

Texas's Big Bend National Park | Trip Report

May 3 – 10, 2019 | Written by Dave Mehlman



With Guide Dave Mehlman, and participants: Barbara, Jan, Connie, Gary, Lois, and Mark





Friday, May 3 | El Paso to Alpine

Dave rounded up the group at the Wyndham El Paso Airport Hotel, very conveniently located almost across the street from the baggage claim area. Most passengers arrived the day before or drove, so no issues with late flights on this trip!

After loading up in the van, we headed east on I-10 for the drive to Alpine, making a rest stop in Van Horn, entering the Central Time Zone and losing an hour. Leaving I-10, we passed through the beautiful grasslands between Marfa and Alpine, and spotted a few interesting birds, including a Zone-tailed Hawk flying north of the highway, and Cave Swallows nesting under a highway overpass. A brief stop at the Marfa Lights Viewing Platform yielded no lights, few birds, and clean bathrooms. We arrived in plenty of time at the historic Holland Hotel in Alpine, right on Main Street, and had a lovely welcome dinner at the nearby Reata Restaurant.

Saturday, May 4 | Alpine to Marathon to Big Bend National Park

We checked out of the Holland Hotel and continued our drive east to the town of Marathon, where we turned south for our first stop (and birding) of the trip: Fort Peña Colorado Park, better known as “The Post.” Getting out of the van, we were immediately greeted by many, many wonderful birds, almost far too many to mention. Particularly interesting of note were many Vermilion Flycatchers, Orchard Orioles, and Summer Tanagers; a very cooperative male Bronzed Cowbird, Bell’s Vireos, a Painted Bunting, Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, and, much to Dave’s surprised delight, a singing Yellow-green Vireo!

The birding was so enjoyable we spent about 2.5 hours there before heading back north to the Gage Gardens in downtown Marathon. The Gardens were also full of birds, including the stakeout Barn Owl roosting in a pine tree (which Dave had seen on the April trip), Cedar Waxwings, Cave Swallows, Inca Doves, both Cassin’s and Western Kingbirds, and two Blue-winged Teal on the small pond. Again, way too many species to mention at this delightful spot. After birding here, we headed just across the railroad tracks for a lunch of delicious sandwiches at the V6 Coffee Bar in Marathon.

After lunch, we headed northeast to the Marathon Prairie-Dog town where, after some searching, we were able to discover two Burrowing Owls. We either saw or heard some of the characteristic grassland species of the area also, including Swainson’s Hawk, Eastern Meadowlark, and Cassin’s Sparrow. We left



here and headed south to Big Bend, arriving at the Panther Junction Visitor Center in time for people to look around the Center before it closed. We then continued on to the Chisos Basin and checked into our comfortable rooms at the Chisos Mountain Lodge, followed by a bird list review and then dinner in the Lodge's dining room. During dinner, we were entertained by a pair of Hepatic Tanagers trying, for some reason, to enter the dining room through the glass windows! Although we never figured out why they were doing this, for most of us, this was the best we had ever seen this southwestern specialty at such close range.

Sunday, May 5 | Big Bend National Park: Rio Grande Village

We all had breakfast at the Lodge dining room, getting in as soon as it opened, obtained our bag lunches, and then piled in the van and headed out to explore the southeastern part of Big Bend. Our first destination was Rio Grande Village, adjacent to the Rio Grande. At this well-known birding site, we had our first encounters with many of Big Bend's riparian bird species, including a nesting Common Black Hawk, Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, Painted Buntings, some Black Vultures, and a pretty tame Javelina. After birding around the Village area, we moved to the nearby Rio Grande Village Nature Trail in the adjacent campground. During our walk on the trail to the Rio Grande itself, we added more birds



typically found in or near wetlands here, including Common Yellowthroat, Yellow-breasted Chat, Blue Grosbeak, a female Blue-winged Teal, and a Green Heron. Some of the group added to their Coahuila, Mexico, list since the river is narrow enough that several bird species on the other side were easily heard.

We then headed to the nearby Daniel's Ranch picnic area to have lunch, by which time the temperatures were getting pretty hot, though not unusually so for this time of year at the lower elevations of the Park. Dave was able to relocate the stakeout Tropical Parula by its song (a good bird for anywhere in the U.S.) and we added a few more species to the day's list.

We continued on to the Boquillas Canyon Overlook and then to the Boquillas Canyon Overlook Trail. Despite the heat, a few folks ventured out on the trail, at least a short way, to try to get a better look at this impressive canyon (which, from a distance, is so narrow that it is hard to pick out of the uplifted range it is carved into!). Leaving here, we began our trip back to the Chisos Basin, stopping at Dugout Wells to look for some birds. Due to the heat, there were few birds, with the noticeable exception being a Verdin feeding fledglings (perhaps from the nest that we had found on the April trip). Returning to the Lodge in mid-afternoon, we made plans to reconvene for a walk around the Basin in late afternoon, but a thunderstorm rained us out. Oddly, a Cattle Egret picked that moment to appear around the Lodge—hard to explain since there are neither cattle nor wetlands anywhere near this site! As usual, we finished the day with a checklist review and dinner at the Lodge dining room.



