

Texas' Big Bend: Birding & Wildlife | April 28 – May 5, 2023 | Trip Report | by Greg Butcher



With guides Dave Krueper and Greg Butcher, and participants: Alan, Alice, Art, Chris, Dede, Dick, Steve, and Susan



eBird Trip Report: To see the bird report for the trip on eBird, go to <https://ebird.org/tripreport/125016>

Summary: We enjoyed four major habitat types: the Chihuahuan Desert, the Davis Mountains, the Chisos Mountains, and the Rio Grande Riparian Area. The area we visited is often called the Trans-Pecos because we were west of the Pecos River. In addition to targeting West Texas breeding birds, we picked up a number of migrants moving through at the height of springtime. We added some interesting mammals such as Collared Peccary and Pronghorn, a couple of snakes, and a Bullfrog.

Fri., Apr. 28 Drive to Lake Balmorhea | Fort Davis

After a few false starts, we all met at the El Paso Airport at 9:45 am and headed East to Lake Balmorhea in Reeves County. Our first stop was a short break in Van Horn. We enjoyed lunch at The Bear Den (La Cueva de



Oso). Lake Balmorhea produced by far the most waterbirds of the entire trip, including good side-by-side views of Western and Clark’s Grebes. Then we were off to the Hotel Limpia in Fort Davis and dinner at Blue Mountain Bar & Grill.

Sat., Apr. 29 Davis Mountains | Madera Canyon Trail | McDonald Observatory

We picked up breakfast and lunch at the Stone Village Market, then headed off on a wild goose chase for Pinyon Jays and Montezuma Quail, but no luck despite good advice from local bird photographer Mike Gray. Then we thought we were looking at Bighorn Sheep, but in fact we had close looks at a herd of a dozen introduced Aoudad or Barbary Sheep. We drove higher in elevation, parked at Lawrence E. Wood Picnic Area, and hiked the Madera Canyon Trail. Our rewards included Ferruginous Hawk, Townsend’s Solitaire, and great looks at a male Hepatic Tanager. We had a picnic lunch at McDonald Observatory and toured the telescopes and exhibits.

In the afternoon, a few of us visited Fort Davis National Historic Park and enjoyed Rock Wrens and Lark Sparrows along with the history lessons. Then we visited the two bird blinds at Davis Mountains State Park. We had our first hummingbirds there (Black-chinned) and enjoyed Acorn Woodpeckers, Scrub Jays, and Scott’s Orioles. The Harvard Bar & Grill was short-staffed, so we dined at another cave, Cueva de Leon, for Mexican food. A few of us went back to the state park after sunset for great looks at an Elf Owl and a fun visit with Bruce Beehler, a Smithsonian Institution ornithologist. We even got a mention in his travel blog.

Sun., Apr. 30 Davis Mountains State Park | The Post SW of Marath on Big Bend National Park

We headed back to the state park in the morning and picked up two new tanagers (Summer and Western) and a couple of grosbeaks (Black-headed and Blue). Before leaving Fort Davis, we shopped at the local grocery store to pick up breakfast and lunch food so we could spend more time birding and sightseeing in Big Bend National Park. Then it was off to Marathon! We birded at The Post, more formally known as Fort Pena Colorado Park. What a productive spot for late morning! We had 18 Blue Grosbeaks hanging out in the grass, a pair of Golden-fronted Woodpeckers flying in and out of a nest, gorgeous Vermilion Flycatchers, a couple of orioles (Bullock’s and Orchard), and our first Yellow-breasted Chat and Pyrrhuloxia – the desert cardinal!



Lunch was at the V6 Coffee Bar in Marathon next to the Gage Hotel, which was swarming with swallows – Barn, Cliff, and Cave! Driving from Marathon to Big Bend, we passed by an old set of mountains that were formed at the same time as the Appalachians and the Ouachitas and had weathered in a great variety of ways. Inside the park, we climbed over the Chisos Mountains to our lodge in Chisos Basin. Right outside our cabins, we had White-throated Swifts, Mexican Jays, Cactus Wrens, Canyon Towhees, and Scott’s Orioles! We had our first of three dinners at Chisos Mountain Lodge.

Mon., May 1 Big Bend National Park | Rio Grande Village

We got up early to beat the heat along the Rio Grande. We enjoyed several roadrunners and a coyote, who didn’t seem overly interested in us or in the coyote. We had a close Collared Peccary here as well. For birds, we had Bell’s Vireos everywhere, a couple of Brown-crested Flycatchers, a fly-by Yellow-headed Blackbird, and 4 of the prettiest birds on the planet – Painted Bunting! We had an amazing afternoon at Dugout Wells – migration was in full swing and many of the typical Big Bend birds showed themselves well. We had 5 species of warblers: Orange-crowned, Nashville, Yellow, Yellow-rumped (Audubon’s), and Wilson’s.

