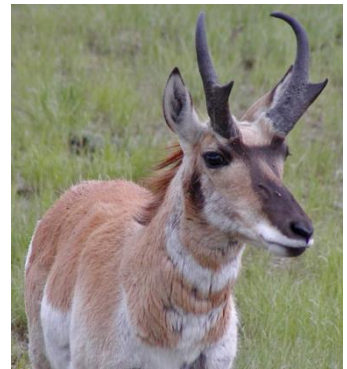


Texas Big Bend: Birding and Wildlife | Trip Report

April 22 - 29, 2019 | Written by Michael Marsden



With Guides Michael Marsden & David Mehlman, and participants Mark, Mary, Emma, Jayne, Kristin, Mark L, Sheila, Elizabeth, Jim, Marria, Nancy, and Stephen.





Monday, April 22

A large group, but numbers were more than offset by the expertise and assistance, of Dave as our second guide and driver. There were thankfully no delays at the airport, and we were able to leave El Paso in the early afternoon for our 200-mile drive to Alpine. The first couple of hours over largely birdless creosote flats, was not an inspiring start, but after Van Horn, the scenery changed markedly for the better; interspersed grasslands and succulent desert and the majestic mountains of the Trans Pecos as a backdrop. And it was in the stretch of Hwy 90 between Van Horn and Marfa that we had our introduction to some of the characteristic wildlife of the region - Chihuahuan Ravens, Swainson's Hawks, Pyrrhuloxias, and delightful groups of Pronghorn antelopes. Less characteristic was Elmgreen and Dragset's pop art Prada Marfa, standing incongruously in the desert miles from any other building.



We were able to spend a little time in Marfa, so we stopped by the wetlands just south of the town. Unhappily most of the ponds were dry, but there were still lots of Mexican Ducks together with a handful of Blue-winged Teal and, best of all, an adult male Yellow-headed Blackbird which, despite his gaudy plumage, somehow eluded us after our initial sighting. We then took a brief drive around the center of town to view the Hotel Paisano, County Courthouse, and some of the artists' studios. From there we drove on to the historic Holland Hotel in Alpine, where we were to spend the night, and a delicious dinner at the famed Reata Restaurant.

Tuesday, April 23

After an early breakfast at our hotel, we headed out to our first birding destination - Marathon's Fort Pena Colorado Park, better known to birders as the Post; the site of a former military outpost established in 1879 as protection against marauding Apaches. The road into the Park from Marathon was gratifyingly productive, with an array of species including Black-tailed Jackrabbits, Scaled Quail, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Say's Phoebe, Brewer's Sparrow, Greater Roadrunner, and a more surprising Least Flycatcher. And the cottonwoods in the Park were even birdier, with several family groups of Vermilion Flycatchers, as well as Orchard & Bullock's Orioles, Summer Tanagers, Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, and Cassin's, Western, & Scissor-tailed Flycatchers. A Virginia Rail calling in sedges by the pond couldn't be tempted out.





At Marathon's delightful Gage Gardens, we came across a trio of unexpected species – a roosting Barn Owl (shown to us by a helpful staff member), an American Robin (a rather uncommon migrant here), and Dave had a brief view of a waterthrush that was almost certainly a Louisiana that a local birder had seen in the same spot earlier in the week.

After a pleasant lunch at the V6 restaurant in Marathon, we headed to the grasslands north of the town, the site of an extensive Black-tailed Prairie Dog village, and the summer home of several Burrowing Owls. We quickly found our first owl and then spotted at least three others among the dozens of mounds. Other wildlife there included Pronghorns, Lark Buntings, and a singing Cassin's Sparrow.

We then started the long drive to dinner and our lodgings at the Chisos Mountain Lodge in the very heart of Big Bend National Park, with a stop at the Park's spectacular Fossil Discovery Exhibit on the way. Nights at the Lodge are renowned for their peace and tranquility - but not this time! Instead we experienced a night of the most momentous storms and prolonged bouts of hail and lightning. At least we were indoors.

Wednesday, April 24

After a filling breakfast, we collected our packed lunches and headed off to Rio Grande Village. One of our principal targets was a pair of Common Black-Hawks that have for several years nested in the cottonwoods along the Rio Grande. We soon located the nest and found one of the hawks perched nearby. Equally exciting were the close views in the campground of a hunting Greater Roadrunner and a foraging Collared Peccary. We then walked the Village's Nature Trail, which crosses a small wetland with a beaver pond before heading down to the Rio Grande. The wetland had a nice mix of wildlife – a feeding Nutria (an exotic from South America), a Texas Spiny Softshell turtle, a Plain-bellied Watersnake, a Black Phoebe, our second calling Virginia Rail of the trip, and even an overhead Common Black Hawk. The hike to the river was memorable for its many species of cacti, as well as for several deep perfectly cylindrical holes we saw in the limestone bedrock - metates made by native Indians for grinding mesquite beans and grain.

