

# South Texas Birding & Nature Jan. 20 – 28, 2022 | by Bryan Calk



With guide Bryan Calk and participants Dennis, Holly, Jeff, Terry, and Tracy



## **Fri., Jan. 20      Arrivals Corpus Christi | Rockport**

Today we gathered in Corpus Christi where we began our tour. The first stop was at Suter wildlife refuge, which left us feeling like we hit the jackpot right off the bat! We had a great diversity of ducks, Black Skimmers cruising by very close to us on the boardwalk, and Roseate Spoonbills glowing hot pink on this cloudy and chilly day. Next we headed over to Indian Point Park, where we eventually found some fairly large groups of shorebirds that included lots of Dunlin and Western Sandpipers, a couple of Marbled Godwits, and perhaps most interesting was a behavioral interaction between a Tricolored Heron and a Neotropic Cormorant. They foraged side-by-side along the water's edge, almost appearing like they were hunting/fishing cooperatively. Then we made our way up towards Rockport with a quick detour over to the Live Oak Country Club where we got great views at a Loggerhead Shrike hunting some bushes on the edge of the field and some Snow Geese moving around in the air



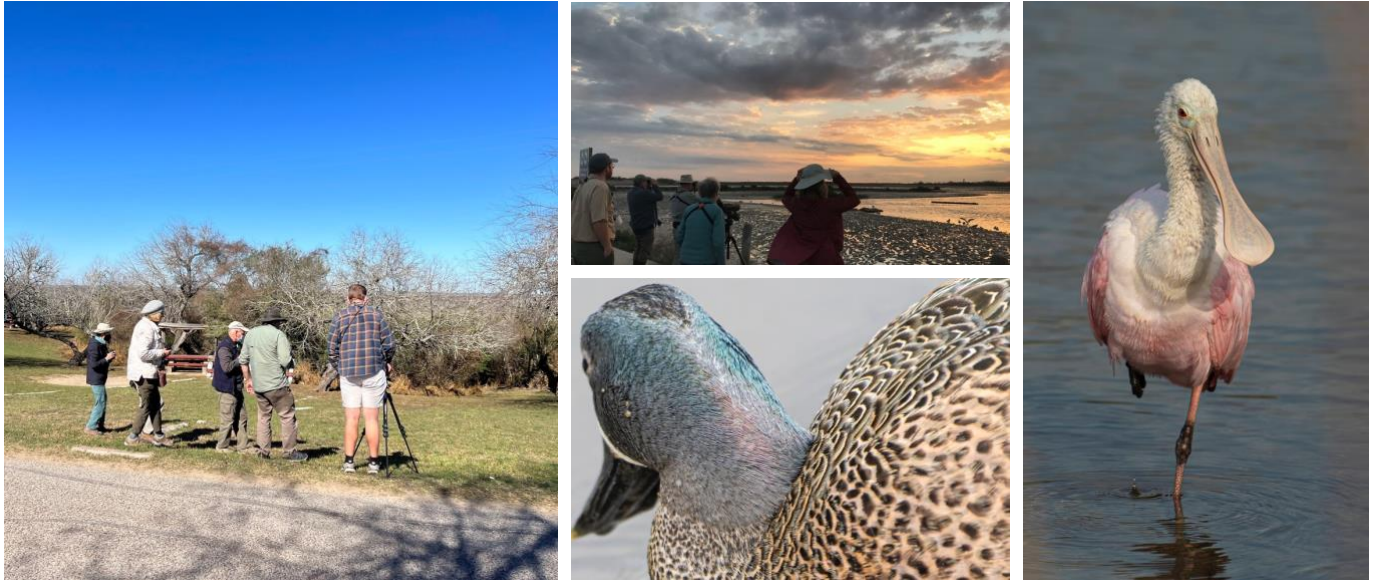
at a distance. Finally we checked into our inn, got to know each other during our orientation, and ran through our first species checklist before heading across the street to enjoy dinner at a local, fresh seafood joint.

## **Sat., Jan. 21                      The Skimmer | Lamar Peninsula**

After the cold front yesterday, we were glad to step outside to much calmer, albeit still pretty chilly, weather. We walked over to the docks for our boat trip into Aransas National Wildlife refuge aboard The Skimmer with Captain Jay. Jay took us across Aransas Bay and right into the refuge where our very first stop afforded us exceptional views of a family group of Whooping Cranes, forming part of a small feeding frenzy around a freshwater pond on an old spoil island. There were scores of other herons and egrets in the area with terns flying overhead and ducks foraging in the water and flying in the distance. We continued to explore the refuge stopping for American Oystercatchers and Lesser Black-backed Gulls as we navigated shipping traffic coming through the intracoastal waterway, mostly composed of petrochemical barges. We headed back to the dock and headed to lunch in Rockport before some birding on the Lamar Peninsula. There we found plenty more Whooping Cranes, a couple Vermilion Flycatchers, and one of the largest and most beloved Virginia live oak trees in the state. Back on the Live Oak Peninsula we headed down Cape Velero Drive where we combed through the wetlands finding many wading birds, including a very dynamic Reddish Egret that was shuffling its feet and “canopy feeding,” we had an amazing comparison between Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs standing side-by-side, and a nice group of spoonbills. We then headed back to the inn where we ran through our checklist before heading to dinner at another local seafood spot.

