

Texas' Big Bend National Park | April 24–May 1, 2023 | Trip Report | by Dave Mehlman



With guides Dave Mehlman and Peter Burke, with participants: Bob, Dan, Dave, Dianne, Jean, Lisa, Mark, Mark, Phyllis, Tammie, and Terri



Mon., Apr. 24

El Paso | Balmorhea | Fort Davis

Our Naturalist Journeys Big Bend tour got off to an excellent start in the morning. Conveniently, most of the group spent the previous night at the Wyndham El Paso Airport, as did Dave and Peter, so we collected all those present and began loading our van for the long drive to Fort Davis via Balmorhea. Dave and Peter then each headed off to a different hotel to pick up the remaining members of the group (although Terri and Dan were already in Fort Davis as they had driven out for some pre- and post-trip camping). Both vans then navigated their way onto I-10 in the El Paso morning rush hour traffic, then headed east through the extensive Chihuahuan Desert scrub that surrounds the city. Successfully navigating the CBP checkpoint with nothing but a wave through, we entered Central Time Zone and then made a stop in Van Horn for gas and facility break, where both vans reunited.



We then continued east, arriving in late morning at our first birding stop of the tour, the Sandia Wetland Project outside the small west Texas town of Balmorhea, where we met Terri and Dan in their own truck. This very easy to bird wetland stop had a few Black-necked Stilts and Killdeer, along with some Blue-winged Teal, Mexican Duck, and a pair of Northern Shoveler. Some beating of the shrubs nearby yielded White-crowned and Savannah Sparrow and a lovely Swainson's Hawk soared overhead—the signs were good for a great trip! Finishing up here, we headed into town for a great lunch of Mexican classics at La Cueva de Oso and then went out of town to the nearby 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. Some of the best highlights were great views of several shorebirds quite close, including Least, Baird's, and Spotted Sandpiper; Lesser Yellowlegs; Black-necked Stilt; and an unfortunately far-off flock of Wilson's Phalarope. Out on the water, Clark's and Western Grebes floated by, along with Double-crested Cormorants, Ruddy Ducks, and some American White Pelicans. Meanwhile, on land, we enjoyed a perching and calling Scaled Quail and several Northern Mockingbirds.

Finally tearing ourselves away from this literal oasis, we drove the relatively 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 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, distributed the checklists, and then got back into van to head south to Alpine for dinner at Reata Restaurant. Luckily, we were seated at the outdoor patio under the extremely large Wisteria and enjoyed our first dinner together. Finishing up, we headed back to Fort Davis in the gathering dusk, eagerly anticipating our day tomorrow in the Davis Mountains.

Tues., Apr. 25 Davis Mountains

We started the day with everyone "foraging" in Stone Village Market for breakfast items of their choice and we picked up our bag lunches there. After a quick stop back at the Limpia to get ready for the day, we climbed into our vans and headed up into the Davis Mountains. Our first stop was the Lawrence Wood Picnic Area, surrounded by pine forest on all sides. This reliable spot yielded a lot of great birds to start the day, including Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay (the common jay of the Davis Mountains), Acorn Woodpecker, Ash-throated Flycatcher, a flyover Sharp-shinned Hawk, and a cooperatively perching and singing male Hepatic Tanager which allowed for great scope looks. At this point, Dave's plan had been to go up to the nearby Davis Mountains Preserve headquarters/visitor center of The Nature Conservancy (which owns all the surrounding land here). However, the assistant preserve manager kindly came by at that point to say that the preserve manager would be unable to meet with us after all. But he did invite us to come by the visitor center, look around, and use the facilities, so

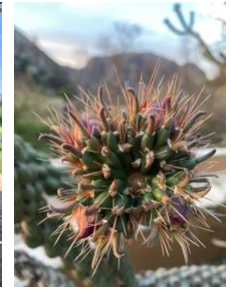


we took advantage of the offer. The visitor center had a lot of information, including some great maps of the landscape conservation effort that has been accomplished by The Nature Conservancy and partners in the greater Davis Mountains region. Unfortunately, a rather strong wind came up at that point, so we made a decision to head right away to our next destination, Davis Mountains State Park, at a lower elevation to try to avoid the worst of the wind.

