

South Texas Birding & Nature | Feb. 21 – Mar. 1, 2022 | by Bryan Calk



With guides Michael Marsden and Bryan Calk and participants David, Denny, Dottie, Jay, Jean, Joel, Nan, Peggy, Ronnie, and Todd.



Mon., Feb. 21 Arrivals Corpus Christi | Rockport

In Corpus Christi, we had the pleasure of kicking off the tour and meeting everyone in our group. After gathering, we spent the afternoon driving north towards Rockport the back way, taking narrow county roads to check out some hidden birding hotspots (thanks to Michael's expert knowledge of the area). Along the way, we saw an impressive congregation of Canvasbacks, a flock of Snow Geese, Roseate Spoonbills, and an assortment of other waterfowl and wading birds. This area also gave us a taste of the expansive grassy saltmarshes that dominate the bays across the gulf coast. Once settled in at the inn, dinner was served in the form of some exceptionally fresh seafood at Charlotte Plummers, and we participated in our official introductions as we got to know each other.

Tue., Feb. 22 The Skimmer | Goose Island State Park

This morning, about half of our group decided to partake in some early morning birding at the Rockport demonstration gardens and Tule Creek – a fantastic gem of a greenspace in Rockport, most well-known for the large numbers of migratory birds that use the habitat in spring and fall. Our efforts were rewarded with several



fun birds, including excellent views of our first Black-bellied Whistling-ducks for the trip, whistling away as they flew into the pond and showed off their unique plumage and social behavior. Once back at the Fulton Inn we met up with the rest of our crew and walked across the street to board The Skimmer for a boat ride across the bay and into Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. Captain Jay, a local biologist and local wildlife expert, showed us an amazing time. We saw no fewer than 13 Whooping Cranes at exceptionally close distances. Parents were feeding their young from the previous year, catching several blue crabs and other unseen morsels. Captain Jay taught us all about their life history and conservation status, providing important context to these endangered birds. Along the way, several other fun things were seen including Lesser Black-backed Gulls, a white morph Reddish Egret, a Merlin, and even some bottlenose dolphins. Back on land, we had lunch at a local Texas BBQ joint called The Shack, then headed north to the Lamar Peninsula where we wandered around Goose Island State Park. Here was another family group of Whooping Cranes, this time with twin colts, several Sandhill Cranes, Roseate Spoonbills, Vermilion Flycatcher, and of course the enormous and beautiful live oak that is the Big Tree. We headed back over towards Rockport where we enjoyed dinner at the Old Fulton.

Wed., Feb. 23 Port Aransas | Mustang Island | Hazel Bazemore | Birding to the LRGV

We woke up this morning and started heading south, saying goodbye to Rockport. Once ferried across to Port Aransas, we headed to Paradise Pond and the Leonabelle Turnbull Port Aransas Birding Center. A few new species for the trip were here, but the incredible abundance of waterfowl really stole the show more than any one species. As we headed south on Mustang Island, we stopped to check out a nesting platform and were delighted to find a Aplomado Falcon sitting on it - what a sweet sight! The nesting platforms are maintained by the Peregrine Fund to re-establish these birds in the area. The largest and most successful population in the US is found further south in Cameron County, so finding one of the few that are holding on in the Corpus Christi area was extra special. Lunch was next at a local joint called Snoopy's in Corpus Christi. The local seafood was delicious, and we had some relaxing views of the bay out the panoramic windows. While eating lunch (with



binoculars in our laps of course), we looked out only to find a huge white Glaucous Gull loafing on a sand spit with a group of Laughing Gulls and American White Pelicans - quite a rare bird for the area! Moving further inland, the next stop was Hazel Bazemore County Park. We learned about the hawk watch and impressive fall raptor migration that happens here, and saw a few good birds including Belted Kingfisher, Loggerhead Shrike, and Long-billed Curlews. From here we turned back south again, stopping in Kingsville to visit the King Ranch visitor center where the first Green Jays and a Golden-fronted Woodpecker were found, and even a Rufus Hummingbird dropped in, another rare treat for the area. As we neared the LRGV, we stopped in to comb through a flock of white geese, and sure enough we picked out a few Ross's in the mass of Snow Geese. In true Texas ranchland style, we even happened upon a couple of emus (many south Texas ranches are known for having an assortment of exotic animals). Finally, we made it to Rancho Viejo where we enjoyed a great dinner and got settled into our villas.

