

Texas Hill Country Trip Report

April 16 – 21, 2017 with Bob Behrstock

With participants Arthur, Joan, and Dorothy



Sun., April 16 Arrival in San Antonio / On to the Hill Country & Lodgings at Neal's in Concan

After picking up an SUV at the airport in San Antonio, I rendezvoused with the participants and we departed for Concan around 2:15 PM. Driving westward on Hwy. 90, we encountered our first Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, glorious birds that accompanied us throughout the tour. Plenty of flowers were blooming along the highway, attesting to the wet spring Texas was experiencing. Soon, we could see the limestone hills of the Edwards Plateau in the distance. A stop at the feedlot just northwest of Sabinal was productive with Lark Sparrows, Purple Martins, a Greater Roadrunner, dozens of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, several Yellow-headed Blackbirds, and our first Pyrrhuloxia. The roadside vegetation was blooming and alive with butterflies. Sheltered among the bases of the shrubs were several individuals of Spice Lily or Texas Tuberose (*Manfreda maculosa*), an uncommon south Texas specialty here at its northern limits. After seeing a few Dickcissels singing along the road, we stopped at a low water crossing a few miles east of Neal's where Arthur scoured the roadside and river edge for plants and the rest of us chatted with Easter Sunday picnickers who were enjoying the cool river. After checking in and getting situated in our cabins, we strolled over to Neal's restaurant. Just before stepping inside, we found a great surprise and arguably the best bird of the trip, a light morph Short-tailed Hawk that was circling low over the restaurant's parking lot. Short-tailed Hawk is a very uncommon bird in the Hill Country with most recent sightings further east at Lost Maples State Natural Area. This was a great bird to see on the first afternoon of the tour. During dinner, we discussed some of the mechanics of submitting records to eBird. Later that evening, there was a rainstorm of biblical proportions that threatened to wash away campers who had pitched tents below us near the Frio River.

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Mon., April 17 Uvalde / Ft. Inge / Fish Hatchery / Neal's

After a 6:30 breakfast, we birded the grounds a bit, checked the cattle guard feeding station, and then departed for Uvalde. As we drove southward, we entered a mosaic of desert scrub and agricultural fields. A quick stop alongside an onion field netted us a flock of Crested Caracaras feeding with Black Vultures. In Uvalde, we ventured briefly into the park that surrounds Ft. Inge, an historic site.



Leaving Ft. Inge, we visited nearby Cook's Slough, a nature park whose lakes receive water from the adjacent city wastewater facility. Along the entrance road, we encountered our first Long-billed Thrasher and a male Bronzed Cowbird. The lakes had surprisingly few waterbirds (we would see them later), but we had instructive views of Neotropic Cormorant, and a couple of singing male Blue Grosbeaks, and Diamond-backed Watersnakes. A walk along the park trail took us to mesquite woodlands, patches of blooming prickly pear cactus, and several ponds, and yielded a very nice assortment of colorful damselflies, dragonflies, and butterflies. Eventually, we retreated to Uvalde for lunch. We had plans to eat at a restaurant scouted by our last Hill Country tour, but it was closed so we chose the Town House, an old stand-by that's popular with the locals. The restaurant parking lot provided us with our first Couch's Kingbird, a South Texas bird that's thinly scattered through the Hill Country. After lunch we continued a short way west to the federal fish hatchery, a site I'd scouted years ago for one of the Hill Country birding trails. The hatchery ponds yielded the assortment of waterbirds we'd missed earlier at Cook's Slough, including Solitary Sandpiper, Blue-winged and Cinnamon Teal, Gadwall, American Wigeon, and Redhead, as well as a number of dragonflies and butterflies we'd not yet encountered. Sadly, the Uvalde Rexall Drugstore had closed its doors for good, so we were deprived of ice cream cones and sundaes at their counter. Nonetheless, a stop at Sonic provided us with cold drinks to nurse on the way back to Concan. As we ascended the hills, we entered an impressive thunderstorm, but it diminished abruptly as we arrived back at Neal's. After dinner, several of us birded the grounds, netting us six trip birds including nice looks at White-eyed and Yellow-throated Vireos, Carolina Chickadee, Black-crested Titmouse, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, and several other common species.

