

South Texas Birding & Nature | Trip Report

Feb. 23 – Mar. 1, 2020 | Written by Michael Marsden



With guide Michael Marsden, and participants Louise, Holly, Dan, Julie, Gail, Jean, and Delsa





Sun., Feb. 23 Arrival in Corpus Christi | Texas Coastal Bend Birding

We all met at noon in Corpus Christi, and it was apparent from the outset that this was going to be a companionable group with a complementary mix of attributes, including the birding experience of Gail, Julie, and Dan, the photographic expertise of Jean and Desla, and the sharp eyes and ears of Louise and Holly. We initially drove north by way of Mustang Island and the birding hotspots of Port Aransas. Along the way, we came across just about all the expected waders and shorebirds, including Little Blue Herons, Reddish Egrets, and a sole Piping Plover in a flock of Semipalmated Plovers.

At the Port Aransas Birding Center (now fully repaired—and improved—after the devastation of Hurricane Harvey in 2017), we were delighted by Roseate Spoonbills in full nuptial plumage, flocks of American Avocets and American White Pelicans, close views of Gull-billed Terns, and best of all the arrival of two Whooping Cranes just a few yards from the observation platform. The oddest sight, though, was of a uniformly café-au-lait-colored Common Gallinule seemingly lacking all melanin in its plumage.

One bird we did not see here on our initial visit was a hoped-for Mew Gull, a Texas rarity that had been in the area for about a month. We were lucky, though, to meet Rockport birder Susan Foster who told us to come back at 3:30 p.m. when it would likely make an appearance. Sure enough, on our return just a few minutes after Susan's forecast time (following a productive visit to the beach, where we came across a lone Bonaparte's Gull, several Sandwich Terns, and an unseasonable Common Tern), just about the first bird we saw was the gull! After a brief visit to Paradise Pond, we caught the ferry to the mainland on the way to the Inn at Fulton Harbor and a welcome seafood dinner at Charlotte Plummer's. Before getting to the Inn, though, we couldn't resist a diversion through Rockport Beach Park to end our birding day with close views of at least 150 Black Skimmers roosting there.

Mon., Feb. 24 Whooping Crane Boat Tour | Aransas National Wildlife Refuge

This was the morning we were to go on one of the *Skimmer's* celebrated Whooping Crane tours. There had been forecasts, happily mistaken, of stormy weather—instead we enjoyed calm waters and a sunny morning. It was a wonderful tour. Captain Jay, standing in for Captain Tommy, is a trained biologist and knowledgeable about the



ecology of the bays and the natural history of Whooping Cranes. Even better, he was able to maneuver the boat to give us memorably close views of Whooping Cranes, both feeding and in flight. We saw about 16 during the trip, and Jean and Delsa were able to take some splendid photographs. Other notable sightings included an overhead Peregrine Falcon, an adult Lesser Black-backed Gull, a pair of Boat-tailed Grackles (at the very southern boundary of their Texas range), close-ups of American Oystercatchers, a brief view of a flying American Bittern, Reddish Egrets in nuptial plumage showing off their startlingly bright pink bills, and Bottle-nosed Dolphins gamboling in the boat's wake.

After lunch, we drove north across the Copano Bay causeway to the Lamar Peninsula, the location of Goose Island State Park and other productive birding sites. We started birding at Eighth Street, where a partially flooded pasture held 4 Whooping Cranes and a dozen Sandhill Cranes (both taking advantage of grain supplied by a nearby rancher), together with Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, White Ibises, Roseate Spoonbills, Neotropic Cormorants, Anhingas, and other water birds.

The Big Tree, part of Goose Island State Park, is reputedly the largest Live Oak in Texas and some one thousand years old. Remarkably it survived Hurricane Harvey unscathed. Eastern Bluebirds graced its branches at the time of our visit. At the Park's feeders, we saw a bathing Gray Catbird, as well as Chipping, Lincoln's, and Field Sparrows, the latter being particularly welcome as they are rare in the Valley and would be unlikely to be seen again on our tour. But the most memorable sight was of several Brown and American White Pelicans gathered around the fish-cleaning station, patiently waiting for handouts from the fishermen. It was by then time to return to our hotel and an enjoyable dinner at Rockport's Glow restaurant.

