech-Owl and Common Pauraque--both on day roosts, a nice selection of puddle ducks including all three local teal sitting side-by-side, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, and a seasonally uncommon male Black-chinned Hummingbird. Non-avian critters included a striking Mexican Bluewing butterfly, more big American Alligators, Red-eared Sliders, and the bizarre Texas Spiny Softshell Turtle. Leaving Estero, we dropped south a bit to a grain elevator just north of the Mexican border. There, amidst thousands of Red-winged Blackbirds, we saw dozens of Yellow-headed Blackbirds and the trip's only Bronzed Cowbirds.

Dinner was at the Blue Onion in Weslaco (try the Calzone Puttanesca), and the bird list was called back at the Alamo Inn.

**Wed., Feb. 26 A Cold Front hits at Santa Ana NWR / More BBQ / Frontera Audubon Preserve**

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We started with a 6:30 breakfast then made the short drive to Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge. As we walked out to Pintail Lake, we were slammed by a windy cold front. Seeking shelter in a birding blind on Willow Lake, we had excellent looks at a group of Wilson's Snipe and some of the other more common waterbirds. We bailed at 10:00 and had coffee west of the refuge then returned in the rain to the Alamo Inn.

Lunch was at Willie's Barbecue in Alamo. After lunch, we drove east to Frontera Audubon's preserve in Weslaco, trying to make the best of the nasty weather. There, we got close views of Buff-bellied Hummingbird, White-tipped Dove, and a few other common Valley birds, as well as the preserve's population of Sabal Palms. Our six-thirty dinner was at the El Dorado in Alamo.

**Thurs., Feb. 27 South Padre Island / Laguna Atascosa NWR /**

After the now usual 6:30 breakfast, we drove eastward toward the Gulf, making a detour to Old Port Isabel Road. Not finding Aplomado Falcons, we continued to South Padre Island and the mud flats at the Convention Center, picking through the gulls and terns roosting at the water's edge. There, things became livelier, as we encountered a couple of Black-and-white Warblers in the shrubbery behind the Center and a lovely Yellow-throated Warbler, presumably a migrant, feeding with Yellow-rumped Warblers in short mangroves along the boardwalk. Also, along the boardwalk, we saw our only Pectoral Sandpiper, a nice addition, and a Sora. From the deck at the end of the boardwalk, we had close views of a number of species including Roseate Spoonbill, Black Skimmer, Red-breasted Merganser, Redheads, and other waterfowl, several species of terns, and both white- and dark-morph Reddish Egrets.

Lunch was at Dirty Al's, a favorite of bikers, boaters, and birders visiting South Padre Island. After lunch, we continued north to Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. Orange-crowned Warblers fed at oranges at the Visitor's Center feeders and a Long-billed Thrasher foraged just outside the window as we checked in. After checking the Osprey Overlook, and knowing that the Refuge loop had been closed to private cars to protect the Ocelots, I made a command decision to return to Old Port Isabel Road but this time to a different part of the road. There, we saw male and female Aplomado Falcons at a nest platform--nonbanded birds that are, as most people are concerned, countable by ABA rules. From there, we returned to Alamo then had dinner at Luby's in Weslaco.

**Fri., Feb. 28 Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park / Anzalduas County Park**



Again after the now usual 6:30 breakfast, we drove back to see the Burrowing Owl missed by Carol due to her mid-day arrival. Happily, it was showing well in the rocks where it passes the winter. We then continued west to Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park, headquarters of the World Birding Center. There, we walked the park roads and visited a couple of blinds and feeding stations. Crossing the canal into the park, we saw a Black Phoebe, here near the eastern boundary of its range. Bentsen has a large feeder array just inside its gate and we had good views of many Plain Chachalacas, a Long-billed Thrasher, Great Kiskadees, White-tipped Doves, Black-crested Titmice, Ladder-

backed and Golden-fronted woodpeckers, and the trip's only Clay-colored Thrush. From the well-designed blinds, we could almost touch the Green Jays, White-tipped Doves, Altamira Orioles, and Northern Cardinals coming in for oranges and seed.

