

Texas Big Bend National Park | Trip Report

April 27 – May 4, 2021 | Written by Dave Mehlman



**With Guides Dave Mehlman, Steve Shunk, and Kathleen Hall & participants
Cynthia, Dan, Dennis, Ginger, Harry, Jeff, Marcia, Mark, Pat, and Phill**





Tues., Apr. 27 Arrivals in El Paso, Texas | Fort Davis

Kathleen and Dave rounded everyone up upon their arrival at the El Paso airport, we loaded up the two SUVs (with Mark and Cynthia in their own cars—quite the convoy) and headed out for our Big Bend/West Texas adventure! We made our way east, stopping for a break in Van Horn and at the scenic (but windy) Point of Rocks Picnic Area, before arriving in Fort Davis at the lovely Hotel Limpia. By popular demand, Dave's vehicle stopped at the mandatory selfie stop in the region: the legendary Prada Marfa art installation (oddly located outside Valentine, TX), but were nearly blown away by a dust storm. A quick visit to the Stone Village Market was made for supplies, before we reunited in the Limpia's sitting room for introductions, a trip overview, and discussion of plans for the next day. We then headed across the street to the Fort Davis Drug Store for dinner, where we were welcomed with open arms by the proprietress, Jennifer, and her staff.

Wed., Apr. 28 The Davis Mountains

After breakfast across the street at the Drug Store, we loaded up and headed to the Davis Mountains, the first stop being the wonderful wildlife blinds at Davis Mountains State Park. These blinds, with their associated feeders and water features, always produce a multitude of birds. Highlights included Black-headed Grosbeak, Acorn Woodpecker, Common Bushtit, Western Tanager, and Cassin's Kingbird. After sating ourselves there, we headed further up in elevation to the Lawrence E. Wood Picnic Area, where Dave led a large group on the Madera Canyon Trail on the adjacent TNC preserve. Although a bit short on birds, the most astounding thing happened as the group walked on the trail: three Montezuma Quail blasted off the ground right by our feet! Although the siting of this beautiful quail was brief and perhaps unsatisfactory, this was a super find for the group. We also found Ash-throated and Gray Flycatcher, and some nicely seen Black-chinned Sparrows.

Finishing our walk, a picnic lunch of the best-ever chicken salad (picked up earlier in the morning by Dave from the Stone Village Market and ordered by Naturalist Journeys food expert Carrie) was enjoyed at the picnic area, then we headed back down to town. Mark and Phill broke off to spend some more quality time at the State Park, while most of the group visited the Fort Davis National Historic Site. The latter tells a fascinating story, though a few of us did also note the Rock Wrens flying around the old building foundations.

In what was becoming a usual pattern, we then gathered before dinner in the Hotel Limpia's sitting room for the overview of the next day and the bird list. At this time Steve appeared in the doorway, as if by magic! The incredible vehicle shuttle Kathleen had orchestrated to allow Steve to get here from another tour (and the guide from the previous tour to leave early for another commitment) was a smashing success. This night's dinner was in the next-door Blue Mountain Bistro in their back dining room due to the chilly weather.



After dinner, we loaded back up in the vehicles and went back to Davis Mountains State Park, primarily to mount a vigil for the well-known Elf Owl which appears at dusk every evening at its hole in a telephone pole in the campground. Indeed, the owl appeared at the appointed time and put on a very good show, eventually flying off to forage for the night. We also enjoyed a Cooper's Hawk in its nest in an adjacent tree and a fun conversation with the two denizens of the campsite we invaded, who were very welcoming.

Thurs., Apr. 29 The Post at Marathon | Prairie Dogs | Gage Gardens | Big Bend National Park

We were up again for another breakfast across the street at the Drug Store, followed by the ritual vehicle loading. At this point, Kathleen headed back home to Albuquerque, her essential vehicle shuttle work for two tours completed at last, and Steve took over the other SUV. The group drove to Fort Peña Colorado Park (The Post, in birder-speak) just south of Marathon for a very fun morning of birding. This wonderful site yielded a lot of great things; to Steve and Dave's amazement, there were 40 Blue Grosbeaks foraging in the grass here (mostly males)—a larger group than either of them had seen before. Other species included Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Vermilion Flycatcher, Pied-billed Grebe, American Coot, Lark Sparrow, and Lark Bunting. Dave indulged his inner swallow passion and was able to pick out a Bank Swallow flying along with lots of Barn and Northern Rough-winged Swallows.

