

Texas' Big Bend National Park | Trip Report | Apr. 30 – May 7, 2022 | by Dave Mehlman & Michael Good



Guides: Dave Mehlman and Michael Good, with participants: Alan, Carol, Don, Gary, Inge, Janet, Jill, Joanne, Katie, and Leo



Sat., Apr. 30

Arrive in El Paso, Texas | Fort Davis

Dave and Michael started the day by going to the Hotel Paso del Norte in downtown El Paso to pick up early arrivals Gary, Jill, Janet, Katie, and Alan (aka, the Bellingham Crew) for a little morning birding in the El Paso area. The first site picked, Ascarate Park, proved impossible to visit due to a mysterious traffic jam in the area, so we continued to our birding site for the morning: Keystone Heritage Park and adjacent Kevin von Finger Wetlands on the west side of El Paso—the first visit there for any of us. What a find this site proved to be! An excellent morning was had by all in the area in both the wetlands and the landscaped part of the main park, adding several species that were not to be seen at all later in the trip. The wetlands were a highlight, where we found Mallard, Northern Shoveler, Ruddy Duck, Gambel's Quail, a Ring-billed Gull, Mississippi Kite, and a nice array of shorebirds, including American Avocet, Black-necked Stilt, Semipalmated Plover, Wilson's Phalarope, Long-billed Dowitcher, and Baird's and Least Sandpiper. The gardens yielded an active Verdin nest. What a fabulous way to start the trip! We then returned to the airport to wait for other arrivals and have lunch. Just after mid-day, Dave loaded up his big van with the early arrivals and headed out, picking up Leo and Joanne at their nearby hotel along the way. Michael followed a bit later in the minivan, having picked up Carol, Inge, and Don. We all essentially headed straight for Fort Davis and the Hotel Limpia, stopping for a break in Van Horn and at the Prada Marfa art installation (which is nowhere near Marfa, somewhat oddly!). Arriving at the Limpia, we all got checked in to our rooms in the hotel (though two were in the Casa Limpia just across the street) and then enjoyed our welcome dinner at the Blue Mountain Bistro across the patio.



Sun., May 1 The Davis Mountains

Our first full day of the tour started with most walking down the main drag in Fort Davis to the Stone Village Market for breakfast, generally consisting of breakfast burritos and whatever else anyone cared to gnosh on. We also picked up our bag lunches for the day there, returned to the hotel for a quick clean-up and to get our field gear, and then we all headed off for a day in the Davis Mountains. We drove up to the Lawrence Wood Picnic Area along the main highway through the mountains, noting the good views of the McDonald Observatory telescopes along the way. A walk through the picnic area yielded some nice birds, including Lark Sparrow, Acorn Woodpecker, Plumbeous Vireo, Black-crested Titmouse, White-breasted Nuthatch, and Hepatic Tanager. After this nice start to the day, we headed back down the mountain to the Davis Mountains State Park for the rest of the morning.

The State Park is always a favorite stop in this tour and this time was no exception. The Emory Oak Viewing Area has numerous feeders of different kinds, along with a water feature and fruits stuck on agave leaves. Birds were quickly seen and identified from all directions, including Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay (the common jay of the Davis Mountains), Scott's Oriole, Blue Grosbeak, Phainopepla, Canyon Towhee, and a very nice Rufous-crowned Sparrow. The group then walked across the campground to the other viewing blind at the Interpretive Center, spotting a female Vermilion Flycatcher on her nest! Activity at the second blind was a bit slower, but we added Lesser Goldfinch, Northern Cardinal, Black-headed Grosbeak, Bewick's Wren, and a fly-by Cooper's Hawk to our burgeoning list. Our appetite worked up by all these birds, we returned to the Emory Oak blinds for a picnic lunch at the tables right across the street.

