

# Texas' Big Bend | Trip Report | April 22–29, 2022 | by Dave Mehlman and Michael Good



With guides Dave Mehlman and Michael Good, and participants: Betsy, Gene, Hal, Jon, Kate, Marcia, Midge, Phil, Ruth, and Steve.



## **Fri., Apr. 22**

## **Arrive in El Paso, Texas | Early Birding | Fort Davis**

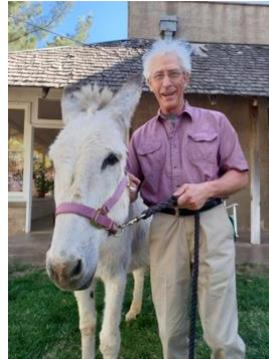
The early birding team (Gene, Phil, and Steve, with Michael driving) left El Paso airport traveling on I-10 east for Balmorhea Lake. On the way, we encountered our first Swainson's Hawk and Chihuahuan Raven of the trip. We all enjoyed our introduction to the Chihuahuan Desert as we drove to our first stop at Sandia Spring Wetland Project. This 40-acre wetland is a collaboration between the Texas Farm Bureau and local farmers working with the Nature Conservancy's Sandia Springs Preserve. It is located on a Texas Department of Agriculture Family Land Heritage Ranch owned by Don and Ellen Weinacht. Many waterbirds were recorded, including Blue-winged Teal, Long-billed Dowitcher, White-faced Ibis, and long looks at our first Lark Sparrows. Our next stop took us to Balmorhea Lake, a 560-acre reservoir with water coming from Toyah Creek, fed by the nearby San Solomon Springs. The team added waterbirds Pied-billed, Western and Clark's Grebe, an unexpected Whimbrel, Least and Semipalmated Sandpipers, Greater Yellowlegs, and 3 Neotropical Cormorants. We also recorded our first American Pipit on the lake's western shore. Our travels then took us to Balmorhea State Park where the wind



had reached high enough speeds that all of the park visitors were leaving and there were no birds to speak of except for Gene's life bird, Ladder-backed Woodpecker. We made one last stop on our way to Hotel Limpia at the Wild Rose Pass picnic area where we were surprised with some excellent observations of Pyrrhuloxia and our first Wilson's Warbler. Meanwhile, back at the airport, Dave rounded up the rest of our group (except for Kate and Ruth who drove directly to Fort Davis). One incoming flight was a bit delayed, but eventually everyone showed up, so Dave loaded the van with Betsy, Hal, Jon, Marcia, and Midge and all our gear and we set off for Fort Davis. We made a brief rest stop at the "traditional" Pilot Station in Van Horn and quickly paused at the famed Prada Marfa art installation on the way there. Arriving at the Hotel Limpia in Fort Davis, we all checked in and met up with the previous arrivals. Despite the restaurant's having "forgotten" our reservation, we were all accommodated eventually at our welcome dinner in the back room of the Blue Mountain Bistro, and we enjoyed a great welcome meal, even if it was a bit late. After that, it was off to our rooms for our first night of the tour.

## Sat., Apr. 23                      The Davis Mountains

Breakfast today was down main street at the Stone Village Market, and many walked the short distance, though a few drove. Enjoying the breakfast burritos, we had our first experience at this Fort Davis institution, and we picked up our pre-ordered lunches. Then, it was off to the Davis Mountains for the day. Our first stop was the Davis Mountains State Park. Dave got our vehicle permits for the day, while the group jumped out to bird at the entrance station with fine views of a Phainopepla, among other things. We then proceeded to the Emory Oak Wildlife Viewing Area ("fanciest little bird blind in Texas", or so says the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department!), where we had great views of lots of birds, including Summer Tanager, Northern Cardinal, Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay, Scott's Oriole, and Blue Grosbeak. We then proceeded across the State Park to the Interpretive Center's blind, where we added Lincoln's Sparrow, Bewick's Wren, and Black-headed Grosbeak to our rapidly growing bird list. Having had our fill at the blinds, we returned to the vehicles (where a Black-chinned Hummingbird nest was noted) and continued up into the mountains to the Lawrence Wood Picnic Area. The group then hiked the Madera Canyon Trail on the adjacent Davis Mountains Preserve of The Nature Conservancy. Although the trail was pretty quiet, we were able to see Ash-throated and Gray Flycatcher, Sharp-shinned Hawk, and a veritable bucketload of Chipping Sparrows. The morning's activities had whetted our appetite by this time, so we moved to a shaded picnic table and ate our tasty sandwiches from the Stone Market.