Later in the morning, having had our fill at The Post, we headed NW of Marathon to look at the Black-tailed Prairie Dog town, in a vain search for Burrowing Owls (it was very windy), and finished the morning at the beautiful Gage Gardens in the town of Marathon. The Gardens, more sheltered than other places, proved to be very productive, with a large number of Orchard Orioles foraging in some of the hedgerows, and good views of Wilson's Warbler, Summer Tanager, Audubon's Yellow-rumped Warbler, and a Bullock's Oriole. At this point, we then headed to a delicious lunch at the Reata in Alpine, followed by shopping for more "supplies" at the Porter's grocery across the street.

After lunch, it was off to Big Bend National Park! Taking the route in from Marathon, we stopped at the Fossil Discovery Exhibit and enjoyed this great exhibit of fossil discoveries in the park, as well as the progression of habitats over the eons that has occurred here. We then finished the final leg of our drive to the Chisos Basin, where the room keys were ready to go and everyone settled in, very happy to be in this lovely place. As usual, we met up before dinner to go over the bird list and discuss plans for the next day. Then, Steve and Dave went to the main lodge to pick up the first of many take-out meals enjoyed under the gazebo picnic tables.



Fri., Apr. 30 Big Bend National Park

To respect the National Park Service's guidelines of groups ≤ 8 people, at this point, we separated into two groups. Steve led one half to the West side of the park and Dave led the other half to the East side. But, in a total surprise, it was rainy! Nevertheless, we persisted.

The *westsiders* visited numerous sites for the day, including Sam Nail Ranch, Sotol Vista, Lower Burro Mesa Pouroff, Cottonwood Campground, and Santa Elena Canyon.

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. The rain made for a slow stop at our first site, Dugout Wells, so we spent little time there (but ticking a great view of Crissal Thrasher!) and continued on to Rio Grande Village where we birded the store and RV camping area under cloudy, but not rainy, skies. Highlights included Bell's Vireo (what else?), a Common Black-Hawk hunkered down on its nest, Lesser Nighthawk, and Yellow-breasted Chat. Entering the Rio Grande Village Campground, we stumbled upon a large flock of migrants, including several Western Tanagers, Western Wood-Pewee, Cedar Waxwing, Lark Bunting, Summer Tanager, and an elusive male Painted Bunting. Proceeding to the Nature Trail, we enjoyed a short hike to the Rio Grande under cloudy (to Dave's amazement) skies. Highlights included a Green Heron, Black Vulture, a Common Black-Hawk perched in the open on the Coahuila side of the river, Barn, Bank, and Cliff Swallows, and a singing Carolina Wren. Non-avian objects of interest included many, many (milli, milli?) millipedes, apparently out and foraging due to the moist conditions.

After working up an appetite, we drove to the Daniel's Ranch area, where we ate our take-out lunches and then birded the cottonwoods, finding a few things such as the ubiquitous Vermilion Flycatcher, Lesser Goldfinch, Wilson's Warbler, and Painted Bunting. From here, we continued on to the Boquillas Overlook and Boquillas Canyon Trail (the temperature at the latter being 71° F, causing Dave to faint in amazement!), where the group hiked a short way up the trail to overlook the entrance to the canyon. This allowed us unexpectedly good views of migrating Violet-green Swallows from above and the White-throated Swifts put on a show, zipping by at close range and swooping down to drink in the river—seeing them at close range and from above is always a unique experience.



We then headed back to Chisos Basin, stopping abruptly on the way and making a U-turn, as “spider-eye” Dave spotted a tarantula walking in the highway. Probably, like the millipedes, out because of the rain, we observed it and took photos and shooed it off the highway—a very nice find. We stopped briefly at Dugout Wells in hopes of more activity, but not much was happening, so we continued on to Panther Junction. Dave wanted to re-photograph the growing agave stalk there, which he did, but it was raining lightly, but steadily, so our stop there was brief. We returned to the Basin where rain continued, so everyone grabbed their takeout dinner and ate it in their rooms. A storm came in, causing a bit of thunder and a power black-out. Everyone was reminded of this when their lights (which, of course, we had all forgotten to turn off!) came on suddenly in the middle of the night.

Sat., May 1 Big Bend National Park

This day was essentially the same as the previous day, except that Dave’s group went to the West side and Steve’s to the East. Again, it was rainy—an unprecedented two straight days of rainy weather in big bend!

