

Texas Hill Country | Trip Report

April 14-19, 2019 | Written by Pat Lueders



Guides: Pat Lueders & Carlos Sanchez, with 11 participants: Martha, Rob, John, Lyn, Joan, Ron, Joann, Sidney, Cliff, Marcia, & Joe





Sunday, April 14 | Meeting at San Antonio airport; drive to Neal's Lodges

The group gathered in the afternoon at the San Antonio airport for the scenic drive to the beautiful Texas Hill Country, and the Edward's Plateau, to begin our tour of the unique area. Before we left, Ron had asked if we would see Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, and we spotted countless numbers of them perched on wires along the highway. What a fabulous bird, and such a great start to the trip! We arrived at the family resort, Neal's Lodges, moved into our spacious cabins, and enjoyed a delicious welcoming dinner at their restaurant.

Monday, April 15 | Fort Inge Historic Park, Cook's Slough Nature Area & Uvalde Fish Hatchery

After the first of many delicious breakfasts, we began our birding at Fort Inge Historic Park, a 42-acre protected park along the Leona River featuring a volcanic plug and dry slopes. We spotted Savanna and Lark Sparrows along the road and heard Pyrrhuloxia vocalizing. We saw them perched on wires with Northern Cardinals close by for comparison. A Cactus Wren's distinctive call was heard at the gate and all of us had good looks at this, our largest U.S. wren. Other species particular to this habitat that we saw included Ash-throated Flycatcher, Lincoln's Sparrow, Verdin, and Western Kingbird.

At Cook's Slough Nature Area, we walked the levees around their ponds spotting Blue-winged Teal, Northern Shovelers, American Coot, and Neotropic Cormorants. A vocalizing Olive Sparrow was very cooperative, coming out in the open for all to enjoy. We had only quick looks at a Great Kiskadee, quite a distance north of its normal range. Many photographed and enjoyed the beautiful wild flowers in this wetland habitat.

After lunch in Uvalde, at the unique Tea Room, we traveled to the famous Uvalde Fish Hatchery. This oasis in the surrounding dry habitat attracts ducks; and, while walking on the levees, we spotted Black-bellied Whistling and Ring-necked Ducks. Shorebirds including Wilson's Snipe, Solitary Sandpipers, and Greater Yellowlegs were feeding near a White-faced Ibis and Great Egret. A Sora was seen scrambling low in the reeds. Many enjoyed the beautiful Vermilion Flycatcher, and a Couch's Kingbird vocalized.

After dinner, a short night walk around Neal's provided the call of the Chuck-will's-widow and good looks at Striped Bark Scorpions found by using an ultraviolet flashlight. All retired to their cabins after enjoying a



delicious dinner and a successful day at these wonderful locations!

Tuesday, April 16 | Birding around Neal's, Chalk Bluff Park, Frio Bat Cave

We began birding near our cabins, starting at a location for one of the target species of this area, Black-capped Vireo. After hearing and viewing this species with a conservation rating of "Vulnerable", and an estimated population of only 20,000, we walked along the beautiful Rio River bordered by impressive sandstone cliffs; enjoying the distinctive call of the Canyon Wren. Warblers seen in this area included Yellow-breasted Chat, Nashville, Northern Parula, and Yellow-throated. But the star of this walk was the close encounter with a Canyon Wren, which sat on a rock within a few feet of the group, vocalizing for all to enjoy. A memorable encounter with nature for all to enjoy!



We traveled to Chalk Bluff Park with a picnic lunch, spotting a singing Black-throated Sparrow, Bell's Vireo, Bewick's Wren, and two Crested Caracara from the entrance road. After lunch, a small herd of Barbary Sheep were spotted and seen with the scope climbing the limestone cliffs. Introduced in the Texas Hill Country in 1957, they are now firmly established in the Edwards Plateau. We got much better looks at a Great Kiskadee and spotted our first Ladder-backed Woodpeckers.

Chosen as one of the most memorable events of the trip, we spent the evening viewing 11-13 million pregnant Mexican Free-tailed Bats emerging from the Frio Bat cave. Cave Swallows entered the cave before the bats began emerging, a steady stream of bats leaving to feed as far away as San Antonio, returning before sunrise. A beautiful sunset was a bonus that added to the enjoyment of this remarkable spectacle of nature!



Wednesday, April 17 | Kerr Wildlife Management Area, Garner State Park

The drive to Kerr WMA crossed the Guadalupe River at many locations; all agreed that the beauty of this area was breath taking. At the entrance, we found a carpet of Blue Bonnets to photograph. We heard, and got good looks, at the other target species for this area, the Golden-cheeked Warbler, the only bird species whose

breeding habitat is confined to Texas. The conservation rating for this warbler is "Endangered". We also saw additional Black-capped Vireos, Clay-colored Sparrows, and Golden-fronted Woodpeckers.

After lunch at a colorful local tavern, we traveled to Garner State Park, stopping along the way at a field carpeted with a large variety of wildflowers. We visited the feeders at the park finding Blue Grosbeak, Indigo



Buntings, and Wild Turkey. A mixed feeding flock produced Hutton's Vireo, Orange-crowned Warbler, a Golden-cheeked Warbler, and Summer Tanager.

Thursday, April 18 | Utopia City Park, Lost Maples State Natural Area

On the drive to Lost Maples, we stopped briefly at Utopia City Park and found a pair of Barred Owls that call the park home. They flew into the tree near us vocalizing for all to see — voted another favorite trip experience by the group.

On this drive, we crossed the Sabinal River multiple times, again an area with unparalleled beauty. Lost Maples is a 2,200-acre protected site famous for the Golden-cheeked Warbler. We visited a blind that produced great looks at a Lazuli Bunting, another group favorite, as well as our first Woodhouse's Scrub-Jays, a White-tipped Dove, also north of its expected range, Inca Doves, a Rufous-crowned and Lincoln Sparrow, and Bullock's and Scott's Orioles. Our walk along the Sabinal River through the limestone canyon populated with relict Bigtooth Maples produced many vocalizing, and additional good looks, at the beautiful Golden-cheeked Warblers.

Our farewell dinner was enjoyed in Utopia, at the Lost Maples Café, known for its delicious selection of pies. What a wonderful ending to a magical day!

Friday, April 19 | Birding around Neal's Lodges, return to San Antonio

We shared farewells with each other at our last breakfast at the restaurant, and half of the group departed for the airport. The remaining members of the group had time to bird the pecan grove behind the resort. We were fortunate to spot a male Painted Bunting singing from a tree, along the road that became our last bird species of the trip. What a delightful ending to such an enjoyable trip to the beautiful Texas Hill Country, and the Edward's Plateau!

Photo Credits:

Black-chinned Hummingbird, Pat Leuders, (PL); Ducks, PL; Lazuli Bunting, PL; Wild Flowers, PL; Vireo viewing, PL; Lunch, PL; Cooks birding, PL; Free-tailed Bats, PL; Bat Cave, PL; Frio Bat Cave, PL;