Tues., April 18 Park Chalk Bluff / Nueces River / Frio Bat Cave

After breakfast, which we shared with several other birding groups, we left Neal's at 7:15. We drove southward to Uvalde then northwest towards Park Chalk Bluff, a popular birding spot along the Nueces River. Before actually entering Chalk Bluff, we made a side trip a bit further northwest, first driving through agricultural land and then up onto rocky slopes that were cloaked in a bewildering variety of wildflowers. As we drove slowly



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listening to the morning chorus, we approached a male Black-capped Vireo singing from roadside shrubbery. Exiting the car, we had staggeringly good looks at this attractive and often elusive bird, as it remained in the open for several minutes. Continuing a bit further, we stopped for a Field Sparrow that was teed up along the road, and then heard our quarry, a singing Gray Vireo — well, actually two Gray Vireos. Before long, we had good looks at these decidedly nondescript birds whose best field marks were their uniform plumage and big voices. After this successful detour, we retraced our route back to Chalk Bluff. Entering their driveway, we stopped for several birds including Curve-billed Thrasher, Bewick's Wren, and White-crowned Sparrow. While checking in, we watched a Cactus Wren singing its grinding song from light poles outside the office. Birding the huge bromeliad-festooned Live Oaks between the office and the river, we encountered birds we'd seen previously and a few new ones including Brown-crested and Vermilion Flycatchers, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Summer Tanager, Red-eyed Vireo, and for one, a flock of Cedar Waxwings. In the eastern portion of the property, an open pecan grove adjacent to the Nueces River, we saw Orchard and Hooded orioles, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, many Yellow-breasted Chats, and a cooperative Olive Sparrow — another South Texas bird here at the northern limits of its range. We returned to the picnic area near the office and ate our box lunches provided by Neal's and then headed back to Concan. Dotty and Joan opted to remain at Neal's while Arthur and I returned to the previously visited low water crossing a few miles back toward Sabinal. A male Painted Bunting provided a bit of color, as did the bright red blossoms of Cedar Sage growing near the fence line and several deep purple Dusky Dancers, damselflies that are numerous along Hill Country streams. Returning to Neal's, we had an early dinner then made the short drive to the entrance gate of the Frio Bat Cave. There, we rendezvoused with about 10 other cars full of people who had made reservations for tonight's bat emergence. At 6:15, we were joined by Bain Walker of Frio Bat Flights who led our procession into the private ranch where the cave is located. On some evenings, there may be a bit of time before the bats emerge, during which visitors can watch Cave Swallows while Bain or one of the other site interpreters discussed the history of the cave and the biology of Brazilian (Mexican) Free-tailed Bats. This night, the bats emerged early. In fact, we had hardly climbed the short stretch of road to the cave before we heard the fluttering of wings and the bats began to stream out just a few feet over our heads. Typically, up to 12-million bats emerge but Bain mentioned that there were more bats



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this year, a phenomenon yet to be explained. This was my eighth or so visit to the cave and the earliness of the emergence and sheer numbers of bats made it the best so far. Standing on the crest of the hill, we could see a smoke-like stream of bats extending miles southward from the cave. These bats spread out over several counties, removing innumerable numbers of insects from the air, in turn providing a huge economic benefit to the region's farmers who are able to use lower levels of insecticides on their crops. As we watched the balls and ribbons of bats disperse over the countryside, a couple Swainson's Hawks flew in and plucked their dinner from the endless bat buffet. The Frio Bat Cave emergence is one of the largest in the world and is, in its own way, a wildlife spectacle on par with what you might experience in Africa or the Antarctic.