## **Sun., Jan. 22                      Port Aransas | Mustang Island | Hazel Bazemore Birding to the LRGV**

We said goodbye to Rockport this morning and headed down to the gulf coast via Mustang Island, where we first started in Port Aransas at the Leonabelle Turnbull Port Aransas Birding center. It’s hard to think of a more productive place to bird in such a small area. As soon as we parked, we were surrounded by a flock of Yellow-rumped Warblers with a variety of ducks and water birds flying overhead. Once we got out onto the boardwalk, we were greeted by hundreds of waterfowl, American White Pelicans, Common Gallinules, and an array of egrets and other wading birds. We got to study in depth the differences between the white morph Reddish Egret (about as common as the dark morph in this region), and the other more familiar white-colored egrets. And much to our delight, it turned out that we had not yet said left behind the Whooping Cranes, as this year a family with two colts had taken up residence at the Birding Center for the first time in many years! A Clapper



Rail gave us a very brief glimpse, while a Sora walked around for exceptional views for almost 10 minutes just below our feet on the boardwalk. When we finally pulled ourselves away, we drove a short section of the gulf-side beach in Port Aransas finding the usual suspects like Royal Terns and Willets and enjoyed the crocheted artwork from locals in the area, decorating the barrier posts of the beach.

Next, we headed down to the rest of Mustang Island, stopping along the way to admire the island's resident pair of Aplomado Falcons resting on their hacking/nesting platform. By now we were all getting a little hungry, so we headed over to lunch at Snoopy's Pier, of local favorite joint with great views of the water. A Red-breasted Merganser, Brown and American White Pelicans, and a variety of other water birds kept us entertained while we ate. After lunch, we birdied by van along the JFK Causeway wetlands where we got to study the differences in some of the smaller shorebirds, including Snowy and Semi-palmated Plovers, Dunlins and more. Our last stop in the Corpus Christi area was that Hazel Bazemore County Park, home to their world-famous fall season hawk watch platform. While we were well outside of raptor migration season, the park still offers a great variety of habitats and good birding year-round. During our visit, we encountered our very first Green Jay and Golden-fronted Woodpecker. Too quickly, it was time to head south to Brownsville, with just a brief stop at the Sarita rest area for Brewers Blackbirds. After getting checked in, we had just a little bit of daylight left - perfect timing to go look for the local parrot flock. We succeeded in finding a small group of White-fronted Parrots that gave us a flyover, but the typical larger flock of birds was nowhere to be found – very odd for this usually very reliable flock! Then we headed over to Cobbleheads where we chatted about the day and got to catch a little of the 49ers vs Cowboys game on the TV, making some of us feel like we were in enemy territory!

## **Mon., Jan. 23                      Laguna Atascosa NWR | South Padre Island**

We headed to the coast for a final time this morning, starting with a stop at the Zapata Memorial Boat Ramp where we watched the climax of a spectacular sunrise over the wetland. Many species of water bird congregate in the open flats that are dotted with mangroves and other vegetation. Some of our highlights included many Black Skimmers, a pair of American Oystercatchers, and even some bottlenose dolphins working through the shallow water. Next, we got started at the South Padre Island Birding & Nature Center. The boardwalks provided us with the classic gallery of herons, including fantastic views of Great Blue Heron, Tricolored Heron, and Yellow and Black-crowned Night Herons. The waterfowl, though, pretty much stole the show with stunning examples of Northern Pintail, Blue-winged Teal, Mottled Duck, and Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, all at point-blank range. And



just as we were getting ready to leave, the cherry on top was a beautiful Yellow-throated Warbler that played in a Spanish dagger foraging for insects. We popped over to the flats behind the convention center which were lousy with Piping Plovers and other shorebirds before an early lunch at on the island. Back on the mainland, we made a sort of impromptu stop at the Laguna Vista Nature Trail. This little suburban park has quickly become a popular stop for birders as it has been proving itself to be more and more of a rarity hotspot. For us, it provided Rufus Hummingbird and a seasonally rare Yellow Warbler, and maybe best of all was when the sun finally came out, allowing us to study some insects, including Dainty Sulfurs and Mallow-scrub Hairstreak. Then we headed off to Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge with a stop for some Harris's Hawks feeding on the side of the road. Along the refuge entrance road, we counted at least seven Greater Roadrunners on the edge of the brush sunning themselves. At refuge HQ, we checked out the blinds where the action was nearly constant with bird after bird take baths, including Olive Sparrow and an Orange-crowned Warbler that showed off its usually hidden orange crown. On our way back to the hotel, we cruised down Old Port Isabel Road where we were rewarded with many Long-billed Curlews and one very cooperative White-tailed Hawk.