Tues., May 2 Big Bend NP | Water Treatment | Lost Mine | Basin Loop Trails

We didn’t have far to go this morning for the trail to the water treatment pond, just below Chisos Basin Campground. Our early start was rewarded by great looks at Crissal Thrasher, Bewick’s Wren, and the second-most-beautiful-bird on the planet, Varied Bunting (in full sunlight!). We had close looks at a small Big Bend Black-headed Snake, and there were Cactus Wrens everywhere! At mid-day, we took the Lost Mine Trail for the great views, but the birds weren’t bad either. Mexican Jays accompanied us for the whole walk. Black-crested Titmice, Rufous-crowned Sparrows, and Green-tailed Towhees reminded us of the southwestern specialties that call Big Bend home. Before dinner, we hiked the Basin Loop Trail just above our cabins. Among the usual species, we enjoyed some of the smaller birds of the basin: Bushtit, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, and Lesser Goldfinch. (We left the Verdins down in the desert at a lower elevation.)



Wed., May 3

Sam Nail Ranch | Burro Mesa Pouroff | Cottonwood Campground | Santa Elena Canyon Overlook

Sam Nail Ranch is one of the oases that attract birds in Big Bend, but we started our day with a snake sunning itself at eye level – a Red Racer, also known as a Coachwhip. The biggest surprise here was seven Yellow-breasted Chats singing and showing themselves throughout the area. We thought we had a hybrid Indigo-Lazuli Bunting, but Dave’s photo analysis suggests that it was a first-year male Indigo Bunting.

A quick stop at Sotol Vista Overlook produced 4 species of sparrows (Cassin’s, Chipping, Rufous-crowned, and Black-throated) and a Canyon Towhee, which is really another kind of sparrow. We all really enjoyed the Burro Mesa Pouroff. In addition to the dramatic cliff above us, we appreciated 3 species of wrens (Rock, Canyon, and Cactus), a brief look at a Phainopepla, and 3 more Aoudads – non-native Barbary Sheep. The walk to the Pouroff featured lots of Common Side-blotched Lizards. Cottonwood Campground was one of the birdiest places on the trip. We had a nest of Gray Hawks. Among the smaller birds, we had Vermilion Flycatcher, Verdin, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, and Lucy’s Warbler. En route to Santa Elena Canyon Overlook, we flushed a couple of Common Ground-Doves on the side of the road. This night’s dinner was special! We visited the almost-ghost town of Terlingua, toured the eclectic general store, and dined at the Starlight Theater, an amazingly good restaurant for such a dusty out-of-the-way town.

Fri., May 4

Dugout Wells | Christmas Mountains Oasis | Prairie Dog The Gage Hotel

Our last birding stop in Big Bend was a return to Dugout Wells where we got to compare Northern Cardinals and desert cardinals – Pyrrhuloxias. Then we left Big Bend and headed to the wonderful oasis created by Carolyn Ohls and her friends in the Christmas Mountains. The number one reward there is the lavender-throated Lucifer’s Hummingbird. I think everyone had a good view of an Elf Owl tucked away deep in the vegetation. A flock of Lark Sparrows and a couple of new sparrow species provided evidence that we were in the middle of migration, and Scaled Quails and roadrunners reminded us that we were still in the southwest.

We spent the night at the glorious Gage Hotel in Marathon, but before stopping there, we headed 10 miles northeast to the Marathon Prairie Dog Town. We were hoping for a Burrowing Owl, which didn’t appear, but the



rewards were many. In addition to the prairie dogs, we got close to several Pronghorn. I only recorded 4 species of birds, but all of them are worth a mention: Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Loggerhead Shrike, Chihuahuan Raven, and Chihuahuan Meadowlark, a recent split from Eastern Meadowlark. Our last dinner was quite memorable at the 12 Gage Restaurant in the hotel.

Sat., May 5 From Marathon to El Paso for Departures

First flights were in the afternoon, so we had a leisurely breakfast at the V6 Coffee Bar and headed west to El Paso. We all headed home with memories of Trans-Pecos Texas dancing in our heads!

Photo Credits: Acorn Woodpecker (Alan Hull - AH), Scenic (Dave Krueper - DK), Lucifer Hummingbird (DK), Painted Bunting (DK), Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (DK), Group (DK), Yellow Flowers (DK), Red Flowering Cacti (AH), Vermilion Flycatcher (AH), Barbary Sheep or Aoudad (AH), Cactus Wren (AH), Scenic (DK), Painted Bunting (AH), Scenic (DK), Summer Tanager (DK), Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (DK), Mexican Jay (DK), Pronghorn (AH), Rock Wren (DK), Red racer/Coachwhip (DK), Canyon Towhee (DK), Female Black-headed Grosbeak (AH), Curve-billed Thrasher (AH)