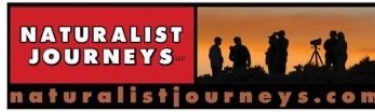


# Texas Big Bend National Park\* | Trip Report

April 19 – 26, 2021 | Written by Dave Mehlman



**With guides Dave Mehlman, Bryan Calk, and Kathleen Hall, and participants Betsy, Brenda, Carol, Elaine, Ginny, Jerry, Karren, Leigh, Linda, Sue, Taylor, and Tina**







Before launching into the trip report, I have to introduce this tour. I think for many of us, including myself, this was the first major outing in over a year. The tour faced a bunch of challenges in its planning and implementation, some anticipated and others not. Of course, the greatest known challenge was the Covid Pandemic which has forced changes large and small on the entire travel industry. However, this tour in particular faced many “unknown unknown” challenges, which included (in no particular order): unusually cold weather (it was 38° F on one of our mornings in Fort Davis; most in the group did not plan on this); a large fire in the Chisos Mountains high country, which resulted in the complete closure of the Chisos Basin area (including the lodge and campground) until April 23 (which lost us two of the nights planned there) and the closure (to this day) of all but one of the Chisos back-country trails which we normally hike; and the unexpected change in lead guide for the tour at nearly the last minute due to an unexpected illness. Many people pitched in to help out in making this tour a success. At the risk of forgetting some, I would like to acknowledge Peg, Carrie, Sarah, and Elissa from Naturalist Journeys for tirelessly working as hard as humanly possible to pull off all the logistics (meals, lodging, transportation, scheduling); Bryan for being willing and able to head off to Texas at the last minute and step in as a guide on the tour; Kathleen for being willing and able to implement a complicated vehicle shuttle, allowing Bryan to both participate and meet his prior commitments (and to get everyone back to El Paso!); all the staff (many of whom I do not know) at the places we stayed and ate for their work in providing food and lodging, particularly Jennifer at the Fort Davis Drug Store and Laura at Chisos Basin Lodge, who went out of our way to facilitate our trip; and, not in the least, all the participants who made the decision to travel with us during these “interesting” times. To all of you, my greatest thanks!

## Mon., Apr. 19 Arrivals in El Paso, Texas | Fort Davis

Several in the group arrived the previous day, staying at various places in El Paso. During the morning, everyone assembled at the airport and headed out for adventure! Dividing up into the various vehicles, Bryan (aka “Owl Man”) headed out first and took his passengers to Van Horn for a break, for some “shopping” at Porter’s, and some early birding at the Van Horn cemetery. Dave (aka “Terlingua Stud”), accompanied by Sue, Carol, and Jerry driving themselves, headed off soon thereafter and stopped in Sierra Blanca for a brief rest. The various vehicles then continued on and stopped at the Point of Rocks Roadside Picnic Area on the way to Fort Davis, where we found a Black-chinned Hummingbird nest under construction and admired the beautiful flowers of blooming Mexican Buckeye. Continuing on to Fort Davis, we arrived and checked into the historic Hotel Limpia and got settled into our rooms. The group met just before dinner in the Limpia’s breakfast room to review the upcoming the trip, get the bird lists and other Naturalist Journeys goodies, and discuss plans for the next day. Dinner that evening was at the Fort Davis Drug Store across the street from the Limpia. Originally scheduled to be outside, we ran into very cool, unseasonably so, weather, so we ate in the Drug Store’s upstairs private dining room.



## **Tues., Apr. 20    The Davis Mountains**

For our first true field day, we headed across the street to the Fort Davis Drug Store, which kindly opened extra early, to have breakfast. Fortunately, Dave brought the most excellent meal order list (put together by Carrie, our excellent meal planner) and helped everyone remember what they ordered so long ago! Then, we loaded up and headed first to Davis Mountains State Park to watch the action at the two wildlife blinds. The birds were plentiful and constant: immediately greeted by a large flock of Cedar Waxwings, we found many other avian goodies, including Green-tailed Towhee, Black-throated Sparrow, a Lincoln's Sparrow, Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay (the typical jay of the Davis Mountains), Black-crested Titmouse, the previously reported Brown Thrasher at the interpretive center blind (quite rare in these parts, much to the amusement of the eastern members of the group), and, as if on command, a Zone-tailed Hawk flying with Turkey Vultures (as if in a birding instruction video).

