



Naturalist Journeys' Texas Hill Country Birding and Nature Tour April 12 - 17, 2015

TRIP REPORT

by Michael Hilchey

& an Amazing Collection of Photos, by Mahlon Hale

Guide Michael Hilchey, with five participants:
Mahlon, Cathy, Kathleen, Rebecca and Ann

Sunday, April 12, 2015 Arrival in San Antonio / Neal's Lodge

Michael Hilchey, of Brant Tours, stepped in with a week's notice to fill the very big shoes of our Hill Country master guide, Bob Behrstock, who was called away for family illness. Many thanks to Michael for leading a great tour.

Our first day of the tour was short and sweet, a summary welcomed after a day of travel. After scooping up Mahlon, Rebecca, Kathleen and Cathy from their respective locales in San Antonio, we got on the freeway and headed west into the Hill Country. Scissor-tailed Flycatchers welcomed us to Texas shortly after leaving the city limits. We stopped to study their graceful flight and peachy armpits before continuing towards Concan. These wonderful tyrants of the prairie escorted us throughout our tour — they were seen every day and became the unofficial trip mascot! The



west Texas highways also afforded us our first Crested Caracaras, Loggerhead Shrikes, American Kestrels and Red-tailed Hawks.



After a quick stop in Hondo to stock up on libations for the week, we found ourselves pulling off the road at the Sabinal Feedlots. A pair of feisty Bell's Vireo greeted us with some disdain while Northern Cardinal and Pyrrhuloxia offered up some great views. Purple Martin swung through the air alongside our first Black and Turkey Vultures and we even managed to find a couple of Yellow-

headed Blackbirds brightening up the otherwise grim dairy farm.



It was then on to Neal's Lodge — our home for the duration of the tour. We settled into our rooms and met our fifth participant, Ann, who had driven up from the Rio Grande Valley that morning. Black-crested Titmice, White-eyed Vireos and Yellow-throated Warblers entertained us on our evening walk and just before dinner, a beautiful male Northern Parula serenaded us from the enormous Bald Cypress trees along the river bank.

Monday, April 13, 2015 Uvalde Area

A pre-dawn breakfast at Neal's was followed by a stroll around the lodge grounds and feeders. A stunning male Hooded Oriole may have been the morning's highlight, or perhaps it was the Olive Sparrow seen from the deck. The poor sparrow had lost its tail recently and was looking a bit ridiculous as it popped in and out of the understory.



By mid-morning we loaded up the van and headed south to Uvalde. We made a quick detour to Walmart (Mahlon was experiencing a camera malfunction) and then headed straight to Cook's Slough. The slough is a lovely city-run park featuring several wooded ponds and a small riparian creek.

Our first interesting sighting here was not a bird at all, but a group of Diamondback Water Snakes basking on tree limbs and a metal storm drain overhanging one of the ponds. In all, we had eight lazy snakes, soaking up the morning sun.

Shortly thereafter we checked off both White-Crowned and Lincoln's Sparrows coming into a puddle along the trail to bathe. While we were enjoying the sparrows, the raucous call of Great Kiskadee broke

the morning calm and posed for some great scope views. A bit further down the trail, Verdin, Lark Sparrow and Chipping Sparrow made an appearance, followed by flyover Yellow-crowned and Black-crowned Night-Herons! Couch's Kingbird was another great addition as we walked along the edge of the slough. Then, as we approached one of the more wooded ponds, a Green Kingfisher called from the dense banks. We searched and searched for the bird, but never did find it. However, our search was not in vain as we happened upon a migrating Nashville Warbler, a pair of Black-Bellied Whistling Ducks and perhaps the bird of the day: a Green Jay! A pair of the jays announced their arrival before flying into



view across the pond from us. We were lucky to see these gorgeous tropical birds here in the northern tip of their range.



Summer Tanager and Bewick's Wren put on a good show before we loaded up and headed to the Tea House in Uvalde for lunch. The Tea House is a cute cafe nestled in the center of town. They have great food and quite the stash of antique furniture and knick-knacks to rummage through.



After lunch we headed west to the USFWS Fish Hatchery. The trees here were full of birds, including Bronzed Cowbird, Ladder-Backed Woodpecker, Vermilion Flycatcher, Golden-Fronted Woodpecker and Western Kingbird! On the pond we had great looks at Spotted Sandpiper and Greater Yellowleg with a pair of lingering Redhead that had joined Blue-Winged Teal and Black-Bellied Whistling Duck on the water. The heat of the afternoon made for slower birding, so we headed back to Neal's by mid-afternoon.

At Neal's we made a few stops before dinner. The feeders by our cabins produced Blue Grosbeak, Hooded Oriole, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Carolina Wren and Common Ground-Dove — a great end to the day!

