

# South Texas Birding & Nature | Trip Report

## Mar. 7 – 15, 2022 | by Bryan Calk



With guides Michael Marsden and Bryan Calk, and participants Ann, Beverly, Carol, Jane, Katherine, Lucy, Melinda, Nancy, Sandra, and Steve



### **Mon., Mar. 7      Arrivals Corpus Christi | Rockport**

On a cold, wet and windy afternoon, just hours after a front descended upon the region, our group of birders assembled in Corpus Christi, Texas. Straight away, we headed north and east towards the coast for our first stop at Indian Point Park. Walking along the road with pools of water on either side, we were immediately met with a fantastic assortment of species to kick off our tour. Undoubtedly the highlights here were the Reddish Egret and Tricolored Herons foraging away just a few yards from us. Around the corner, a congregation of shorebirds included both Semipalmated and Piping Plovers. Up FM 1069 towards Rockport, we stopped along the way at a few ponds and wetland areas to see who was hiding out. Some White Ibis and a Roseate Spoonbill stole the show, until we headed up Cape Valero Drive where we saw several Reddish Egrets in full breeding plumage, a Wilson's Snipe sneaking through the grass, and more herons and egrets than we could shake a stick at. Once up in Rockport, we made a loop through the beach park and then settled into our lodging at the Inn at Fulton Harbor. Dinner at Charlotte Plummers was a seafood delight, and with bellies full, we concluded the evening with formal introductions around the table and plans for the next day.



## **Tue., Mar. 8**

## **The Skimmer | Lamar Peninsula**

A few hardy participants joined us this morning for a casual walk through the Rockport Demonstration Gardens at Tule Marsh. As we entered the park on the boardwalk, we lucked into a small feeding flock of songbirds composed of four species of warbler, including a stunning Black-and-white and a couple Black-crested Titmice (our first real Texas specialty bird). Below the boardwalk was a feeding frenzy of White Ibis and Snowy and Great Egrets. This gave us a great opportunity to study the very different feeding strategies between them. The plant life here is a unique blend of eastern and subtropical species, so we took some time to learn about a few of the more common ones like red bay and green briar.

After our walk, we joined the rest of our group and boarded “The Skimmer” for our tour of Aransas National Wildlife Refuge by boat under the leadership of Captain Tommy. A wonderful educator, Tommy gave us the lay of the land and taught us some of the history of industry in the area, from the cattle barons to the now booming fisheries industry. Once inside the refuge, we got our main target almost right away: Whooping Cranes! We would go on to see more than a dozen individuals, with some remarkably close encounters. Other highlights included a variety of egrets and herons, some shorebirds, Common Loons coming into breeding plumage, and of course the Atlantic bottlenose dolphins put on a little show for us. Aransas NWR is home to most of the remaining migratory Whooping Cranes which, at their lowest point, were down to just 15 birds in 1941. Thanks to some incredible conservation efforts, the birds now number somewhere around 700, with more than 80% of them being the migratory population centered at Aransas. It was an incredible experience to see this conservation success story in action. Back at the mainland, we enjoyed some Texas barbecue for lunch and headed up to the Lamar Peninsula where we marveled at Big Tree, the oldest living Live Oak tree in Texas, and found 10 more Whooping Cranes feeding in a field alongside some Sandhills. It was incredible to see these presumed bachelor birds congregated together, as Whooping Cranes will usually fiercely defend small territories throughout the year as small family groups or pairs. A couple of stunningly brilliant and very accommodating Vermilion Flycatchers captivated us, as did the Black-Bellied Whistling Ducks and a variety of other wildlife. We enjoyed dinner at the Old Fulton where we ran through our first checklist routine.





**Wed., Mar. 9**

**Port Aransas | Mustang Island | Hazel Bazemore | King Ranch Visitor Center**

It was finally time to start heading south today. We left the mainland for Mustang Island and Port Aransas, where we started at Paradise Pond and the Leonabelle Turnbull Port Aransas Birding Center. At Paradise Pond, a pair of Lease Grebes were at first sleeping in the cattails, but then became exceptionally territorial when a few Blue-winged Teal moved in a little too close. We believe the grebes likely were either working on a nest or were getting close, since they would not normally be so aggressive. It was quite entertaining to watch these tiny little grebes bully the teal which are considerably larger than them. At the nearby Birding Center, we were greeted with a few warblers including Black-and-whites and Yellow-throated, and as soon as we hit the boardwalk, a Capper Rail was walking out in the open, quickly disappearing into some shrubbery. The fantastic boardwalk here allows intimate views of many bird species exhibiting a range of behaviors. One particularly interesting moment came when a Great-tailed Grackle took to terrorizing any bird it could get to – Green-winged Teal, Laughing Gulls, and Common Gallinules were all his victims!