Wed., April 19

Kerr Wildlife Management Area / Mo Ranch / Hunt / Neal's

After breakfast, we departed at 7:20 northward then eastward to Kerr Wildlife Management Area. On our way to Kerr, we saw Wild Turkeys, and a few introduced "Texotics" including Axis Deer, antelope,



and several Emus. Entering Kerr, we stopped at a large patch of Antelope horns milkweed, a lifer for Arthur. While discussing the curious pollination strategies of milkweeds, we had nice looks at Field and Rufous-crowned Sparrows. Continuing into Kerr, we encountered three Hutton's Vireos, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Lark and Black-throated Sparrows, and a number of other birds, as well as an electric orange male Flame Skimmer, our only sighting of this dragonfly for the trip. The several Black-capped Vireos we found were especially skulky, making us all the more grateful for the excellent looks we had near Park Chalk Bluff. Departing Neal's, we drove a short way to

Mo Ranch, a religious retreat that's open to birders. Along the road, there were many vines of Scarlet leather flower, a lovely Clematis with red bell-like flowers that's endemic to the Texas Hill Country. As we were leaving the ranch, we had fine looks at a pair of Canyon Wrens that were investigating the gutters and air conditioner of one of the buildings. Our plan was to continue to Kerrville for lunch, but we stopped instead along the Guadalupe River in Hunt where we investigated a couple of restaurants then took a local's advice and went for barbecue at The Hunt Store. Forsaking the drive to Kerrville, we opted to take the very scenic route westward along the Guadalupe, making several wildflower stops (Hill Country Penstemon, blue bonnets, Mealy cup sage and a host of other species) as we approached Hwy 83 and our return southward to Neal's. At 4:30, we had an optional walk around Neal's grounds — which produced a male Painted Bunting, Bell's Vireo, and some close roosting Turkey Vultures. Shortly after, we all convened for dinner.

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Thurs., April 20 Lost Maples State Natural Area / Utopia / Neal's



We departed Neal's at 7:15, heading east past Garner State Park on 1050 to Utopia. Our first stop was at the wooded hummingbird feeding station in the Utopia City Park. There, a number of Ruby-throated Hummingbirds were coming in for a sugar fix, their red gorgets sparkling in the dappled sunlight. Continuing northward, we followed the Sabinal River and were soon at Lost Maples State Natural Area. Lost Maples, as its name suggests showcases a disjunct population of Bigtooth Maples that shade the riparian area along Can Creek. There among a mixture of oaks, maples, and most importantly, Ashe Junipers, we would search for Golden-cheeked Warbler, a very beautiful bird whose nesting range is confined to the Texas Hill Country. Golden-cheeks weave their nest from fine strips of Ashe Juniper bark and have developed an obligate relationship with the tree

— usually referred to in the Hill Country simply as cedar. Along the Maples Trail, we picked up a few new butterflies and saw some interesting plants, including more Scarlet leather flower, the local yellow morph of Red buckeye, and Green (Pearl) milkweed vine, a lifer milkweed genus for Bob. Birds along the trail included Carolina and Canyon Wrens, Indigo Bunting, Red-eyed Vireo, and a distant Scott's Oriole high on a ridge. For much of the morning, the warblers played hard to get but as we returned to the car, we had excellent looks at both a male and a female. After the hike, we enjoyed a bounteous picnic lunch. Now nourished, we drove to the feeding station at the East Trail, Arthur hiking a bit and the rest of us watching the feeders from a blind and the shade of a large juniper. There, we added several new birds for the trip, including Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay, Lincoln's Sparrow, and a cooperative pair of White-tipped Doves — yet another South Texas bird that has extended its range northward into the Hill Country. Leaving Lost Maples, we returned to the Utopia City Park to search for Blue Jays and kingfishers in its huge Live Oaks and along its beautiful cypress-lined impoundment. Alas, it seemed that our birding luck for the afternoon had already run dry, but it was a pretty stop. Returning to Neal's, we paused for a while at the edge of the Frio River, picking up the trip's only Black Phoebe and had our last dinner.



Fri., April 21 Departures

We began with the usual 6:30 breakfast, giving us adequate time to pack up prior to our 8:45 departure. The drive to the airport — about an hour and forty-five minutes — was uneventful; the morning traffic not too hectic. Dotty and Joan made their flights easily, Arthur picked up a vehicle for another few days of botanizing in the Hill Country, and I dropped off the tour vehicle, picked up my own car, and drove to east Texas to begin a nine-day tour.

Photos by Bob Behrstock, except Black-capped Vireo and Golden-cheeked Warbler by Tom Dove.

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