

# **SPRING IN SOUTH TEXAS**

**APRIL 5-16, 2009**

**LEADER: BARRY ZIMMER**

**COMPILED BY: BARRY ZIMMER**

**VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS, INC.  
2525 WALLINGWOOD DRIVE, SUITE 1003  
AUSTIN, TX 78746  
[WWW.VENTBIRD.COM](http://WWW.VENTBIRD.COM)**

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*The bluff at Santa Margarita Ranch is simply my favorite place in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Perched about 30 feet above water level, one can scan up and down river for a mile or so and view the nearby treetops from more or less eye level. Our group spent an entire morning at this spot with never a dull moment.*

*From the second we arrived noisy Great Kiskadees squawked at us from a nearby hackberry. As it turned out, they were actively building a nest there, and we were able to watch the process. Couch's Kingbirds hawked insects over the river. A troop of stunning Green Jays skulked through the dense thicket below us. A Clay-colored Thrush (amazingly, one of eleven we would see on the trip!) began singing and was quickly coaxed into view. Fluorescent Altamira Orioles landed in a bush less than 15 feet away, singing their sweet, melodic song, while the shyer Audubon's Orioles also provided superb views a little farther out. Three Red-billed Pigeons were spotted teed up in a distant willow, and we had scope views; shortly, they flew right by us and were followed by a noisy Ringed Kingfisher. Quiet ticking notes just below the bluff revealed the presence of a tiny Green Kingfisher foraging along the river's edge. A Gray Hawk began calling to our right and ultimately landed in full view. Golden-fronted and Ladder-backed woodpeckers, Long-billed Thrasher, Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, a stunning male Blue Grosbeak, and Bullock's and Orchard orioles all vied for our attention. All this activity within the first 45 minutes at the bluff!*

*But the best was yet to come. As the thermals began to rise, we noticed three raptors rise up from the thickets across the river in Mexico. With the morning sun at our back, we could see that they were Hook-billed Kites, two males and a female. Ultimately they flew past the bluff going north and crossed the river into U.S. territory. Unbelievable luck! Other raptors put in appearances, including Swainson's and Red-shouldered hawks and Crested Caracaras. Just before we left, three Muscovy Ducks were spotted swimming along the riverbank, completing a clean sweep of all our hoped for targets and more. In all, we tallied 77 species just standing in one spot for a few hours, with most of the Valley specialties and several rarities.*

*Of course, this was but one morning of our 11-day trip through South Texas that started in Corpus Christi and ended in San Antonio. In the Rockport area, we had marvelous views of nine Whooping Cranes, including one pair that flew right across the bow of the boat. Nearly 30 species of shorebirds were seen in the coastal lagoons including Snowy and Piping plovers, Long-billed Curlew, and Baird's and Stilt sandpipers. A Clapper Rail came to within 15 feet of our group and noisily protested our presence. A Sedge Wren gave exceptional views, as did Reddish Egrets (many on the rookery island) and Roseate Spoonbills. A Broad-tailed Hummingbird at Goose Island was a superb rarity. Paradise Pond gave us a nice fallout one morning with about 13 species of warblers, Indigo and Painted buntings, and Baltimore and Orchard orioles to name a few.*

*Farther south we scoured the King Ranch where, after some effort, we had walkaway scope views of Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl from 30 feet. Tropical Parula, Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, and Audubon's Oriole came with less effort, as did roosting Barn Owls and baby Great Horneds on a nest.*

*The Valley was hosting many rarities this year and we had good success chasing several of them. We had two Masked Ducks at Laguna Atascosa from about 50 feet, a female Blue Bunting for most at Frontera, and Rose-throated Becard and Black-throated Magpie-Jay (escapee) at Llano Grande. Other Valley highlights included superb views of Elf Owl and Eastern Screech-Owl, a roosting Pauraque at 15 feet, Red-crowned Parrots, Green Parakeets, Least Grebes, White-collared Seedeater, seven Muscovy Ducks, and Fulvous Whistling-Ducks.*

*We ended in the scenic Hill Country where we tallied nine Golden-cheeked Warblers and had nice views of several Black-capped Vireos. Ten million bats pouring out of a cave with Merlin and Swainson's and Red-tailed hawks chasing after them was a breathtaking natural history sight.*

*We finished with over 260 species of birds (including all of the regional specialties), enjoyed the spectacle of migration along the coast, and had very nice weather. In all, a wild success!*