After dinner, we bravely headed into the nearby pecan grove in hopes of some owls! We spent a good chunk of time searching for our nighttime friends and while we did hear Barred Owl and Chuck-Wills-Widow, though we didn't ever see them. We did, however, get looks at raccoons and several young fawns sitting in the grass.





Our third day started with yet another glorious sunrise and breakfast above the Rio Frio at Neal's Cabin. After a slightly later breakfast (resting up from the owling the night before) we loaded up and got back on the highway.

Today we were headed to Chalk Bluff Park — a gorgeous riparian oasis on the Nueces River. En route we were treated to a field full of Crested Caracara, Cattle Egret and Scissor-tailed Flycatcher munching insects in the morning light. The birds really started to pick up as we

left the highway and started down the dirt road to the park. The desert scrub provided habitat for several sparrows including Clay-colored, Chipping, Black-throated, Lark, Cassin's and White-crowned. Adding a bit of variety were several Vermilion Flycatcher, a Greater Roadrunner and Cactus Wren. One of the more interesting bird experiences of the tour happened along this road, when a male Pyrrhuloxia hopped his way onto the window of the van and checked himself out in the side mirror!



Once inside the park, we headed to the river and were immediately rewarded by a flyover female Ringed Kingfisher! There's no mistaking these enormous birds as they loudly glide over the water.

The white, chalky bluffs above the river provided a beautiful backdrop for the constant stirring of Turkey and Black Vultures, Red-tailed Hawk and Cliff Swallow noisily chattering overhead.



Right at the boat launch we had excellent looks at a pair of Brown-crested Flycatcher who surely had nests in one of the cottonwoods lining the river. The flycatchers barked at us for quite some time until we were distracted by a pair of Green Kingfisher shooting past us, low over the river.

Shortly after, a White-tipped Dove began its mournful song from the opposite river bank. Not surprisingly, we never saw the fat dove, but were able to listen to it for some time. A slow meander downstream produced a few more birds of interest. A Red-eyed Vireo teased us with song for nearly an hour before coming into view and a gorgeous Yellow-breasted Chat made us work almost as hard, until finally appearing from the dense undergrowth for a few photos.



For lunch we headed to the nearby pecan grove, but before the sandwiches made it out of the bag, a mixed flock of birds passed us high in the canopy. Yellow-throated Vireo, Yellow-throated Warbler, Nashville Warbler, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, another Brown-crested Flycatcher and a Hermit Thrush were shooting past us left and right in a flurry of excitement. The cherry on top had to be a very cooperative Long-Billed Thrasher who posed nicely for the scope, singing loudly for everyone to see!

With the sun getting higher, we opted to head to our next destination after a quick sack lunch. Of course, we had to pay at the park office as we left — and got our chance to meet the park mascot, Jilly the goat!

Our next stop was just a short way to the north along a ranch road in the juniper hills above the river. Here we were after one of our target birds for the trip, Black-Capped Vireo! Soon after getting out of the car we heard our bird, and several minutes later we managed to see a few, slightly obscured, views of these incredible hill country specialties. Of course, obscure looks are not why we traveled all the way to Texas, so we moved up the hill and found another pair of vireos signing up a storm. With a bit of work, we managed some great looks at the birds singing and chasing each other. As a bonus, a Gray Vireo was heard singing from across the road. With a little more work, we soon had a pair of Gray Vireos in site! This was our sixth vireo species of the day! The Black-Capped Vireo was not too pleased about his gray cousin being on his side of the hill and the two birds got into quite the altercation as we headed back to the van. It was great to see both species in the same binocular view!



We quickly drove back to Neal's after our vireo encounter and had an early dinner in anticipation of our evening outing. After dinner we headed a short distance to the famous Frio Bat Cave, anticipating a great show. This small limestone cave on private



property is home to the second-largest, non-human congregation of mammals on the planet!

We walked up the hill to the cave, got comfortable, and waited. Cave Swallows and a gorgeous male Black-Tailed Gnatcatcher kept us company as the sun started to set. Then, just as the sun hit the horizon, the cave's residents started to stir. We looked down and saw a cloud of Mexican Free-Tailed Bat circling inside the cave before they turned outward and poured



into the twilight! For the next hour and a half we stood awestruck as 10- to 12-million bats drained the limestone cave mere feet above our heads and into the surrounding hills. The tiny creatures created an endless cloud as far as the eye could see with Red-tailed and Swainson's Hawks and a Merlin taking advantage of the spectacle by serving themselves a nice bat dinner. This was truly an awe-inspiring experience for everyone present! Wow!

As the last rays of light dipped out of view to the west, the bat stream slowed to a trickle and we headed back to the van. But the night wasn't over yet — there were still owls and night birds to find! Chuck-Will's-Widow had begun their nightly chorus as we headed down the road. Eastern Screech Owl then



joined the soundscape, followed shortly by a pair of Great Horned Owl. We stopped near the stream at the bottom of the road and within minutes of hitting play on the Ipod, a pair of Elf Owl were a few meters away in a large oak tree! The birds were surely very close, but before we could see them, a pair of Eastern Screech Owl flew in, sang a few rounds and scared off their smaller relatives. We didn't end up seeing Elf Owl that night, but had great looks at Eastern Screech Owl instead.

