

South Texas Birding & Nature | Trip Report
February 28 – March 7, 2019 | Written by Michael Marsden



**With Guide Michael Marsden, and participants:
Jean, Randy & Sandra, Barry, James & Susanna and Rebecca**





Friday, February 28

The weather, normally so co-operative on our South Texas tours, let us down. It wasn't that it was so bad in Corpus Christi, where we were all scheduled to meet at noon, as by then the heavy rain of the morning had cleared and seemed unlikely to return. But storms further north had resulted in the cancellation of some flights out of Dallas-Fort Worth, including Jim and Susanna's. Not only that, but we were soon to hear that American Airlines wouldn't be able to fly them into Corpus Christi until the next day!



That caused a change to our plans. Instead of driving north on Mustang Island, we decided to bird Hazel Bazemore County Park in Corpus Christi and proceed on to Rockport from there. Hazel Bazemore's location by the Nueces River and its array of habitats make it the prime birding site in a City with a claim to be the birdiest in the U.S. The range of birds recorded in the Park was reflected in the species we saw on this brief visit — eastern Sedge Wren, western Vermilion Flycatcher, and our first southern specialties — Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Great Kiskadee, Couch's Kingbird, and Bronzed Cowbird.

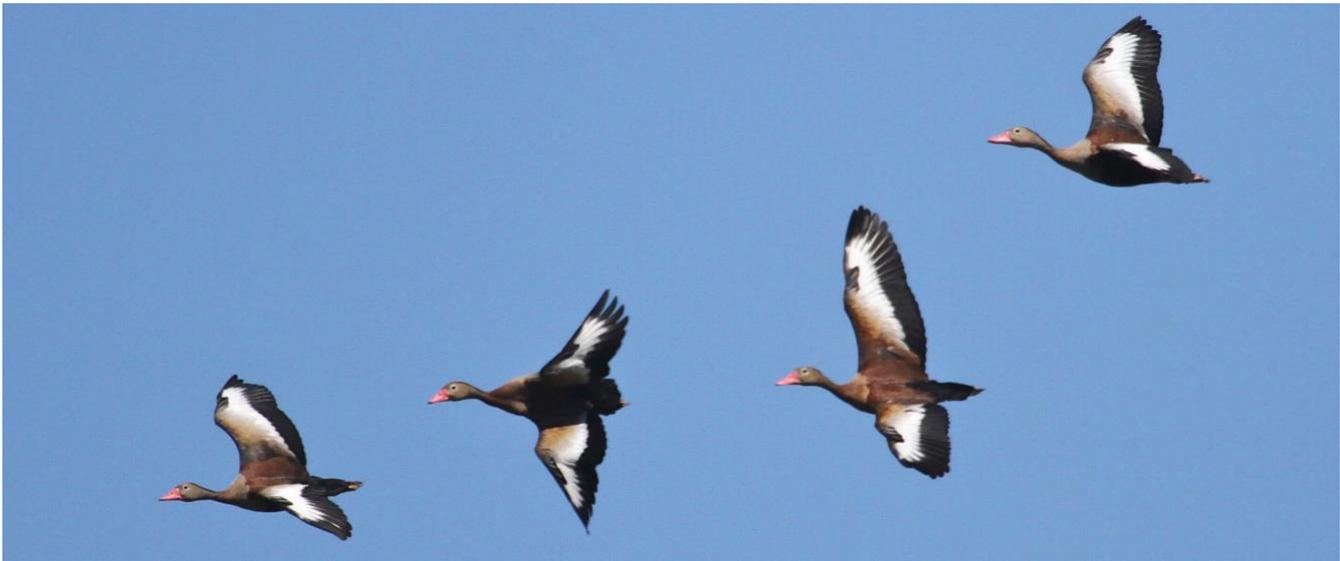
From there we drove north to Rockport, stopping briefly at Indian Point County Park, where we saw American Avocets and Red-breasted Merganser. We then stopped at Aransas Pass, where we had wonderful views of two roadside White-tailed Hawks. Rockport is a birding paradise with a plethora of places to bird, but we were only able to visit three in what was left of the afternoon — the wetlands at Live Oak Country Club with their lingering Snow Geese, Sandhill Cranes, flocks of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, and White-faced Ibis. Cape Valero, where we saw Roseate Spoonbills and an array other waders and wildfowl, and Rockport Beach Park, with its roosting flock of well over a hundred Black Skimmers. By then, dusk was approaching so we made our way to the Inn at Fulton Harbor, where we were to spend our first two nights, and a welcome dinner at Charlotte Plummer's Seafare.