Thu., Feb. 24

Bayview Resacas | Laguna Atascosa NWR | South Padre Island

East from Rancho Viejo, our group arrived in the community of Bayview. We explored the extensive resaca (oxbow lake) habitats here that can be home to a wide variety of birds thanks to the accessible fresh water and patchwork of several different habitats. The first signs of spring migration came in the form of three swallow species, and we found a variety of water-loving species, but our rarest find was a northern Yellow Warbler, as the northern extent of their typical winter range is much further south in Mexico. After this great start, we moved on to Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge and walked through the rich habitat around the visitor center as a dense fog moved in. This beautifully diverse and well-preserved Tamaulipan thorn-scrub is sadly rare to find in these parts of south Texas due to exponential urbanization and clearing for row-crop agriculture. On



our way out, we ran into Harris's and White-tailed Hawks perched up right along the road. For lunch, we stopped in at Port Isabel, and after some warm food, we left the mainland and made it over to South Padre Island where the fog was thankfully lifting. At the South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center, we were enthralled by what our group dubbed a "Gallery of Herons." The boardwalk acted like the halls of an art gallery, and each of the nine heron species we saw, plus spoonbills, ibises, and more, were each their own stunning piece of art. Brown Pelicans showed us that birds can be both beautiful and comical as they repeatedly made short dives into the water trying to catch a bite to eat. Along the way, a Yellow-throated Warbler foraged at eye-level above the boardwalk, and even just landed inches away from Bryan's face while exploring a palm. Everyone got some incredible views. Inside the visitor center, the extensive exhibits taught about the various wildlife and natural history of the area. After briefly checking out the SPI Convention Center and the Zapata Memorial Boat Ramp, we made it back to Rancho Viejo for dinner and our checklist wrap-up.

Fri., Feb. 25 Oliveira Park

Sabal Palm Sanctuary | Boca Chica | UTRGV Resacas |

Today we drove south for our first experience birding right along the border. Sabal Palm Sanctuary, owned by National Audubon and run by the Gorgas Science Foundation, is one of the southmost properties the public can visit for birding in Texas and contains one of the last remaining stands of native sabal palm (*Sabal mexicana*) forest in the US. Our arrival happened to be just moments before the bird feeders to be filled, and after waiting for just a few minutes, the Plain Chachalacas, Green Jays, and White-tipped Doves descended from the shadows! As luck would have it, we turned around from the feeding station only to see two bobcats playing in



the trail - what a rare treat, and especially with such prolonged views! After they finally disappeared into the brush, we headed down the trail to immerse ourselves in this dense tropical environment. At the end of our hike, we headed out to get a taste of what the locals eat at the Laredo Taco Company. We then drove out towards the gulf along Boca Chica Boulevard to check out the sand flats and see the SpaceX construction. We ran into a good variety of shorebirds, a feeding group of Gull-billed Terns, and even a coyote wandering the shallow waters in the flats - what a great day for mammals! Our next birding stop was at The UTRGV campus resaca habitat. A small warbler flock here included both Black-throated Gray and Black-throated Green Warblers and two male Ringed Kingfishers were bickering loudly over territory. Dinner at Cobbleheads was a nice break with some warmth and delicious food, but we braved the cold one more time and were rewarded with a nice show put on by the mostly Red-crowned Parrots roosting at Oliveira Park in Brownsville.

Sat., Feb. 26 Santa Ana NWR | Estero Llano Grande State Park

With our bags packed, we headed west following the Rio Grande upstream towards Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge. This 2,088-acre tract of land is arguably the best-preserved single tract of subtropical thornscrub habitat left in Texas. The large Texas ebony trees dripping with Spanish moss, an array of wetland lakes, and its proximity to the river all lead to this being an unparalleled hotspot for birds. Even on this, another cold, overcast day, we still readily saw dozens of species. Some of our favorites included an assortment of wading birds including some stunning Roseate Spoonbills and White-faced Ibis. Along the trail, we encountered the most uncharacteristically obliging Olive Sparrows. They played in the path ahead of us just feet away for several minutes; it was truly unbelievable! A Green Kingfisher pair chased each other back-and-forth in front of us for about ten minutes, and just when we thought we were finished, a perched Peregrine Falcon served as a cherry on top of a great morning.



After lunch at the delicious Blue Onion, we made our way to Estero Llano Grande State Park. This is a relatively new park, but it now draws in perhaps more birders than any other state park in the country. After walking the grounds, we got to see a mother Great Horned Owl brooding her young, two oriole species coming to feeders, a Great Kiskadee eating a brown anole, a few Buff-bellied Hummingbirds defending feeders and Turk's cap flowers, and of course the Common Pauras were as obliging as ever. We had a short drive to the Alamo Inn to check in and then enjoyed a traditional Tex-Mex dinner.