We took a very brief break at the hotel to run through our checklist for the day, before departing for parrot redemption, which luckily was highly successful as we chased them down through the neighborhoods, discovering their roost site for the night, occupied by around 200 Red-crowned Parrots and 50 White-fronted. We celebrated with a traditional LRGV Tex-Mex dinner.

## **Tue., Jan. 24                      Sabal Palm Sanctuary | UTRGV Resacas**

With strong winds and light rain on our drive out, we were apprehensive about how our day of birding ahead might go. But no matter the weather, there are always great birds to see in the valley! By the time we made it out to Sabal Palm Sanctuary (a preserve situated right on the Rio Grande River near the southernmost point of Texas) the rain stopped, the clouds parted, but the wind picked up. After checking out the historical Rabb mansion, we hit the trails to explore one of the most unique parks in the region, as it holds one of the last remaining stands of native Sabal Palm Forest in Texas. Along the trail, we encountered a rare-for-winter Rose-breasted Grosbeak, a Nilgai bolting away from us into the brush, and a variety of rare and specialized plants

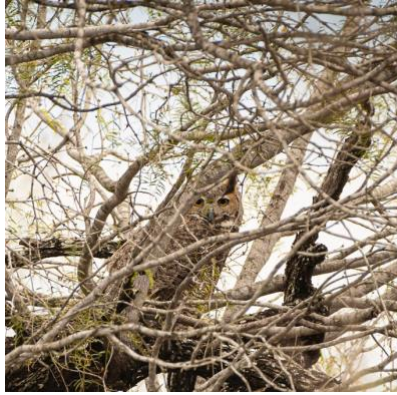


lining the winding trails. Next, we headed to a deli in downtown Brownsville before stopping in at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley campus's resaca habitat. The winds were truly howling by now, so the songbirds were difficult to find, but luckily, we got to enjoy watching Anhingas catching several fish below us, Tropical Kingbirds, a diversity of butterflies (hanging on for dear life) in the butterfly garden, and the cherry on top as we were making our final pass through the habitat was a beautiful Ringed Kingfisher. We called it a day a little early to give us some time to rest and recover after five intense days of birding, and prepare for a long day of walking ahead.

## **Wed., Jan. 25                      Santa Ana NWR | Estero Llano Grande State Park**

We packed our things and headed east, with our first stop at Estero Llano Grande State Park. This relatively new park for the valley quickly became a hotspot for birds and birders alike, and this morning showed us just why that is. As the sun rose over the refuge, we were greeted by hundreds of whistling ducks and a variety of other waterfowl off the visitor center deck before heading out to the trails. One of the big highlights for us on our walk was playing hide and seek with the Common Pauraque which love to hide right on the ground off the side of the trail, and fortunately we were successful in finding one snuggled up against the base of a tree. We continued our hike up the levee to see the Llano Grande, with lots of waders, shorebirds, and great views of the park behind us from this elevated vantage point. On our way back to the deck we ran into a couple of Fulvous Whistling-Ducks and Black Phoebe, both uncommon for the area. Back in the tropical zone of the park, we spent a good amount of time at the new Indigo Blind where birds were constantly coming into the feeders, including Buff-bellied Hummingbirds, Olive Sparrows, and even a couple of pretty cute Hispid Cotton Rats. As we were waiting for the Buff-bellied to give us some better views, a female Broad tailed Hummingbird came in, which is quite rare for the valley at any time of year.

Next, we had lunch at the Blue Onion, a local Mediterranean-fusion restaurant, before heading over to the Alamo Inn to get checked in and drop off our luggage. Just south of the inn we visited Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge for a couple of hours where we were successful in finding Green Kingfisher and Cinnamon Teal among quite a few other birds, and as we were leaving the refuge at the end of our walk, we were treated to superb views of a pair of Altamira Orioles, the last highlight on an incredible day of birding two of the most productive parks in the state.