After lunch, the group went to the Fort Davis National Historic Site to view and learn about this fascinating piece of US Army history, most active in defending the San Antonio—El Paso wagon trail from attacks. While everyone was touring the Fort, Dave used the time to go shopping for Big Bend breakfast supplies at the supermarket in town. We then returned to the hotel for a brief rest and then went for an early dinner at the Chateau Wright Winery, a few miles southwest of town. There, we enjoyed a wonderful late afternoon outdoors, eating tasty items from the food truck and enjoying some of the home-grown and vinted wines. The enjoyable scenery was complemented by enjoyable birds, too, such as a Red-tailed Hawk, Black-throated and Clay-colored Sparrow, and a small flock of Blue-winged Teal which had found the small water reservoir just behind the eating area. Returning to Fort Davis for a short break, we then got back in the vans (no rest for this intrepid group!) to head



back to Davis Mountains State Park for some very late afternoon/dusk birding. A few birds were still around the viewing areas, including a perched Cooper's Hawk at Emory Oak, but the start of the show was to be at dusk, when we all gathered (along with many others, a huge crowd) in front of the telephone pole by the Interpretive Center. Sure enough, after what seemed like an agonizing wait, an Elf Owl appeared, much to everyone's delight. Though it quickly retreated into its hole (were the paparazzi too much?), it reappeared after a while two more times and we saw the other member of the pair fly in to do a nest site switch. Incredible evening for all!

Mon., May 2 The Post at Marathon | Gage Gardens | Prairie Dog Town | Big Bend National Park

Convening at about 7:00am at the Hotel Limpia, we once again walked down the street to forage for breakfast (quite successfully, I might add) at the Stone Village Market, having loaded a few bags in the vehicles prior to departing. After returning and doing final packing, we began our long voyage to Big Bend National Park.

Our first stop, as we headed down highway 118 to Alpine, was a roadside stop at Musquiz Lake, an impoundment with riparian vegetation around the edges. Although there seemed to be much activity, all we could successfully locate were Yellow-breasted Chat, Summer Tanager, and Vermilion Flycatcher, with the lake itself largely empty except for American Coot and Mexican Duck. We continued through Alpine to the town of Marathon, where we headed south to one of the top birding sites of the tour: Fort Peña Colorado Park (aka The Post). The Post and the road in were very productive with great viewing opportunities; some of the highlights included Scaled Quail, Lesser Nighthawk, Orchard and Bullock's Orioles, Western and Summer Tanager, both Brown-headed and Bronzed Cowbird (with fantastic looks at a male of the latter, with its ruff and fierce red eye), Green-tailed Towhee, and Gray Hawk. Most interesting was a Bell's Vireo nest at the north end of the park, which facilitated some sort of look at this hard-to-see bird for everyone in the group.

Reluctantly leaving this wonderful spot, we headed back into town for a stop at the Gage Gardens. Though heavily landscaped, these gardens repeatedly produce rarities for west Texas. Among our findings while cruising



through the gardens were White-crowned Sparrow, Inca Dove, another Bronzed Cowbird, Western Wood-Pewee, Hermit Thrush, and several Painted Buntings (including a very cooperative male drinking from a pool on the concrete deck of the party pavilion!). After all this productive and fun birding, we were famished and made our way a short distance to the V6 Coffee Bar with its elegant sandwiches. While there, we encountered another Naturalist Journeys tour on their way out of the park, so we were able to get some intel on a few things from that group.

After lunch, we continued with a brief detour northeast of Marathon to visit the prairie-dog town in search of Burrowing Owls and other critters. Although we could not locate any owls, we did see Pronghorn, Black-tailed Prairie-Dogs, Eastern Meadowlark, and a beautiful Swainson's Hawk flying overhead. After that, we headed directly to Big Bend National Park, encountering road construction right from the entrance station and on for many miles. We did have time, however, to stop at the Fossil Discovery Exhibit to learn about the geology of Big Bend, and at the Panther Junction Visitor Center for some shopping and to get our entrance passes. After that, it was on to the Chisos Basin, where we got our keys for the Chisos Mountains Lodge and decided to just get in line for tables for dinner. This proved to be a wise decision, as the Lodge dining room staff was teetering on collapse and we ended up waiting two hours for a table (and longer to eat) with only one waiter available! But we managed to get fed and then went to our rooms in time to enjoy the sunset through the Window.