Continuing south down the island, we pulled over to see the pair of Aplomado Falcons sitting on their nesting platform. These birds were reintroduced to the area, and currently only a single pair occupies Mustang Island around the state park. Fortunately, they have some prime hunting habitat all to themselves and they look to be gearing up for a nesting attempt! We then headed to lunch at a Snoopy's, a local seafood dive along the causeway between Mustang Island and Corpus Christi, where we got our fill of more great seafood. Some even went next-door to Scoopy's to have a celebratory ice cream after a great morning of birding. The best part of eating here are the panoramic windows which allowed us to study the breeding plumage of the Brown Pelicans up close and in detail... for such a common one, they really are striking! Next was Hazel Bazemore County Park where we stood on the hawk watch platform and learned about the massive raptor migration that occurs here every fall and got a few south Texas specialty species including Long-billed Thrasher and Great Kiskadee. Our West Coast visitors were of course enamored with the first Northern Cardinals of the trip, and one particular female cardinal captivated all of us with her rich olive-brown plumage and strikingly contrasting orange bill. Continuing south, the King Ranch's visitor center provided more great finds including an overwintering Rufus Hummingbird, a troop of Green Jays bounding through the honey mesquite, and even a confiding covey of the plump and charismatic Northern Bobwhite! From here we blasted south through the ranch lands of Kenedy and Willacy Counties making our way to Rancho Viejo where we got settled into the villas.



**Thu., Mar. 10**

## **Bayview Resacas | Laguna Atascosa NWR | South Padre Island**

The birding began today right at the grounds of Rancho Viejo where Tropical Kingbirds were playing in the trees. American White Pelicans, whistling-ducks, and others were also part of the entertainment as we loaded the vans and headed to the community of Bayside. Exploring the resacas (old oxbow lakes from the Rio Grande), the highlight had to be the Ringed Kingfisher that gave us a great fly-by view right over our heads. Next, we headed off to Laguna in Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge with a serendipitous stop for some low-hunting White-tailed Kites along the way. The dense subtropical thornscrub habitat here is home to several South Texas specialty species and is a great representation of what much of the landscape in this area would have looked like before urbanization and the conversion to row-crop agriculture. While scanning Atascosa Lake, the highlight of our time here presented itself as a crisp adult White-tailed Hawk glided slowly by, banking and weaving along, giving us great looks at all its best angles. After our time in this beautiful refuge, we drove to a brand-new site called the South Texas Ecotourism Center where we were one of the first ever birding groups onto the property. The impressive high-rise boardwalk gave us expansive views of the coastal prairie habitat, and Eastern Meadowlarks sang in earnest while another White-tailed Hawk soared over. With the abundant planting of native vegetation, this site will surely become more productive for birding into the future, and it was so encouraging to see the local communities valuing habitat conservation and birding in this region where so much has already been lost. Over the causeway and onto South Padre Island, we made a pitstop to pick up sandwiches (and found a *Pyrrhuloxia*!) and had a picnic lunch at the SPI Birding & Nature Center. Immediately when we arrived, we found signs of spring migration in the form of several warblers including a Louisiana Waterthrush walking and bobbing away right next to a pile of American alligators. The boardwalks produced an impressive variety of beautiful herons and other coastal species at close range, and some Red-eared Sliders swam through the water below us. We briefly checked the convention center next-door before finally stopping at the Valley Land Fund's Sheepshead Lots where an early Hooded Warbler was skulking in the shadows, and the incredibly bright Hooded Oriole dropped in... It's always a good day when you get double "hooded" action! We wrapped up with dinner at Rancho Viejo and were excited to see a chance of sun and warm weather in the forecast for our birding the next day.





## **Fri., Mar. 11      Sabal Palm Sanctuary | Boca Chica | UTRGV Resacas | Parrots**

On our final venture to the east today, we started at Sabal Palm Sanctuary. This remnant stand of sabal palm forest creates a magical atmosphere like no other place in Texas. The towering palms and dense and diverse vegetation captivated us even more than the birds. So many rare and range-restricted species live here, and at times it really feels like you are hiking through the tropical jungle. We got views of our first Plain Chachalacas, White-tipped Doves, and Mexico from across the Rio Grande. A pair of Javelinas bolted across the trail ahead of us, and Nilgai (an invasive antelope from Pakistan) tracks and droppings occasionally littered the path. We had our lunch at the Laredo Taco Company as the locals do, where we found a rare overwintering Yellow Warbler.