We had already planned to have our picnic lunch at Daniel's Ranch, and it was particularly fortuitous that this was also the location of a long-staying Tropical Parula. As soon as we arrived, Dave started to hunt for it and was soon successful, enabling everyone to have wonderful views of this rare visitor from Mexico. Other birds here included Gray Hawk, Painted Bunting, and Eastern Bluebird.

After a detour to view the Rio Grande and Mexico at Boquillas (where we had unforgettably close encounters with a juvenile Greater Roadrunner begging food from one of its parents), we visited Dugout Wells, a little oasis of water and mature trees surrounded by a vast expanse of shrub desert, where the highlight was a Verdin building one of its typically spherical nests.



On the way back we met heavy rain at the Panther Junction Visitors' Center, but it soon cleared up. We really were extraordinarily lucky with the weather throughout the trip.

Thursday, April 25

This was the day scheduled for our long trek in search of Warblers. In the end only six of us completed the entire loop (of some 11 miles) – others opted to stay around the Lodge, hike the shorter Basin Loop Trail or cover just part of the Pinnacles Trail. Thankfully the weather cooperated for everyone and we had a wonderful day - though we were surprised to come across piles of frozen hailstones from Tuesday night's storm in shaded corners along the trails!

On the way up on the Pinnacles Trail we saw many of the expected higher elevation species, including Hutton's Vireo, Cordilleran Flycatcher, Townsend's Warbler, White-breasted Nuthatch, and Dark-eyed Juncos. White-throated Swifts circled the high cliffs, and a Zone-tailed Hawk flew over, desperately trying to get away from a harassing American Kestrel. Our only hummingbirds were Blue-throated and Broad-tailed. We did get rather unsatisfactory sightings of two or three Colima Warblers on the Boot Canyon & Colima Trails, but our best views of that species were on our way down at the junction of the Colima & Laguna Meadows Trail, where a couple of birders we met had them staked out and helpfully pointed us in the right direction.

For once, though, the bird of the day was not the Colima but a Slate-throated Redstart, yet another rare visitor from Mexico that had established territory by the creek at the start of the Juniper Trail. We (eventually!) found the place and spent several delightful minutes watching as the redstart pirouetted, constantly singing, in the trees around us.



One of the advantages of staying at Chisos Mountain Lodge is the wealth of wildlife that can be seen on and around its grounds. Its 5400' elevation and variety of habitats attract both low and high elevation species. Those we saw there during our stay included Acorn Woodpeckers, Say's Phoebe, Mexican Jay, Canyon Towhee, Cactus Wren, Black-throated & Rufous-crowned Sparrows, Black-headed Grosbeak, and Scott's Oriole. Most memorable, though, was a pair of Hepatic Tanagers persistently fluttering against the windows of the restaurant each day while we were eating. The food was pretty good!

Friday, April 26

Today we headed towards the southwestern corner of Big Bend. Our first stop was at the old Sam Nail Ranch with similar habitat to Dugout Wells. But here we found several species that were new for the trip Cedar Waxwing, MacGillivray's Warbler, Varied Bunting, Brewer's Blackbird, and Yellow-breasted Chat, which seemed to be everywhere - with the bonus of stunning views in ideal light of adult male Pyrrhuloxias in all their splendor.



Next stop was the trail at Lower Burro Mesa Pour-off and its exhilarating mix of spectacular cliffs and wildlife-rich habitats. Here we had our best sightings of Rock Wrens, but the highlight was scope views of a remarkably cooperative Gray Vireo – not a particularly rare bird, but one that can be frustratingly elusive. Then on to the Cottonwood Campground for our picnic lunch, and more birds – Brown-crested Flycatcher, Bullock's Oriole, and Western Tanager in the cottonwoods, and a Lucy's Warbler which Dave managed to track down in the surrounding brush.



After lunch we drove down to the Rio Grande at Santa Elena. The scenery here is awesome with the sheer limestone walls of the canyon towering 1500' above us. There is a trail across Terlingua Creek, past an overlook with breathtaking views and on into the heart of the canyon, but by now it was very hot: Mark and Ingrid braved the entire walk, others got as far as the overlook, while some of us stayed behind to enjoy the peace of the river.