Tues., Feb. 25 Port Aransas | South Texas Ranchland

Today we were to drive south to the Rio Grande Valley through some of the richest birding areas in the U.S. We started in Rockport, a birding paradise with an abundance of outstanding sites of which we only had time for brief stops at Tule Wetlands, Moore's Pond, Cape Valero, and Live Oak Country Club. The only new species we came across was Ruddy Duck, though a perched Peregrine at Cape Valero unconcerned by our proximity was the real highlight.

We then birded the coastal wetlands at Portland's Indian Point Park with its opportunities for close views of shorebirds and waders. A walk on the trails at Pollywog Ponds was next and there we came across our first South Texas regional specialties—Least Grebes, Long-billed Thrashers, and a Green Kingfisher. Other birds included Ring-necked Duck and a spectacularly handsome drake Hooded Merganser.



We enjoyed a picnic lunch at Hazel Bazemore County Park, celebrated among birders as the site of one of the country's leading hawk watches. There was no raptor migration on our visit, of course, but we did see a Red-shouldered Hawk, as well as Vermilion Flycatcher, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Great Kiskadee, Black-crested Titmouse, and other characteristic birds of the area.

From there, the drive south took us through some of the famed ranchlands of South Texas. To get a feel for the area we spent a little time around Sarita, where many of the employees of the Kenedy Ranch live. Much of the surrounding habitat is mesquite brushland giving us great views of Crested Caracaras and Harris's Hawks. More intriguingly, though, were the Nilgai—huge exotic antelopes which have increased in numbers in South Texas so dramatically over the last few decades that they have become an unwelcome pest here and yet, ironically, are endangered in their native India and Pakistan.

We arrived at the Rancho Viejo Country Club and Resort, where we were to stay for the next two nights, before dark and so were able to enjoy a little birding in and around the resaca (the local name for an ox-bow lake) right by our accommodation. A real surprise was a dozen or so Least Grebes on the water—a species never before recorded on eBird from this location.

Wed., Feb. 26 Old Post Isabel Rd. | South Padre Island

After breakfast we had the rest of the day to cover as much birding in Cameron County as we could squeeze in. Our first stop was at Old Port Isabel Road, where we were lucky enough to see not only an Aplomado Falcon but also a couple of White-tailed Hawks—surely the two most handsome raptors species in North America? We then drove north through Bayview, with its miles of resacas and side-by-side views of Anhingas and Neotropic & Double-crested Cormorants, to Laguna Atascosa NWR, where we birded the Kiskadee Trail and Osprey Overlook. The main attractions at the Refuge were the bird-feeding stations, where we, and especially the photographers, enjoyed particularly close views of Green Jays, Plain Chachalacas, Olive Sparrows, Great Kiskadees, White-tipped Doves, and Long-billed Thrashers. A pair of hunting Greater Roadrunners, seemingly oblivious of our presence, was a welcome bonus.

From there we headed to South Padre Island, where we walked the boardwalks over the wetlands at both the Convention Center and the Birding & Nature Center. Again, the delight here was how close we could get to the birds—just about all the waders, including Roseate Spoonbills in full nuptial plumage, Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, Mottled Ducks, Stilt Sandpipers, and Long-billed Dowitchers among many others. A curiosity here was a duck that seemed from its white-edged speculum (and had been reported as) a Mexican Duck, but it also showed a dark spot at the base of its lower mandible characteristic of Mottled Duck and may well have been a hybrid Mexican Mottled Duck.



Back on the mainland, we drove south on Hwy 48 towards Brownsville, seeing Chihuahuan Ravens by the roadside and stopping briefly at the Zapata Boat Memorial Ramp flats with their dozens of Black Skimmers and other larids, and a plethora of shorebirds, including our only Marbled Godwits of the tour.

Our next stop was the University of Texas campus in Brownsville. Many of the buildings are situated around a resaca which has become a major birding spot in recent years. The star bird at the time of our visit was a long-staying Common Black Hawk, and we eventually did get wonderful scope views of it perched in trees by the resaca. Other birds here included Green Kingfisher, Black Phoebe, Tropical Kingbird, House Finches, and flyover Green Parakeets.

