

Texas' Big Bend National Park

Trip Report | May 2-9, 2023 | by Peter Burke



With guides Peter Burke and Michael Good and participants: Karen, Susan, John, Kate, Mike, Barrie, Dana, Kevin and Karl



Everyone arrived a day early for this trip, so we were able to meet first thing in the morning on Tuesday, May 2 and get right on the road. Michael had explored some local birding spots the day before and suggested that we make a quick stop at Rio Bosque Park, just outside of El Paso. Here we were treated to lots of good birds including a noisy flock of Monk Parakeets and a very cooperative Burrowing Owl. Our adventure would include two days in the Davis Mountains before making the big drive south to Big Bend National Park. We would spend four days exploring this remote and beautiful location, experiencing the Chisos Mountains, Chihuahuan Desert, Santa Elena Canyon. We also had the chance to visit the quirky town of Terlingua after spending the morning at Carolyn's place, high in the Christmas Mountains. Our final night was spent in Marfa at the historic Hotel Paisano. What made our trip so special was the cohesiveness of our group. Everyone seemed to get along with one another from day one, and that camaraderie was a driving force throughout the week. We found 150 species of birds plus 11 mammals and at least 12 reptiles/amphibians. Details are below.

eBird Trip Report: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/124353>



Tues., May 2

El Paso | Balmorhea | Fort Davis

Our Naturalist Journeys Big Bend tour got off to an excellent start in the morning. After Peter and Michael met everyone at their hotels in El Paso, we made our way to the nearby Rio Bosque Park in search of a Burrowing Owl Michael had found the previous day, and anything else that might be around. Gambel's Quail could be heard in all directions, and after some searching, we managed to get some in the scopes for all to see. A large flock of Monk Parakeets was a nice surprise, with at least two dozen seen flying and perching at close range. Karen spotted what would be the first of many Lesser Nighthawks on this trip. Other nice birds at this stop included Greater Roadrunner, Verdin, Green-tailed Towhee, a handsome Townsend's Warbler, Summer Tanager and Pyrrhuloxia.

This was an unscheduled stop and we had quite a bit of driving to do before reaching the Davis Mountains where we would be based for the next two nights. We headed east through the extensive Chihuahuan Desert scrub that surrounds the city with views of Ciudad Juarez just south of the border. After passing through the CBP checkpoint and noting the small colony of nesting Cave Swallows in the eaves, we entered the Central Time Zone en route to our next destination – the Sandia Wetlands. These small, unassuming ponds were surprisingly birdy, with Blue-winged Teal, Scaled Quail, Black-necked Stilt, American Avocet, Long-billed Dowitcher and over a dozen Wilson's Phalarope. A Green Heron was another nice find, as were a pair of Bullock's Orioles and a cooperative Chihuahuan Meadowlark. This last was recently given full species status but was previously known as the "Lillian's" subspecies of Eastern Meadowlark, a fact preserved in its scientific name, *Sturnella lilianae*.

Our final stop before arriving in Fort Davis was Lake Balmorhea. This Lake has by far the best (and only!) aquatic habitat in west Texas, and we spent an enjoyable time there scoping the lake and cruising a bit of the shoreline. A few Franklin's Gulls were observed, and those in Michael's vehicle had nice looks at the first Painted Bunting of the trip. We all had excellent looks at the many Clark's Grebes, and with some scanning, a Western Grebe was also located, providing a nice opportunity to compare these two larger, handsome grebes. Several American White Pelicans also were patrolling the lake, some demonstrating the coordinated fishing strategy they are



known for, swimming in formation to drive small fish into the shallows where they are easily netted in their unique bills.

Finally tearing ourselves away from this literal oasis, we made the short drive to Fort Davis, getting our first views of the Davis Mountains along the way. Arriving at the historic Hotel Limpia in the center of town, we unloaded the vans and checked into our rooms. Toward the end of the afternoon, we gathered in the Hotel Limpia's lobby for a short briefing about the tour, before enjoying our first dinner together at Cueva de Leon. After dinner, we handed out the species list and began our nightly review of the many birds, mammals and other wildlife viewed that day. We returned to our hotel in the gathering dusk, eagerly anticipating our day tomorrow in the Davis Mountains.