After lunch, we divided the group depending on interests. Michael took Betsy, Jon, Steve, and Gene to the nearby McDonald Observatory to geek out on telescopes. Our first bird at the McDonald Observatory was an Eastern Bluebird, igniting the group's enthusiasm to check out the self-guided tour of this amazing array of telescopes. The effort paid off as we learned about the research arm of the University of Texas at Austin's Astronomy Program. Mt. Locke and Mt. Fowlkes are home to some of the darkest skies and have some of the best equipment in the world to study astronomy and astrophysics. We added Say's Phoebe, Cassin's Kingbird, and Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay to the list and satisfied our geekiness too! Dave took the rest back to the Hotel Limpia (where a wedding was going on) and most spent the rest of the afternoon exploring Fort Davis or enjoying the comfortable hotel. Hal met Dave later in the afternoon and they went for a short trip to the Fort Davis National Historic Site to visit this partly restored Buffalo Soldier-era fort. Based on a hot tip Dave got from the Hotel Limpia staff, we loaded up in the late afternoon and headed out for an early dinner at the Chateau Wright Winery a few miles outside of town. There, we sampled the eclectic offerings from the Too Hot for TABC (we still do not know what this means!) food truck on site. Many also partook of the wine offerings while we enjoyed a delightful evening outside in the shade, enjoying the wonderful view over the grasslands. Naturally, birds were seen during dinner, including Eastern Meadowlark, Black-throated Sparrow, and the ubiquitous Vermilion Flycatcher.

Returning to the hotel, we had a brief time to digest, and then we reconvened late in the day for an evening outing back to the State Park. While waiting for everyone to arrive, the bride came over and invited us to dance to the excellent cowboy-funk band that was playing at the post-wedding festivities! This was a tough one for us, but we decided to stick to our "birding guns" and head to the park. Arriving at the park, we assumed our positions near a telephone pole and began the nightly vigil. Sure enough, at about 8:39pm, an Elf Owl appeared in the hole in the pole and peered out at the crowd—success! Everyone got good looks, though the light was not so great at that hour, and many took photos. The owl in the bag, we returned to the hotel for another night's rest.



**Sun., Apr. 24                      The Post at Marathon | Gage Gardens | Big Bend**

We began the day with another episode of breakfast foraging at the Stone Village Market, followed by packing, loading, and checking out of the Hotel Limpia. We then drove to Fort Peña Colorado Park (aka, The Post) south of Marathon, with a quick stop in Alpine for gas. The Post, Dave’s favorite birding spot on the tour, and the road into it yielded many good birds with excellent viewing opportunities. Among these were Killdeer and American Pipit wandering around on the grass, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, more Blue Grosbeaks, Bell’s and Plumbeous Vireo, Savannah Sparrow, Brown-crested Flycatcher, Orchard Oriole, and several Blue-winged Teal on the pond. White-crowned Sparrows were still around, as were a few Lark Sparrows and a Savannah Sparrow.

