



TEXAS' BIG BEND – MONSOON MADNESS & METEOR SHOWERS

August 8 - 15, 2016

Trip Report © Greg Smith



Greg Smith, guide, with Mary Jane, Lani, Ann and Darlene...

Monday, 8 August – El Paso to Fort Davis

We had everyone in the vehicle and were on our way to Fort Davis. But first we needed a little lunch, and lunch here meant Tex-Mex! With the harvest of Hatch Green Chiles commencing, we lucked into



some sauces for our meal that were very tasty. So after sampling many of the different sauces, we drove east towards Fort Davis.

The temp was trying to make triple digits as thunderheads lined the horizon. It seemed that we had downpours all around us, but for the most part didn't have to make our way through any of them before stopping in Van Horn for a quick break. From there we started to hit all the downpours so we took the 118 exit and then headed southeast to Fort Davis. Along this very green and very scenic route we found Scaled Quail, Swainson's Hawk and numerous Greater

Roadrunners. Not a bad start prior to our checking into the Hotel Limpia...

Tuesday, 9 August – Davis Mountains State Park/Balmorhea/Fort Davis/McDonald Observatory

Bright sun was the first thing to greet us this morning as we headed over to a local deli and picked up a field breakfast for our time in Davis Mountains State Park. We walked around the campground and found Hutton's Vireo, Summer Tanager and Blue Grosbeak. At the two feeding stations maintained by the park we had a young male Rose-breasted Grosbeak, lots of White-winged Doves and some of those belligerent Rufous Hummingbirds. The monsoon had been very kind to this park as the grasses were tall, green and filled every open space. Last treat as we walked back to the car was a fairly large whiptail scorpion out for a morning stroll. Usually nocturnal, we got long, great looks at this harmless invertebrate.

We headed north to Balmorhea Lake, an artesian fed lake in the middle of some very inhospitable desert. The area around the lake had not had the good fortune to be on the receiving end of any of the monsoonal downpours and was dry all around the lake. But water always seems to attract birds on the wing and here we had Clark's Grebe, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, and Willow Flycatcher. We also had a distant Black Tern, along with a solitary Whimbrel, Greater Yellowlegs and a mixed flock of small peeps. Not bad for this isolated lake.

After some more Tex-Mex we stopped at the State Park and birded the cienega with a huge downpour as a backdrop. Pied-billed Grebes with young, a solo Painted Bunting and electrical lines covered with Barn Swallows waiting for this storm to pass. All of a sudden it was very dusty from the wind as the lightning-covered front approached, so getting in the car was prudent. We were able to find Scaled Quail with young and a Yellowed-billed Cuckoo as it flew over its nest, and then the sky unloaded...



It was on and off rain as we headed to Fort Davis National Historic Site, but when we arrived we there was a long enough respite that we were able to walk out to the infirmary where a Rock Wren was busy foraging. Inside the building behind a picture on the wall we found about twenty-five small, dark brown bats roosting. And on our walk back through the bugle-laden grounds we found a displaced Short-eared Owl sitting atop one of the hillside oaks. This was a great way to finish the day before taking a break and heading out to the observatory for some nighttime sky viewing.



McDonald Observatory puts on Twilight and Star events, and we were scheduled to take part in the 9:30 Star Party. We arrived and made our way to the Star Date Café and had dinner, and then explored the interpretive center. Because the afternoon rains had flooded the amphitheater, we started with some explanations about the celestial events that were taking place overhead. And then it was off to the ten or so telescopes placed around the plaza for star viewing. Great explanations and views of what we all took for granted overhead every night...

Wednesday, 10 August – Chihuahuan Desert NC & BG/The Post/ Marathon/Big Bend

After breakfast at the Black Bear and some early morning birding in the State Park we headed down the road about four miles to the Chihuahuan Desert Nature Center & Botanical Gardens. Walking through the fenced off garden section gave us looks at Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Phainopepla and Cassin's Kingbird. It also put names to some of the plants that we had not been able to identify while in the State parks and for our future travels into Big Bend. This is a well thought-out garden and was helpful in understanding the desert and its components.

It was a thirty-minute drive to our lunch at the very tasty Reata and along the way we found our first Pronghorn, the world's fastest ungulate. There were more Swainson's and Red-tailed Hawks on the power poles and quite an assortment of kingbirds.

After lunch we were driving east to Marathon to Fort Pena Colorado when we found a pair of nesting Scissor-tailed Flycatchers with at least three fledged young. All were on the power lines as the parents foraged and brought back fairly

large prey items to the hungry young. At the Fort (aka The Post), we found American Coot, a family of Summer Tanagers, Yellow Warbler and a Tree Swallow mixed in with the Barns.



Next up before our drive into Big Bend were the black-tailed prairie dogs on 385. Lots of dogs, but we weren't able to find any Burrowing Owls...

Thursday, 11 August – Sam Nail/Blue Creek/Santa Elena/Castolon/Burro Mesa Pouroff/Terlingua



On the road to Santa Elena we stopped at two different locations: The small oasis at the old Sam Nail Ranch, and then for a short hike up Blue Creek.

Sam Nail had loafing Turkey Vultures and then a female Bullock's Oriole came shooting out of the undergrowth. Deeper into the trees we found a couple of Bell's Vireos and a chatty Yellow-breasted Chat. White-winged Doves seemed to find that a great place to hang out,

and were then joined by Western Wood Pewees. Nice to see a few migrants...

Blue Creek has an old ranch home down below, so we hiked down there among a number of Black-throated Sparrow, a few Pyrruloxia and the ever-present Canyon Towhees. This is a great canyon for Lucifer's Hummingbird when all of the ocotillos are blooming, but even with the abundant rain and leafy, green stems, there weren't any flowers. We had great looks at a colorful greater earless lizard, and even better looks at Varied Bunting that flew in and perched about 18-feet from us...