Brownsville's Oliveira Park with its roosting flock of parrots was our final destination, and we were soon in the midst (and noise!) of some 200 as they flew in and perched side-by-side on power lines in front of us before finally settling in the eucalyptus trees in the park. Most were Red-crowns but there were also about 50 White-fronted Parrots keeping a little aloof from their cousins. It was a fitting climax to a productive day of birding, which we celebrated with dinner at Lola's Bistro in Brownsville before driving back to Rancho Viejo and a restful night.

Thurs., Feb. 27 Santa Ana NWR | Estero Llano Grande State Park

We started our Hidalgo County birding at the renowned Santa Ana NWR with its over 2000 acres of riparian forest, thornscrub, and wetlands. We had already seen many of the birds there, but this was an opportunity to study them in as pristine an environment as can now be found in the Valley. And we did add some new species for the trip, most notably White-faced Ibis, Ringed Kingfisher, Clay-colored Thrush, Altamira Oriole, and gloriously colored drake Cinnamon Teals with their rather drabber mates. Louise also heard a calling Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, but none of us could get a view of it.

After a delicious lunch at the Blue Onion in Weslaco, we spent most of the afternoon at Estero Llano Grande State Park. This is now perhaps the most popular refuge with both local residents and visiting birders in the Valley. Many of the birds here become so used to people that they seem to lose much of their innate wariness, much to the delight of photographers and others. One of the birding highlights at Estero is a Pauraque that has for several years roosted in much the same area by Alligator Pond. All the birding guides know this and have happily shown it to many hundreds of visitors. This time, though, it wasn't there! It had apparently moved further into the brush to a more secluded area where it traditionally nested. Fortunately, we later bumped into Huck Hutchens, the volunteer naturalist at the Park, who very kindly went out of his way to show us a couple of roosting Pauraques in another part of the Park. They were so well camouflaged that we'd never have found them without Huck's help.



Among the over 60 other species we came across at Estero were a pair of White-tailed Kites, two Wilson's Snipes (at close range in full view), Black Phoebe, Green Kingfisher, and at least a dozen Least Grebes. Along the Arroyo Colorado were flocks of American Avocets, Black-necked Stilts, Long-billed Dowitchers, Stilt Sandpipers, and American White Pelicans.

On our way to the Alamo Inn, where we were to stay for the next three nights, we briefly visited the Progreso grain silos, where we were able to pick out several Yellow-headed Blackbirds and Bronzed Cowbirds among the many thousands of Red-winged Blackbirds there.

Fri., Feb. 28 Bentsen-Rio GV State Park | Edinburg Scenic Wetlands

Just six of us set out this morning for Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park as Jean and Delsa had planned a specialist day of photography with the Alamo Inn's Mary Beth Stowe. On the way, we were happily distracted by a flock of 150 or so Green Parakeets that had settled on wires directly above the road we were driving along. They stayed long enough for us all to get out of the van and experience their dazzling color in the morning sun.

At Bentsen, we walked the main trail past the Nature Center to Kingfisher Overlook at the Park's resaca and the nearby Green Jay birding blind. There was very little on the water, but the feeders gave us wonderful views of a multitude of Plain Chachalacas, Green Jays, Altamira Orioles, and White-tipped Doves. We returned to the Visitors' Center by way of the Kiskadee Trail, getting unsatisfactory glimpses of a Gray Hawk and (at last!) more than satisfactory ones of a Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet. Birds at the Center included both Black-chinned and Buff-bellied Hummingbirds at the feeders, a couple of Black Phoebes by the water feature, and several Curve-billed Thrashers in the gardens.

After a picnic lunch at Bentsen, we drove on to Anzalduas County Park, situated on the banks of the Rio Grande. The first bird we saw as we entered was a Say's Phoebe—a rare visitor here, but one that had been in the park for some weeks. Other birds included a Ringed Kingfisher on the river and several Vermilion Flycatchers.

One of the attractions of Anzalduas is a grass field that has for many years been the wintering territory of a small number of Sprague's Pipits. The problem is that the field is huge and the pipits small and disinclined to fly. The only way generally to see them is to walk the field in the hope of disturbing one and identifying it by its characteristic call and flight action. This time, however, the grass had just been cut and we were lucky enough to spot the birds on the ground without having to put them up. We were then able to watch four of them for prolonged periods through a scope! We had invited a couple of visiting birders to join us in the pipit hunt and they told us about a perched adult Gray Hawk they had seen earlier near the park entrance. We soon relocated it and again had amazing views of another prize species.



