

South Texas Birding & Nature With Naturalist Journeys



Guided by Bryan Shirley & Michael Marsden with participants Maureen, Roger, Merle, Bill, Michelle, Vicky, Larry, Sydney, Marian, Kate, and George

Compiled by: Bryan Shirley

Summary: March 10-18, 2023 Birding along the Texas coast around Rockport and the Lower Rio Grande Valley. We had a great trip visiting some of the most famous birding destinations in the US including Aransas NWR, Santa Ana, Bentsen Rio Grande, and other wonderful parks and preserves in the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

Family or Species Common Name: Scientific Name

BIRDS

Ducks, Geese, and Swans: Anatidae

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck *Dendrocygna autumnalis*—Seen most days during the tour including sitting on the roof of our hotel. We had great views of them posing for photos along the boardwalk at South Padre

Muscovy Duck *Cairina moschata*— Common introduced and domesticated around Brownsville area

Gadwall *Anas strepera*— Common at Santa Ana NWR. Also seen in the Rio Grande at Salineño

American Wigeon *Anas americana*—Recorded on 2 days, once on South Padre Island and again the following day at Santa Ana NWR

Mexican Duck *Anas Fulvigula* – Had a pair fly down the Rio Grande at Salineno showing obvious white lines on both sides of the speculum

Mottled Duck *Anas fulvigula*— Common and seen most days

Blue-winged Teal *Anas discors*— One of the more common ducks on the tour and recorded on almost every day

Cinnamon Teal *Anas cyanoptera*— We had a few that gave us good scope views at Santa Ana NWR on Willow Lake

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata*— Large number of them at Leonabell Turnbull Birding Center and a few others here and there throughout the tour

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*—One seen once during the trip – a female at Santa Ana on Willow Lake

Green-winged Teal *Anas crecca*— A flock of about 30 was observed at Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Center, then a couple on South Padre and Santa Ana NWR

Canvasback *Aythya valisineria*—3 were seen on the Rio Grande near the island while we were looking for Red-billed Pigeon

Redhead *Aythya americana*—Recorded 2 days of the trip. First seen at Rockport Beach and then again at South Padre Island

Ring-necked Duck *Aythya collaris*— One at Santa Ana and one in the River at Salineño

Lesser Scaup *Aythya affinis*— 2 far upstream at Salineño in the river

Bufflehead *Bucephala albeola*—A couple as we crossed Aransas Bay in the Skimmer

Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator*—We had about 10 on our Aransas NWR boat trip and had one at Goose Island that afternoon as well

Ruddy Duck *Oxyura jamaicensis*— A flock of about 20 at El Zacatal – the pond along the hwy as we traveled to Santa Ana from Brownsville

Guans and Chachalacas: Cracidae

Plain Chachalaca *Ortalis vetula*— It took us a while to get good looks, but finally had a bunch of them at Bentsen Rio Grande SP. Also a bunch at the feeders at the Butterfly center

New World Quail: Odontophoridae

Scaled Quail *Callipepla squamata*—Awesome to see a large flock of this normally difficult to observe species coming to the feeder at Rancho Lomitas

Partridges, Pheasants, and Allies: Phasianidae

Wild Turkey *Meleagris gallopavo*— Several large flocks at Bentsen Rio Grande SP. Toms were in full display trying to impress the hens

Loons: Gaviidae

Common Loon *Gavia immer*— Briefly seen by a couple of the group as we cruised back toward Rockport across Aransas Bay

Grebes: Podicipedidae

Least Grebe *Tachybaptus dominicus*—Seen a few different days including a displaying bird on the pond at the University in Brownsville

Pied-billed Grebe *Podilymbus podiceps*— Singles reported almost daily

Cormorants: Phalacrocoracidae

Neotropic Cormorant *Phalacrocorax brasilianus*—Common throughout the trip, but much more so after we left Rockport

Double-crested Cormorant *Phalacrocorax auritus*—Common on the Aransas portion of the trip, then much less common in the Rio Grand Valley

Anhinga: Anhingidae

Anhinga *Anhinga anhinga*—Had low numbers at Goose Island, Univ. Of Texas, and a migrating flock of over 20 birds at Bentsen Rio Grande Valley

