

South Texas Birding & Nature | Nov. 1-9, 2021 | by Bryan Calk

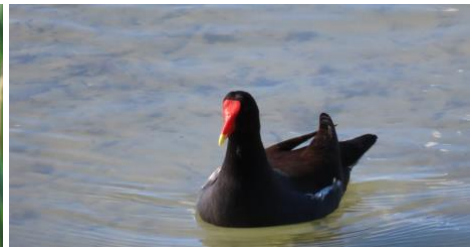


With guides Michael Mardsen and Bryan Calk and participants Ann, Bjorne, Christine, Deanna, Jan, Janet, John, Larry, Lois, and Marlo



Mon., Nov. 1 Arrivals Corpus Christi | Port Aransas | Rockport

Our group convened at about noon, and as soon as we did, we were birding! Starting at Suter Wildlife Refuge, where we picked up an assortment of mostly wading and waterbirds, including our first white-morph Reddish Egret for the trip. A stop at Packery Channel revealed how few avian migrants were around, as highlights here were Red-eared sliders and a Bullfrog. Then we headed north to the Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Center in Port Aransas, which was much more productive. Here we saw many ducks of a few species, a huge American alligator, and an assortment of migrants including a rare Palm Warbler and a Northern Parula. Many of the birds



were very cooperative, giving up-close views. Around the corner, we stopped in at Paradise Pond where some Least Grebes had been hanging out recently – an odd bird for the location. Paradise Pond also gave us a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker in stunning adult male plumage. We then drove onto the ferry and made our way to The Inn at Fulton Harbor where we dinner across the street at Charlotte Plummer.

Tue., Nov. 2 The Skimmer | Goose Island State Park | Rockport

Today we started at the demonstration gardens in Rockport for some early morning birding as the sun rose. A Tennessee Warbler, Gray Catbird, and some Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks were highlights along the walk, and we spotted a beautiful Black-throated Green Warbler right by the vans as we were leaving. We then headed over to the docks where we met Captain Tommy and boarded “The Skimmer,” our vessel for the rest of the morning. It was an absolute joy to spend the morning out in the various bays and inlets of Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. From the boat we spotted thousands of individual birds, mostly shorebirds, waders, and ducks. Captain Tommy was so generous with his knowledge of the area and taught us about history and how things have changed in the area over time. After lunch at a local barbecue place, we went to Goose Island State Park and the Big Tree, where we saw a good assortment of migrant songbirds including Summer Tanager, Scissor-tailed and Vermilion Flycatchers. We took the scenic route back to the Inn in Fulton which gave us a chance to spot some Snow Geese and Sandhill Cranes.

Wed., Nov. 3 Rockport | Corpus Christi | Birding to the LRGV

Today was a relocation day for us from Rockport to the Lower Rio Grande Valley, of course with many stops along the way to look for birds. After a brief look around Rockport Beach, we moved on to Indian Point in Corpus Christi where we had a good diversity of shorebirds including three species of plover and Marbled Godwit. Hazel Bazemore was productive as ever, with the rarity highlight being a Tropical Parula. Other more typical species



included our first Green Jays, Great Kiskadee, and some other south Texas specialties. From there, we headed south with a brief detour down a Kenedy Ranch entrance road where we had Harris's and White-tailed Hawks. Upon reaching "The Valley," we headed straight to our lodging at Rancho Viejo country club.

Thu., Nov. 4 Old Port Isabel Rd | Hwy 48 | South Padre Island

Our group enjoyed breakfast at Rancho Viejo and started our day of birding at Old Port Isabel Road. Wood Storks were an unexpected treat, but the road proved too muddy to continue due to some harsh weather that mostly blew through at 2:00 AM. The remnants of the front stuck with us the rest of the day making it windy and drizzling rain, keeping most of the songbirds deep in hiding. We forged ahead along Highway 48 to the Zapata Memorial Boat Ramp where we had a substantial number of shorebirds and terns as well as some lingering Franklin's Gulls. With the wind blowing, it was hard to tell what was drizzle from the clouds and what was spray from the bay, but it was all very invigorating, and for some, a welcome change from the hot temperatures the days prior. We continued onward to South Padre Island Convention Center where we saw TWO Cape May Warblers - incredibly rare in this part of Texas and the US, especially this time of year. Wading birds and shorebirds were active on the flats and in the mangroves, and we braved the 30 to 40 mph sustained winds to admire them. After checking some other spots on the island, we continued back to the mainland and had lunch at Joe's Oyster Shack in Port Isabel. After, we searched high and low for Aplomado Falcons on Highway 100, but we only managed a very brief sighting of one flying across the road. Port Isabel Reservoir provided some very close-range views of some shorebirds to study. At Laguna Atascosa, as we anticipated, songbirds were very few and far between due to the weather. From here we drove around some of the resacas in Bayside where we had a Ringed Kingfisher, lots of Anhinga, and a very cooperative Marsh Wren. On the drive back to Rancho Viejo, we had a few White-tailed Kites out hunting a field.