Entering the park, we stopped at the entrance station to pay our fees (and, thanks to Dan, we got one van in for free!) and look around. While Dave took care of business, Peter found some fun birds for the group, including the ever-popular Scott's Oriole, Cassin's Kingbird, and a perching Black-chinned Hummingbird. Continuing, Dave's van had a wonderful view of a Coachwhip crossing the road for our first herp sighting of the tour, then we all parked at the Emory Oak observation blind for some serious birding. This blind always has lot of activity, though one has to keep a sharp eye peeled for the more furtive species that come and go. The area was loaded with Chipping Sparrows, but sharp eyes among the group picked out at least one Clay-colored Sparrow in with them. The suet feeders drew in Pine Siskin, Western Tanager, more Scott's Orioles, and Ladder-backed and Acorn Woodpecker, while Cassin's Kingbirds noisily chattered overhead and a Canyon Towhee snuck in almost unobserved (note that I said "almost"!).

After filling ourselves at this avian feast, Dave led the group on the short walk over to the Interpretive Center blind on the other side of the campground, picking up Vermilion Flycatcher on the way. This blind, though smaller, had an impressive mix of birds, too. Very noticeable were 2 brightly colored White-throated Sparrows foraging on the ground, a rare species in west Texas. Northern Cardinal, Black-headed Grosbeak, Bewick's Wren, Summer Tanager, and a somewhat surprising Cassin's Finch also put in appearances to delight everyone. After all this birding, hunger pangs began to be set off, so we returned to the vans and sat down to consume our delicious sandwiches from the Market accompanied by cold beverages from the cooler. Meanwhile, Terri had talked to a local birder who was at the park who invited us to come over to his nearby house for some birding.

After lunch, we split into 2 groups for the afternoon. Peter took a subset of folks to the nearby McDonald Observatory for some astronomical insight and them to Limpia Crossing while Dave took the rest to Limpia Crossing and then on to the Fort Davis National Historic Site. Limpia Crossing is where Dell Little, the person



whom Terri met at the State Park, lives and both groups met him at his house and then proceeded to explore the immediate area. The primary highlight was the large flock of Pinyon Jay that had been in this area for many weeks; an unusual occurrence in the Davis Mountains. Both groups found the flock and many other birds in the vicinity, in addition to enjoying our time with Dell and Mike Gray, another landowner in the area (and avid bird photographer). Dave's group also got great looks at a Spiny Crevice Lizard hiding in the cracks of a wall at Mike's house.

After this exciting day in the Davis Mountains, we returned for a brief rest at the Limpia, then walked across the patio for dinner (in truth, a disappointing one) at the Blue Mountain Bistro. After dinner, we reconvened, got in the vans, then headed back to the park very late in the day, arriving at the Interpretive Center as dusk fell. Dave led the group over to a nearby telephone pole where we began the owl vigil, oddly not sharing the area with any other birders. Peter and Dave had pre-sighted their scopes on the proper hole in the pole, so at 8:43pm, right on schedule, when an Elf Owl stuck its head out to peer around, everyone could get a decent look, despite the fading daylight. As we watched, the other owl of the pair flew in and apparently exchanged places, so we had a classic owl night out at the park! After that, we returned to the hotel, tired but happy, to rest up for the coming day.

Wed., Apr. 26

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

We began the day with another (successful!) foraging expedition to Stone Village Market, then 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 Elk in a field by the side of the highway to add to our trip mammal list. Continuing on, we stopped for ice in Alpine, then continued east to the town of Marathon and our first birding destination of the day: Fort Peña Colorado Park, known by most as "The Post." The road into The Post is an excellent birding road, with great birds and little traffic. This year was no different, as we took over an hour to drive about 4.5 miles, stopping and birding constantly on the way. 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 Vesper, Brewer's and Chipping Sparrows; several Pyrrhuloxia; Scaled Quail; Loggerhead Shrike; and soaring Swainson's Hawk.