Wed., May 3 Davis Mountains

Our breakfast gathering place was the Stone Village Market, a short walk from the Limpia and a wonderful taste of local culture for sure! After breakfast, we grabbed our bag lunches and made our way into the Davis Mountains, stopping at the Lawrence Wood Picnic Area. At the interpretive center by the entrance, we found Black-chinned Hummingbirds, Acorn Woodpecker, Vermilion Flycatcher and many more good birds. A bit further down, we had great looks at a Grace's Warbler and also a nice Black-throated Gray Warbler. A curious Plumbeous Vireo came to investigate the group, and a Western Bluebird was another nice find. Hepatic Tanagers were singing and calling from the hillside, but frustratingly difficult to get eyes/scopes on, though some in the group were able to catch fleeting glances. We made our way to the Davis State Park where a pair of feeding stations provided excellent opportunities to view birds up close. Scott's Oriole, Cassin's Kingbird, Black-chinned Hummingbird, Acorn Woodpecker and Canyon Towhee were all seen well. Peter found a Black-and-white Warbler, a nice migrant for the area. Michael pointed out Ash-throated Flycatcher and Lark Sparrow, and the photographers in the group had their hands full trying to capture images of so many desert scrub species!

After filling ourselves at this avian feast it was time for some lunch! We sat down to consume our delicious sandwiches from the market accompanied by cold beverages from the cooler. After lunch, we visited Dell's house, a local that Peter knew who maintained extensive feeders at his home in a nearby development. The target for this excursion was Pinyon Jays, but none were at his feeders this afternoon. As a consolation, we did



get excellent views of Indigo and Lazuli Buntings. On the way out, we learned that sharp-eyed Michael had managed to get looks at a Pinyon Jay!

After this exciting day in the Davis Mountains, we returned for a brief rest at the Limpia, then walked across the patio for dinner at the Blue Mountain Bistro. That evening, those who chose to drove back to the park later that evening in hopes of seeing Elf Owl. Arriving just as the sun was setting, we trained our scopes on a small hole in a phone pole and waited. And waited. And waited. Just when it seemed that any hope of glimpsing an owl would be dashed, Peter heard a call and then moments later the male arrived at the hole, delivering some food to the female who, presumably, was busy incubating eggs. A few minutes later, the female was seen peering from the nest cavity. A long vigil, but successful! We returned to the hotel, tired but happy, to rest up for the coming day.

Thurs., May 4

The Post | Gage Gardens | Prairie Dog Town | Big Bend National Park

This morning, following another fun foraging expedition to Stone Village Market, we returned to the Limpia to pack and load our vans for departure. Heading south from Fort Davis to Alpine, we enjoyed the morning light and spotted a few White-tailed in a field by the side of the road to add to our trip mammal list. Our first birding destination of the day was Fort Peña Colorado Park, known locally as “The Post.” The road into The Post is an excellent birding road, with great birds and little traffic, and we took our time, making numerous stops. Some of the morning highlights along the Post Road included many singing Cassin’s Sparrows (some of which perched cooperatively on shrubs and fences) along with Pyrrhuloxia, Scaled Quail, Loggerhead Shrike and soaring Swainson’s Hawk.

Arriving at the park itself, we spent several delightful hours birding this literal oasis in the desert. Summer Tanagers and Vermilion Flycatchers were conspicuous, and a Lesser Nighthawk buzzed the parking lot. A distant Cooper’s Hawk was a nice find, and as we watched a Zone-tailed Hawk briefly came into view as it separated from a few Turkey Vultures it was no doubt using as cover! Golden-fronted Woodpeckers were a delight, as were the very active Orchard Orioles who were seemingly competing for our attention. Making a final stroll around the park we encountered an awesome spectacle of migration. Dozens of male Blue Grosbeaks were gathered, foraging on the ground and no doubt refueling for their journey further north to their breeding grounds. Not far we found dozens of Clay-colored Sparrows with at least a few Brewer’s and Chipping Sparrows mixed in. On the drive out, many more Blue Grosbeaks were seen on the fences, in the shrubs and feeding on the ground – an impressive and memorable experience to be sure! Then we returned to Marathon where we enjoyed very



satisfying sandwiches at the V6 Coffee Bar right in town. We took a few extra minutes to walk the street, do some shopping and admire the majestic and historic Gage Hotel right next door. After lunch it was time to get on the road to Big Bend. Peter asked Michael to keep his eyes out for Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, and wouldn't you know it, but he somehow managed to find a pair guarding a nest! After a few minutes spent admiring and photographing these handsome birds, we set our sights south, driving the long, lonely road to Big Bend National Park, the highlight destination of our tour.