Tearing ourselves away from this spot, we drove into town for a brief stop at the Gage Gardens. Although not natural habitat, these landscaped grounds suck in birds from all around. In our case, we found Cave Swallow, Inca Dove, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, and a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher perched on the entrance gate! By now famished, we took the very short drive into town and had delicious lunches at the V6 Coffee Bar. After a quick look at the shops near the V6, we loaded up for the long drive back to Alpine and then down to Big Bend National Park. Our initial plan to stop by Christmas Mountains Oasis on the way into the park had to be scuttled due to lack of time and the distance involved for us to get from Marathon to the Chisos Basin (136 miles!). Arriving at the Chisos Mountains Lodge (and enjoying the fabulous scenery and views of approaching the Chisos Mountains through the west entrance in the late afternoon), we checked in, settled in our rooms, and then negotiated the first of several dinners in the Lodge dining room. This proved to be challenging due to the limited staffing in the dining room, meaning we had to eat in small groups and frequently had to wait for an hour or more for a table. But, the scenery of the Basin more than made up for this small hardship. We also picked up our lunches for tomorrow at this point, which everyone took to their room for the night.

**Mon., Apr. 25                      Birding Rio Grande Village**

This morning marked the first of our “picnic breakfasts” in the Chisos Basin of food that we had brought with us—the understaffing at the Chisos Mountains Lodge meant that they were not serving breakfast at all. Oddly, although the skies were clear in the pre-dawn darkness, by sunrise, a big cloud bank had rolled in with strong



winds, signaling the arrival and passage of a strong cold front. Nevertheless, we persisted with Dave's french press coffee, oatmeal, yogurt, granola, and fruit and it seemed that everyone survived. We left the Basin for a full day exploring the east side of Big Bend National Park, although the Basin itself was nearly completely socked in with clouds, forcing us to drive extremely slowly out of and down the mountain. It slightly cleared as we got lower and we soon arrived at our first stop, Dugout Wells. Unfortunately, the wind was strong enough that there were few birds, although we managed to dig up Brewer's Blackbird, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Wilson's Warbler, and a few other things, before deciding to depart for lower elevations. Arriving at Rio Grande Village, we went directly to the Nature Trail in the campground, though the winds were still gusting. As luck would have it, one of the better birds of the trip, a previously reported Common Ground-Dove, was foraging right by the campground road so everyone got some sort of view of this tiny dove from inside the vehicles! The nature trail itself was quite windy and therefore not too birdy, but we made up for the lack of quantity with high quality: Gray and Zone-tailed Hawk, Black Vulture, and more pipits as we walked to and from the Rio Grande (fronting on the State of Coahuila at this point). Next, we made a stop at the Rio Grande Village itself to use the bathrooms, then did a little birding along Daniel's Ranch Road. Strong winds caused the Common Black Hawk to sit so tight on its nest that it could not be seen, much to Dave and Michael's disappointment. A few other birds were found, though, including an Indigo Bunting, more ubiquitous Vermilion flycatchers, more hordes of Chipping Sparrows, and more pipits.

We then continued to Daniel's Ranch for a picnic lunch under the wind-blown cottonwoods. Again, not much was to be found, though we spotted Black Phoebe, Spotted Sandpiper, and Belted Kingfisher along the river (where Jon's phone took an ill-advised swim in the river!) and Summer Tanager in the cottonwoods. Next, we drove to the Boquillas Canyon Overlook where some of us were nearly blown off the cliff by a very strong wind gust. After having a good view of where the Rio Grande cuts into the Sierra del Carmen, we split into two groups. Michael led Jon, Gene, and Kate (the seriously hardy hikers of the group!) for a walk into Boquillas Canyon itself. The 1.6-mile walk into the Canyon was remembered by the high gusty winds sandblasting everything in its path, including the hikers! Our staff weatherman, Jon, suggested that some of the gusts reached 60 mph!! We did pick up Rough-winged Swallows gliding over the Rio Grande and a greater appreciation for erosion by wind and water. Meanwhile, Dave took the others back to the Chisos Basin, with a stop at the Panther Junction visitor center. Reuniting at the end of the day, we again had dinner in the Lodge restaurant, having learned how to better navigate the sign-in and eating process.