We finally made it in mid-morning to the park itself, where most promptly ran to the bathrooms! We then spent several delightful hours birding this literal oasis in the desert, hardly moving at all. The “usual suspects” here proved a delight, as everyone saw Vermilion Flycatcher, Orchard Oriole, Cactus Wren, Summer Tanager, Blue Grosbeak, and Golden-fronted Woodpecker. Several Blue-winged Teal and Spotted Sandpipers were on the pond and, at one point, a small flock of Green-winged Teal flew by. A large flock of Clay-colored Sparrows was present, more than Dave had ever seen on all his prior years’ tours put together. However, it was the rarities that we found that truly amazed everyone, even the hardened birders like Peter and Dave. First up was a female or immature Mountain Bluebird that was very easily seen; this bird had been continuing at the site for a while. Next, Dave noticed a Kentucky Warbler (very rare in west Texas) foraging along a fence line. This bird proved very cooperative, and all had incredible looks at this bird as it poked around the leaf litter for food—as good a view as one could have had even on the Gulf Coast! To top it off, toward the end of our stay we discovered a Brown Thrasher (another west Texas rarity) foraging in the grass—all in all, an incredible morning at this lovely site.

We then returned to Marathon itself and took a quick stroll around Gage Gardens, though it proved to be kind of quiet aside from a nicely seen male Bullock’s Oriole and more Vermilion Flycatchers, Wilson’s Warblers, and Northern Cardinals. After this, we drove the very short distance to have very satisfying sandwiches at the V6 Coffee Bar right in town and many took the opportunity to stick their heads inside the majestic and historic Gage Hotel right next door. After lunch, since we were still on time, we made a dash east and north to visit the prairie dog town right off the highway to Fort Stockton. However, due to the heat and time of day, little was visible except for the Black-tailed Prairie Dogs running about and many lovely blooming wildflowers.

Finishing here, we returned to Marathon for gas, then headed south on the long, lonely road to Big Bend National Park, the highlight destination of our tour. We stopped at the entrance sign for obligatory sign photos and admired the profusion of blooming shrubs there, including Creosotebush, Whitethorn Acacia, Catclaw Acacia, and many more. We passed through the Persimmon Gap Entrance Station, already closed for the season, and stopped for a bathroom break at the small roadside station there, where a flock of Brewer’s Blackbirds and Brown-headed Cowbirds conveniently put in an appearance. At this point, we were running a bit late, so we continued south and arrived at the Panther Junction Visitor Center (and Park headquarters) a bit after it had closed at 5:00pm. Since there was nothing to do there, we continued on and drove up the Green Gulch Road into the scenic Chisos Basin. Arriving in the basin, we checked in at the reception for the Chisos Mountains Lodge



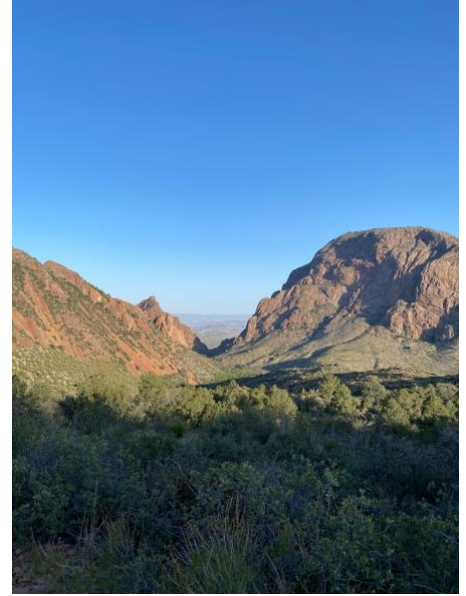
then headed straight into the dining room as we were early enough to get a table right away due to the staff constraints in the dining room there. After dinner, we got in the vans and drove to our rooms, unloaded our gear, and settled in. We briefly reconvened at the gazebo for the bird checklist and discussion of plans for the next day, after which we all enjoyed our first night in the Chisos Basin.