East down Boca Chica Blvd., the coastal prairie grasslands and ephemeral wetlands provided beautiful scenery and great birds like a Merlin and the spectacular Scissor-tailed Flycatchers. Elon Musk's SpaceX project provided interesting insight to the future of this landscape. After a quick walk of the beautiful sands of Boca Chica Beach, we turned around and headed back west to the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley in Brownsville. This beautiful campus hosts a variety of habitats including an old resaca, where Black-throated Gray and a few other warblers flitted through the bamboo and tepeguaje trees above us, Anhingas dried their wings, and orioles hopped through the palms. The sun broke through the clouds, and at 80°, it finally felt like the LRGV should!

We headed to an early dinner at Cobbleheads in Brownsville, and after eating, departed to Oliveira Park. This is a known roosting site for a large flock of Red-crowned Parrots and a few other introduced species. As we were watching and waiting for them to come in, we noticed the flock hanging out in a neighborhood behind the park. After doing a little exploring and chasing down the birds by ear, we found them congregating in a few residential yards. As we stood on the street watching the parrots, we had a wonderful surprise when an extremely welcoming resident opened her home to us so we could watch the parrots in her back yard! We truly hit the jackpot by parking where we did. It turns out she and her sister who lived in the house were bird lovers themselves, enjoying the parrots every evening as they would come to eat the fruit of their Loquat trees. We stood there in a mixture of disbelief, awe, and pure joy as hundreds of Red-crowned, White-fronted, and Red-ored Parrots fed just feet away from us in a loud and chaotic cacophony. The birds would go back and forth



between the fruit tree and a tall ash, where they would pick apart the fruit and send birds of it raining down on the yard and us. After the parrots moved on, the ladies told us stories about how the parrots came to the area and their own personal history. It was truly the experience of a lifetime, all thanks to some old-fashioned south Texas hospitality.

## **Sat., Mar. 12                      Santa Ana NWR | Estero Llano Grande State Park**

This morning after breakfast, we packed our things, said goodbye to the coastal prairies, and headed west to Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge. This sprawling tract of subtropical thorn-forest is home to hundreds of species of birds throughout the year. The variety of habitats here attract such a great diversity of all kinds of life, and along our 3 1/2-mile hike, we saw all three kingfisher species, a variety of shorebirds, a Green Jay mimicking the call of a Gray Hawk, a Least Grebe devouring a fish almost as big as it, and a huge flock of hundreds of Anhingas migrating north over Mexico, just to name a few.

The Spanish moss hanging from ancient Texas Ebony trees felt like curtains inviting us into another world, and the chorus of Rio Grande leopard frogs calling from the wetlands tied this magical scene together. Lunch was held at the Blue Onion, a favorite stop among birders in the area, and next we headed to Estero Llano Grande State Park, a place designed especially for birders.

After observing the social antics of the Black-bellied Whistling-Duck and watching a stunning drake Cinnamon Teal cruise across the water from the deck, we meandered through the tropical zone of the park. A Great Horned Owl was roosting near its nest which gave us some pretty strong side-eye as we all gazed up at it. Around the corner, Buff-bellied Hummingbirds were coming to the feeders and a Common Pauraque snoozed on





its roost amongst the leaf litter. We then took one last jaunt through the wetland half of the park to Alligator Lake, where Sandra's amazing spotting skills landed us yet another Pauraque, and dozens of roosting night herons lined the water. A diamondback water snake and a few alligators (of course!) were also hanging out. At the Alamo Inn, we checked in and had some traditional Tex-Mex for dinner.