#### **ITINERARY:**

- April 5 - arrival in Corpus Christi; afternoon visit to Tule Lake (45 Species)
- April 6 - Blucher Park, Oso Bay, Hans Suter Park, Paradise Pond, Mustang Island, Port Aransas Birding Center, Rockport Beach Park (126 species; 129 total)
- April 7 - Whooping Crane boat trip to Aransas NWR, Cavasso Creek, Goose Island State Park (100 species; 147 total)
- April 8 - Cape Velero, Paradise Pond, Port Aransas Birding Center, Mustang Island, Chapman Ranch, Sarita (108 species; 159 total)
- April 9 - Norias Division of King Ranch, Frontera Audubon Thicket, residential McAllen (77 species; 184 total)
- April 10 - residential Weslaco, Estero Llano Grande State Park, Laguna Atascosa NWR, Frontera Audubon Thicket, evening owling (108 species; 200 total)
- April 11 - Bentsen State Park, Santa Margarita Ranch, Zapata (79 species; 211 total)
- April 12 - Santa Margarita Bluff, Zapata, Las Palmas, FM 3169 (99 species; 225 total)
- April 13 - Salineno, drive to Concan, Frio Bat Cave (105 species; 239 total)
- April 14 - Hwy 337 near Leakey, Brushy Creek Ranch, Utopia, Neal's Lodge (74 species; 255 total)
- April 15 - Neal's Lodge, Sabinal Feed Lot, Sabinal, drive to San Antonio (80 species; 261 total)
- April 16 - departure for home (261 total species)

#### **KEY:**

- C = coastal areas around Rockport and Corpus Christi
- K = King Ranch, Sarita
- V = all valley areas from Laguna Atascosa NWR to San Ygnacio
- H = Hill Country, Sabinal

**bold-faced species** indicate birds of rare, casual or accidental occurrence in the area  
underlined species indicate birds of very uncommon occurrence in the area or species which occur regularly but in such low densities as to be easily missed

## **BIRDS:**

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck C,K,V,H---almost daily, including an estimated 800 in one day (one rooftop was covered with them)

Fulvous Whistling-Duck V---nice flock at Estero Llano Grande; often missed entirely

**Muscovy Duck** V---three from the bluff on the Mexican side and four the next morning at Salineno on the U.S. side; some years none are present at all; nice prolonged scope study

Gadwall C

American Wigeon V---only one seen

Mallard V---several of the “Mexican Duck” race along the Rio Grande

Mottled Duck C,K,V

Blue-winged Teal C,K,V

Northern Shoveler C,V

Green-winged Teal C,V

Redhead C---late

Lesser Scaup C,V

Bufflehead C---late lingering birds around Rockport

Red-breasted Merganser C---three late birds on our boat trip

Ruddy Duck C,V

**Masked Duck** V---two female plumaged birds studied at length from about 50 feet at Laguna Atascosa; first time on this trip in several years; a real bonus!

Plain Chachalaca V---many excellent views

Wild Turkey K,H---including displaying males on the King Ranch

Northern Bobwhite V---seen very well near Las Palmas

Scaled Quail V---ditto

Common Loon C

Least Grebe V---very close at Estero Llano Grande

Pied-billed Grebe C,V,H

Eared Grebe C---several along Mustang Island and a few on boat trip

American White Pelican C,V

Brown Pelican C

Double-crested Cormorant C,V

Neotropic Cormorant C,V

Anhinga K,V---nice close studies at Estero Llano Grande and a migrant flock of about 35 over Bentsen

Great Blue Heron C,V---including cute, fuzzy babies on rookery island

Great Egret C,V

Snowy Egret C,V

Little Blue Heron C,V

Tricolored Heron C,V

Reddish Egret C---including **nine** white morphs; up close at rookery islands

Cattle Egret C,K,V

Green Heron V

Black-crowned Night-Heron C,V

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron C,V---several great views; more numerous than usual