Saturday, March 1

This was the morning we were to go on one of the *Skimmer's* celebrated Whooping Crane tours. They normally start at 7:30 am, but unfortunately because of the Captain's prior commitments, this one had been scheduled for 9:00 am. We made good use of the time though, by birding the Rockport

Tule Wetlands in the center of town. This proved very productive with close views of Mottled Ducks; helping us



distinguish their subtle field marks, and dozens of frenetically feeding White Ibis. Even more striking were the antics of three Red-shouldered Hawks as they interacted with a seeming mixture of aggression, affection, and play.

And the *Skimmer*, of course, didn't disappoint, despite unusually cold winds. The Captain knows the bays intimately and was able to maneuver the boat to give us memorably close views of Whooping Cranes both feeding and in flight. We saw over 20 during the trip, learning much from the Captain about their natural history, and came across lots of other species, including a trio of other strikingly handsome black and white birds - Buffleheads, American Oystercatchers, and American Avocets still mostly in their winter plumage. Memorably, a hunting Merlin tried to take a Spotted Sandpiper, which only escaped the ultimate fate by momentarily dropping into the water.

After a particularly enjoyable barbecue lunch at Stevie Lew's, we finally made contact with Jim and Susanna, who had managed to get a flight to Corpus that morning. When we met them at the airport, they seemed in remarkably good spirits considering the miserable couple of days they must have had. They were keen to make up for lost time so we decided to drive back to Rockport by way of Mustang Island and Port Aransas, and squeeze in as much birding along the way as we could. We came across all the expected waders, shorebirds and ducks on the Island, with the highlights being dozens of American Avocets at Port Aransas Wetlands, and Roseate Spoonbills in full nuptial colors at the still partially closed Birding Center. The most extraordinary sight at the latter though, was a pale, creamy leucistic Common Gallinule – none of us had ever seen anything like it. After a short ferry ride to the mainland, we drove back to our hotel and some fine dining at the Old Fulton Seafood Café.

Sunday, March 2

After breakfast, we drove north across the Copano Bay causeway, to the Lamar Peninsula, the location of Goose Island State Park and other productive birding sites. We started birding at Eighth Street, where some freshwater wetlands held Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, White and White-faced Ibises, Roseate Spoonbills, Neotropical Cormorants, and other water birds. On Twelfth Street, on the north side of the wetlands, we came across a small flock of American Robins, a very uncommon bird further south in the Valley, and a honey-colored Grasshopper Sparrow. But we didn't see any of the Whooping Cranes that are often here in the winter. They were instead a few blocks to the south taking advantage of the ready food at a grain feeder maintained by a local rancher. At the feeders at Goose Island State Park, we saw Chipping, Lincoln's, White-throated, and Field Sparrows, the latter two being particularly welcome as they would be unlikely to be seen again on our tour. But the most



memorable sight was of several American White Pelicans standing by the fish-cleaning station patiently waiting for handouts from the fishermen.

We had lunch in Kingsville, and then stopped off at the Visitors' Center of the King Ranch, famed not only as the largest ranch in the U.S. but as one of the country's prime birding sites. Unhappily, the Center is some distance away from the best birding, but we did see our first Green Jays of the tour there and learnt a little about the history of the area. From there we drove down to the Valley seeing a few Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, lots of Crested Caracaras, and a flock of Brewer's Blackbirds on the way.

We arrived at the delightful Inn at Chachalaca Bend about 5:00 pm, which gave us a little time to unpack and do some birding before dinner at a local Mexican restaurant. The first birds we came across at the Inn were (of course!) Plain Chachalacas, and from the Inn's viewing platform overlooking a resaca (the local name for an ox-bow lake), we also saw Anhingas and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons, our last species for the day.

Monday, March 3

Breakfast at the Inn at Chachalaca Bend was served at 7:30 am, so we had time before that for some early morning birding on the Inn's 40 acres of grounds and nature trails. We were rewarded with great views of several of the Valley specialties — Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Long-billed Thrasher, Great Kiskadee, Black-crested Titmouse, and our first sighting of White-tipped Doves as they competed, not always successfully, with the many Plain Chachalacas at the Inn's feeding stations.