Monday, May 6 | Big Bend National Park: Chisos Basin and Chisos Mountains High Country

This day was, at least for some, the highlight of the entire trip: the hike up into the Chisos Mountains high country to look for the Colima Warbler. After our usual breakfast and obtaining our lunches, the group assembled for the hike. Both Barbara and Lois elected to accompany Dave on the long hike; the rest preferred to explore on their own and did a shorter hike on the Basin Loop Trail and remained closer to the Lodge. So, what follows is the account of the long-distance hikers.



Dave decided to do the hike in the "reverse" of the normal loop: we went up via the Laguna Meadows Trail, over on the Colima Trail to the Boot Canyon Trail, and then down by the Pinnacles Trail. In total, we started the hike just before 8:00am and returned to the Lodge just before 6:00pm; total distance hiked

was probably about 10 miles with the maximum elevation gain about 1700 ft. This was a very rewarding, but tough hike; Dave recorded 6 different Colima Warblers by sight, song, or call during the hike, including a superb view by all hikers of one bird foraging very low near or on the ground for several minutes. The decision to start with Laguna Meadows Trail appeared to be a sound one; Dave heard the first singing Colima just over 2.5 hours into the hike on the Laguna Meadows Trail, which was pretty early into the hike. Also, the Laguna Meadows Trail is very exposed in the afternoon, so it is much more comfortable to hike up that in the morning, when it is mostly in shadows, and come down Pinnacles Trail, which has more tree cover for the sunny afternoons.

We did very well on the birds during the hike, seeing just about all the expected higher elevation species. These included the stakeout (and long-occurring) singing Slate-throated Restart in upper Boot Canyon, (which we observed interacting with and displaying to a Painted Redstart—fabulous behavior watching), Zone-tailed Hawk, White-throated Swift, Blue-throated and Broad-tailed Hummingbirds, Hutton's Vireo, Cordilleran Flycatcher, Hermit Thrush, and many, many more. We also had very good views of two White-tailed Deer of the endemic Sierra del Carmen subspecies. The hikers straggled in to their rooms at the Lodge by 6:00pm, tired but very happy, then had dinner in the Lodge restaurant.

Tuesday, May 7 | Big Bend National Park: Santa Elena Canyon

After breakfast and lunch pick-up in the Lodge dining room, we headed out to explore the southwestern portions of Big Bend. Our first stop, with the sun coming up, was the Sam Nail Ranch in the desert lowlands. This is a fabulous stop for birding the desert and, indeed, one of the first birds the groups saw was a spectacular male Varied Bunting; well-perched in the top of a nearby mesquite! We had good looks all-around at the great desert birds that occur there, including a Crissal Thrasher, several Yellow-breasted Chats, Northern Cardinal, Black-throated Sparrow, Blue Grosbeak, Summer Tanager, and many Turkey Vultures still on their night roosts.

After a quick stop at Sotol Vista for restrooms, we visited the Lower Burro Mesa Pour-off for its fabulous cliffs and birds. The Gray Vireo that we had found on the April trip was still present and singing, though a hard bird to see well. Other good finds included more Varied Buntings, another Blue Grosbeak, singing Canyon Wrens, and a Scaled Quail. Interesting to Dave were the presence of House Finches in this canyon, which seemed to be absent elsewhere in the Park.

After a brief visit to the Mule Ears Viewpoint to admire the view, we continued on to Cottonwood Campground, arriving in the late morning. The heat was still tolerable, so we birded around the campground, finding some of the desert riparian specialties such as Brown-crested Flycatcher, Lucy's Warbler (including an adult feeding a fledged young), Painted Bunting, and Northern Rough-winged Swallow. We then devoured our lunches in the campground's picnic area, which was otherwise almost deserted.

Despite the heat, we continued eastward, stopping at the Santa Elena Canyon Overlook to admire this impressive canyon from a small distance, then drove on to the Santa Elena Canyon Trailhead. Although most stayed in the shade there, a few of us braved the heat and the slightly flooded Terlingua Creek to wade across to the canyon overlook trail. Wading across the creek proved interesting since the water was so muddy that you could not at all see where you were stepping, but as far as I know, the three



people who went across all came back with 2 feet and 10 toes each. The view into the canyon is fabulous, but the heat by this time (early afternoon) was formidable, so everyone finally returned to the van (and its air conditioning!) and we went to the small store in Castolon for our traditional afternoon ice cream treat.

To cap off this remarkable day, we drove further east out of the park to get gas in Study Butte, then on to the “quirky” ghost town of Terlingua. We enjoyed an excellent dinner out at the Starlight Theater and shopping in the nearby stores (and hanging out with the locals on the porch!), then returned to the lodge in the evening after another tiring, but very rewarding, day.