White Ibis C,V

White-faced Ibis C,V

Roseate Spoonbill C,V---spectacular views of many

Black Vulture C,K,V,H

Turkey Vulture seen daily in numbers  
Osprey C,V  
**Hook-billed Kite** V---after missing this bird completely the past couple of years, then missing it during a three hour vigil at the Bentsen hawk tower this year, we were rewarded with nice views of two males and a female from the bluff where I hadn't seen one in years; probably missed more often than seen  
White-tailed Kite V---five total  
Mississippi Kite V---flock of 11 over Bentsen were the only ones  
Northern Harrier C,V  
Sharp-shinned Hawk H---one en route to Neal's  
Cooper's Hawk K,V,H  
Harris's Hawk K,V---numerous in the valley with up to 20 in one day  
Red-shouldered Hawk V---two from the bluff  
Broad-winged Hawk V,H--- flight of about 250 over Bentsen one morning; also a very rare **dark morph** bird in the Hill Country  
Gray Hawk V---one adult and two immatures from the bluff  
Swainson's Hawk C,K,V,H---catching bats at the bat cave in a spectacular display!  
White-tailed Hawk C,K---seven total  
Red-tailed Hawk C,K,V,H---also catching bats  
Crested Caracara C,K,V,H---an estimated 56 seen with many excellent close views  
American Kestrel V,H---scarcer than normal  
Merlin H---single female at the bat cave catching bats!  
Peregrine Falcon H---one very distantly near Castroville; our last new bird  
Clapper Rail C---superb study from about fifteen feet!  
Sora C,V---nice views at Port Aransas & Hans Suter  
Common Moorhen C,K,V  
American Coot C,V  
Whooping Crane C---9 seen from the boat including three quite close (50 yards or so) and a flying pair that came right in front of the boat  
Black-bellied Plover C  
American Golden-Plover C---single bird at Port Aransas seen poorly by most  
Snowy Plover C---one only; uncommon and declining  
Wilson's Plover C  
Semipalmated Plover C  
Piping Plover C---one only; declining  
Killdeer C,V---oddly only six were seen the whole trip  
American Oystercatcher C  
Black-necked Stilt C,V  
American Avocet C  
Spotted Sandpiper C,V  
Greater Yellowlegs C,K  
Willet C  
Lesser Yellowlegs C,V  
Upland Sandpiper C,V--- scope views of one small flock of seven near Rockport  
Whimbrel C---four total  
Long-billed Curlew C---seven  
Marbled Godwit C  
Ruddy Turnstone C  
Sanderling C

Semipalmated Sandpiper C---more numerous than usual  
 Western Sandpiper C  
 Least Sandpiper C,V  
Baird's Sandpiper C---nice studies near Rockport  
 Pectoral Sandpiper C---more numerous than usual  
 Dunlin C  
 Stilt Sandpiper C,V--- can be tough  
 Long-billed Dowitcher C,V---all dowitchers positively identified were of this species  
 Laughing Gull C,V  
 Franklin's Gull C---eight total  
 Ring-billed Gull C,V  
 Herring Gull C  
 Least Tern C  
 Gull-billed Tern C,V  
 Caspian Tern C,V  
 Forster's Tern C,V  
 Royal Tern C  
 Sandwich Tern C  
 Black Skimmer C---amazing views at nesting colony  
 Rock Pigeon urban areas throughout  
Red-billed Pigeon V---good views from the bluff  
 Eurasian Collared-Dove C,K,V,H---after getting our first ones for this tour just eight years ago, this species has become a regular fixture in most areas  
 White-winged Dove C,K,V,H  
 Mourning Dove seen daily  
 Inca Dove almost daily  
 Common Ground-Dove K,V,H  
 White-tipped Dove V  
 Green Parakeet V---superb scope views in north McAllen; about 50 total  
Red-crowned Parrot V---after much searching we had great views in Weslaco  
 Greater Roadrunner K,V---twelve total  
Barn Owl K---great study of roosting birds on King Ranch; uncommon  
 Eastern Screech-Owl V---excellent views; subspecies *mccalli*  
 Great Horned Owl K---two half grown babies on nest at close range  
Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl K--- after much effort (five plus hours of searching) we had fantastic scope views of one for several minutes at about 30 feet! first spotted by Donna  
Elf Owl V---great show on night walk; uncommon & easily missed  
 Lesser Nighthawk V  
 Pauraque V---unsurpassed scope views of bird on day roost  
 Common Poorwill H---heard only (as has been the case the last several years)  
Chuck-will's-widow C,V,H---one seen well though briefly at Blucher the first morning, two others heard at bentsen and the Hill Country  
 Chimney Swift scattered throughout  
 Buff-bellied Hummingbird C,K,V---exceptional views  
 Ruby-throated Hummingbird C,K,V,H---more numerous than usual  
 Black-chinned Hummingbird H---common at Neal's  
**Broad-tailed Hummingbird** C---our rarest find of the trip and a tour first was one at Goose Island  
 Ringed Kingfisher V---only five seen; declining?  
 Belted Kingfisher C---two only