After the delicious breakfast, we had the rest of the day to cover as much of Cameron County as we could squeeze in. We initially drove north through Bayview with its miles of resacas towards Laguna Atascosa NWR, seeing on the way our first White-tailed Kite and brief views of a flock of flying shorebirds that could only, from their shape, uniformly colored plumage, and dull wing stripes, have been early arriving American Golden-Plovers. At Laguna, we birded the Kiskadee Trail and Osprey Overlook seeing Harris's Hawks, Olive Sparrows, and Altamira Orioles.

From there, we headed to South Padre Island, where we visited the Birding & Nature Center, and birded the mudflats just north of the Convention Center (which was effectively closed for a car show). At the Center we found some Stilt Sandpipers, had wonderful views of a feeding Sora, and were delighted by the sight of Reddish Egrets and Green Herons in the blazing colors of their nuptial plumages. And among the shorebirds on the flats were Dunlin and Short-billed Dowitchers, both new species for us.

We had been warned by the weather forecasters of a northerly cold front that was likely to arrive that evening. It came earlier than we expected, and we could actually see (and feel) as it advanced south down the Island. The next 72 hours were going to be cold!

Back on the mainland, we drove south on Highway 48 towards Brownsville, stopping briefly at the Zapata Boat Ramp, with its hundreds of Black Skimmers and other larids, and a plethora of shorebirds including Marbled Godwits and American Oystercatchers. Before driving into Brownsville, we made a detour to Old Port Isabel Road in the hope of Aplomado Falcon, but it was likely hunkered down somewhere sheltered from the bitterly cold winds and we missed seeing it. We did, however, come across our first Least Grebes, as well as two White-tailed Hawks, and at least a dozen Long-billed Curlews in the grasslands.

Brownsville's Oliveira Park was our next destination, and we were very lucky on the way to come across flocks of Green Parakeets (which do not use the Park) coming in to roost in the old part of town. At the Park, the parrots came in a little later than usual, but we were eventually in the midst of a pandemonium of hundreds of these noisy, colorful birds as they eventually settled to roost in the trees above us. Most were Red-crowned Parrots, but we also saw two other species - Red-lored and White-fronted Parrots. It was an ideal climax to a productive day of birding, which we celebrated with a seafood dinner at Dirty Al's Cajun Restaurant before driving back to the Inn and a restful night.



Tuesday, March 4

We started our Hidalgo County birding, at the renowned Santa Ana NWR with its 2000 acres of riparian forest, thornscrub, and wetlands. We had already seen many of the birds there, but this was an opportunity to study them in as pristine an environment as can now be found in the Valley. And we did add some new species for the trip, most notably Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Hooded Oriole, Verdin and gloriously colored drake Cinnamon Teals with their rather drabber mates.

On the way to lunch at the Blue Onion in Weslaco, we briefly visited the Progreso grain silos, where we were able to pick out several Yellow-headed Blackbirds, among the many hundreds of Red-wing Blackbirds there. We spent the afternoon at Estero Llano Grande State Park. This is now perhaps the most popular refuge with both local residents and visiting birders in the Valley. Many of the birds become so used to people that they seem to lose much of their innate wariness, much to the delight of photographers and others. One of the birding highlights at Estero, is a Pauraque that has for several years, roosted in much the same area by Alligator Pond. All the birding guides know this and have happily shown it to many hundreds of visitors. This time, though, the area was cordoned off! Fortunately, we later bumped into Rick Snider, the volunteer naturalist at the Park, who told us that the area had just been secured that morning to protect the bird's nest. Rick then very kindly showed us a roosting Pauraque in another part of the Park. The other outstanding birding we had at the Park was along the Arroyo Colorado, where dozens of American Avocets, Black-necked Stilts, Long-billed Dowitchers, Stilt Sandpipers, and American White Pelicans were feeding.

After an enjoyable, if rather cold day of birding, we drove to the Alamo Inn, where we were to stay for the next three nights, and dinner at El Dorado.

Wednesday, March 5

Bentsen Rio Grande State Park was our main destination on Wednesday. We initially walked the main trail to Kingfisher Overlook at the Park's resaca and then on to the Green Jay birding blind. We had wonderful views of Plain Chachalacas, Green Jays, Altamira Orioles, and White-tipped Doves. We also came across two handsome Gray Hawks, a Black Phoebe, and a juvenile Yellow-bellied Sapsucker that were all new species for the tour.