Sun., Feb. 27 Salineño Wildlife Preserve | Falcon State Park | Rancho Lomitas

With an early morning breakfast, we hit the road west once again, this time to the upper limits of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Our first stop was Salineño where we started off by birding right along the banks of the Rio Grande. As we walked along the water, we saw Green and Ringed Kingfishers, several Osprey making attempts to catch fish, and some of our group even caught a glimpse of the Morelet's Seedeater – a very range-restricted Texas specialty species. Back up the hill, the famous Salineño feeding station (run by volunteers Merle and Lois) was full of activity. We sat at the feeders watching a veritable rainbow of birds chowing down. Up to eight Altamira Orioles were in view at once at point-blank range, a Long-billed Thrasher darted in and out of the bushes near our chairs, Green Jays and Kiskadees provided the comedy show, Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks buzzed through the feeders chasing down anything too slow to hide... needless to say it was never-ending entertainment! We eventually drug ourselves away and headed to Falcon State Park where on the shore of Falcon Lake we ate a picnic lunch. Here, hundreds of cormorants and dozens of pelicans flew by over the water,



and several Crested Caracaras, two Harris's Hawks, and a Turkey Vulture were all competing over one dead fish on the edge of the shore. Quite the lunch and the show! Our final birding destination of the day was Rancho Lomitas where we sat at another fantastic feeding station. This time, we enjoyed stunning views of a true south Texas delicacy, Audubon's Oriole. Other species around included Bewick's and Cactus wrens, Curve-billed Thrasher, and even a couple of Black-throated Sparrows. On our drive out of the ranch, a stunner of a Verdin cooperated for close views in the brush just a few feet away. After our species count and dinner, we made plans for the next day...

Mon., Feb. 28

Bentsen RGV State Park | Edinburg Scenic Wetlands

Finally seeing a weather forecast for clear skies, no wind, and no precipitation, we decided to try our luck at chasing one incredibly rare bird before breakfast. An intrepid bunch from our group rose well before sunrise and headed down to Santa Ana NWR. A little backstory... In October of 2021, the first ever documented sighting for the United States of a Bat Falcon was confirmed at the refuge. These birds are typically found only as far north as central Mexico with their range is extending south across the American tropics. Since this individual's initial report, thousands of birders traveled to the LRGV to try their luck at locating it. So, our crew decided to give finding the Bat Falcon a shot. It had been extremely difficult to track down over the last week due to the atypically persistent cold front, despite dozens of birders covering the area. But with the change in the weather, we thought there was a chance the bird might return to its old habits. And as soon as we pulled up to the refuge and before we could even park the van, we saw our target bird perched there waiting for us! Just as the sun was about to peek up over the horizon, the bird took off in pursuit of a Northern Harrier that apparently flew a little



too close for comfort, and we watched as the falcon disappeared into the distance. What an amazing experience! Returning to the inn for breakfast and celebration, we then gathered up the rest of the gang and headed out to Bentsen Rio Grande Valley State Park. Here, we walked the main park road for about a mile, giving us our first Wild Turkeys and where we heard the rare Rose-throated Becard, but the stars of the show were the raptors! A group of seven(!) Gray Hawks were interacting with each other in the sky at once - an exceptional sight to see! Neither of the guides Bryan nor Michael had even witnessed such a group all together at once. Moments later, that was topped when two juveniles lifted from nearby trees to join in the party. We also caught sight of Zone-tailed, Red-shouldered, Cooper's, White-tailed, and Red-tailed Hawks. On the tram ride back to the parking lot, we stopped to watch a Greater Roadrunner hunt for insects just a few feet away. Next, we popped into Anzalduas County Park to have a picnic lunch, and on the drive, in the raptor show somehow just continued to get better! A few White-tailed Kites, a pair of White-tailed Hawks, and a Merlin perched up and were our welcoming committee to the park. After our picnic under the Spanish moss, we drove to Edinburg Scenic Wetlands where we walked the maze of narrow trails looking for songbirds and observed the wading birds and waterfowl around the lakes. We picked up a few new species including Purple Martins flying overhead and an Indigo Bunting just as we were leaving. We reminisced on our fun week of birding while we had a fantastic final dinner at Republic of the Rio Grande.

Tue., Mar. 1

Quinta Mazatlan | Departures from McAllen

On our final day of the tour, we headed to Quinta Mazatlan for a leisurely morning of birding. Walking the grounds of this historical McAllen city park, we admired artwork by local artisans, read about the history of development and conservation in the valley, and of course saw nice birds. A pair of Lesser Goldfinches proved to be our final new species bringing our total to 175, and the rest of the classic valley specialty species, including an abundance of Clay-colored Thrushes, gave us a delightful LRGV farewell.

Photo Credits: Group Photo (Bryan Calk - BC), Northern Mockingbird (BC), Vermillion Flycatcher (BC), Neotropic Cormorant (BC), Whooping Crane (BC), Long-billed Curlew (BC), Reddish Egret (BC), Little Blue Heron (BC), Rufous Hummingbird (BC), Snowy Egret (BC), Tricolored Heron (BC), Bobcat (BC), Yellow-throated Warbler (BC), Pied-billed Grebe (BC), Yuca (BC), Black-crested Titmouse (BC), Northern Shoveler (BC), Common Pauraque (BC), Group Birding (JA), Olive Sparrow (BC), Black-bellied Whistling-duck (BC), Group at Salineño (JA), Ladder-backed Woodpecker (BC), Great Kiskadee (BC), Green Jay (BC), Altamira Oriole (BC), Wetland Birding (BC), Bat Falcon (BC), American White Pelican (BC), Crested Caracara (BC), Inca Dove (BC)