Green Kingfisher V---nice studies; eight total  
 Golden-fronted Woodpecker C,K,V,H  
 Ladder-backed Woodpecker C,K,V,H  
Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet K,V---very nice views of this uncommon and local species  
 Eastern Wood-Pewee H---heard only by some at Brushy Creek Ranch  
 empidonax species H---seen only by Julia; thought to be a Least  
 Black Phoebe H---Julia's favorite bird!  
 Eastern Phoebe H  
 Vermilion Flycatcher V,H---always a treat!  
 Ash-throated Flycatcher V,H  
 Great Crested Flycatcher C,V  
 Brown-crested Flycatcher K,V,H  
 Great Kiskadee K,V---many superb views  
 Couch's Kingbird C,K,V  
 Western Kingbird K,H  
 Scissor-tailed Flycatcher C,K,V,H---everyday with a high count of 371 in one day!  
**Rose-throated Becard** V---an immature male that was overwintering at Estero Llano Grande was  
 seen mostly in flight, but some got on it perched; only about the fourth time ever for this trip  
 Loggerhead Shrike C,V,H  
 White-eyed Vireo C,K,V,H---many nice studies  
 Bell's Vireo H---great study of nest building pair near Neal's  
**Hutton's Vireo** H---a nice Hill Country rarity; not seen by all  
Black-capped Vireo H--- great looks for all of this skulking Hill Country specialty; voted the third  
 favorite bird of the tour!  
 Yellow-throated Vireo H  
Warbling Vireo C---early were two at Paradise Pond  
 Blue-headed Vireo V,H  
 Red-eyed Vireo H  
Blue Jay H--- heard only; easily missed on this trip  
 Green Jay K,V,H---always stunning  
 Western Scrub-Jay H---subspecies *woodhouseii*  
**(Black-throated Magpie-Jay** V---though obviously an escapee this stunning bird was tied for  
 second favorite bird of the tour)  
 Chihuahuan Raven V  
 Common Raven H  
 Purple Martin C,K,V,H  
 Tree Swallow C  
 Northern Rough-winged Swallow C,V,H  
 Bank Swallow V  
 Cliff Swallow C,V  
 Cave Swallow V,H---great studies near Laredo  
 Barn Swallow almost daily  
 Carolina Chickadee H  
 Black-crested Titmouse C,K,V,H---recently resplit from Tufted  
 Verdin V,H  
 Bushtit H---a group favorite?  
 Cactus Wren V  
 Rock Wren H---good views at the bat cave  
 Canyon Wren H---scope views

Carolina Wren C,V,H  
 Bewick's Wren V,H  
 House Wren C,K,V,H---scattered migrants  
Sedge Wren C---exceptional views of this skulker; late  
 Marsh Wren C,V---heard only  
 Ruby-crowned Kinglet H  
 Blue-gray Gnatcatcher C,V,H  
Black-tailed Gnatcatcher V--- uncommon & local  
 Eastern Bluebird H  
 Hermit Thrush H  
Clay-colored Robin V---this species is expanding at an incredible rate; still considered an  
 unexpected vagrant just five or so years ago, but now seems to be fairly widespread throughout  
 the valley; we had an amazing eleven total with many great views  
 Gray Catbird C,K,V---more numerous than usual  
 Northern Mockingbird seen daily in numbers  
Brown Thrasher C---Paradise Pond  
 Long-billed Thrasher C,K,V,H---many superb views  
 Curve-billed Thrasher V---much scarcer than usual, but still very good views  
 European Starling almost daily  
 Cedar Waxwing V  
 Tennessee Warbler C---one at Paradise Pond  
 Orange-crowned Warbler C,K,H  
 Nashville Warbler C,V,H  
 Northern Parula C,V  
Tropical Parula K--great views on King Ranch  
 Yellow Warbler C---one at Port Aransas was early  
 Yellow-rumped Warbler C,V,H---mostly Myrtle types, but with one Audubon's (Sabinal)  
 Golden-cheeked Warbler H---excellent views; nine seen  
 Black-throated Green Warbler C---six seen  
 Yellow-throated Warbler H  
 Black-and-white Warbler C,V,H  
Worm-eating Warbler C---uncommon  
 Ovenbird C,V  
 Northern Waterthrush C---early  
 Common Yellowthroat C,V---mostly heard  
 Hooded Warbler C---superb studies of males  
 Wilson's Warbler V---one only  
 Yellow-breasted Chat C,V,H---quick views for some, but for others heard only  
 Summer Tanager C,K,V,H  
White-collared Seedeater V---thanks to John and then Julia we had great views of a young male with  
 relatively little effort; generally tough and easily missed  
 Olive Sparrow V,H  
 Spotted Towhee H  
 Canyon Towhee H  
 Rufous-crowned Sparrow H  
 Cassin's Sparrow V---nice views  
 Chipping Sparrow C,V,H  
 Clay-colored Sparrow C,V,H---more numerous than usual  
 Field Sparrow H---exceptional views