**Tues., Apr. 26**

**Santa Elena Canyon | Christmas Mountains Oasis**

The day dawned as another cool, cloudy day—unusual for the Chisos Mountains. But we dug into our breakfasts and coffee outside Dave’s room and prepared for the day. Loading into the vehicles we headed out to explore the west side of Big Bend National Park via the Ross Maxwell Scenic Drive. Our first stop was the Sotol Vista rest stop/overlook, where we could use the facilities and admire the view to the west, including the far-off Santa Elena Canyon appearing as a small notch in a mountain. We then drove straight to the Santa Elena Canyon trailhead where we enjoyed a very pleasant hike into the canyon with temperatures only about 70°F and cloudy skies—the first-time conditions had ever been this nice for canyon hiking in all Dave’s years guiding in Big Bend! Everyone hiked into the canyon, all the way to where the rock walls close in on the Rio Grande and it is not possible to go further without wading. Sadly, the Rio Grande itself was so low that wading was more than possible; in fact, a few crossed over the river at this point, barely getting their boots muddy, to touch the Chihuahua side. Despite the clouds and a bit of wind, we enjoyed some birds here including the usual Northern Rough-winged Swallows, a Slate-colored Junco, White-throated Swift, Painted Bunting, and Canyon and Rock Wrens. Santa Elena Canyon is the home of the latter two! After hiking out, we drove back on the Scenic Drive to Cottonwood Campground, where we ate our sandwiches at the picnic area. Time was a bit short, but we found a few things in the campground, including Eastern Bluebird and Golden-fronted Woodpecker. Heading out, we drove out the west entrance again and then north to go visit the Christmas Mountains Oasis. Though this site is normally visited on the tour on our departure from Big Bend, scheduling conflicts with other groups and our inability to visit on the way into the park meant this was our only opportunity.

The always ebullient Carolyn Ohi-Johnson was there to welcome us to her mountain oasis paradise and its fabulous birds, well worth the gnarly drive in. The latter did not disappoint; great views (and many lifers!) were head of the local star attraction, Lucifer Hummingbird, as well as Varied Bunting; Chipping, Brewer’s, Vesper, Black-throated, Lincoln’s, Savannah, and Clay-colored Sparrows; Pyrrhuloxia; Solitary Sandpiper (at the cement pond); and a large Western Coachwhip. Late in the afternoon, we reluctantly left this lovely spot to return to the Chisos Basin and our usual, highly choreographed, dinner table routine at the Lodge dining room.



## **Wed., Apr. 27 Chisos Mountains**

Today was devoted to the Chisos Mountains, with a needed break from driving for both the guides and everyone along. A large group of 8 led by Michael and Dave headed up the Laguna Meadows trail for higher elevations, while others, who preferred not to hike so much, stayed in and around the Basin area. All heeded Dave's instructions to bring lunch and lots of water, so up we went, with various people turning back as they reached their respective limits. Of course, the hiking was at a birding pace and we spotted lots of birds along the way including Mexican Jay, Scott's Oriole, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Black-crowned Titmouse, Broad-tailed Hummingbird, and a Hutton's Vireo. Much of the group made it to the outhouse about 3.5 miles in where they decided that was enough and had their lunches. Meanwhile, the intrepid Michael, not to be deterred by mere miles or lunches, pressed on solo and was able to locate the holy grail of the Chisos (Colima Warblers) further up the trail. At least the rest of us got to know they were there! We all then returned down the lengthy trail at our paces for a free rest of the afternoon and then our usual dinner routine in the dining room. A long, arduous, but very satisfying day was had by all!