Just a bit east, we stopped at Anzalduas County Park for our picnic lunch. The stroll afterward produced our first Caspian Terns, Gray Hawk, handsome Eastern Fox Squirrels, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, titmice, and many Golden-fronted Woodpeckers. Leaving Anzalduas, we drove north to the Edinburg Scenic Wetlands World Birding Center. While looking for the near mythical Tropical Parula, we encountered Summer Tanager and Blue-headed Vireo, and reviewed the ducks, herons, and other waterbirds present on the site's lake. Dinner was at Poncho's in McAllen.

**Sat., March 1 Salineño / Falcon County Park / Falcon Dam / Chapeño / Roma Bluffs**

After a slightly earlier 6 a.m. breakfast, we departed northwest following the Rio Grande toward Falcon Reservoir. Our first stop was near Rio Grande City where we saw a few Cattle Egrets along the highway. These proved to be the only ones we encountered during the tour.

At the town of Salineño, we some spent time at property administered by the Valley Land Fund and along the margin of the Rio Grande. The feeders, visited for years by birders from all over the world, had been provisioned with oranges, bird seed, and peanut butter, and were alive with birds. From the comfort of the chairs provided by the site hosts, we had good looks at White-tipped Doves, Olive Sparrows, Altamira Orioles, Great Kiskadees, Green Jays, a Long-billed Thrasher, several Orange-crowned Warblers, and the target bird, Audubon's Oriole, a

species not present at sites we visit closer to the coast. Along the river, we saw Red-shouldered Hawk, and a white morph Reddish Egret, an extremely uncommon species inland.

This one had been present at this location for a couple of weeks. We also saw a pair of copulating Gray Hawks, several Spotted Sandpipers, and two species of turtles: Texas Spiny Softshell Turtle, and Rio Grande Cooter.

Continuing to Falcon County Park, we were unable to turn up a sparrow flock but had nice looks at male and female Pyrrhuloxias. A singing Cassin's Sparrow across the street was frustratingly



elusive.

Continuing just a bit further west, we visited Falcon Dam State Park where we had our picnic lunch and did a little birding. Birds in the park were a bit sparse, owing to new regulations concerning feeding birds. Nonetheless, we saw species characteristic of the desert scrub including Greater Roadrunner, Crested Caracara, Bewick's Wren, and Black-tailed Gnatcatcher. Leaving the park, we detoured for a bit along the road to Chapeño. That proved to be a good decision, as we enjoyed long looks at both Grasshopper and Cassin's sparrows, both perched right outside our van.

From there, we backtracked to the Roma Bluffs and the small historic district where custom's houses and warehouses marked the furthest upriver that steamships could carry their cargo. The World Birding Center there was closed so we spent a few minutes scanning the Rio Grande and the adjacent town of Ciudad Miguel Alemán, and then departed for the lower Valley.

En route, we stopped in McAllen where we sampled the local Green Parakeet spectacle, watching groups of them flying, roosting in the rather open trees, and drinking at a large fountain. After freshening up at the Alamo Inn, we enjoyed Mexican food at the new Arturo's in Weslaco.

### **Sun., March 2 Birding and Departures**

The last morning was pretty much a review of waterbirds at Estero Llano Grande State Park where the wind was blowing hard enough to keep everyone at a slight deviation from vertical. First, we covered the old trailer park area looking for a flock that never materialized. We did see a curious sight--a treetop-full of Golden-fronted Woodpeckers. We then walked around the lake closest to the park headquarters, getting good looks at a variety of ducks and other waterbirds, as well as our last sliders and soft-shelled turtles, and, in the process, added a single Ring-necked Duck to the tour's species list. We then returned to the Alamo Inn to finish packing and departed for the short drive to the McAllen Airport at 12:30.

A good trip despite the crazy cold patterns across the USA this winter!

*Trip Report and Species list by guide, Bob Behrstock [www.naturewideimages.com](http://www.naturewideimages.com)*