Thurs., Apr. 27 Big Bend National Park: East Side

We began our first full day in Big Bend by opening up the restaurant for its buffet breakfast and picking up our bag lunches. After heading back to our rooms to finish getting ready, 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 many vociferous Bell's Vireos, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Pyrrhuloxia, Bullock's Oriole, and Black-throated Sparrow. However, the prize of the morning was a very well-concealed Western Screech-Owl ensconced in a niche of an old, almost dead, cottonwood tree! It paid us no mind as we moved around trying to get the ultimate view and /or photograph—definitely a treat for all of us. As we headed back to the vans, a flock of Brewer's Blackbirds landed in a tree and a Greater Roadrunner ran by as if to give us an inspection.

Our next stop was Rio Grande Village, where we made a quick visit to the store to use the facilities. A bit of birding right around the store yielded Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Common Raven, Brown-crested Flycatcher, and a Virginia's Warbler. Continuing on, Dave and Peter dropped everyone off at the Nature Trail entrance, then drove back to park the vans. The group then walked out on the trail, across the wetland, to the Rio Grande, finding a Common Yellowthroat, Yellow-breasted Chat, Northern Cardinals singing madly, and a soaring Black Vulture en-route. Near the river, Savannah and Lark Sparrows appeared in the sandy area, while a Mexican Duck flew overhead (apparently confused as to whether it was a Mexican Mexican duck or an American Mexican duck). Over the river a few Northern Rough-winged Swallows foraged as we took in the view of the State of Coahuila on the other side and a Painted Bunting sang from the riverside trees. On the walk back, we heard a Marsh Wren in the cattails in the wetland—what a super morning walk!

At this point the lunch time stomach bells were ringing so we headed down the road a short ways to the Daniel's Ranch area and found a shady picnic table at which to consume our sandwiches with cold drinks from the cooler. After lunch, we walked around the immediate area. At the Rio Grande, a Black Phoebe foraged about near the water. Meanwhile, overhead we noted White-throated Swifts, Common Black and Gray Hawk, many



Summer Tanagers, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, and an Orange-crowned Warbler. Starting the trip back, we stopped by the road at the long-standing Common Black-Hawk nest and, with the aid of some careful positioning of the scopes, saw the head of one of the hawks in the nest. After a while, much to our delight, the hawk stood up and perched in the nest, providing awesome views of this majestic southwestern riparian raptor—what a highlight!

At this point, we collectively decide it was pretty hot, so we began heading back to the Basin with a stop at the Panther Junction Visitor Center. This allowed Dave and Peter to get squared away with our entrance permits (thanks to a large number of passes in the group, we all got in for free) while others browsed the store and looked at the interpretive exhibits. Returning to Chisos Basin, we had a bit of free time before gathering for dinner in the dining room, followed by a meeting in the gazebo to go over the bird list and discuss plans for tomorrow. Walking out of the dining room, we discovered a few Bushtits foraging in the trees (possibly with a nearby nest) and a Black-crested Titmouse visited us during the checklist discussion. A great end to a superb first day in Big Bend!

Fri., Apr. 28

Big Bend National Park: Chisos Mountains

Today was the appointed day for the group to spend all day in the Chisos Mountains, but we started off with our normal routine of a buffet breakfast at the Lodge and picking up our bag lunches. Reconvening outside our rooms, we all got our gear together and everyone picked out their lunch (trying, sometimes in vain, to interpret the sandwich codes on the bags!) and got ready to go. We decided to start our hike as a group, though several intended to do a shorter hike and others a longer hike. Dave led the group to the Chisos Basin trailhead where we spent a bit of time familiarizing ourselves with the trail network and, for those going on the longer hike, what lay ahead. With that briefing, we all started up the trail.