Pelicans: Pelecanidae

American White Pelican *Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*—Recorded a few from the Skimmer, then a flock of about 40 at Leonabelle Turnbull, and another flock in the river at Estero Llano Grande

Brown Pelican *Pelecanus occidentalis*— Common around Rockport and in the coastal areas

Herons and Egrets: Ardeidae

Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias*—Recorded almost daily and many seen on rookeries in the Rockport area. Also interesting to note that we had the all white form – **Great White Egret** from the skimmer

Great Egret *Ardea alba*—Common and seen daily

Snowy Egret *Egretta thula*— Common and seen nearly everyday

Little Blue Heron *Egretta caerulea*—The least common of the herons we observed. Only 3 recorded during the tour but we had good looks through the scope on the resaca at the University

Tricolored Heron *Egretta tricolor*—Seen in low numbers on about half of the days. Perhaps our best view was the one roosting in the mangroves just a few feet from the boardwalk on South Padre

Reddish Egret *Egretta rufescens*—Lots around Rockport on the rookery islands

Green Heron *Butorides virescens*— 2 from the boardwalk on South Padre and one at Estero Llano Grande

Black-crowned Night-Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*—One our first day at Rockport Beach and then a couple more from the boat at Aransas

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron *Nyctanassa violacea*— Great looks at one at the Zapata boat dock and a few more at the

University in Brownsville

Ibis and Spoonbills: Threskiornithidae

White Ibis *Eudocimus albus*—Common and seen around water everyday the first half of the trip. Especially memorable was a flock of appx 200 birds that flew past us while we were on the Skimmer

White-faced Ibis *Plegadis chihi*—only recorded on 3 days in very low numbers. Mostly just fly-bys

Roseate Spoonbill *Platalea ajaja*—Always one of the favorites. Recorded daily at the beginning of the trip along the coastal marshes

New World Vultures: Cathartidae

Black Vulture *Coragyps atratus*—Not as common as the next species, but still seen most days of the trip in small numbers

Turkey Vulture *Cathartes aura*—Good numbers seen daily. Large migrating kettle of well over 100 birds at Sabal Palms

Osprey: Pandionidae

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*— Fairly common and recorded 4 days

Hawks, Eagles, and Kites: Accipitridae

White-tailed Kite *Elanus leucurus*— One perched on the telephone wires on the drive between Brownsville and Santa Ana NWR gave wonderful views

Swallow-tailed Kite *Elanoides forficatus*- Very brief views by part of the group at the Laguna Atascosa NWR headquarters of this early migrant

Northern Harrier *Circus cyaneus*— Not common but we saw one or two most days of the trip

Sharp-shinned Hawk *Accipiter striatus*—Quick flyby in the morning at Bentsen Rio Grande SP

Harris's Hawk *Parabuteo unicinctus*—Saw 4 birds on telephone poles and hunting along the hwy on our way to aguna Atascosa

White-tailed Hawk *Geranoaetus albicaudatus*—We found this beautiful hawk soaring above Mustang Island near the falcon hack tower

Gray Hawk *Buteo plagiatus*—The driver of the tram at Bentsen Rio Grande stopped the tram to allow us to get good looks of this hawk soaring above the road

Broad-winged Hawk *Buteo platypterus*—One was in with a few other hawks and Turkey Vultures migrating over Bentsen Rio Grande

Swainson's Hawk *Buteo swainsoni*— In with the same bunch of birds as the previous species

Red-tailed Hawk *Buteo jamaicensis*—Not common and we only recorded a couple during the tour

Rails, Coots, and Allies: Rallidae

Clapper Rail *Rallus crepitans*—Had one calling at Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Center and eventually found it skulking around the reeds and was able to watch it through the scope for a few minutes before it disappeared

Common Gallinule *Gallinula galeata*—We had this species at only 3 locations (Leonabell Turnbull, South Padrem and Santa Ana) but at those three they were very common

American Coot *Fulica americana*—Common in any lake or marshy area

Cranes: Gruidae

Sandhill Crane *Antigone canadensis*—A group of 6 was near the pond next to Big Tree at Goose Island SP