Dave’s westside group stopped first at the Sam Nail Ranch, usually a very productive site. However, after eating our breakfasts in the SUV, we walked the trail and got pretty wet due to the slow, but steady rain. About the best (and only!) birds we could extract were a singing Northern Cardinal, Yellow-breasted Chat, and a bedraggled Western Wood-Pewee. Continuing on, we went to Sotol Vista, a bit higher in elevation and completely fogged in! Dave assured everyone that the “vista” was incredible (skeptical sounds ensued), and an argument broke out as to whether this place should be re-named “Sotol Vista sin Vista” (accurate, but long and repetitive) or just “Sotol” (to reflect the absence of a vista, but not very specific). This argument remains unresolved as of this writing.

Continuing on, wet but undaunted, the westsiders next stopped at Lower Burro Mesa Pour-off, where at last the rain ceased and the skies began to clear. We enjoyed the hike into this great geological feature (although there was not enough rain to produce a pour-off) and found some nice birds, including Black-throated and Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Canyon Wren (seen and singing its wonderful song), Wilson’s Warbler, and both the Gray-headed and Pink-sided forms of Dark-eyed Junco.

Our spirits lifted by the clearing skies, we traveled to the Cottonwood Campground, which was quite productive. Right in front of where the SUV was parked was a Vermilion Flycatcher nest and we watched the female feeding



some young chicks, while the male defended the nest from all avian trespassers. A walk around the campground yielded many birds, including Lesser Nighthawk, Painted Bunting, Black-headed and Blue Grosbeak, Pine Siskins, Green-tailed Towhee, Indigo and Lazuli Buntings, a roosting Great Horned Owl, Varied Bunting (spotted by Mark and identified by Dave), and great views of a Pocket Gopher (an animal not usually showing itself in daylight). We then enjoyed lunch there at one of the campground picnic tables.

Pushing ever onward, we stopped at the Santa Elena Canyon Overlook to admire this incredible canyon cut straight into a wall of rock, then drove to the pretty crowded Santa Elena Canyon trailhead (what was with all those motorcyclists on their hogs, anyways?). Most of the group took the plunge and hiked the Santa Elena Canyon Trail, going a short distance into the canyon (which involved “wading” over the totally dry Terlingua Creek—no one believed Dave’s tales of having to wade through water on previous trips). Although the trail had a lot of people, we enjoyed the views and admired a softshell turtle near the edge of the river.

Alas, this was the end of the road, so we headed back to Chisos Basin. Stopping at Castolon, we noted that, for some reason, large numbers of Lesser Nighthawks were out flying around, both over the road and at the village, probably feeding on insects because the weather had improved so much. Some enjoyed ice cream from the store. Continuing on, we stopped at Sotol Vista to admire the view (finally!), then again at Sam Nail Ranch (which proved to be as unproductive as earlier in the day).

Returning to the Basin, we met at the end of the afternoon to review the bird list, discuss plans for the day, and consume our take-out dinners.

Sun., May 2 Big Bend National Park

This day was devoted to the Chisos Basin trails. The power went out again shortly after 7:00 AM. No takers were to be had for the Laguna Meadows trail hike, the only open option for folks wanting to find Colima Warbler. Instead, the group did various things, including the Basin Loop Trail and other explorations in the lodge area. The entire group enjoyed the Basin Loop Trail, giving us a chance to see higher elevation birds which we had not encountered yet. Noisy Mexican Jays put on their usual show, accompanied by Scott’s Oriole, Acorn Woodpecker, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, many Western Tanagers, and a Spotted Towhee

Re-convening by our rooms in the afternoon, Dave and Steve were dismayed to learn that the power was still out (in fact, we confirmed that it was out over a wide swath of west Texas)! Figuring this was “above our pay grade”, Steve and Dave took a group down to the campground and birded the empty group campground area. Although



not too much new was found, we were intrigued by sightings of Verdin and Pyrrhuloxia, both lower desert birds that seemed a bit out of range in the Basin. We also saw Cactus Wren really well and found some old nests of this intriguing wren species. Heading back up to the top, we then walked the road behind the lodge room buildings to the Stone Cabins, observing a Black-crested Titmouse bathing in a small pool of water in a rock wall, Scott's Oriole, Black-chinned Sparrow, and Dave spotted a Virginia's Warbler (reported to us by another birder) but could not get the rest of the group on it in time.