Tues., May 3 Rio Grande Village

The day began with a fine picnic breakfast in front of Dave's room where those who wished were greeted with a fresh cup of coffee from Mr. Coffee himself (actually, only Dave standing there with a thermos!). After this, we got ready and loaded up in the vehicles with our lunches for a day to explore the east side of Big Bend National Park. Our first stop was the Dugout Wells area, an old homestead with a still operating windmill to pump water. This site, since it is far greener than the surrounding desert, many times attracts a variety of birds in migration. Today, there were only a few things around of interest, including Western Tanager, Wilson's Warbler, Scott's Oriole, Brewer's Blackbirds, and a Desert Cottontail. The Ladder-backed Woodpecker pair with a nest in a cottonwood at the site, which we had noticed on the previous tour, were continuing to bring food to their nest, allowing for good looks at both sexes of this desert woodpecker.

We then continued to Rio Grande Village, our primary destination for the morning. On attempting to drive to the trailhead for the Nature Trail (in the campground) we found that half the campground was closed off to vehicle traffic for repaving. So, Dave and Michael dropped everyone off at the barricades and went back on the road to park in the overflow parking area. The Nature Trail proved to be a fun hike, and everyone made it to the Rio Grande (in this area of the park fronting on the State of Coahuila) and Katie even took a dip in the river (must have some fish genes in her!); The birds, though not abundant, were good and included Yellow-breasted Chat,



Verdin, Black-throated Sparrow, and Black Vulture. A few Desert Millipedes were also crawling around, and Big Bend Sliders and Spiny Soft-shelled Turtles were out sunning in the wetland for good viewing. Returning from the trailhead, we birded the closed part of the campground for a while. Following a tip from Big Bend area uber-guide Lee Hoy we located a singing Lucy's Warbler, though it refused to sit still for long. Other finds in the campground included Greater Roadrunner, Eastern Bluebird, Brown-headed Cowbird, and a Lesser Nighthawk.

Finishing our morning birding, we headed down the road to the Daniel's Ranch area for a picnic lunch at the tables in the shade of the cottonwoods. Although the cottonwoods were quiet, we had the unusual experience of seeing soaring raptors right from the table, including Turkey Vulture, Gray Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, and a very unexpected Osprey! After lunch, we worked our way back down Daniel's Ranch Road, stopping by the black-hawk nesting area. A Common Black-Hawk, or at least various parts of it, were easily visible on the nest from the road, especially with the aid of the spotting scopes—we finally were able to check that one off our list! Although it was starting to get hot at that point in the afternoon, we continued to the Boquillas Canyon Overlook to admire the view of the river cutting straight into the Sierra del Carmen, with the small village of Boquillas, Mexico, easily visible on the other side. Luckily, we glimpsed a Snowy Egret flying upriver from the overlook and found a singing Painted Bunting in the mesquites below. At this point, due to the heat, we split the tour up. Michael took Leo, Allen, Katie, and Gary to hike into Boquillas Canyon itself. The temperature at the canyon was 101° F with a sunny blue sky (always it seems) and thankfully a light wind offering some relief from the Chihuahuan Desert "dry" heat. We found the local tamale dealer who gave us some insight into the dwindling tourist numbers as summer approaches. We had a wonderful encounter with a Canyon Wren calling, an exhibition by a Painted Bunting which Leo liked, both Say's and Black Phoebe, and the ubiquitous Bell's Vireo. Everyone enjoyed the air-conditioned ride back to Chisos Lodge. Dave took the rest back to the Chisos Basin to escape the heat, with a stop at the Panther Junction Visitor Center along the way. When we all reassembled late in the afternoon at the Lodge's patio area to begin the dinner quest, we had a surprise: the Lodge had completely shut down its dining service and was only doing take-out meals! However, this proved to be a bit of a blessing in disguise, as we were able to commandeer two tables on the patio in the shade and get our take-out orders taken, while we sent out our scouts to make a beer run at the Basin Store. A very enjoyable evening it turned out to be, with food, beer, and bird-listing on the patio!