Vesper Sparrow C,H---late  
 Lark Sparrow C,K,V,H  
 Black-throated Sparrow V,H---very handsome  
 Savannah Sparrow C,V,H  
 Seaside Sparrow C---somewhat distant scope views  
 Lincoln's Sparrow C,V,H  
 Swamp Sparrow C---late migrants  
White-throated Sparrow C---late birds at Goose Island  
 White-crowned Sparrow V,H  
 Northern Cardinal almost daily  
 Pyrrhuloxia C,V,H  
Blue Grosbeak V,H---single males at the bluff and Neal's; early  
Painted Bunting C,V---stunning male at Paradise Pond on both visits, plus another at Bentsen; on  
 the early side  
 Indigo Bunting C,V---up to ten in a day; more numerous than usual  
**Blue Bunting** V---female at Frontera seen by most of group well, but missed by a couple (including  
 me!); casual visitor to the U.S.  
Dickcissel H---an early arriver flew high over Neal's; rarely seen on this trip  
 Red-winged Blackbird almost daily  
 Eastern Meadowlark C,V  
Yellow-headed Blackbird H---very uncommon in this area this late; about 15 males at the feedlot  
 Brewer's Blackbird H---a few lingerers  
Common Grackle H---scarce; seen only by Julia behind Neal's store  
 Boat-tailed Grackle C---at its southern limit; best views ever  
 Great-tailed Grackle everywhere but Neal's  
 Bronzed Cowbird C,K,V,H---wonderful helicopter display flight the first afternoon  
 Brown-headed Cowbird C,K,V,H  
 Orchard Oriole C,K,V  
 Hooded Oriole K,V,H  
 Baltimore Oriole C---early arriving birds at Paradise Pond  
 Bullock's Oriole V  
 Altamira Oriole V---fluorescent orange  
Audubon's Oriole K,V---excellent views of this uncommon & local species  
Scott's Oriole H---stunning responsive male from 30 feet!  
 House Finch H  
 Pine Siskin V,H---unusual in LRGV; late  
 Lesser Goldfinch K,H---black-backed race  
 American Goldfinch K,H---somewhat late  
 House Sparrow seen daily

total species - 261

**Mammals:** total species - 17 (counting exotics)

Atlantic Bottle-nosed Dolphin  
 Eastern Fox Squirrel  
 Rock Squirrel  
 Mexican Ground Squirrel  
 Desert Cottontail  
 Black-tailed Jackrabbit

Collared Peccary (Javelina)  
 Feral Hog---introduced  
 White-tailed Deer  
 Nilgai---introduced  
 Impala---introduced  
 Spotted Deer---introduced  
 Blackbuck---introduced  
 Raccoon  
 Coyote  
 Nine-banded Armadillo---leader only at Neal's  
 Mexican (Brazilian) Free-tailed Bat---excellent flight of an estimated 10,000,000!!!!

**Reptiles & Amphibians:** total species - 11

whiptail (Cnemidophorus) species---either Texas Spotted or Prairie Lined Racerunner  
 Rose-bellied Lizard  
 Carolina Anole  
 Blanchard's Cricket Frog---heard only  
 American Alligator---a huge one at Port Aransas  
 Diamond-backed Water Snake  
 Coachwhip  
 Indigo Snake  
 Red-eared Slider  
 Rio Grande Cooter  
 Alligator Snapping Turtle

**Butterflies:** total species - 27

Monarch	Cloudless Sulphur	Juniper Hairstreak
Queen	Clouded Sulphur	Brown Longtail
Gulf Fritillary	Southern Dogface	Two-barred Flasher
Variiegated Fritillary	Little Yellow	Laviana White Skipper
Bordered Patch	Cabbage White	Common Checkered Skipper
White Peacock	Checkered White	Hespera skipper species (Green?)
Mexican Bluewing	Great Southern White	dark brown skipper with white spots
Pipevine Swallowtail	Texan Crescent	
Black Swallowtail	Phaeon Crescent	
Giant Swallowtail	Reakirt's Blue	

**Significant others:**

the aurora highwayalis  
 the popeye statue (also the pink octopus, the shark, & the Easter bunny among others)  
 neon palm trees in Las Palmas  
 bluff list of 77 species  
 the border patrol incident  
 the adventures of Perly