

Texas Photo-Friendly Birding | Trip Report April 8 – 15, 2021 | Written by Greg Smith



With Naturalist Journeys Guide Greg Smith and local guide Michael Marsden, and participants Jay, Dina, and Niki





Thurs., Apr. 8 Arrivals in Alamo, Texas

Everyone was checked into our birder friendly B n B by dinner time, so with masks and being fully vaccinated, we headed across the street for some Tex-Mex and introductions. No one had been to this part of Texas, so everything would be new landscape-wise, as would most of the natural community and wildlife. We discussed tomorrow's goals and how best to mitigate the one day of 100°+ heat that we would experience on this trip.

Fri., Apr. 9 Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park | North American Butterfly Association Center

We had an early breakfast and headed out towards Bentsen-Rio Grande to try and beat the heat. We did the long loop staying close to the shady side of the road. The feeding stations had closed for the season as of 1 April, but there were plenty of Plain Chachalacas out and about panhandling. We got to see a late Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, our first Altimira Oriole, and plenty of Green Jays.

We made our way around to some pools of water where we started to find migrating Cave, Barn, and Northern Rough-winged Swallows. A Little Blue Heron flew overhead, and this drew our attention to a small flock of Broad-winged Hawks migrating north. There were about fifty birds with a few Turkey Vultures mixed in.

The heat was pretty to close to 98° by the time we headed towards the visitor center. But the heat wasn't too much for a small flock of Inca Dove and one White-tipped Dove. The shade was feeling a little on the light side given the temperature, so we wasted no time making into the air-conditioned building for a respite.

After a poke-inspired lunch we headed to the North American Butterfly Association headquarters to see what birds found it acceptable to be out in this kind of weather. The ones that cooperated were Greater Kiskadee at the feeding station, along with a number of Ruby-throated Hummingbirds. Back at the visitor's center we had a solo Curve-billed Thrasher and a Loggerhead Shrike. We decided the shade of the trees on the other side of the gardens might be worth a try, so we headed on over. Not much action, but the one bird we did find was a Gray Hawk, the only one for the trip. We saw only two butterflies at the center, maybe it was the time of year?

Sat., Apr. 10 Estero Llano Grande State Park | Edinburg Wetlands

Estero Llano has a wonderful wetland in front of the entrance station. Least Sandpiper, a small calling flock of dowtichers, with one Long-billed calling out, Black-bellied Whistling Duck, Black-necked Stilt, Northern Shovelers and other waterfowl. But the wetland highlight was the Stilt Sandpiper parading around out front.

We walked around the other ponds where we had an indigo snake swimming in shallow water, along with American Coot and lots of Red-winged Blackbirds. But the best bird(s) was a pair of Brown-crested Flycatchers calling back and forth.

After lunch we headed up to Edinburg Wetlands, but they had unfortunately closed the entire park complex.



Sun., Apr. 11 Rancho Lomitas | Falcon Dam

We started out early so we could drive the back roads to Rancho Lomitas. We were rewarded with great looks at Grasshopper and Lark Sparrow, late American Kestrel, Eastern Meadowlark, Pyrrhuloxia, and lots of Crested Caracara.

We pulled into the rancho and were met by the owner and a cooing Greater Roadrunner. Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, and Green Jays made their way into the feeder, and then came a small covey of Scaled Quail. It was pretty quiet as most birds were on nests, so we headed over to another set of feeders where Hooded Oriole and Lincoln Sparrow were foraging. A Cactus Wren was calling and put in a very brief appearance, while in the background we could hear the tinkling song of Black-throated Sparrow. Other than Northern Cardinal, that was all for the Rancho as we headed towards Falcon Dam.

Along the way we had small flocks of Scissor-tailed Flycatcher foraging along fence lines. More Lark Sparrows and meadowlarks, along with cardinals darting over the road. We headed north on Highway 83 to the entrance of Falcon Dam State Park.