Though it was hard to turn away, we then headed up to the Lawrence E. Wood Picnic Area, where Bryan led some folks around the picnic area and Dave led the others on a hike on the Nature Conservancy's Madera Canyon Trail. Though the morning was kind of slow (possibly due to the cool weather), we managed great views including Wild Turkey, Lark Sparrow, and a Plumbeous Vireo, plus a good flight of Red Satyrs on the trail. Hungry, we enjoyed a fine picnic lunch of the world's best chicken salad (thanks to Carrie for that one, too!) at the picnic area. After lunch, we headed back into town with a stop at the Fort Davis National Historic Site.

After enjoying another pleasant dinner upstairs at the Drug Store, we all loaded back up at about 7:30 PM and headed back to Davis Mountains State Park. First, we made a stop to look for more birds at the wildlife blinds, then joined the large crowd at the famed telephone pole in the campground and finally saw the Elf Owl appear in its hole at dusk. A great way to end a great day!

## **Wed., Apr. 21    The Post at Marathon | Prairie Dogs | Alpine**

We enjoyed our final breakfast at the Drug Store (giving hearty thanks to Jennifer and her team for their enormous efforts to feed us), packed and loaded the SUVs and drove through the town of Alpine and then on to Marfa to bird The Post (Fort Peña Colorado Park). This is Dave's favorite birding site on the whole tour and, indeed, it did not disappoint! The mix of wetland, cottonwoods, and desert habitats kept Bryan and Dave jumping, pointing out birds left, right, up, down, and sideways. Our first waterbirds were found, including Green



Heron, Pied-billed Grebe, American Coot, American Wigeon, Gadwall, Mexican Duck, Solitary Sandpiper, and a Belted Kingfisher. An unbelievable identification clinic was held with both Cave and Cliff Swallows perched next to each other in a tree in the full morning sun, making it easy to distinguish the differences between forehead patch colors and size and throat color on the two species—neither Dave nor Bryan had experienced anything quite like that. This was soon followed by excellent viewing of the ubiquitous, but cryptically colored and hard to see, Bell's Vireo. But the hits just kept on coming—some searching by the guides yielded interesting and hard to find species there (also with pretty good views) including Blue Grosbeak, Swamp Sparrow, Marsh Wren, and a super view of a Broad-winged Hawk soaring just overhead.

Though it was hard to leave, everyone was pretty satisfied with this wonderful place, so we drove northwest of Marathon for a quick visit to the local prairie dog town. Although the diversity of species was low, we found classic prairie dog town species (after some diligent searching) such as Black-tailed Prairie Dog, 2 Burrowing Owls, 2 Loggerhead Shrikes, Ferruginous Hawk, Swainson's Hawk, a bunch of Pronghorn, and a Coyote.

Running a bit late, we then headed back to Alpine for a delectable lunch on the patio at Reata, then took a quick break to get "supplies" at the Porter's grocery store across the street. After the break, we headed over to Johnson Ponds (the Alpine home of well-known local conservationist Carolyn Ohl-Johnson) for birding. A great local rarity was seen by some: a previously reported Wood Thrush (Carolyn was out trying to take pictures of it). Other nice birds seen included Inca Dove, Cassin's Kingbird, Common Yellowthroat, and Wilson's Warbler.

In late afternoon, we headed south of town to our destination for the evening: the Cattleman's Guest House (an Airbnb ranch home; big thanks to Carrie for finding this place since our plans were in flux at that point). Fortunately, the combination Dave had been given opened the gate and then, carefully following Peg's instructions, Dave assigned rooms (and bathrooms!) to everyone. After unloading everything, he and Bryan went back to Alpine to check into their hotel rooms and procure dinner and breakfast supplies for the hungry masses. Unfortunately for all concerned, the BBQ place Dave had planned to procure a dinner from was not open on weekdays in the evenings, so Bryan and Dave quickly implemented plan J-3-b for meals and found some frozen pizza at Porter's. That, along with leftovers from the previous day's lunch, kept everyone satisfied.

## **Thurs., Apr. 22 Alpine | Christmas Mountains Oasis | Terlingua**

Chef Brenda, having flown in especially from California, spearheaded the cooking of a breakfast casserole and fruit salad for the group (and many pitched in to make the all-important coffee!). Bryan and Dave arrived, and Bryan promptly found a Western Screech-Owl in the trees outside the front door, which was soon accompanied by a Great Horned Owl on a nearby telephone pole—an owl of a morning for sure!

