

# Texas Hill Country | Trip Report

April 13-18, 2021 | Written by Pat Lueders



With Guides Pat Lueders & Steve Shunk and 6 participants: David, Susan, Don, Terry, Marty & Brian





## **Tues., April 13 Meeting at San Antonio Airport; Drive to Neal's Lodges**

We all met at the San Antonio Airport; everyone arrived in advance to sightsee in the lovely city of San Antonio. After a short stop for supplies, we left the busy city to immerse ourselves into the nature and scenery of the beautiful Hill Country and the Edward's Plateau. We checked into our spacious cabins situated above the Rio Frio River, and enjoyed dinner at the charming Neal's Café, finding a male Ruby-throated Hummingbird at the feeders with many Black-chinned for comparison. We then turned in to rest comfortably before our adventure would begin the next morning.

## **Wed., April 14 Cabin 61, Fort Inge Historic Park, Cook's Slough Nature Area, Chalk Bluff Park**

Many of us awoke this morning to the "hooting" of a Great Horned Owl. After a delicious breakfast served by Mary, who we would get to know well, we made our first visit to Cabin 61, on the other side of the Rio Frio River, where birders are welcome, and feeders attract many species. An Olive Sparrow was singing when we arrived and cooperatively showed itself to the delight of the group. Rufous-capped Sparrow and Lesser Goldfinch were seen under the feeders, the sparrow a life bird for many in the group. A pair of the US's largest Kingfisher, the Ringed, are vocalizing as they fly upriver. What a great beginning to the day! The scenic drive to Uvalde, the largest city in the area with 16,000 residents, was quick; and, as we parked at the entrance to Ft. Inge Historic Park, a Greater Roadrunner crossed the road! A male Scissor-tailed Flycatcher poised for us on the fence. As we birded along the road, a Great Kiskadee was heard vocalizing, and we were thrilled with great views of this colorful flycatcher at the most northern part of its typical range. Bell's Vireos were establishing their territories and were especially easy to spot as was a cooperative Ash-throated Flycatcher. Not so cooperative was an elusive but vocal Curve-billed Thrasher.

We moved a short distance to Cook's Slough Nature Area, finding 6 Yellow-headed Blackbirds in a mixed blackbird flock at the entrance. As we approached the first pond, two Egyptian Geese were on the levee and a Least Tern was feeding over the water. Another Great Kiskadee came very close for a great photo opportunity. Wow! Beautiful Wood Ducks, Blue-winged Teal, American Coots and Northern Shovelers were swimming around an island containing perched Neo-tropic Cormorants. Muskrats were spotted near the shore. Black-bellied Whistling Ducks were heard overhead and seen in the pond.



After a picnic lunch, we moved on to Chalk Bluff Park, spotting a pair of Harris's Hawks sitting on a utility pole. Fenced at the entrance was an odd assortment of camels, ostrich, emus, and other exotics. Vermilion Flycatchers were everywhere, and we saw a Spotted Sandpiper working the rocks on the Nueces River below the impressive sandstone cliffs. Chihuahuan Ravens, Black and Turkey Vultures used the thermals produced by the cliffs. A Carolina Wren was building a nest as was a Cactus Wren, and we heard the distinct call of a Couch's Kingbird. Orchid Orioles were feeding near the river as are Summer Tanagers and we heard the haunting call of the Canyon Wren. Dinner at a barbeque restaurant in Uvalde was an enjoyable ending to a great day of birding!

### **Thurs., April 15 Lost Maples State Natural Area**

We headed north today through the dynamic Edward's Plateau to visit a hotspot for the endangered Golden-cheeked Warbler. During the scenic drive, we found a pair of Crested Caracara feeding on kill in a field. We crossed the Sabinal River multiple times and arrive at Lost Maples, a 2,200-acre protected site for the warbler. Amazingly, we found a singing Golden-cheeked Warbler in the visitor center's parking lot for all to see! A mixed migrating warbler flock near the blind included a Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Orange-crowned, Yellow-throated, Nashville and Black-and-White Warblers, and Inca Doves were seen under the feeders. A Scott's Oriole was establishing its territory. What a start! A beautiful hike on the West trail produced a singing Tropical Parula, and all could see he had no eye ring. Louisiana Waterthrushes were staking out their territories along the scenic creek, and we counted 15 Golden-cheeked Warblers along the trail. In the parking area for the bird blind, Steve heard a vocalizing Black-capped Vireo, which we pursued till all had as good looks as possible. How fortunate to find both of our main target birds for the trip in the same area!