We had lunch at Cottonwood Canyon and it was eerily quiet. No hawks, and no migrants, and very few passerines. And it was the same at Santa Elena Canyon., except we had a few high soaring Turkey Vultures with two of their smaller cousins, the Black Vultures.

Tornillo Creek had blown out and flooded after all the heavy rains, so there really wasn't anyway to get across to the hillside trail into the canyon. But then maybe that wasn't the worst thing given the temperatures...

Burro Mesa Pouroff was a great little hike with, but again, with very few birds. It was mid-afternoon and most birds were probably hunkered down in the shade of the canyon. But it did make for perfect timing on our drive over to Terlingua for our dinner at the Starlight Theater.



It was the night for the Perseids and when we got back to the Basin it was raining. So with clouds overhead, some of us set our alarms for just after midnight. Then weren't a lot of meteors but we got to see anywhere from 8 – 12 during our time out in the warm Texas night...

Friday, 12 August – Rio Grande Village/Boquillas/Panther Junction

It is all downhill from the Basin to the Village and we stopped along the way for plants, birds and animals. A Western diamondback was laid out on the road compressing its body as flat as possible to

absorb some heat from the dark pavement. Small groups of vultures were temporarily grounded and black-tailed jackrabbits were common as we made it to the parking lot.



The walk along the road towards Daniels Ranch gave us a couple of *Myarchius* flycatchers, a number of Vermilions and a Gray Vireo. The grassy field on the east side of the Common Black-Hawk nesting area (and yes, the hawk was very cooperative...) was alive with birds. Lots of Blue Grosbeaks, Painted Buntings and a solitary Indigo Bunting and adult male Orchard Oriole. Those flowering grasses were perfect for all these seed-eaters. Continuing down the road we got great looks at Gray Hawk and more flycatchers. Then it was time for lunch...

Next we drove to the campground and parked ourselves next to a pool of water next to the road. Common Ground-Dove, Inca Dove, Golden-fronted Woodpecker and other species utilized this body of water to quench their thirst on this 105-degree day. We also had time to go partially out the Rio Grande Nature Trail, but most of the pond was overgrown with cattails.

After a quick stop at Boquillas, we were able to spend some time in the shade looking at the historic buildings of Hot Springs. And just around the corner from them were all those pictographs and petroglyphs. But given that it really was hot, we headed back up to the cooling rains of the Basin we could see...

Saturday, 13 August – The Basin

The morning sun rose and gave us looks at the surrounding peaks through broken clouds. The peaks, the Pinnacles and Casa Grande acted like a dam with clouds slowly rolling from the Window and piling up against this dam of sentinels. And when these moist clouds started backing up and intensifying their depth, we lost sight of the sky and the Basin.



After breakfast, we gathered at the trailhead for the Rim loop, wondering if the weather service prediction and our response were going to be adequate. With flash flood and heavy rain Watches in effect, we made the decision to hike as long and as far as we could, but turnaround at 10:30. Off we went to tackle the first of the two steep sections of the trail.

The ground was saturated from the daily rains that had been paying homage to the peak's capture of passing clouds. Fortunately most of the trail has a gravel base, but there were sections with puddles and mud. Bird activity was dropping much as the clouds were over the Pinnacles. On the east and north



facing slopes we had deer, Gray Jay, Blue-Gray Gnatcatcher and Western Tanager. The lichens were alive with all of the moisture as we made our way as far up as to where the trail goes into switchbacks. It was 10:30 and the lowering clouds were right above our heads, so we turned back looking for the cutoff to the Basin Trail Loop that would take us down the more xeric route of Laguna Meadows. It was getting chilly and you could feel the anticipation of the ground waiting for the rain. We arrived at the trailhead and had stopped to talk when the rain started and we barely made it to our rooms before that heavy

rain watch became a reality. Suffice it to say, there was lots of rain...

Sunday, 14 August – Lajitas/Big Bend Ranch State Park/Fort Davis

The Oasis at Christmas Mountain didn't answer emails about whether they were open for the day, and their blog said that they were out in the field traveling and photographing *Odontes*, so we made the decision to head back north through a different route following the Rio Grande. We headed back through Terlingua and then entered Lajitas where we stopped at the Big Bend Ranch State Park Visitor Center and took in their impressive geology and natural history interpretive center. The sky was heavy with clouds, but there was no flash flood watch today.



A good part of the road west from the park entrance follows the Rio Grande's north bank. Turnouts gave us wonderful views of both Mexico and their Rio Bravo. This was remote wilderness on either side of the river and we really only saw a dozen other vehicles for the sixty+ miles we were on the road. And then we rolled into Presidio, a border town with a down home lunch spot called the The Enchanted Bean. Very friendly service and definitely Tex-Mex specialties...

We drove due north from here passing through Marfa and driving into the familiar parking lot of the Hotel Limpia in Fort Davis. We shared a farewell dinner at the Blue Mountain Bistro before heading to our final night of sleep deep in the heart of Texas...

Monday, 15 August – Highway 118/Flights Home

We still had some time for birding, so after a quick stop at the local deli for breakfast we headed out to the cemetery and then to some residences that have a number of hummingbird feeders. We got great looks at Indigo Buntings and more Blue Grosbeaks, but the only hummingbirds we could find were Black-chinned. We stopped at the Lawrence Picnic Area on 118 and got great looks at Western Tanager, immature Cooper's Hawk and a few other goodies before hopping into our Suburban and heading back

to El Paso and our flights home. We had lots to talk about, and plenty of time to relive those special places we had visited in the past week. It was a special time...