After life-saving ice creams and drinks at the historic Castalon store, we drove to the golf course at Lajitas, where one of the ponds had proved productive in the past. Unhappily, though, the land was being developed for housing and the pond was screened from view. The delights of the neighboring Yates Longhorn Museum having proved resistible, we back-tracked to the former mining town of Terlingua, now settled by as intriguing a bunch of folk as one could imagine, for a shopping spree and our scheduled dinner at the inimitable Starlight Theater with its delicious food and live music.



Saturday, April 27

One of the greatest pleasures of any birding vacation in Big Bend is the opportunity to visit Christmas Mountain Oasis, the domain of the indomitable Carolyn Ohl-Johnson, who has through unimaginably hard work created a birding paradise and comfortable home in the midst of a seemingly unpromising creosote desert. All the feeders were active during our visit, giving us memorable views of several Lucifer Hummingbirds, Carolyn's signature species, as well as Black-chinned Hummingbirds, and a more unexpected Varied Bunting. Carolyn also kindly showed us two active Bell's Vireo nests. Other birds we came across on her land included Scaled Quail, Scott's Oriole, Blue Grosbeak, Nashville Warbler, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Brewer's Sparrow, and a flock of at least 30 Lark Buntings. We were particularly privileged on this visit to be invited to tour Carolyn's remarkable home and to be told something of its history and the problems she overcame in building it.

After a quick lunch at Fort Davis, we headed straight for Davis Mountains State Park. The uplands here enjoy more rainfall than Big Bend and haven't been quite so badly degraded by overgrazing and are generally greener and less austere. And the birds are often surprisingly different – no Blue-throated or Lucifer Hummingbirds, no Colima Warblers or Mexican Jays but, unlike Big Bend, there are nesting Woodhouse Scrub-Jays, Western Wood-Pewees, Gray Flycatchers, Lark & Chipping Sparrows, and Western Bluebirds (all of which we saw in the area during our visits). Other species we came across in the Park included Northern Waterthrush, Pine Siskin, and Rufous-crowned & Clay-colored Sparrows.



On our way back to Fort Davis and the Hotel Limpia, where we were to spend the next two nights (and dine each evening at their superlative Blue Mountain Bistro!), we stopped off to visit the Fort Davis Historic Park, a particularly well maintained example of a frontier military post that had been active during the later Indian wars between 1854 and 1891

Sunday, April 28

Our last full day! After an early breakfast and another brief visit to Davis Mountains State Park, we drove to the Lawrence Wood Picnic Grounds and walked the 2.4 miles of the Nature Conservancy's Madera Canyon Trail. This traverses a rich mix of grassland and pinyon/juniper habitats and skirts an often-productive pond. Birds here included Black-crested Titmouse, Gray Flycatcher, Cassin's & Western Kingbirds, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Bushtit, Western Bluebird, Townsend's Solitaire, Dark-eyed Junco, calling Wild Turkey and Black-chinned Sparrows.

After a few hectic days of birding, a more relaxed afternoon seemed called for, so we opted to take a fascinating conducted tour of the McDonald Observatory, and return early to our hotel. It was not entirely birdless, however – a Zone-tailed Hawk flew over the hotel and, at dusk, we returned briefly to the State Park to watch two Elf Owls emerge from their daytime roost.

Monday, April 29

We had to get back to El Paso for noon and, after a leisurely breakfast at the Fort Davis Drug Store, there was little time for birding, but those travelling with Dave had the bonus of a new species – an immature Golden Eagle - and we all had farewell views of Chihuahuan Ravens, Swainson's Hawks, and Pronghorns to conclude an enjoyable and productive trip to West Texas.

Photo Credits:

Summer Tanager, Tom Dove (TD); Colima Warbler, TD; Golden-fronted Woodpecker, TD; Yellow-headed Blackbird, Carlos Sanchez (CS); Swainson's Hawk, CS; Pronghorn, Peg Abbott (PA); Pyrrhuloxia, Barry Ulman (BU); Western Flycatcher, PA; Vermillion Flycatcher, Xavier Munoz (XM); Virginia Rail, TD; Burrowing Owl, Greg Smith (GS); Tropical Parula, Mike Boyce (MB); White-breasted Nuthatch, Doug Greenberg (DG); Cordilleran Flycatcher, Sandy Sorkin (SS); Dark-eyed Junco, Hugh Simmons (HS); Slate-throated Redstart (PA); Bullocks Oriole, PA; Northern Waterthrush, CS; Pine Siskin, SS; Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Richard Becker (RB); Group photo, Michael Marsden (MM).