The early going was slow, bird-wise, although Scott's Orioles and White-winged Doves serenaded us most of the early part. We soon arrived at the Basin Loop Trail Junction, where Dave, Jean, Phyllis, and Tammie peeled off for a shorter hike and a relaxing day in Chisos Basin. Continuing on up into the mountains were Bob, Dan, Dianne, Lisa, the Marks, and Terri accompanied by Peter in front (nice of him to stir up the bears, wouldn't you say?) and Dave at the rear (to prod the slackers!!). As we got higher, we began to encounter a few more birds. Mexican Jays were constantly calling and we found a Rufous-crowned Sparrow, some Townsend's Solitaires, Spotted Towhees, many Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, and a few quite vocal Hutton's Vireos. Arriving at our first landmark, the



saddle overlooking Chisos Basin about mid-morning, we took a group photo while being buzzed by a bold male Broad-tailed Hummingbird. After admiring the view, a Black-chinned Sparrow suddenly sang from the brush beside the trail which we managed to get glasses on, though not a fabulous view of this classic shrub desert sparrow. Onward and upward we pushed, climbing higher and higher into the Chisos as more, taller trees began to appear, though excellent views to the south and west were had constantly. Approaching the Colima Trail, Dan noticed that Santa Elena Canyon was visible through a gap in the mountains, seemingly only a minor dash in the far mountain range. Continuing on the Colima Trail, we crested the high point of the hike at a bit over 7200 feet, then decided it was time for a lunch break on the trail. Finding a nice shady spot, we all sat down and devoured our lunches and drank plenty of water. As luck would have it, as we were finishing lunch, a Colima Warbler started singing in the trees right nearby! A few people were able to get on this bird before it disappeared, thereby providing a lifer for many and, frankly, the justification for this entire hike! At that point, being over half-way through the legendary Chisos Mountains Loop and not having had satisfactory Colima views for the whole group, we decided to go for it and complete the entire Loop.

Therefore, after lunch was consumed, we loaded our packs back on and proceeded down the trail. At this point, we entered the large burn scar from the 2021 wildfire which burned much of the higher terrain of the Chisos. Dave was particularly interested in seeing this, as he had done the tours in 2021 which were impacted by this fire and had not had a prior chance to hike the area since. Somewhat to his surprise, the burn was clearly very patchy with some completely torched areas but most of the burn scar had some kind of vegetation survival and recovery. As we moved along, we noted a few “flycatching” Acorn Woodpeckers and a nearly constant parade of singing Black-crested Titmice as Common Ravens periodically flew overhead croaking. Arriving at the junction with the Boot Canyon Trail, we turned left to continue on, encountering a small mixed species flock with Townsend’s, Hermit, and Wilson’s Warbler; Black-headed Grosbeak; and another Townsend’s Solitaire. 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.

Tightening our bootlaces and grabbing a drink of water, we began the steep hike down Pinnacles Trail. A short way down, Dave heard and spotted another Colima, though only a few at the end of the line got to see anything of it. Other species noted on the way down included a Red-tailed Hawk and some White-throated Swifts soaring



high among the Pinnacles. At that point in the hike and the day, however, most of our efforts were focused on putting one boot in front of the other as we descended steadily, arriving back at the Basin Trailhead a bit over 9 hours after starting. Comparison between our various apps and smartphones suggested we had hiked about 10.5 miles—an incredible achievement for all and for such a large group! We then returned to our rooms to take off our boots, grab a quick shower and cold beverage, and then head up to the dining room to meet the others for a celebratory dinner. What a long, tough, but incredibly satisfying day!

Sat., Apr. 29

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. Sam Nail has always been one of Dave's favorite stops in the Park and this year did not disappoint. It's hard to say, but two of the great highlights in the morning there were the memorable display flights and songs of the multiple Yellow-breasted Chats to be found there and the simultaneous singing of male Northern Cardinal and Pyrrhuloxia. Several of the folks on the tour specifically mentioned those chats as their personal highlight of the entire trip and the "dueling" cardinal and Pyrrhuloxia were quite interesting—sometimes, the only way to tell who was singing was to look for the beak moving in the scope, the songs were that similar! Other highlights at Sam Nail included Summer Tanagers, Brown-headed Cowbird, Cactus Wren, Brewer's Sparrow, and a lovely adult male American Redstart.