**Thu., Jan. 26**

## **Salineño Wildlife Preserve | Falcon State Park | Rancho Lomitas**

We were on the road well before the sun was up this morning in order to reach the western most extent of the Lower Rio Grande Valley on the far end of Starr County. We started our morning with a walk right along the banks of the Rio Grande at Salineño. A variety of ducks were out on the water, and a Ringed Kingfisher was seeking some breakfast under the ripples in the current. We stopped to admire a dilapidated Altamira Oriole nest and studied some animal signs in the dusty trail. Back at the feeding station, the birds were devouring their breakfast! Several Altamira Orioles were nearly constantly eating or drinking, along with many Green Jays, a group of Plain Chachalacas, White-tipped Doves just a few feet away from us, and of course the playful Great Kiskadees. Ultimate drama unfolded when an accipiter swooped through and nailed one of the hundreds of Red-winged Blackbirds that crowd these feeders.

Next, we headed over to Falcon State Park where we walked through a campground where several residents and the park host have set up birdfeeders and baths. They were bringing in a variety of brush country species, including a covey of Northern Bobwhite, Pyrrhuloxia, and Black-throated Sparrow. While the LRGV hosts an abundance of birds, many of the more widespread US species can be surprisingly hard to come by, so we were pretty pleased this morning to find American Robins and a Northern Flicker. Our last birding stop of the day was out at Rancho Lomitas, situated north of Rio Grande city. This is a private property boasting some fantastic Tamaulipan thornscrub with an excellent set of feeders. As soon as we arrived, we pretty much nailed all of our target species, including a couple dozen Scaled Quail, Audubon's Orioles, Cactus Wren, And Curve-billed Thrasher. In the distance, we heard a soft hooting... A pair of Great Horned Owls were duetting in the afternoon! We were able to finally track them down for some nice looks in a mesquite tree. Then we said goodbye to our hosts at the ranch and were off for dinner at Casa de Adobe in Rio Grande City before making it back to the Alamo Inn.



## **Fri., Jan. 27**

## **Bentsen RGV State Park | Edinburg Scenic Wetlands**

The drizzly weather found us again, and we started out at Bentsen Rio Grande Valley State Park in hot pursuit of a couple of rare birds that have been reported in the area. Unfortunately, and partly due to the weather, we struck out on those, but still managed to find some fun birds, of course! Some of our favorites were many Clay-colored Thrush, Buff-bellied Hummingbirds, and a beautiful and cooperative Verdin. A brand-new bistro had opened right in the state park visitor center, so we decided to give it a try and it turned out to be one of our best lunches of the whole week! One of the best parts had to be the huge windows, allowing us to view all the birds in the gardens like Altamira and Hooded Orioles just outside the glass. Next, we headed over to Anzalduas County Park, where we had a nice flock of American Pipits and Least and Pied-billed Grebes hanging out side-by-side for a very nice comparison. Our last stop of the day was at the National Butterfly Center which, thanks to the weather, we managed to not find a single butterfly at, but the birds certainly delivered. Along the hackberry trail, we encountered a nice mixed flock of passerines with a couple of Blue-headed Vireo, Northern-beardless Tyrannulet, and American and Lesser Goldfinches. When we made it to the feeding station, it was constant activity with probably the most cooperative and bold Audubon's Oriole Bryan had ever seen, and the most unique bird of the bunch being a hybrid Audubon's x Altamira Oriole. We called it a day and headed back to the Inn for a little time to pack and to run through a checklist before heading out to mid-town McAllen in search of the Green Parakeets that roost amongst the hundreds of thousands of Great-tailed Grackle. Eventually the parakeets came in, swirling around us before finally landing on the wires just above our heads where we got to watch them hang upside down and snuggle up for the night... Absolutely, adorable! Our last full day in the field was concluded with a fabulous dinner at one of McAllen's premier restaurants, SALT.

## **Sat., Jan. 28**

## **Quinta Mazatlan | Departures from McAllen**

On our final day of the tour, we headed to Quinta Mazatlan for a leisurely morning of birding. Walking the grounds of this historical McAllen city park, we admired work of local artisans, read about the history of development and conservation in the valley, and of course saw nice birds. A few goodies like Inca Dove, Clay-colored Thrush, Common Pauraque, and even a Least Grebe were there to give us a LRGV farewell.

Photos by Bryan Calk: Group, Green Jay, Roseate Spoonbill, Great Egret, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Altamira Oriole, Birding by the Water, Vermillion Flycatcher, Black-necked Stilt, Loggerhead Shrike, Group Birding, Sunset, Blue-winged Teal, Roseate

Spoonbill, White-tailed Hawk, Armadillo, Orange-crowned Warbler, Yellow-throated Warbler, Group Birding, Common Pauraque, Hispid Cotton Rat, White-faced Ibis, Broad-tailed Hummingbird, Great Horned Owl, Green Jay, Great Kiskadee, Northern Bobwhite, Northern Mockingbird, Long-billed Thrasher, Audubon's Oriole, Pauraque