After packing and loading and doing final cleaning of the AirBnB, we headed south toward Terlingua, stopping at the famed Christmas Mountains Oasis en-route.





The Christmas Mountains Oasis is a well-known site to birders visiting the Big Bend region, though the drive in is *interesting!* We met Carolyn there again as she continues her tireless efforts to improve the Oasis; Dave, who had been there before, particularly admired the new viewing structures that had been put up since his last visit. There were way too many excellent birds seen here to list, but some of the highlights included Lucifer Hummingbird (this being one of the most, if not the most, reliable places to see this species in the U.S.), Pyrrhuloxia, Phainopepla, Scaled Quail, Hermit Thrush, Ash-throated Flycatcher, and a brief appearance of a male Varied Bunting.

After the Oasis, which was extraordinarily hard to tear ourselves away from, the famished group stopped at the legendary DB's Rustic Iron BBQ food truck in Terlingua, which Dave had found on Yelp (he was determined to get the group some good Texas BBQ somewhere, somehow on the trip). Good BBQ was enjoyed by all, and DB bailed out Dave's poor bulk BBQ ordering skills by giving us an extra pound and a half of his awesome brisket (which was inhaled, I believe, it was so good)!

We continued down to the Barton Warnock Visitor Center of the Big Bend Ranch State Park and wandered the interpretive trails there. Next, we drove back to Study Butte and visited the Study Butte/Terlingua Wastewater Treatment Plant for some specialty birds, you have just gotta go to where the birds are! Several interesting things were seen (and, of course, added to the trip bird list) such as a previously reported Least Grebe, Cinnamon Teal, Wilson's Phalarope, Baird's Sandpiper, and American Pipit. In our eagerness to see these goodies, we were chased off the treatment plant berm, standing on which was NOT ALLOWED! Avoiding arrest, we then drove a very short distance to our night's lodging at Big Bend Resorts & Adventures. After an agonizingly long check in process, everyone finally got in their rooms (to quote Brenda about this place: "I've stayed in worse!"). We then journeyed to old town Terlingua and enjoyed a fine dinner at the Starlight Theatre, of course paying our respects to the right honorable ex-mayor Clay Henry, proudly mounted and displayed on the Starlight stage with beer bottle in mouth.

## **Fri., Apr. 23 Big Bend National Park**

We packed and loaded extra early, early enough that a few Lesser Nighthawks were still flying around under the highway lights and landing in the road and driveways of the Resort. We drove a short distance to the excellent coffee bar at Far Flung Outdoor Center, where we were knocking down the doors! Much to our dismay, we consumed all the Terlingua Studs they had, so some had to settle for "mere" walnut muffins.



After breakfast, we finally were headed to Big Bend National Park. To respect the National Park Service's guidelines restricting groups to  $\leq 8$  people, we separated into two approximately equal groups for the day. Bryan led his group to the west side of the park and Dave led the other half to the east side.

The *westsiders* visited numerous sites for the day, including Sam Nail Ranch, Sotol Vista, Lower Burro Mesa Pour-off, Cottonwood Campground, and Santa Elena Canyon. On the way back, the "traditional" stop was made at the Castolon store (alas, a new version to replace the old one that burned up in the 2019 fires) for ice cream.

The *eastsiders* had a bit farther to go, but sites visited included Dugout Wells, Rio Grande Village, the Rio Grande Village campground and nature trail, the Daniel's Ranch picnic area, and Boquillas Canyon. On the return trip to the Basin, a brief stop was made at Panther Junction (Big Bend National Park headquarters) to walk the nature trail and admire the rapidly growing agave flower stalk (aka "the asparagus"). On the way back, it was fascinating to note the temperature change: 95° F at Boquillas Canyon upon departure and 74° F at Chisos Basin upon arrival! The birding was a special highlight of the day (in addition to the fabulous scenery); some of the more notable finds included Black-and-white, Orange-crowned, Wilson's, Black-throated Gray Warblers and Northern Parula at Dugout Wells; White-faced Ibis, American Pipit, and Solitary Sandpiper in the flooded areas of the campground; Black Vulture, Northern Cardinal, Spotted Sandpiper, Lesser Nighthawk, and Carolina Wren on the Nature Trail; a Common Black-Hawk on its nest at the Village; a Western Coachwhip at Boquillas Canyon (which Dave and a few hardy souls hiked into, it being "only" 93° F!); and Javelinas and a spectacular pair of Gray Hawks and several Summer Tanagers at Daniel's Ranch. The Nature Trail was also very good in yielding non-avian species, including Plain-bellied Watersnake, Big Bend Slider, Texas Spiny Softshell, and the invasive Tilapia and Bullfrog. A picnic lunch was enjoyed under the cottonwoods at Daniel's Ranch, with supplies partially procured by Leigh and Tina, whom the group charged with foraging in the Rio Grande Village store for lunch meat and cheese.