Continuing on, we stopped 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) and use the facilities. While there, we were treated to a great sparrow display with Black-throated, Vesper, and Rufous-crowned all foraging on the ground and flying about at close range. Given the rapidly ending morning, we next headed straight to Cottonwood Campground, very close to the Rio Grande, for some birding followed by a picnic lunch.

Cottonwood proved to be a very excellent birding stop. Thanks to Dan and Terri, who had camped there the previous week, we quickly found the Gray Hawk nest in one of the large cottonwoods and these birds put on quite a display as they perched in the nest and soared overhead—a truly elegant hawk! Dan and Terri also pointed out to us a Black-chinned Hummingbird nest in a mesquite and we could easily see at least one large



chick barely fitting into the nest through the scope. The walk around the entire campground proved very productive, turning up many interesting birds including Summer and Western Tanager, a pair of American Goldfinch, lots of Yellow-rumped Warblers with a few Wilson's mixed in, one Western Wood-Pewee, Virginia's Warbler, Plumbeous Vireo, and a Common Ground-Dove (this latter was heard by Dave but only seen by a few before it flew off). This delightful walk ended with a picnic lunch at tables under the mesquites, one of which had a very noisy Black-tailed Gnatcatcher in it! That last one was a new experience for us all.

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 in near-perfect conditions, with temperatures around 80°F. Prepping ourselves with water, we got our packs out and headed to the River. However, to get to the Santa Elena Canyon trail this year involved either a wade across Terlingua Creek in waist-deep water or an additional hike upstream to where the creek ran very shallow. While most chose the latter, a few brave souls plunged in to enjoy the delightfully cool water and then the scramble up the bank on the far side. All then met up again and continued 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. While most were distracted by the rocks and the river, observant members of the group admired the interesting plants growing in the limestone here, including flowering Lechuguilla, and a few birds put in an appearance including Painted Bunting, the usual Bell's Vireo, and Rock and Canyon Wrens. Arriving at the end of the hike, where the steep cliffs meet the river, a few plunged in to enjoy the water.

We then did the return hike and arrived back at the vans for some welcome cold beverages. Piling into the vans with the A/C on full blast, we drove back on the Scenic Drive, then continued west for a dinner in the funky town of Terlingua at the Starlight Theatre. Arriving there a bit late, our table was ready to go so we headed in and enjoyed the great food, ambiance, and live music at the Starlight. Many took the opportunity to visit Clay Henry, the former, beer-drinking goat mayor of Terlingua, on the stage before leaving, as is the custom here! After dinner, we wandered around Terlingua for a short while, some shopping while others just soaked in the late afternoon vibe of the town. We then got in the vans and began the drive back to the Chisos Basin, admiring the Chisos Mountains all lit up with the glow of the setting sun. While driving the Park Road, several Lesser Nighthawks fly by or over to add a new species to our bird list. Getting back to the Lodge at about 8:45pm, we



were too tired to do more than briefly discuss the plan for the following day then retire to our rooms for another well-earned rest.

Sun., Apr. 30 Big Bend National Park | Christmas Mountains Oasis | Marfa

We began the day with our final buffet breakfast at the Lodge, though it appeared that several other groups had come in the day before since it was quite crowded that morning, though the food selection was unchanged. After getting our lunches, we returned to our rooms, gathered all our bags, packed the vans, then went to the Lodge one final time to turn in all the keys. Heading down from the Basin a last time, we turned west again on the entrance road and drove into Terlingua for a quick stop for “good coffee,” kolaches, and other treats at Far Flung Outfitters (to make up for the brown liquid we had been consuming for 4 days!). After that special stop, we went back to Study Butte, filled up our gas tanks, and headed north.