Arriving back at our rooms at the end of the day, it fell to Dave to convey to the group the bad news that their dinner that night (due to the all-day power outage) would consist of cold sandwiches or ... cold sandwiches! Plus, either a brownie or cold cobbler for dessert. Our carefully planned dinner orders were thrown out, Dave took everyone's order, and we all enjoyed the sandwiches. Fortunately, the power came back on in late afternoon, so our "adult beverages" were bien fría!

Mon., May 3 Big Bend National Park | Christmas Mountains | Marfa

After distributing the day's take-out breakfasts and lunches, we somehow managed to fit everything back in our vehicles (including the miraculous box of chips which always seemed to have more and more bags of chips in it) and we headed out of Big Bend National Park to the west, with a stop in Terlingua for some great coffee and muffins at the Far-Flung Outdoor Center's coffee shop. We then ducked across the highway to visit the Terlingua-Study Butte Wastewater Treatment plant for some good birds, including the previously reported Least Grebe enjoying the splendor of the pond, several Gadwall, an out-of-place Ring-billed Gull, American Pipit, Yellow-headed Blackbird, Killdeer, Wilson's Phalarope (doing their daily spin session), and Least and Western Sandpiper.

Then we headed north, to the famed Christmas Mountains Oasis off the main highway. Upon leaving the paved road, Mark and Phill left their car and piled into the two SUVs, heeding Dave's advice that the road into the oasis was "gnarly." Great birds were seen, and everyone got a chance to meet and talk to Carolyn Ohl-Johnson, the mastermind behind this place. We also turned in here the huge number of uneaten oranges that had accumulated up to this point in the trip. The Oasis always produces a huge bird list; some specialties included Lucifer Hummingbird, Lazuli and Varied Bunting, Scaled Quail, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Western Tanager, and a Dickcissel seen by some of the group. We stayed the entire morning there, eating our lunches on the spot, to fully enjoy the place—I can't wait to get back!

We then worked our way out to the highway and headed north to Alpine and then Marfa. An essential stop was made on the way: the Marfa Lights Viewing Area. Alas, as it was during daylight, no chance to see the famed lights. Arriving in Marfa and getting everyone settled in their rooms at the famed Hotel Paisano (and admiring the old photos on the walls of Rock Hudson, Liz Taylor, and James Dean), a hardy group of die-hards accompanied Steve and Dave to yet another wastewater treatment facility: the Marfa Settling Ponds south of



town. Although all the birding was from the road, a lot of goodies were seen, including several new to the trip: Long-billed Dowitcher, Baird's Sandpiper, Lesser Yellowlegs, White-faced Ibis, Mexican Duck, Blue-winged Teal, American Wigeon, Northern Harrier, and quite a few Pronghorn grazing on the green grass. A very productive birding spot, but not so pleasant to be at due to wind and high-speed traffic on the highway.

We then returned to the Paisano for our final bird checklist and dinner—what a treat! Jett's Café had set up three tables on their patio, which we promptly rearranged into one, and we celebrated our last evening together. Jeff also went out at dusk to the courthouse nearby and heard the hooting Great Horned Owls which Dave had mentioned to the group.

Tues., May 4 Departures from El Paso

After consuming our pre-ordered breakfast at the Hotel Paisano (and an introduction to sopapillas for some newbies), we headed to El Paso International Airport for good-byes and onward travels. By popular demand, the entire group stopped at Prada Marfa for selfies—much better weather than on the way in! Arriving at airport departures, we said our final good-byes and concluded a wonderful trip.

Photo Credits:

Group at Chisos Basin, Steve Shunk (SS); Lechugilla, Dave Mehlman (DM); Painted Bunting, Mark Vaughn (MV); Wilson's Warbler, MV; Black-headed Grosbeak, MV; Varied Bunting, MV; Golden-fronted Woodpecker, MV; Prada Marfa, DM; Davis Mountains Picnic, DM; Chisos Basin Sunset, DM; Santa Elena Canyon, SS; Tarantula, DM; Pocket Gopher, MV; Blue Grosbeak, MV; Painted Bunting, MV; Terlingua Water Treatment Plant, DM; Sotol Vista in the clouds!, DM; Lucifer Hummingbird, MV; Group at El Paisano Hotel, DM.