The gardens around the Visitors' Center are always worth birding. We were particularly keen to do so on this visit as a young male Calliope Hummingbird, an extreme rarity in South Texas, had been reported there. The weather was still uncomfortably cold, so we got permission to eat our picnic lunch indoors in the Center — and our tables overlooked the feeder that the hummingbird favored! So, it was just a question of waiting and



eventually we all got satisfying views of this gem of a bird. Others we came across in the gardens included Wilson's Warbler, and an immaculate Yellow-throated Warbler.

After a brief drive through a not particularly productive Anzalduas County Park, we visited Granjeno and the winter territory of a Burrowing Owl, which gave us wonderful views among the stones of its adopted home. From there, we visited nesting Monk Parakeets in Hidalgo, and finished our birding day at the Edinburg Wetlands, where we saw our only Green Kingfishers of the tour.

Dinner that night was at the Republic of the Rio Grande — at one of their indoor tables!

Thursday, March 6

An early start this morning, as we set out on the long drive west to Starr County. Our first birding stop was on the banks of the Rio Grande at Salineño, where we watched Ospreys fishing in the river. We also saw two flying Mexican Ducks, showing their characteristic white-edged speculums, and a much hoped-for Ringed Kingfisher flying up river. Gray Hawks were calling distantly but we couldn't locate them. We tried, without very much hope in the cold weather, to find White-collared Seedeaters but we, alike all the other seekers that morning, were out of luck.

We then enjoyed the hospitality of Merle, Lois, and Michael at the feeding station where we, as always, had wonderful views of Altamira Orioles, Green Jays, White-tipped Doves, and Long-billed Thrashers among others. We visited Falcon State Park after that, but it was very quiet, so we headed out for Benito and Toni Trevino's Rancho Lomitas, where we ate our picnic lunch supplemented by Toni's delicious homemade mesquite biscuits and prickly pear tuna drinks. The highlight of the afternoon was a guided tour of the Ranch (on a truck-drawn wagon!) by Benito, a leading ethnobotanist and born story teller. Benito beguiled us with tales of family and regional history and of the many uses he and his forbears made of native plants. Our driver was the Ranch's resident naturalist, Jim Seeden, who afterwards shared his expertise with us and allowed us to watch the many birds coming to his feeders, including Cactus Wren, Curve-billed Thrasher, Pyrrhuloxia, Black-throated Sparrow, and best of all an Audubon's Oriole and a covey of Scaled Quail. On walks around the Ranch, we also came across Greater Roadrunners and a Vermilion Flycatcher. It really is a magical place!

We left the Ranch with regret but needed to return to the Alamo Inn and our farewell celebratory dinner of parrilladas, accompanied by traditional Mexican music, at the Palenque Grill in McAllen.

Friday, March 7

Quinta Mazatlan, one of the World Birding Centers, is just minutes away from the Airport, and an ideal location for our last few hours of birding. And, rather like Bentsen, we had an additional stimulus to go there as a young Crimson-collared Grosbeak, a rare visitor from Mexico, had for some time been coming to their feeders. We were again lucky. After waiting less than an hour, we got wonderful views of the bird. We also saw a Black-and-white Warbler and renewed our acquaintance with several of the specialty birds of the Valley, including Clay-colored Thrush.

We still had a little time before we had to get to the airport, so we made a brief visit to the historic Piedad Cemetery. And there we saw our last new species, Lesser Goldfinch, which brought our cumulative total for the tour (not counting presumed escapees), to a satisfying 180.



Photo Credits:

Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Barry Ulman (BU); Audubon's Oriole, BU; Burrowing Owl, BU; Calliope Hummingbird, BU; Crimson-collared Grosbeak, BU; Pyrrhuloxia, BU; Long-billed Thrasher, Susan Rose (SR); Green Kingfisher, Tom Dove (TD); Whooping Crane, BU; Flock of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, BU; Green Jay, BU; Anhinga, Sandy Sorkin (SS); Yellow-crowned Night Heron, Mike Boyce (MB); Harris's Hawk, Greg Smith (GS); Olive Sparrow, Carlos Sanchez (CS); Altamira Oriole, Terry Peterson, (TP); Black Phoebe, SS; White-tipped Dove, MB; Group Photo, BU.