While driving through the town of Leakey, we found a large flock of Pine Siskins near Main St, and enjoyed a traditional Mexican dinner at a local restaurant. All agreed that Lost Maples was a very magical place!

### **Fri., April 16 Pecan Grove, Rio Frio River, Rio Frio River Bat Cave**

This morning we visited the Pecan Grove, a private area near Neal's. Many Axis Deer with their distinctive spots call this area home. Vermilion Flycatchers were seen fly catching and a Hutton's Vireo was found by its distinctive call. Sparrows were abundant in this area, and we got good looks at many Chipping, Clay-colored,



Vesper, Field, and beautiful Lark Sparrows. A Blue Grosbeak sat on the utility wire singing his song, and Indigo Buntings are seen for a nice comparison. Many Summer Tanagers, Yellow-breasted Chats, and Northern Cardinals added to this colorful array of birds. A vocalizing Painted Bunting unfortunately could not be located. Pat spotted and got her scope on an unexpected Grasshopper Sparrow for all to see.

After a delightful lunch at the fun Hippy Chics River Shack in downtown Cancun with delicious pizza and sandwiches and a surprise visit by a Hooded Oriole, we enjoyed a leisurely walk along the Rio Frio River. Warblers in the sycamore trees included Black-and-White, Orange-crowned, Nashville, Northern Parula, and Yellow-throated. Steve remembered a roosting spot for a Green Kingfisher, and we were fortunate that she was there, probably near her nest in the bank. What a treat to get great looks at this rare kingfisher!

After dinner at Neal's, we met the naturalist at the entrance to the Rio Frio Bat Cave to experience the natural wonder of millions of Mexican Free-tailed Bats emerging from the cave with the background of a beautiful sunset! Cave Swallows began entering the cave as the bats emerged in waves of thousands. Two Harris's Hawks and American Kestrels awaited their chance to catch one of the bats. The bats had returned to the cave later than usual this year because of the polar vortex experienced in Texas in February, so we were very fortunate to observe this memorable event!

### **Sat., April 17 Kerr Wildlife Management Area, Lost Maples, Utopia City Park**

On this, our last full day, we drove to Kerr Wildlife Management Area, traveling the Edward's Plateau and crossing the scenic Guadalupe River numerous times. We passed acres of hunting lodges stocked with exotic mammals, spotting even Zebras! Carpets of Texas Blue Bonnets added color to the fields during the drive. At the entrance, a Black-capped Vireo was calling as were numerous Bell's Vireos. As we drove, we stopped at additional locations for other Black-capped for additional good looks and also found a Spotted Towhee, Bewick's Wren, and a Lincoln's Sparrow.

Lunch at the Hunt Café was delicious, many enjoyed the café's famous Texas barbeque, and we stopped again at Lost Maples, hearing many Golden-cheeked and migrating warblers and getting one last great look at a Black-capped Vireo.

Our farewell dinner at Neal's included time to reminisce about the wonderful week we had just spent in the Texas Hill Country!



## Sun., April 18 Pecan Grove, return to San Antonio

After breakfast, we made one last visit to the nearby Pecan Grove. What a good decision! A Wild Turkey crossed the road at the entrance, a Hermit Thrush was spotted in the trail, vireos were again singing, a pair of beautiful Eastern Bluebirds were nest building in the bluebird house, Field Sparrows and Eastern Meadowlarks were calling, and a pair of Great Blue Heron were seen at the top of a tree near the pond as were Cedar Waxwings.

The return drive to San Antonio was bittersweet for all, signaling the end to an exciting week of birding, scenery, and nature in the Texas Hill Country!

### Photo Credits:

Guide Pat Lueders & group at Kerr Wildlife Management, Don Cheeseman (DC); Vermilion Flycatcher, DC; Great Kiskadee, DC; Group at dinner, Brian Nordstrom (BN); Flowering Prickle Pear Cactus, Marty & Terry Evanson; Fallow Deer, DC; Carolina Chickadee, BN; Harris Hawks, BN; Neal's Lodge on the Frio River, DC; Egyptian Geese, BN; Big Tooth Maple Tree, DC; Couch's Kingbird, BN; Gigantic Juniper Tree, DC; Group Walking, BN; Waiting for the Bats, Bats at Sunset, Marty & Terry Evanson; Los Maples State Natural Area, Marty & Terry Evanson; Guide Steve Shunk on the Frio River, Marty & Terry Evanson.