## **Sun., Mar. 13                      Salineño Wildlife Preserve | Falcon State Park | Rancho Lomitas**

Westward-bound, we started our journey this morning before the sun rose. The first stop of the day was Salineño, Texas, an old, tiny border town with a stunning view of the Rio Grande along a short trail, and a well-stocked feeding station operated by volunteers Merle and Lois on property donated to the Valley Land Fund. We started our time here with a walk along the water where we encountered Mexican Ducks, Green Kingfishers, and a pair of Gray Hawks entering their traditional nest tree. After some patience, we heard a Morelet's Seedeater singing from the island in the river, a sound that can only be heard in Texas from a short section of the river during just a few months of the year. But the beauty of the river itself on a clear and pleasant morning was truly just as beautiful as any bird we saw. At the feeding station, Audubon's and Altamira Orioles, Green Jays, and Long-billed Thrashers bounced through the branches and fed on the suet just feet away from us. It was such a treat to be able to see these birds so closely that we could count their eyelashes! We eventually pulled ourselves away and headed to Falcon State Park and reservoir where we had a picnic lunch by the butterfly garden. At one of the camp sites, the park host had a few feeders with some seed still left from the morning, and a small covey of Northern Bobwhites came to pick up some last scraps while Crested Caracaras chased each other endlessly overhead. After visiting the shore of the lake in the park, we were off to our final stop, Rancho Lomitas. The feeding stations here immediately gifted us with a group of shy Scaled Quail, and other visitors included Cactus and Bewick's Wrens, Pyrrhuloxia, Curve-billed Thrashers, and a pair of Hooded Orioles. But all too soon, it was time to head to dinner at Rio Grande City and make our way back to Alamo for the night.

## **Mon., Mar. 14                      Bentsen RGV State Park | Edinburg Scenic Wetlands**



Today we had a leisurely morning and headed towards Bentsen Rio Grande Valley State Park. When we arrived, we birded around the visitor center area and awaited our tram ride back to the Green Jay blind. While walking up to the blind, a surprise Swainson's Hawk glided slowly over us, an early arrival from their wintering grounds in Argentina. From inside the blind, we watched the feeders for a while where a beautiful Altamira Oriole in an unusual plumage routinely came in. Unlike a typical member of this species, it had bright yellow plumage instead of dark orange, yet had the black markings of an adult bird. A couple of Lincoln's Sparrows, Green Jays, and Great Kiskadees played in the birdbath, and Long-billed Thrashers came to and from view. We then got word that an Audubon's Oriole was being seen back at the headquarters building, and since a few of us had missed it yesterday, we hustled back that direction on foot while those who had already seen it toured the park by tram to meet us there. As soon as those of us on foot arrived, we were rewarded for our efforts and saw the oriole immediately in the garden. What a treat! Once regrouped we headed to lunch at the Fresco Green Deli, a new spot for all of us, and after eating we went northeast to Edinburg Scenic Wetlands. This beautiful city park was once just a barren patch of farmland adjacent to a floodwater and sewage treatment facility, but now has been converted into a beautiful, lush park by the city of Edinburg. It serves as a nature education facility for the public, and today was no exception as the trails were busy with residents from children to adults, all enjoying the beautiful weather and discovering all kinds of wildlife right in their neighborhood; it was so encouraging to again see the community involvement with nature. On our own walk, we found two species of kingfisher, a pile of diamondback water snakes, two species of turtle, and an assortment of herons and egrets. We then headed back to the Alamo Inn for some downtime before dinner at the Republic of the Rio Grande.

**Tue., Mar. 15**

## **Quinta Mazatlan | Valley Nature Center | Departures from McAllen**

Our last morning together started with a moment of reminiscing on the week over breakfast. It is always so fun to think back on all our wonderful experiences we have had and to hear what everyone's favorite moments were. We then set off for a last bit of birding for the day, with the group splitting up in opposite directions. Michael's van headed west to McAllen's Quinta Mazatlan, a beautiful urban park with a well-preserved old Quinta (country home) and a network of trails with several feeders and water features. Bryan's van headed back east to the Valley Nature Center in Weslaco to chase after a rare Mexican stray, the Golden-crowned Warbler. Both groups had a very successful start to their days surrounded by beautiful birds and settings (and seeing the warbler was just the cherry on top). Just before noon, we reconvened at Quinta Mazatlan for our final goodbyes.

*Group Photo (Bryan Calk - BC), Red-shouldered Hawks (BC), Whooping Crane (BC), Vermillion Flycatcher (BC), American Oystercatcher (BC), Yellow-throated Warbler (BC), Least Grebes (BC), Reddish Egret (BC), Group birding at Hazel Bazemore (BC), Mottled Duck (BC), Louisiana Waterthrush (BC), Lizard (Beverly Riehm - BR), Blue-winged Teal detail shot (BC), White-tailed Kite (BC), Group at Sabal Palm Sanctuary (BC), Merlin (BC), Tropical Kingbird (BC), Red-crowned Parrots (BC), Common Parakeet (BC), Blooming Spanish Dagger (BC), Great Horned Owl (BC), Scaled Quail (BC), Great Kiskadee (BC), Golden-fronted Woodpecker (BC), Pyrrhuloxia (BC), Curve-billed Thrasher (BC), Plain Chachalaca (BC), Green Kingfisher (BC), Texas Spiny Lizard (BC)*