Wednesday, May 8 | Big Bend National Park to Fort Davis; Christmas Mountains

Bidding adieu to Big Bend, we had breakfast in the Lodge dining room and checked out, then headed north to visit Carolyn Ohl-Johnson’s famed Christmas Mountains Oasis. Arriving there in mid-morning, we found Carolyn hard at work on the property and we settled down in front of the feeders to enjoy the show. The stars were, of course, the Lucifer Hummingbirds, but many other nice birds showed up, including Scaled Quail, Varied Bunting, Lesser Goldfinch, an adult Black-throated Sparrow feeding a fully-fledged young, Ash-throated Flycatcher, and Western Tanager. As we were about to leave, Carolyn kindly invited the whole group up to see her wonderful house on the hill, which I think made all of us a bit envious (at least of the house, though maybe not of the road in!). After this wonderful morning, we continued north to Alpine, where we had a late lunch at Judy’s Bread & Breakfast, which fortunately was



still open in the early afternoon. After scarfing the tasty sandwiches there, we continued on to Fort Davis, where we arrived at the Hotel Limpia in mid-afternoon, in time for everyone to check in and rest a bit before we headed out again in the afternoon.

First, we visited the very interesting Fort Davis National Historic Site at the edge of town. We saw the introductory video that the National Park Service shows and then explored the site on our own for a while. Although there were not many birds there, some of us had great views of Rock Wrens in and among the old buildings. Next, we continued up the highway into the mountains and visited the Emory Oak Wildlife Viewing Area in Davis Mountains State Park. There was a lot of activity at the feeders there, including our first Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay of the trip, Black-headed Grosbeak, Blue Grosbeak, Scott's Oriole, Black-crested Titmouse, and a Mule Deer.

We returned to town and the Limpia to clean up, then walked across the street for dinner at the Fort Davis Drugstore. After dinner, we waited a bit, then headed back to Davis Mountains State Park, first stopping at the feeders again. Many of the same birds were present, but of most interest (at least to some) was a Canyon Tree-Frog that was sitting near the flowing water. As dusk arrived, we moved over across the Park to join the crowd at the famed campsite #3 to see if the Elf Owls would show. Indeed, they did, with one bird sticking its head out of the hole in a telephone pole just before 9:00pm and its mate flying in and vocalizing a bit later. Though dark, a rewarding view of this hard-to-see bird species! Then, finally, back to the Hotel Limpia for a well-earned rest.

Thursday, May 9 | Davis Mountains

Loading up the van, we headed to the Stone Village Market for breakfast and to pick up our bag lunches. We then headed further up into the Davis Mountains and parked at the Lawrence Wood Picnic Area, which is also the trailhead for the Madera Canyon Trail on The Nature Conservancy's Davis Mountains Preserve. The picnic area was quite productive, with a variety of birds' characteristic of the higher



elevations of the Davis Mountains, including Plumbeous Vireos (at a nest), Hutton’s Vireo, Canyon Towhee, Cassin’s Kingbird, and a far-off Olive-sided Flycatcher which Dave spotted in a tree (fortunately, his scope came to the rescue!).

The Madera Canyon trail was a bit slow, but many of the usual suspects showed up, including Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Bewick’s Wren, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Western Wood-Pewee, and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. Dave and the group were amazed at the amount of ground disturbance produced by the feral hogs in the area—amazing what those animals can do. Returning to the van after the hike, we once again devoured our picnic lunches in the picnic area.

Our destination was quite popular: the McDonald Observatory run by the University of Texas. Upon arriving at the visitor center, we were greeted promptly by a Zone-tailed Hawk right over the parking lot! The group explored the visitor center and its gift shop and then we all took the solar viewing tour, which included behind-the-scenes visits to the Observatory’s 107-inch reflector and the 362-inch Hobby-Eberly Telescope—very impressive instruments. After having had our fill of astronomy for the day, we headed back to town to the Limpia and then to the nearby Blue Mountain Bistro for our farewell dinner.

Friday, May 10 | Fort Davis to El Paso

Oddly, our last morning started out quite cool and misty, completely unlike any other morning of the tour. After loading up the van and having breakfast at the Stone Village Market, we headed west on the trip back to El Paso, passing again through the marvelous grasslands of the Marfa-Alpine-Fort Davis region. After a stop in Van Horn, we arrived at the El Paso airport and everyone embarked on their journeys home, tired but very happy.

Photo Credits:

Sunset through The Window after arrival in the Chisos Basin, Dave Mehlman (DM); “The Boot” in Boot Canyon up in the Chisos high country, DM; Lois wading mighty Terlingua Creek, DM; “What’s this about a bird feeder?”, DM; The crowd on Owl watch for the Elf Owl, DM; Zone-tailed Hawk, Sandy Sorkin (SS); Summer Tanager, Tom Dove (TD); Swainson’s Hawk, Carlos Sanchez (CS); Eastern Meadowlark, Terry Peterson (TP); Burrowing Owl, Greg Smith (GS); Common Black Hawk, GS; Golden-fronted Woodpecker, TP; Blue-winged Teal, Mahlon Hale (MH); Yellow-breasted Chat, TP; Black-throated Sparrow, CS; Blue Grosbeak, TP; Lesser Goldfinch, GS; Scott’s Oriole, Woody Wheeler (WW); Mule Deer, Peg Abbott (PA); Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, SS.