Whooping Crane *Grus americana*— One of the highlights of the trip was seeing 20+ of this endangered species from the Skimmer with Capitan Tommy in Aransas NWR. We also had a couple at Goose Island and a surprise family group of 4 at Leonabelle Turnbull

Stilts and Avocets: Recurvirostridae

Black-necked Stilt *Himantopus mexicanus*—We had groups of 20+ several days and small bunches other days
American Avocet *Recurvirostra americana*—Flock of about 80 at Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Center and a few others here and there throughout the tour

Oystercatchers: Haematopodidae

American Oystercatcher *Haematopus palliatus*—Seen most days along the coastal areas. We had a banded bird our first day at Rockport Beach and found out later it had been banded about 50 miles north

Plovers and Lapwings: Charadriidae

Black-bellied Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*—Saw a few around Rockport but had over 50 on the mud at the Zapata boat ramp on the way to South Padre

Semipalmated Plover *Charadrius semipalmatus*—3 were running around mixed in with the previous species

Killdeer *Charadrius vociferus*—Recorded 3 days of the trip in low numbers

Sandpipers and Allies: Scolopacidae

Long-billed Curlew *Numenius americanus*—Seen several days including about 10 from the boat in Aransas. One of the weirdest sightings of the trip was seeing them walking around the road in Hidalgo near the monk parakeet colony

Marbled Godwit *Limosa fedoa*—One flew in and landed nearby giving us all great scope views at the Zapata Boat Ramp

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*—We recorded these beautiful shorebirds multiple times but only our first 2 days near Rockport

Stilt Sandpiper *Calidris himantopus*— A flock of about 20 was in the river at Estero Llano Grande

Sanderling *Calidris alba*—One perched on the railing of the pier at Rockport Beach Park our first afternoon

Least Sandpiper *Calidris minutilla*—A flock was at the pond along the hwy on the way to Santa Ana (El Zacatal)

Long-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus scolopaceus*—Recorded 3 days. At Leonabelle Turnbull we had a very large flock of approximately 180 just in front of us off the boardwalk

Spotted Sandpiper *Actitis macularius*—

Solitary Sandpiper *Tringa solitaria*— A solitary Solitary was the pond along the hwy on the way to Santa Ana (El Zacatal)

Greater Yellowlegs *Tringa melanoleuca*—Common and seen most days

Willet *Tringa semipalmata*—Common and seen daily along the coastal beaches and marshes

Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes*—A few seen on 4 different days

Gulls and Terns: Laridae

Bonaparte's Gull *Chroicocephalus philadelphia*—2 flew over the boardwalk at Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Center

Laughing Gull *Leucophaeus atricilla*—Probably the most numerous bird of the trip and was everywhere until we moved inland the second half of the tour

Ring-billed Gull *Larus delawarensis*—Low number seen daily for the first half of the trip

Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*—Surprisingly few – total of 5 birds seen in 4 locations

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*—My van had one perched on the pier near Big Tree at Goose Island. When we returned one minute later with Micheal's Van it had mysteriously disappeared.

Sooty Tern *Onychoprion fuscatus*- Surprise bird of the trip. Seen on our first day at Rockport Beach. We had views of it roosting among the Laughing Gulls and then enjoyed watching it fly around the bay. Not normally seen from shore in TX

Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nilotica*—One distant view in the scope at Leonabelle Turnbull and then 2 more the following day at the Zapata boat dock

Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia*—Lots seen during the boat trip to Aransas and a few more at other locations along the coast

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*—One early migrant at the Zapata Boat Dock

Forster's Tern *Sterna forsteri*—Common from the boat at Aransas and all other locations along the coast. Most common tern during the tour

Royal Tern *Thalasseus maximus*— Nearly as common as Caspian Terns and good to see them together and be able to

compare them in detail

Black Skimmer *Rynchops niger*—Nearly 150 seen at the Zapata Boat dock on our way to South Padre. Mostly they were just sitting on the sand, but we did have one or two briefly show us how they got their name and skim the surface with their huge bills

Pigeons and Doves: Columbidae

Rock Pigeon *Columba livia*— A flock at Goose Island and a flock on South Padre, plus others around the towns

Red-billed Pigeon *Patagioenas flavirostris*—Nailed one at the normal spot on the island just upstream from Salineño in the early morning. Well worth getting up early for!