Our primary stop for the morning was the legendary Christmas Mountains Oasis, at the end of a rugged road in the lower elevations of the Christmas Mountains. Arriving there mid-morning, we were greeted by Carolyn Ohl-Johnson, who owns, manages, builds, maintains, and does everything there. She filled us in on the latest bird sightings as we settled in to watch the show at the feeders and water features that abound on the property. Almost immediately upon arrival we spotted a male Lucifer Hummingbird, probably the specialty species of the Oasis, perched high in a dry agave flower stalk. We spent a very enjoyable several hours at the Oasis and ate our sack lunches there under the shade of the observing bleachers. Just a few of the very many highlights there included a Northern Waterthrush feeding at the edge of the retention pond, Varied Bunting coming into the bird feeder, Scaled Quail periodically visiting the ground feeder, several Black-throated Sparrows, Lincoln’s Sparrow, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, and an Orange-crowned Warbler at the water drip. But, the outstanding bird (or birds, to be correct) was discovered by Carolyn, who pointed out a pair of roosting Elf Owls in a shrub. After a great deal of effort on Peter’s part, everyone was finally able to get on these incredibly hard to find birds for great views and photographs! What a fabulous final bird to top off the tour.

Finishing here, we headed north, said hello to the nice man at the CBP station on highway 118, took a quick pit stop in Alpine, then headed straight for the Hotel Paisano in Marfa, our final evening destination of the tour. We had a bit of a chance to relax and shower, before we met up in the lobby to go over several days’ worth of



checklists and talk about the trip a bit. Then, we had our final dinner together in the Paisano's dining room where we enjoyed a great meal. Then off to our comfy beds for the last night.

Mon., May 1 **Departures from El Paso**

We began the day with specially ordered breakfast burritos, then had a free hour or so to explore Marfa. At this point, we divided into 2 travel groups. Dave took the people flying out later in the day directly to El Paso Airport while Peter took everyone else, first stopping to drop Dan and Terri off at their truck and camper in Fort Davis, then continuing on to drop Bob and Dianne at the airport, and Dave and Tammie at the Wyndham El Paso Airport to retrieve their car. All groups of course stopped at the Prada Marfa near Valentine—the obligatory selfie stop in West Texas and in Van Horn for gas and a break. After the last drop off and set of good-byes, our tour very sadly came to an end.

Photo Credits: Group Photo (David Mehlman - DM), Western Tanager (Robert Leonhardt - RL), Big Bend Scenic (Peter Burke - PB), Turkey Vulture (Terri March - TM), Vermillion Flycatcher (TM), Great Kiskadee (TM), Cassin's Kingbird (RL), Scaled Quail (RL), Spotted Sandpiper (RL), Black-necked Stilt (Dave Bakke - DB), Mexican Jay (DB), Coachwhip (DM), Acorn Woodpecker (RL), Black-headed Grosbeak (RL), Western Tanager (TM), Group Photo (PB), Gage Gardens Scenic (DB), Cactus Details (PB), Summer Tanager (RL), Fort Pena Colorado Park (DB), Gage Hotel Plaque (PB), Chisos Basin Scenic (PB), Western Screech-Owl (PB), Frog (RL), Common Black Hawk (RL), Cactus Mapping the Trail to Colima Warbler (DB), Group taking in the view (PB), The Window Scenic (PB), Gorgeous Views (PB), Black-tailed Gnatcatcher (TM), Santa Elena Canyon Scenic (DB), Yellow-breasted Chat (RL), Cactus Wren (PB), Black Bear (RL), Group crossing Terlingua Creek (DB), Christmas Mountains Oasis Birding (TM), Wilson's Warbler (TM), Elf Owl (RL), Blue Grosbeak (RL), Lucifer's Hummingbird (DM), Gray Hawk (PB), Whiptail (PB), Pronghorn (RL), Scott's Oriole (PB), Varied Bunting (PB)