Wed., May 4 Chisos Mountains

After much anticipation and rumors, today was the planned day for our hike into the Chisos Mountains on the quest for the Colima Warbler! We started with our usual picnic breakfast outside Dave's room to get fortified. After everyone had finished breakfast and loaded their packs with sufficient water and lunch material, we gathered at the Basin trailhead for a brief orientation and to scope out the mountains above. In total, 11 of us started off on the hike heading up the Laguna Meadows Trail, under quite pleasant conditions. We gradually climbed higher and higher, with two peeling off to do the Basin Loop Trail and two more turning back when they reached their limits part way up the trail. The remaining seven of us continued, birding and botanizing on the way. Many distractions abounded, including Spotted Towhee, Mexican Jay, Black-chinned and Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Bewick's Wren, and White-throated Swift. In one of the shady canyons, we had an amazing discovery of two blooming Curly (or Chisos Mountain Crested) Coralroots, a unique and very rare (in fact, it's considered critically endangered) orchid that has no chlorophyll. As we crested the saddle to cross over out of the Basin, we were rewarded by wonderful views of male Broad-tailed Hummingbirds.

Under the intrepid leadership of Michael (aka Mr. Colima) we continued up the Laguna Meadows Trail to its junction with the Colima and South Rim Trails. At that point, we heard a singing Colima and began to pay close attention. Sure enough, we were soon rewarded with excellent views of several Colimas foraging in the oaks and junipers and chasing each other around, sometimes sitting only 5 feet above our heads! Wow, truly the most amazing views ever and we could not have expected such good luck. Having rewarded ourselves with this bird "icing" on the hike "cake", we walked a little way back down and enjoyed a hard-earned field lunch. Retracing our steps, we all worked our way back down the trail, having completed an 8+ mile round trip hike—what a satisfying, though tiring, experience. Meeting up with everyone else, we headed back up to the Lodge patio for another round of dinners. Alan, having been entrusted as chief beer-carrier, performed his duties magnificently with a full cooler appearing on the patio. Meanwhile, waiter Dave, doing one of his many "other duties as assigned", took everyone's takeout dinner order from the by now familiar menu, to help the dining staff. Satisfied, we all then retreated to our rooms and/or enjoyed the sunset at this beautiful spot.



Thur., May 5 Sam Nail Ranch | Santa Elena Canyon

After enjoying another picnic breakfast outside Dave's room, we got ready for a day exploring the west side of Big Bend National Park and the town of Terlingua. We loaded into the vans and set off for the Ross Maxwell Scenic Drive and our first stop, Sam Nail Ranch. This historic homestead site is another mini oasis in the desert that frequently attracts a nice variety of birds. As usual, Sam Nail did not disappoint, with the walk on the short loop trail yielding Bell's Vireo (Inge's fave!), Yellow-breasted Chats perched in the treetops chortling (chatting?) their hearts out, Blue Grosbeak, Painted Bunting, Pyrrhuloxias singing away, and a nicely posing Crissal Thrasher (the only one of the tour) in a mesquite. After this, we continued on the drive and made a quick stop at Sotol Vista to use the facilities and take in the magnificent view to the west, with Santa Elena Canyon appearing as a small notch in a distant mountain.