Some of us (Michael!) paused at the entrance sign to take a group photo surrounded by desert blooms and big skies. We passed the Persimmon Gap Entrance Station, already closed for the season, and made our way to Panther Junction Visitor Center (and Park headquarters). Our group had enough National Park passes to earn free entry into Big Bend. From there we headed up the Green Gulch Road to the breathtaking Chisos Basin, our home base for the next four nights. We met on the patio to review the bird checklist and then enjoyed our first dinner in the park together.

Fri., May 5 Big Bend National Park: East Side

We woke on our first full day in Big Bend to the sounds of Scott's Orioles, Mexican Jays and Cactus Wrens. The buffet breakfast, admittedly a bit carby, nonetheless hit the spot and after picking up our bag lunches, we loaded into our vans for a day in the field exploring Big Bend's east side. We descended from the Basin and turned right on the main park road, passed the Panther Junction Visitor Center and soon arrived at our first destination for the morning: Dugout Wells, an old homestead site where the National Park Service still maintains the windmill to pump water to create an oasis. A slow walk around the area yielded two Lesser Nighthawks, many Bell's Vireos, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Pyrrhuloxia, Bullock's Oriole, Curve-billed Thrasher and Black-throated Sparrow.

Our next stop was Rio Grande Village, where some were fortunate to see a lone Common Ground-Dove, unusual for this location. Other highlights included a Black Vulture, two Greater Roadrunners, a territorial Black-tailed Gnatcatcher and a Golden-fronted Woodpecker. A Painted Bunting did its best to frustrate photographers before being joined by a Varied Bunting. The group was treated to a most unusual duet featuring the two bunting's seemingly trying to outdo one another. We continued out on the Nature Trail where a small flock of warblers included several Audubon's Yellow-rumped Warblers along with Nashville and Wilson's Warblers and a



Common Yellowthroat. Crossing the wetlands, we made our way out to an area where indigenous people used the exposed bedrock to grind grain, leaving behind well-worn natural mortars in the stone. But in the heat of the day it was time to find some shade and cool drinks. We made our way to the Daniel's Ranch area and found a shady picnic table at to enjoy our sandwiches and hydrate. But the star of the show was an adult Gray Ha wk showing off its dark outer primaries, densely barred gray body and banded tail as it circled above. Before leaving the park, we stopped to scope the Common Black-Hawk nest, which was clearly occupied, but only the top of the bird's head and a few tail feathers were visible. Count it! Returning to Chisos Basin, we had a bit of free time before meeting to go over the bird list and discuss plans for the next day. A great end to a superb first day in Big Bend!

Sat., May 6 Big Bend National Park: Chisos Mountains

Today was the BIG DAY. For those who wanted to search for Colima Warbler, a long hike into the Chisos Mountains awaited. For others it was a welcome respite from frantic birding and a chance to explore the trails around the lodge. We began our hike as a group, with some diverging along the way. Arriving at the Basin Loop Trail Junction, Mike and Kate peeled off to enjoy the loop. A bit further up, Dana and Barre reached a point that was enough for them, which left Kevin, Karen, Karl, John and Susan who were determined to continue up the Meadows Trail. The birding was slow at first, with a few Mexican Jays and Scott's Orioles keeping watch over us.

On the hike, and in no particular order, we found Spotted Towhees, Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Townsend's Warblers, Townsend's Solitaires, Western Tanagers, Bewick's Wrens, Black-crested Titmice and more. We made one last push up the Boot Canyon Spur and onto the Colima Trail where, appropriately, we could hear a distant Colima Warbler singing. We stopped for a well-deserved rest and lunch in a shady spot at roughly 7,200 feet and promptly set about devouring our lunches and drinking plenty of water. After lunch, we began our descent down the Pinnacles Trail and through ideal habitat for Colima Warblers. Before long we heard another Colima and with some effort, we were able to get some nice, albeit brief, views. This experience would repeat itself several times, although some, Michael in particular, were able to get much better looks.