We then visited Granjeno, where a Burrowing Owl peeped up at us from among the stones of its adopted winter home. From there, we popped into Hidalgo to view nesting Monk Parakeets, and finished our birding day at the Edinburg Scenic Wetlands, where we at last came across some wintering warblers (Black-and white, Yellow-throated and Wilson's), as well as Verdin, Lesser Goldfinches, and roosting Cattle Egrets.

Sat., Feb. 29 Rio Grande | Salineño | Rancho Lomitas

An early start as we set out on the long drive west to Starr County. Our first birding stop was on the banks of the Rio Grande at Salineño, where we watched Ospreys fishing in the river. We also saw Green Kingfisher, Vermilion Flycatcher, Couch's Kingbird, and a flying Mexican Duck showing its characteristic white-edged speculums. We tried with other visiting birders for White-collared Seedeaters, but we were all out of luck that morning.

At the feeders, we as always enjoyed the warm hospitality of Merle and Lois while having unforgettable views of Audubon and Altamira Orioles, Green Jays, Great Kiskadees, White-tipped Doves, and Long-billed Thrashers among others. A Greater Roadrunner made several appearances—at one time killing, and presumably then eating, a Red-winged Blackbird!

We then headed out for Benito and Toni Trevino's Rancho Lomitas, where we ate our picnic lunch (supplemented by Toni's delicious homemade mesquite cookies!) next to one of the Ranch's three bird-feeding stations. Almost at once we saw an Audubon's Oriole, together with Pyrrhuloxias, Cactus Wrens, and Olive Sparrows, while one of the Ranch's almost tame Greater Roadrunners kept an eye out for stray food. At a second set of feeders we also saw Black-throated Sparrows and coveys of both Scaled Quail and Northern Bobwhites.

The highlight of the visit was a guided tour of the Ranch (on a truck-drawn wagon!) by Benito, a leading ethnobotanist and born story-teller. Benito beguiled us with tales of family and regional history and of the many uses he and his forbears made of native plants. Our driver was the Ranch's resident naturalist, Jim Seeden, who afterwards shared his expertise in natural history with us and allowed us to watch the many birds coming to his feeders. Rancho really is an enchanting place!

Sun., March 1 Bannworth Park | McAllen Nature Center | Departures

After a brief visit to Bannworth Park in McAllen, where we saw over a hundred Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks but not the hoped for Fulvous, we spent our last morning at the McAllen Nature Center, formerly the city's botanic gardens, with its feeders and well maintained trails - ideally relaxed birding before a plane journey!



And right at the entrance there were 3 Lark Sparrows, a new species #178 for the tour. Other birds we came across included Green Kingfisher, Pyrrhuloxia, Cave Swallow, Tropical Kingbird, a flock of Green Parakeets and an Inca Dove sitting on its nest. Most notable, though, was an Audubon's Oriole at the Center's feeders. This is normally a very rare bird in Hidalgo County but there had been several sightings this winter, including this one which had been here for about a month.

We concluded the morning with a walk around La Piedad Cemetery next to the McAllen Airport. This produced no new species, so our total remained at 178 (not counting 3 feral species - or the probable hybrid duck!).



Photo Credits:

Red-crowned Parrots, Delsa Anderl (DA); Bird watching, DA; Golden-fronted Woodpecker, DA; White-eyed vireo, DA; Curve-billed Thrasher, DA; Great Blue Heron, DA; Wilson's Snipe, DA; Last day birding, DA; Greater Roadrunner with a Red-winged Blackbird, DA; American White Pelicans, DA; Roseate Spoonbill, DA; Whooping Cranes, DA; Least Grebe, DA; White-tailed Hawk, DA; Green Jay, DA; Green Kingfisher, DA; Olive Sparrow, DA; Altamira Oriole, DA; Green Parakeet, Holly Fulton; Scaled Quail, DA; Great Kiskadee & Golden-fronted Woodpecker, DA; Group shot, DA; Pyrrhuloxia, DA.