Eurasian Collared-Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*—Common and seen on most days

Inca Dove *Columbina inca*—Low numbers seen on multiple days, but the best views were at Rancho Lomitas where we had about a dozen visiting the feeders

Common Ground-Dove *Columbina passerina*— Brief views near the parking area at Salineño (some saw them beforehand quite well)

White-tipped Dove *Leptotila verreauxi*—It took a while but eventually we had productive feeders and had several of this specialty of the valley feeding very close at multiple locations

White-winged Dove *Zenaida asiatica*—Good numbers at Salineño and on our last morning at Quinta Mazatlan

Mourning Dove *Zenaida macroura*—Common and seen most days

Cuckoos and Allies: Cuculidae

Greater Roadrunner *Geococcyx californianus*—Had one run across the road along the road between Salineño and Falcon SP, but might have only been seen by my van. Later near Rancho Lomitas we had a more cooperative bird seen well by all

Owls: Strigidae

Eastern Screech-Owl *Megascops asio*—Thanks to the rangers at Estero Llano Grande we saw 2, one was difficult even in the scope and the other was as easy as it gets since it was poking its head out of a palm tree!

Nightjars: Caprimulgidae

Common Pauraque *Nyctidromus albicollis*—Thanks again to the rangers at Estero for helping us find this guy. Talk about perfect camouflage!

Hummingbirds: Trochilidae

Ruby-throated Hummingbird *Archilochus colubris*— A few were hanging out around the feeders at the café at Bentsen Rio Grande SP

Buff-bellied Hummingbird *Amazilia yucatanensis*— We were getting worried but eventually had one perched for all to see at Bentsen Rio Grande. The next day at Quinta Mazatlan we had 2 more

Kingfishers: Alcedinidae

Ringed Kingfisher *Megaceryle torquata*—We got lucky to see one perched on a telephone wire above the road as we traveled toward Santa Ana

Belted Kingfisher *Megaceryle alcyon*—Several seen around Rockport and one flying around Willow Lake at Santa Ana provided good looks for everyone

Woodpeckers: Picidae

Golden-fronted Woodpecker *Melanerpes aurifrons*—We had this valley specialty daily other than our days around Rockport

Ladder-backed Woodpecker *Picoides scalaris*—We worked hard to all get a look of our first at Hazel Bazemore Park, but they were much more common in the valley and we had several more

Falcons and Caracaras: Falconidae

Crested Caracara *Caracara cheriway*—Ended up being one of the most common raptors of the trip and we saw them nearly everyday

American Kestrel *Falco sparverius*—recorded only 3 times, all in the Rockport area

Plomado Falcon *Falco femoralis*— What a great bird! We had a pair on a hack tower off the hwy on Mustang Island. Since they were perched, we were able to watch them as long as we wanted and everybody had great views

Parrots: Psittacidae

Monk Parakeet *Myiopsitta monachus*—We went into a neighborhood in Hidalgo to a nest site and saw several of this introduced species there and on the telephone wires

Red-crowned Parrot *Amazona viridigenalis*—We went to Oliveira Park in the evening to see if we could find some coming to roost and what a great show! We had a couple hundred flying around and eventually in the trees around us

Green Parakeet *Psittacara holochlorus*—A flock was on the wires while we were getting ready to leave the hotel in Brownsville one morning. Also had a few fly past our last morning at Quinta Mazatlan

White-fronted Parrot *Amazona albifrons* – About 30 roosting with the more numerous Red-cr Parrots at Oliveira Park

Tyrant Flycatchers: Tyrannidae

Ash-throated Flycatcher *Myiarchus cinerascens*—One was calling and we found it on the telephone pole near our picnic spot at Falcon SP. Apparently a pair nested in the telephone pole last year, so perhaps one of the same pair?