At this point, we entered the large burn scar from the 2021 wildfire that burned much of the higher terrain of the Chisos. Impressively, much of the burned showed signs recovery. A little further on we found another Colima Warbler allowing for better views for most in the group of this very restricted range species. Trudging on, we arrived at the junction of the Emory Peak, Pinnacles, and Boot Canyon Trails, which marked the start of our descent back to the Basin. Here the trail was a bit steeper, and after a long day, with tired muscles and rising temperatures, we were all ready to get back. Some in the group pushed on ahead while others took their time, pausing to view the occasional Red-tailed Hawk or White-throated Swifts soaring high among the Pinnacles. But mostly we focused on putting one boot in front of the other as we descended steadily, arriving back at the Basin Trailhead about nine hours after starting. Comparison between our various apps and smartphones suggested we had hiked about 10.5 miles—an impressive achievement! At dinner we toasted our success as for many this was a life bird that was hotly anticipated and thoroughly earned!

Sun., May 7

Big Bend National Park: West Side | Terlingua

Today started like all the others in Big Bend: exact same buffet breakfast at the Lodge and the pickup of our lunches for the day. After returning to our rooms for final preparations, we loaded into our vans for another full day in Big Bend, this time exploring the western section of the park. Heading down from the Basin, we turned left on the Park's main road, then left again on the Ross Maxwell Scenic Drive. Our first stop on the Drive was the Sam Nail Ranch, another oasis and former homestead in the desert. Among the many highlights in the morning there were the memorable display flights and songs of the multiple, Yellow-breasted Chats. Several people on the tour specifically mentioned those chats as their personal highlight of the entire trip.

We made a brief stop at the Sotol Vista overlook to admire the superb view to the west (and the distant look at Santa Elena Canyon where we would end up). While there, we were treated to a great show as Black-throated, Vesper, and Rufous-crowned Sparrows foraged on the ground at close range. Next, we visited Cottonwood Campground, very close to the Rio Grande, for some birding followed by a picnic lunch.

Gray Hawks were nesting in one of the large cottonwoods, and these birds put on quite a display as they perched in the nest and soared overhead. Peter pointed out a Black-chinned Hummingbird nest in a mesquite that had been occupied just a week before but was now empty. The campground was quite birdy. Karen's sharp eyes found a male Rose-breasted Grosbeak deep in a thicket, and Kate found a Western Tanager. A roadrunner



responded to a tape Peter played, putting on quite a show and eventually flying over a flooded field right in front of our appreciative group. Another highlight was a Brown-crested Flycatcher that was playing “hard to get” with the group, but eventually all were able to get nice looks through the scope. Just before our picnic lunch, Peter spotted a Lucy’s Warbler, but it retreated into thick cover. After lunch, we drove toward the end of the Scenic Drive to the parking area at Santa Elena Canyon, where we prepared for the hike into the canyon. With temperatures already in the high 90s, we made sure to bring plenty of water for this short but tricky hike to the river. To reach the Santa Elena Canyon trail required either wading across Terlingua Creek in waist-deep water, or detouring upstream to where the creek ran very shallow, but then a scramble up the riverbank. Once across, we proceeded up the small set of switchbacks, admiring the incredible geology of the Canyon that cuts through the Mesa de Anguila, with the cliffs towering overhead. Both Rock and Canyon Wrens could be heard, and with some effort seen along the trail. Eventually we reached the end of the trail where the steep cliffs met the river. A few plunged in to enjoy the cool water while others took advantage of the shade. Even Peter got over his aqua-issues, allowing his feet to get wet as he waded the short distance into Mexico!

Then we retraced our steps, arriving back at the vans for some very welcome cold beverages. Loading into the vans with the A/C on full blast, we made our way to the funky town of Terlingua and the Starlight Theatre. A great meal awaited us, and many took the opportunity to visit Clay Henry, the former beer-drinking goat that served as mayor of Terlingua, who now sits stuffed on the stage! After dinner, we wandered around Terlingua for a short while, some shopping while others just soaked in the late afternoon vibe of the town. On our return to Chisos Lodge, Peter spotted a Turkey Vulture along the Scenic Drive, and then noticed a Black-tailed Rattlesnake that was curled up on the road, enjoying the warmth. We all had the opportunity to view and photograph this beautiful snake, and also to get it off the road!