## **Thur., Apr. 28 Gage Gardens | Prairie Dog Town | Marfa**

The day began with our final picnic breakfast outside Dave's room, polishing off the remaining fruit, yogurt, and granola. Loading the vehicles, we checked out of the Chisos Mountains Lodge and headed down the mountain, this time aiming to exit through the north entrance at Persimmon Gap. Our first stop was the Fossil Discovery Exhibit on the road to Marathon with its fascinating overview of the geological history of Big Bend and its full-size replica of a flying *Quetzalcoatlus northropi*, the largest flying animal known to have ever lived! Although the exhibit is in the low desert, a few birds were to be found including Say's Phoebe (nesting on the structure) and a surprising Yellow-headed Blackbird, the only one of the trip. Continuing our voyage north, we arrived in Marathon for a second stop at the Gage Gardens in town, this time allowing for more birding to occur. Though highly landscaped and maintained as a more-or-less formal garden, the Gage produces many good bird reports. The "best" bird there on this day was a Wood Thrush (previously reported, but well out of range in west Texas). More normal, but no less interesting, sightings included Cave Swallow, Inca Dove, Blue Grosbeak, Summer



Tanager, Wilson’s Warbler, Painted Bunting, and Hermit Thrush. At this point, everyone was starving, and we headed back to the V6 Coffee Bar for our second lunch at this fine establishment. Much to our surprise, another Naturalist Journeys tour also arrived for lunch (on their way into Big Bend), making for a fun interaction between the groups. We followed lunch with a bit of free time for people to explore Marathon, including some of the shops and the classic Gage Hotel. Continuing our journey, we made a brief stop northwest of town to visit the Black-tailed Prairie Dog town. However, due to the heat of the day and the wind, we were not able to find any Burrowing Owls, only the prairie dogs themselves. Loading into our vans again, we then headed directly for Marfa, passing through Alpine along the way, for our final night of the tour at the wonderful Hotel Paisano, a true west Texas classic. After arrival, those who wished could settle in and explore Marfa while the true hard cores on the group went with Dave and Michael to the Marfa Settling Ponds just south of town for a final birding stop. The ponds, which have a bit of water and lots of green vegetation, provided some final goodies for the tour, despite the wind and having to bird from the highway. Perhaps most interesting were over 30 Pronghorn, by far the most seen on the entire trip, that were attracted to the vegetation. Bird-wise, several things new to the tour were spotted, including White-faced Ibis, Wilson’s Phalarope, Least Sandpiper, and Red-winged Blackbird, so it proved a productive spot. We returned to the Hotel Paisano for a rest and showers, then we all gathered on the patio for our final dinner. Celebrating our wonderful journey, we recounted various adventures and made plans for tomorrow and Ruth shared a lovely poem by Liberty Hyde Bailey with us. A lovely way to conclude our tour!

## **Fri., Apr. 29                      Departures from El Paso**

After breakfast burritos at the Hotel Paisano, we packed and loaded for the final time and set off for El Paso airport. We made a brief stop at the Marfa Settling Ponds on the way out of town for those who had not come with us the day before. Despite the rising sun being directly in our eyes, we found a few Pronghorn plus Blue-winged Teal and a Solitary Sandpiper. With that, we were off to Van Horn and then I-10 to the El Paso airport for most, though a few stayed at nearby airport hotels. And so ended Naturalist Journeys’ first Big Bend tour of 2022.

*Photo Credits - Group Photo (Marcia Nedland - MN), Big Bend Sign (David Mehlman - DM), Burrowing Owl (Michael J. Good - MG), Sky (Ruth Merritt), Hotel Limpia (MG), Phainopepla (MG), Black-throated Sparrow (MG), Blue Grosbeak (MG), Acorn Woodpecker (MG), Group photo (DM), Group birding (DM), Horse cameo (MG), Bride asking for dance (DM), Western Kingbird (MG), Curved-billed Thrasher (MG), Trail Sign (MN), Greater Roadrunner (MG), Birding (MN), Sunset (MG), Cacti (Ruth Merritt), Summer Tanager (MG), Ash-throated Flycatcher (DM), Scenic (MN), Pots (MN), Cactus Wren (MG), Pyrrhuloxia (MG), Rock Wren (MG), Gorgeous Hike (MG), Scenic (MN), Strawberry Hedgehog Cactus (DM), Rufous-crowned Sparrow (MG), Group learning (MG)*