Great Kiskadee *Pitangus sulphuratus*—Common and seen everyday once we got to the Rio Grande Valley

Tropical Kingbird *Tyrannus melancholicus*— One was calling from a telephone wire near the Monk Parakeets in Hidalgo. Luckily the call is very different from the following species, which is nearly identical

Couch's Kingbird *Tyrannus couchii*—Common and seen daily in the valley

Scissor-tailed Flycatcher *Tyrannus forficatus*—One flew over while we were on the boardwalk at South Padre. Also had a few more in the very early morning while driving to Salineño

Vireos: Vireonidae

White-eyed Vireo *Vireo griseus*—Heard much more often than seen, but we did get good looks at them a few times including at the bird feeder at Goose Island SP

Crows and Jays: Corvidae

Green Jay *Cyanocorax yncas*—One the birds of the trip! Beautiful and fun to be able to see them so well at all the feeders. We saw them everyday in the Rio Grande Valley

Chihuahuan Raven *Corvus cryptoleucus*—Micheal called one out one day – not sure if others got on it or if it was only him

Swallows and Martins: Hirundinidae

Northern Rough-winged Swallow *Stelgidopteryx serripennis*—A few migrants starting to show up. We had a couple at Santa Ana and Estero Llano Grande

Purple Martin *Progne subis*— We recorded them on 4 days. A couple were seen at the Rockport demo gardens and then a flock of about 10 was flying around and perching on the wires at South Padre.

Tree Swallow *Tachycineta bicolor*—Small flocks seen on several days

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*—Low numbers seen most days

Cave Swallow *Petrochelidon fulva*—My van lucked out and got stuck at a red light (unfortunately Micheal's van made it through before it turned red). While we were waiting for the light to change we noticed a large flock of swallows coming in and out of a stream culvert and it turned out to be this species

Chickadees and Titmice: Paridae

Black-crested Titmouse *Baeolophus atricristatus*— First seen at Goose Island/Big Tree, but we saw a few most days of the trip. Definitely one of the cutest birds of the trip!

Penduline Tits: Remizidae

Verdin *Auriparus flaviceps*—Heard a few times but only saw one. It was at Bentson Rio Grande and most of the group was in the hide at a feeder station so only a few of us saw it

Wrens: Troglodytidae

House Wren *Troglodytes aedon*—One seen briefly in the butterfly garden at Falcon SP

Marsh Wren *Cistothorus palustris*— 2 from the boardwalk at Leonabelle Turnbull and another along the Rio Grande at Salineño

Carolina Wren *Thryothorus ludovicianus*—heard only at Sabal Palms and a couple other places

Bewick's Wren *Thryomanes bewickii*—Seen by Micheal and a couple of other people at the Butterfly Center

Cactus Wren *Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus*—Only seen by part of the group briefly at Rancho Lomitas

Gnatcatchers: Polioptilidae

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher *Polioptila caerulea*—Saw good numbers of 10+ at Bentsen and Quinta Mazatlan our last 2 days of the trip. Maybe migrants finally arriving?

Kinglets: Regulidae

Ruby-crowned Kinglet *Regulus calendula*— Only saw a few, one at Goose Island and the others mixed in with the migrant flocks of gnatcatchers

Thrushes: Turdidae

Clay-colored Thrush *Turdus grayi*—First seen near the parking lot at Estero Llano Grande, then also coming to the Salineño and Quinta Mazatlan feeders

Mockingbirds and Thrashers: Mimidae

Gray Catbird *Dumetella carolinensis*—One was seen skulking in the brush during our picnic at South Padre Island

Curve-billed Thrasher *Toxostoma curvirostre*—visiting the feeders at Rancho Lomitas and again the following day at the Butterfly Center

Long-billed Thrasher *Toxostoma longirostre*— Visiting the feeders at most locations in the Rio Grande Valley

Northern Mockingbird *Mimus polyglottos*— Common and seen almost everyday, which is fitting for the State Bird of TX

Starlings and Mynas: Sturnidae

European Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*— Seen most days in low numbers

Waxwings: Bombycillidae

Cedar Waxwing *Bombycilla cedrorum*— small flocks recorded in Rockport, Salineño, and Quinta Mazatlan