At this point, due to the forecasted hot weather, we made a run directly for Santa Elena Canyon with no intermediate stops. This allowed us to hike into the Canyon in the morning temperatures which were still relatively reasonable. Everyone made it all the way into the canyon, noting the shockingly low Rio Grande at this point—no wet feet to get into Santa Elena Canyon this year. The canyon was gorgeous with a nice breeze blowing down canyon, incredible rock walls, and cascades of Canyon Wren music to accent it all. Other birds hanging out included Northern Rough-winged Swallow, Black Phoebe, Black Vulture, Lesser Goldfinch, and Common Raven. Upon our return to the Canyon trailhead parking area, the heat was on (and our stomachs were giving urgent warnings), so we drove to Cottonwood Campground and a shaded picnic table for lunch. Before, during, and after lunch provided more birding opportunities, with various members of the group finding Golden-fronted and Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Hooded Oriole (the only one of the trips), Western Tanager, Painted Bunting, and a Great Horned Owl (the latter spotted by "owl man" Dave roosting on a cottonwood stump well up in a tree). After lunch, it was both too hot to do much outside but too early to head to town. Therefore, we made a short stop at Castolon to see the sadly burned-out old trading post and to get an ice cream from the small store. Continuing, the group drove out of the park to Study Butte and then south on the highway to Lajitas to visit the Barton Warnock Visitor Center of the Big Bend Ranch State Park. Big Bend Ranch is by far Texas' largest state park, but access is on difficult roads from the west side, so this visitor center (named after a famous Texas botanist who was the leading authority on the trans-Pecos flora and a long-time faculty member at Sul Ross



State University in Alpine) is the closest we could get to it. After exploring its museum and resting a bit in the shade, the group continued into old Terlingua, to allow a bit of free time before an early dinner at the Starlight Theatre. Fortunately, no one got thrown in the old jail as a result of this free time, so we went inside to our table by the stage, of course paying our respects to the Honorable Clay Henry, the former beer-drinking goat mayor. The meal was a pleasant break from the Lodge meals and an old-time band played some classic tunes to liven things up, with Don throwing out suggestions. After dinner, it was still daylight, so we enjoyed a lovely early evening drive back into the park, watching the entire Chisos Range light up in the setting sun. An excellent conclusion to another epic day in west Texas!

Fri., May 6

Christmas Mountains Oasis | Marfa

The day began with our final picnic breakfast by Dave's room, with final shots of his scrumptious coffee and a veritable feeding frenzy to finish all the remaining blueberries. After that we prepared to leave by loading the vans with all our gear, a skill for which Leo showed incredible talent! The group had a bit of free time while we waited until we could pick up our final box lunches from the Lodge, which most spent with a final short exploration of the Chisos Basin. The lunches soon arrived, so we squared everything away and headed our vans down from the Basin for the last time.

Leaving via the west entrance, we passed through Study Butte and drove north on the highway to Alpine, turning off on the Terlingua Ranch Road for our destination for the morning: the Christmas Mountains Oasis. This site, privately owned by Carolyn Ohi-Johnson from Alpine, but open to birders is a well-known (at least, in the birding community!) place in west Texas to find and see birds and other wildlife. Planted with trees and containing water features, seed feeders, and hummingbird feeders, it is must-visit stop for virtually every birder and birding tour group in the region. Upon arrival, we immediately saw the star local resident attraction: a male Lucifer Hummingbird sitting on top of a yucca! That proved to be the beginning of the fun, as the group alternately sat at the feeding station viewing area, walked around the oasis, or monitored the nearby pond. A special target for the day was a Worm-eating Warbler, which had been seen at the Oasis on the two previous days and Carolyn gave the group special orders to find it! Those monitoring the feeders were rewarded with many goodies, including both sexes of Lucifer and Black-chinned Hummingbirds, both sexes of Varied Bunting, Scaled Quail, Black-throated Sparrow, Wilson's Warbler, Pyrrhuloxia, and Western Tanager. At one point, Dave decided to monitor the action at the pond and, amid the Chipping and Black-throated Sparrows coming and going from the water, he noticed the Worm-eating Warbler appear briefly! At this point, the call went out and everyone came over and began a search for "the bird", which ended successfully for all after a while, with decent looks and photos of this eastern stray (a first for the Oasis). Additional poking around the oasis yielded Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Townsend's Warbler, and a Pine Siskin; flyovers included White-throated Swift and Red-