We went to a picnic area, had our lunch, and realized it was again, a pretty warm day. We ate in the shade but saw only two Lark Sparrows during our time eating lunch. We drove thru campgrounds, to the boat launch ramps and to the butterfly garden. We were hopeful that with the sprinklers on we would see more birds, but all we had was a female Hooded Warbler and a Bewick's Wren. Add a few Neotropic Cormorants on the water and an overhead Osprey, and that was it for Falcon Dam.

Mon., Apr. 12 Edinburg Wetlands | Delta Lake | Raymondville | Olmito

We gave Edinburg another try this morning as we left Alamo, and it was open and not very crowded—we essentially had the place to ourselves. There were a few warblers including Hooded, Orange-crowned, Yellow-rumped, and Common Yellowthroat. We also had Indigo Bunting, Warbling Vireo, and Lincoln Sparrow.

Water birds included White Ibis, cormorants, Lesser Yellowlegs, and we caught a brief glimpse of a Green Kingfisher, the only kingfisher for our trip. Then, a little more poke before taking the backroads to Rancho Viejo.

Our first stop was at Delta Lake, a small county park out in the middle of nowhere with plenty of water, trees and birds. Small overflow ponds provided pretty fine habitat for shorebirds and waterfowl. The scattered trees



through the various campground loops provided habitat for neo-tropical migrants, while the surrounding fields provided opportunities to view resident and migrant grassland species.

We had some exceptional photo opportunities here also with an eye-level Osprey perched thirty feet away, a Golden-fronted Woodpecker excavating a nest, Yellow-rumped Warbler foraging in the trees, and the waterfowl and shorebirds in the overflow ponds.

We birded the fields around Raymondville where we had migrating Swainson's Hawks, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, and resident Northern Harrier. Eastern Meadowlarks were nesting and were relatively quiet for this part of the drive. But we did start to find many more Black-bellied Whistling Ducks as headed into our lodging for the next three nights in Olmito.

Tues., Apr. 13 Resaca Birding | Old Port Isabel Road | Boca Chica

We started our morning heading north to San Benito, where we picked up Michael Marsden, our local guide for the day. Michael's local knowledge is substantial, and he helped us find a number of local specialties. Top on our list for the morning were any of the three local kingfishers, but as we had been told, most of the resident birds in the area were on eggs and we couldn't find one as we searched the local resacas.

We did get wonderful opportunities to photograph nesting colonies of Great-tailed Grackle and Purple Martin, along with roosting Anhinga, foraging Spotted Sandpiper, and numerous swallow species.

We worked our way down towards Old Port Isabel Road, and along the way had a migrating flock of American White Pelican that easily numbered around 250 birds. These are huge birds and their migrating "V" was one of the biggest any of us had ever seen!

Old Port Isabel Road is home to a now relatively rare native habit of coastal prairie and savannah, with outbreaks of yucca and scattered trees. This is the favored habitat for Aplomado Falcon and White-tailed Hawk. It also provides nesting areas for grassland species that is now becoming short on supply in this part of Texas.

So yes, we did find Aplomado Falcon within the first mile of our drive. Lucky that it was there and good eyes to see it given how distant it was. White-tailed Hawk gave us looks at two different pair, with one being much



closer than the other. This large, snake-eating hawk did not seem too uncommon given that through the rest of the afternoon on other roads, we had another four birds.

Singing and displaying Cassin's Sparrow were along the roadside and very docile giving us good looks. One of the species we got to see on this road was the Eastern race of the Willet. This species flies south during winter and returns to nest in the coastal prairie. The Western race nests up in Northwestern part of the lower 48 but flies south to this area for the winter. The Eastern race was not here a week ago.

After lunch in Port Isabel we headed out Highway 48 and made a stop at a parking area about a third of the way to Brownsville. Shallow Gulf of Mexico waters were all around this parking area as were small islands of vegetation. Most shorebirds had already headed north, but we were able to pick out some peeps, along with both Semi-palmated and Wilson's plovers, along with both color morphs of Reddish Egret and Least and Gull-billed Tern. Dunlin, Black-bellied Plover, and a large flock of Black Skimmers made this 30-minute stop a top-notch way to spend some time.