Perhaps the post-sunset highlight of the trip was a goofy-looking Nine-Banded Armadillo only a few feet from us while looking for owls. The armadillo was making quite a ruckus in the brush at first. We debated if it might be a cow or a raccoon before we saw the little guy! A great way to end an incredible day.



Our third morning of the tour found us headed across the beautiful rolling hill country to Lost Maples State Natural Area. This scenic park incorporates a series of deep, lush canyons and surrounding hills. The creek beds here are filled with crystal-clear water and lined with ancient maple, cypress and oak trees. The surrounding hills boast tall oaks and junipers and the entire canyon is filled to the brim with bird song! Red-eyed, White-eyed and Hutton's Vireos, along with Summer Tanager and Yellow-throated Warbler were some of the most prevalent sounds on this particular morning. A gorgeous male Scott's Oriole announced his presence and offered great looks from the top of a juniper in the parking lot.



Once on the trails, we almost immediately found our target bird. We walked out onto the streambed and within moments our first Golden-Cheeked Warbler was above our heads in a tall juniper, singing and showing off. We spent several minutes admiring this beautiful little bird before heading up the creek.

The trail wandered slowly along the edge of the creek and we wandered even more slowly, stopping every few feet to see another bird. Black-and-white Warbler put on a great show, along with Yellow-throated Vireo, Cedar Waxwing, Carolina Wren, Canyon Wren and others.

As the day heated up, we headed to a few feeding stations in the park. They were mostly quiet, but Western Scrub-Jay and Inca Dove were welcome additions to our list. We decided to take one last walk. A few meters down a trail we were rewarded with yet another solemn White-tipped Dove singing from the dense growth on the creek's edge. As we inched closer, hoping to see it, a sudden noise exploded in the tree above us! WHOOOOSH!!! Unsure of what was going on, we wheeled around to find an enormous male Wild Turkey had flushed out of the tree above us. With some attitude, he tore through the sky and to the river where he proceeded to walk through the current and take a drink before sulking back into the woods.

We left Lost Maples fairly late in the day and headed south to the town of Utopia for lunch at the Lost Maples Cafe. After lunch we ventured to a small, nearby park for some afternoon birding, which turned out to be pretty slow so we wound up



our day of exploring and headed home. Before long, we found ourselves back at Neal's lodge with a few minutes of birding time before dinner and bed.

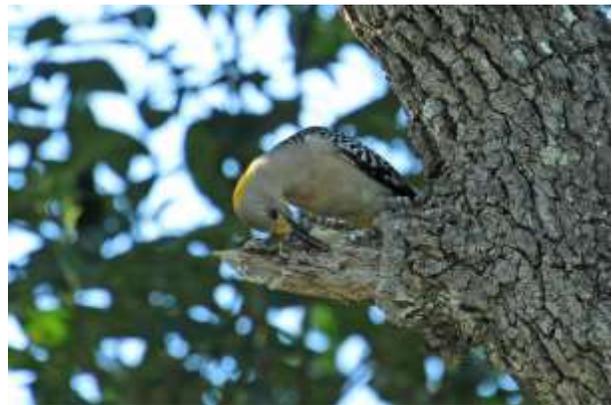


Thursday, April 16, 2015 Kerr Wildlife Management Area

Another breakfast at the lodge was followed by a couple of hours drive to Kerr Wildlife area.

The drive was marked by some gorgeous wildflower blooms covering the softly rounded hills in carpets of yellow, blue and purple! We spent a few hours at Kerr where we were treated to a beautiful Orchard Oriole, along with some fine looks at both Golden-Cheeked Warbler and Black-capped Vireo. This area is one of the best strongholds for the vireos, making it well worth the drive.

By mid-morning we found ourselves a few miles down the highway at Mo-Ranch, a private, riverside facility with wonderful gardens. The birding here was hot! Hutton's Vireo, Pine Siskin, White-throated Sparrow, Rock Wren and Blue Grosbeak were all new additions to the list. We also had a locally-rare Eastern Towhee! Painted Bunting however, continued to elude us so we headed to Kerrville for a great lunch at Grape Juice, a delightful restaurant find in rural Texas.



After lunch we headed to the Riverside Nature Center in Kerrville where we managed to find some confiding Cedar Waxwings before getting completely rained out. With the rain coming on harder and harder, we decided to make for home where we had one last dinner at the lodge.

Friday, April 17, 2015 Departure

Our last day was a travel day — we enjoyed breakfast followed by a drive to the San Antonio Airport to make flights home for all.