tailed Hawk. We spent over three hours there so everyone at some point got their lunch boxes out and consumed their food in this very enjoyable place. Reluctantly, we decided we had to move on in the early afternoon to continue our travels, so we said good-bye to Carolyn and her mountain Oasis and continued on the highway, first passing through Alpine and then on to our destination for the evening: the town of Marfa and its famed lodging, the Hotel Paisano. After checking into its elegant rooms, a group of us, inspired by Katie, headed over to the Chinati Foundation for a self-guided tour of its arts installation for the rest of the afternoon. Founded by artist Donald Judd, the Foundation's grounds are an old army base that was purchased and converted into an enormous outdoor and indoor gallery for Judd's own works as well as installations of other artists. While hard to describe (think "concrete"), it was a fun afternoon walk around the grounds that yielded a few birds, such as Barn Swallow, Wilson's Warbler, and another Great Horned Owl (only seen by "owl man", though). Those who did not go to visit Chinati spent the afternoon poking around the delightful downtown of Marfa. After all had returned to the Paisano and had a chance to freshen up, we met on the patio for a happy hour, final checklist review, and our farewell dinner. A wonderful evening to end the trip on!

Sat., May 7 Departures from El Paso

The departure schedule of everyone meant that we had to leave in two groups. Michael took himself, Joanne, and Leo in the early van, leaving by 7:30AM, after grabbing their breakfast burritos from Jett's Grill at the Hotel Paisano. The drive to El Paso included miles and miles of changing habitat and our last memories of the Chihuahuan Desert. We arrived early in El Paso so we checked out a local golf course/green space where we finished up the trip with excellent quality time with a Swainson's Hawk, a Western Wood Pewee, our favorite, the Great-tailed Grackle and a shower of Golf Balls! The first departure team said good-bye at the El Paso airport, leaving only foot-steps and taking home a bundle of memories wrapped up in 7 memorable days.

Everyone in Dave's group either had a mid-afternoon flight from the airport or were spending an extra night at the airport, so this group had a leisurely morning. We all first enjoyed our burritos, then most explored Marfa a bit on foot to see what this happenin' town had to offer. While walking around, Alan found another Great Horned Owl in one of the trees by the picturesque Presidio County Courthouse. By mid-morning, we were all ready to go, so we packed everything in the big van one last time (with Alan stepping up as chief packer in Leo's absence) and we hit the highway for the 3-hour drive to El Paso. Our first stop was the airport, where we dropped Inge, Don, and Carol off for their flights that afternoon. Then, Dave plus the Bellingham Crew went to the Wyndham airport hotel, where the crew was spending the night and Dave's car was parked. With that, we all dispersed on our migrations home and this Big Bend tour ended.

Photo Credits: Group photo (Katie Cassidy - KC), Fort Davis, Big Bend scenic, Long-billed Dowitchers (Michael J. Good - MG), Elf Owl Vigil (David Mehlman - DM), Summer Tanager (MG), Scott's Oriole (MG), Western Tanager (MG), Pyrrhuloxia (MG), Golden-fronted Woodpeckers (MG), Canyon Towhee (MG), Bronzed Cowbird (MG), Plateau Striped Whiptail (MG), Katie Birding (DM), Chomp! (KC), Cacti (KC), Morning Walk (DM), Black-throated Sparrow (MG), Horse (KC), Bird list (DM), Guide of the year! (KC), Scarlet Hedgehog Cactus (KC), Colima Warbler (MG), Close-up photography (KC), Big Bend Scenic (KC), Dinner (Carol C), Donald Judd art at Chinati Foundation (KC), Bird Grid photos (Great Horned Owl, Vermillion Flycatcher, Pyrrhuloxia & Northern Cardinal by KC), Starlight Theatre (KC), Gallery Grid Photos x 4 (KC)