Mon., May 8 Big Bend National Park | Christmas Mountains Oasis Marfa

We began the day with our final carbo-load, err, buffet breakfast at the Lodge. After picking up our lunches, we returned to our rooms, gathered all our bags, packed the vans and bid farewell to Big Bend! We made one last stop in Terlingua for some “good coffee,” kolaches, and other treats at Far Flung Outfitters, then pointed the vans north.



This morning we would visit the legendary Christmas Mountains Oasis, located at the end of a rugged road in the lower elevations of the Christmas Mountains. When we arrived, Carolyn Ohl-Johnson was there to greet us. Although she had said she might not be able to join us, her passion for sharing this wondrous creation of hers won out, and we were the beneficiaries. Of course the star of the show here was the Lucifer Hummingbird, and we quickly located this rare-outside-of-Mexico hummer and put him in the scopes!

Then we settled in to watch the show at the feeders and water features that abound on the property. Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Bell's Vireo, Curve-billed Thrasher, Lark Bunting, Scott's Oriole and a Ruby-crowned Kinglet (John and Kevin!) were all part of the show. A Cedar Waxwing made a brief appearance, as did Red-eyed Vireo (nice find Mike!), Phainopepla (another great find Mike!), Lesser Goldfinch, MacGillivray's Warbler and Varied Bunting. Perhaps the rarest find was a skulking Kentucky Warbler spotted by Karl and Michael! As we ate our picnic lunches, a lone Scaled Quail worked its way right past the group before disappearing into the desert. We had to pull ourselves away from this magical location, but we still had a few hours to drive before reaching the Hotel Paisano in Marfa, for our final night of the tour. We had a bit of a chance to relax and shower before we met up in the lobby to review a rather long checklist and then share some of our highlights of the trip. We all enjoyed a lovely farewell dinner together in the Paisano's dining room before retreating to our rooms where very comfy beds awaited us!

Tues., May 9 Departures from El Paso

After a decidedly lackluster breakfast at the hotel, we loaded into the vans for the return trip to El Paso. Peter elected to take the scenic route and we soon found our first target of the morning: Pronghorn. In fact, we would see quite a few of these elegant non-antelopes, capable of reaching sustained speeds of 60 MPH! Only the cheetah has been clocked faster (61 MPH), though only for short distances. Continuing through the grasslands south of Mount Livermore, there was one more surprise in store, Golden Eagle! Perched on a pole along the road, we appreciated its elegant golden nape and then had the opportunity to see it in flight when a Swainson's Hawk made a mock dive. What an awesome way to end a fantastic week of birding! Of course, no drive from Marfa to El Paso would be complete without stopping at the Prada Marfa for the obligatory selfie! Then it was off to the airport for drop offs and goodbyes. A wonderful experience with a very nice group!

Photo Credits: Group at Big Bend Sign (Peter Burke - PB), Painted Bunting (Michael Good - MG), American Avocet (MG), Summer Tanager (MG), Coyote (PB), Sunset Scenic (PB), Burrowing Owl (MG), Blue Grosbeak (MG), Verdin (MG), Scaled Quail (Karen Clarke - KC), Acorn Woodpecker (KC), Clark's Grebe (PB), Group Lunch (MG), Lizard (KC), Pipeline Swallowtail (PB),

Black-chinned Hummingbird (MG), Pine Siskin (MG), Getting the Shot! (KC), Purplish Prickly Pear (PB), Lizard in the Chihuahuan Desert (MG), Rock Climbing (MG), Vermillion Flycatcher (MG), Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (MG), Rainbow (KC), Big Bend Scenic (KC), Scenic (KC), Say's Phoebe (PB), Deer (PB), Painted Bunting (MG), New Friends (Barrie London), Ladder-backed Woodpecker (KC), Marine Blue Sooty Owl (MG), Scenic (KC), Group Hiking (PB), Texas Spiny Softshell (MG), Black-tailed Rattlesnake (PB), Group Photo (PB), Western Coachwhip (PB), Lucifer Hummingbird (MG), Black-necked Stilt (MG), Ladder-backed Woodpecker (PB)