New World Warblers: Parulidae

Black-and-white Warbler *Mniotilta varia*— recorded 4 during the tour. Perhaps the best views were at Bensten Rio Grande where we had 2 with a large flock of BG Gnatcatchers and other warblers

Orange-crowned Warbler *Oreothlypis celata*—One with the flock mentioned above at Bentsen and another by part of the group our last morning at Quinta Mazatlan

Nashville Warbler *Oreothlypis ruficapilla*—One seen in a mixed flock by part of the group at Quinta Mazatlan

Common Yellowthroat *Geothlypis trichas*—One seen well at Leonagelle Turnbull from the boardwalk

Northern Parula *Setophaga americana*—Seen my a couple of our group at Laguna Atascosa

Yellow (Mangrove) Warbler *Setophaga petechia (erithachorides)*— Had a few from the boardwalk at South Padre. We saw the resident Mangrove form with the dark chestnut head

Yellow-rumped Warbler *Setophaga coronata*— We had a few on several days, but had a good bunch of them at South Padre where we had our picnic. All that we observed were the Myrtle type

Wilson's Warbler *Cardellina pusilla*— One sneaking around in the bushes by our picnic table during lunch at South Padre

New World Sparrows: Emberizidae

Olive Sparrow *Arremonops rufivirgatus*— Recorded on a couple of day, but the best views were probably at the feeders at Salineño

Black-throated Sparrow *Amphispiza bilineata*— A couple were calling during our picnic lunch at Falcon SP and after a bit of work we were able to locate one perched up and singing in the brush

Lark Sparrow *Chondestes grammacus*—One seen by my van in a tree along the dirt road on our way back to town from Rancho Lomitas

White-crowned Sparrow *Zonotrichia leucophrys*— a couple were along the road between Salineño and Falcon SP

Lincoln's Sparrow *Melospiza lincolni*—recorded at 3 different feeder stations – Goose Island, Hazel Bazemore, and Salineño

Swamp Sparrow *Melospiza georgiana*—A couple were seen well from the boardwalk at Leonabelle Turnbull

Cardinals, Grosbeaks, and Allies: Cardinalidae

Northern Cardinal *Cardinalis cardinalis*— Common and seen daily

Pyrrhuloxia *Cardinalis sinuatus*— Beautiful bird and we were happy to see it well since it was one of the targets of the drier, desert habitat up river at Salineño and Falcon SP

Orioles and Blackbirds: Icteridae

Red-winged Blackbird *Agelaius phoeniceus*— Must be one of the most common passerines on the trip, probably just behind Great-tailed Grackle

Brewer's Blackbird *Euphagus cyanocephalus*—Seen at their normal place, the Sarita Rest Area during our break headed to the Rio Grande Valley

Great-tailed Grackle *Quiscalus mexicanus*— Abundant everywhere

Brown-headed Cowbird *Molothrus ater*— A few seen mixed in with the flocks of RW Blackbirds on several occasions

Hooded Oriole *Icterus cucullatus*—One visited the feeders at Rancho Lomitas

Altamira Oriole *Icterus gularis*—First seen at Sabal Palms, then recorded at most location in the valley visiting feeders

Audubon's Oriole *Icterus graduacauda*— We missed this species at Salineño, so we were thrilled to have one visiting the feeders at the Butterfly Center

Finches: Fringillidae

House Finch *Haemorhous mexicanus*— surprisingly not around, but we did get two our last morning in the parking lot at Quinta Mazatlan

Lesser Goldfinch *Spinus psaltria*—Seen by part of the group at Salineño

Old World Sparrows: Passeridae

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*— Common and seen most days

Mammals

Eastern Cottontail

Black-tailed Jackrabbit

Eastern Fox Squirrel

Rio Grande Ground Squirrel

Hispid Cotton Rat
Collared Peccary
White-tailed deer
Bottlenose Dolphin
Nilgai (territorial dung piles but no actual sightings)

Reptiles and Amphibians

American Alligator
Blue Spiny Lizard
Red-eared Slider
Cane Toad

Butterflies

Queen
Checkered White
Giant Swallowtail
Monarch
Maestra
Pipevine Swallowtail
Texas Crescent