We got to Highway 4 and drove to the very end at Boca Chica. And at the end of the road we came upon the new Space X launch facilities. And there in front of us was the Mars space craft that finally lifted off and landed safely two weeks later. Pretty cool being only a football field away from this big, shiny cylinder.

Practically no birds on the way out, but the drive to our dinner spot had a number of stops. Some pools of water shared a number of Stilt Sandpiper coming into alternate plumage, along with Dunlin, more peeps, calling Short-billed Dowitcher and a few Blue-winged Teal.

We saw Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Caspian Tern, Little Blue Heron, and a number of other species along the banks of the Rio Grande at a couple of stops. We then drove into Brownsville for our evening at the newly revamped Lola's.

We had one more stop after dinner and that was at a local park to watch the parrots come into roost. We got to see both Red-crowned and White-crowned parrots flying in, with reds being the more common. We had already searched for Green and Monk Parakeets earlier in the week up north, but none were found then and now. Michael mentioned to us that if any survived the deep freeze a couple of months ago. Nobody had found where they were roosting.

Fri., Apr. 14 Laguna Atascosa | South Padre Island

We took back roads up to Laguna Atascosa, retracing some of yesterday's resaca stops trying to locate a kingfisher, but yesterday's results were only foretelling today's. So, off we went to Laguna.



The road into the NWR is posted at 25MPH, with numerous speed bumps to ensure our continued compliance and to protect the U.S.'s only population of ocelot. But this road is approached at 10 mph, just because there are so many birds. We had Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Long-billed-Thrasher, Brown Thrasher, Couch's Kingbird, Tropical Kingbird, White-eyed Vireo, Wilson's Warbler, and more. It is worth moving slowly through this entrance road.

The photo blind and the feeding stations had lots of Red-winged Blackbirds, but they also had Olive Sparrow, White-winged Dove and Green Jay. Plain Chachalacas put in a boisterous appearance as did the grackles, but it was time to head to the coast...

The drive out to South Padre Island was quiet bird-wise, but when we drove out onto the beach just east of the Convention Center we were greeted by hundreds of waterbirds. A large flock of Black Skimmers, small groups of Sandwich, Least, and Gull-billed terns, Laughing Gulls, dowitchers, Dunlin and finally lots of courting Royal Terns. Small fish in their bills were being presented, some accepted, some ignored. A lot of erected crests and puffed-out chests made it clear that this was mate finding time.

But the primary reason for going to SPI is the passerine migration, both in the flowering trees of the Convention Center and the boardwalk over the coastal wetlands. Birds had been flying all night and this was their first landfall after an exhausting flight. Water was important, as was cover and food. We just had to stand and watch all of the birds in the trees and identify them. Cape May, Tennessee, Orange-crowned, Prairie, and Hooded Warblers. We also had Louisiana Waterthrush, Northern Parula, Indigo Bunting, White-eyed Vireo, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and more. It was so wild and there were so many birds, we decided we would come back on our final morning.

Sat., Apr. 15 South Padre Island and Departures

We got an early start after packing our gear and headed back to SPI. More time under the flowering trees where we found a flock of twelve Indigo Buntings, Brown-headed Cowbirds, a Veery, Swainson's Thrush, Marsh Wren, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Least Bittern, Roseate Spoonbill and Blue Grosbeak. A fine way to end our trip as we headed back to McAllen and our flights home...

Photo Credits:

Eastern Cottontail, Greg Smith (GS); Reddish Egret, GS; Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Jay Eisenberg (JE); Roadrunner, JE; Summer Tanager, GS; Black-necked Stilt, GS; Altamira Oriole, JE; Green Jay, GS; Broad-winged Hawk, GS; Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, GS; Scaled Quail, JE; Inca Dove, JE; Sora, GS; Least Bittern, GS; Royal Terns, GS.