Fri., Nov. 5

Sabal Palm Sanctuary | Brownsville Dump | Oliveira Park

Today we looked outside to find stunningly beautiful weather and started our adventure by popping in to check out Old Port Isabel Road again. We had another great look at Wood Storks and some other wading birds like Roseate Spoonbills, Tricolored Heron, and a White-tailed Hawk perched very nicely for us. We then drove down to Brownsville's Sabal Palm Sanctuary where we walked about two miles of their beautiful trails. We had luck with some warblers, White-tipped Dove, Olive Sparrows, and we got our first glimpse of Mexico across the Rio Grande. After lunch at Whataburger, a Texas specialty of sorts, we moved on to the Brownsville landfill in search of Tamaulipas Crows, but we did not discover any. The experience there though is sort of a rite of passage for birders in south Texas, and we survived! We then hit the University of Texas - Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) resaca habitat which provided some excellent birding in the way of a decent diversity of warblers, a Green Kingfisher actively fishing just below us, and good comparisons of Couch's and Tropical Kingbirds. Anhingas were out drying off their feathers, and a flock of Green Parakeets flew by in the distance. After dinner at Cobbleheads, Oliveira Park was our last stop for the day where we witnessed the roost of mostly Red-crowned and White-fronted Parrots.

Sat., Nov. 6

Santa Ana NWR | Estero Llano Grande State Park

Today we packed our bags and said goodbye to Rancho Viejo. Our first stop was at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge. We hiked a few miles of their trails, checking out the Willow Lakes and Pintail Lakes areas. Along the way, we saw the beautiful old growth Texas Ebony groves dripping with Spanish moss. And of course, there were birds... highlights included a fly-by Least Bittern, Gray Hawk, Stilt Sandpipers, a distant Altamira Oriole, and day-roosting Common Pauraque. After Santa Ana, we had a delicious lunch at the Blue Onion in Weslaco, and afterwards drove a short distance to Estero Llano Grande State Park. Here, we continued our long day of



walking, but the birds were worth it! We saw goodies like Plain Chachalaca, Fulvous Whistling-Duck, and Ringed Kingfisher. Finally, we made our way to the Alamo Inn, where we would spend the last three nights.

Sun., Nov. 7

Salineño Wildlife Preserve | Falcon State Park

This morning after an early start, we headed west to Salineño. We sat at the river and were mesmerized by multiple species of kingfishers zipping up and downstream and ospreys catching fish. Suddenly, we found ourselves looking at a wild Muscovy flying downstream right in front of us at eye-level: an incredibly lucky sighting of this rare border resident! After some celebrating, we walked up the river and were treated to views of a Zone-tailed Hawk soaring over us, and some just beautiful reflections of the trees in the calm waters of the Rio Grande. Uphill from the water, we enjoyed front-row seats to the famous feeding station here, and enjoyed the antics of Green Jays, Long-billed Thrashers, and Altamira Orioles. After this incredibly enjoyable morning, we headed to Falcon State Park where we wandered around the butterfly gardens for a while and looked at some feeders in the campgrounds. We saw some adorable Common Ground-Doves and a great show of butterflies. Next, we moved to Rancho Lomitas where Bonito greeted us and showed us around his fantastic property. He taught us so much about what it was like to grow up as an immigrant in the area, and how important native plants were, and still can be, for those living there. The birds were also phenomenal here, including Audubon's Oriole, Pyrrhuloxia, Scaled Quail, and Northern Bobwhite. From here we headed back to McAllen where we had dinner at Palenque Grill.

Mon., Nov. 8

Bentsen State Park | National Butterfly Center | Edinburg

This morning, we left the Alamo in and headed out to Bentsen RGV State Park. While birding around gardens at the headquarters, we spotted some Lesser Goldfinches that were bathing and drinking in the gutters of the visitor center. We then hopped on the park tram which dropped us off at the Green Jay blind. Here we were



delighted to see a Javelina with her young coming in to eat breakfast. Along the walk back, Gray Hawks having a short scuffle in the sky, a couple of Red-shouldered Hawks flew over, Wild Turkeys fed under some feeders, and many of the great resident birds of the valley were out and about. A very short drive just around the corner took us to the National Butterfly Center. On our short walk through the Hackberry Trail and around the lower gardens, we got to see a pair of Eastern Screech-Owls and some winter residents of the valley like Nashville Warblers and Ruby-crowned Kinglets gave us great views. We grabbed a seafood lunch in Alamo and headed over to Pat Ayres house to look for a reported Swainson's Warbler. Her beautiful yard was a joy to walk around, but we did not find the warbler. We then got back to the original itinerary and spent some time around the grounds of Edinburgh Scenic Wetlands. The lake had a good assortment of wading birds and Ringed Kingfisher, and we enjoyed great views of Clay-Colored Thrush in the gardens. The wonderful repertoire of various wading birds that roost in the vegetation around the ponds and canals here was so fun to listen to with their pig-like grunts and dinosaur squawks. After a brief meeting to review the checklist, we headed to dinner at Republic of the Rio Grande.

Tue., Nov. 9

Quinta Mazatlan | Departures from McAllen

Today we headed to Quinta Mazatlan World Birding Center to bird the morning hours before we all parted ways. The beautiful grounds were home to birds like Plain Chachalaca, White-eyed Vireo, and the stunning Buff-bellied Hummingbird. But all too soon, we had to say goodbye to each other and the beautiful birds of south Texas.

Photo Credits: Group Photo (Marlo Kauffman - MK), Palm Warbler (Brian Calk - BC), Reddish Egret (BC), Birding on Skimmer (MK), Skimmer (MK), Big Tree (MK), Black-crowned Heron (MK), Common Gallinule (MK), Trim-colored Heron (BC), Birding group (MK), Scenic (MK), Cape May Warbler (BC), Long-billed Curlew (John Gardiner (JG), Group Birding 2 (MK), Wood Stork (BC), Wader (MK), Kingbird (MK), Red-crowned Parrot (BC), Javelina (BC), Group Tour (MK), Green Jay (BC), Broad-billed Hummingbird (MK), Butterfly (MK), Screech Owl (BC), Group (MK)