We all re-converged late in the afternoon at the Chisos Basin Lodge, timing our arrival to miss the afternoon road closure into the Basin (though there were slight delays on the road due to one-lane only travel). Bryan's group had arrived first and obtained all the room keys, so the *eastsiders* immediately enjoyed our comfy rooms at the lodge. Dave & Bryan then retrieved the first of many take-out meals from the hard-working food staff at the lodge and we ate at a couple of picnic tables near the rooms.





### Sat., Apr. 24 Big Bend National Park

This day was essentially exactly the same as the previous day, except that Dave's group went to the West side and Brian's to the East.

The westsiders visited numerous sites for the day, including Sam Nail Ranch, Sotol Vista, Lower Burro Mesa Pouroff, Cottonwood Campground, and Santa Elena Canyon. On the way back, a stop was made at the Castolon store for ice cream. Always an enjoyable outing, some of the interesting sightings included Yellow-breasted Chat and Brewer's and Black-throated Sparrows at Sam Nail; several of the Gray-headed form of the Dark-eyed Junco, Green-tailed Towhee, Red-tailed Hawk, and a Rock Squirrel foraging on Ocotillo flowers at the Pouroff; Gray Hawk, Great Horned Owl, Brown-crested Flycatcher, and Northern Rough-winged Swallow at Cottonwood; and a surprising Northern Harrier from the Santa Elena Canyon Overlook. Alas, the team was not enthused about the trek into the Canyon, but the Castolon ice cream perked everybody up.

The eastsiders visited Dugout Wells, Rio Grande Village, the Rio Grande Village campground and nature trail, the Daniel's Ranch picnic area, and Boquillas Canyon.

Returning to the Chisos Basin, we rendezvoused for the usual bird checklist, plans for the following day, and our take-out dinners.

### Sun., Apr. 25 Big Bend National Park | Marfa

This was our last day in the park, so we spent the entire morning in the Chisos Basin exploring various trails in smaller groups. Dave, up early, heard a Common Poorwill calling in the Basin before he and Bryan picked up the take-out breakfasts and lunches for the group. Trails explored included the Windows Trail, Windows Overlook Trail, Basin Loop Trail, and the trail to the campground. Most of the typical Basin-area birds were well seen by all, including Mexican Jay, a Townsend's Solitaire, Black-chinned Sparrow, and Western Tanager. After eating our take-out lunches at the picnic tables, we packed and loaded and headed for Marfa, taking the route out to Marathon (since we had not done that yet) with a stop at the Fossil Discovery Exhibit (with due respect paid to the enormous *Quetzalcoatlus northropi* overhead, the largest flying animal ever known) and a quick pass-through Dagger Flats.



After a stop to get gas in Alpine, we arrived at the lovely Hotel Paisano for our final night, final bird list, and final dinner together on the patio at Jett's Cafe. Alas, we said good-bye to Bryan soon after arrival—he had places to go and people to meet, but we welcomed Kathleen (aka “Shuttle Maven”), who was pitching in to help shuttle the vehicles between tours.

### Mon., Apr. 26 Departures from El Paso

After consuming our pre-ordered breakfast at the Hotel Paisano (and an introduction to sopapillas for some newbies), we loaded the SUVs for one last time and formed up our final convoy as we headed to El Paso International Airport for good-byes and onward travels.

\*Survivor Edition!

### Photo Credits:

Boquillas Overlook, Dave Mehlman (DM); Ocotillo, DM; Group at Cattlemans, Carol; Elf Owl sighting, DM; Terlingua Creek, DM; Chef's at Work, DM; Cattlemans, DM; Barn & Cliff Swallows, Carol; Marathon Prairie Dog Town, Bryan Calk; DB's BBQ, DM; AM Coffee, DM; Lucifer Hummingbird, Bryan Calk; Tina Wading, DM; The Window lookout, DM; Lunch in Alpine, Brenda; Group dinner in Marfa, DM