

WINTER RIO GRANDE VALLEY

FEBRUARY 23 – MARCH 1, 2009

LEADERS: KIM ECKERT & KEVIN ZIMMER

COMPILED BY: KIM ECKERT

**VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS, INC.
2525 WALLINGWOOD DRIVE, SUITE 1003
AUSTIN, TX 78746
WWW.VENTBIRD.COM**

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Summary

The phrase “Too much of a good thing,” it is said, dates back to a Shakespeare play. How appropriate, considering that I was an English major back in college, someone who never took a biology course of any sort after 10th grade. I somehow ended up in a career leading birding tours, though, where I certainly learned how apt the saying could be.

You’d think a tour like this one to a place hosting a high number of rarities would be a good thing, but this winter in Deep South Texas there were almost too many unusual birds around and just not enough time to find them all—you know, too much of a good thing. Still, we did end up seeing all but a couple of them, resulting in an impressive bird list.

Consider as well that even a tour along the lower Rio Grande Valley without a single vagrant on its list would still be a good thing. You pretty much can’t help but be impressed by the expected “routine” species here, many of which are mostly absent elsewhere in the United States: hundreds of whistling-ducks, strutting chachalacas, tiny Least Grebes, handsome Harris’s and White-tailed hawks, gangs of parakeets and parrots roaming suburban neighborhoods, dozing paraques camouflaged as leaf litter, iridescent Buff-bellied Hummingbirds, huge Ringed and diminutive Green kingfishers, flashes of yellow from Great Kiskadees and Tropical and Couch’s kingbirds, gaudy Green Jays, Long-billed Thrashers and Olive Sparrows lurking in the understory, Altamira and Audubon’s orioles competing for the same feeders...the list goes on.

Again, birds such as those should be all you really need on a list, but several localized and elusive South Texas specialties were also well-represented on this tour—all just barely regular each winter, and all easy to miss: a vocal pair of territorial Gray Hawks circling low overhead; Red-billed Pigeons rounding out a single-day list of eight pigeon/dove species (try doing that anywhere else in the U.S.!); a solitary, self-effacing ani reluctantly emerging from a thicket; a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl out in the open in broad daylight; an especially responsive tyrannulet; a shy but eventually visible Clay-colored Thrush rewarding our patience; a wintering Sprague’s Pipit posing at our feet, literally at our tour’s final birding stop; and a colorful singing male Tropical Parula.

Too much of a good thing, right? No, not quite yet—the good birds get even better. An entirely lost Purple Sandpiper wintering on a South Padre Island jetty was still there waiting for us among the turnstones. A decidedly rare but cooperative male Rose-throated Becard and an escaped “non-countable” (but still spectacular!) Black-throated Magpie-Jay were both at Estero Llano Grande State Park. And a notoriously furtive female Blue Bunting at least grudgingly gave brief but very close views to a few in the group at the Frontera Audubon Thicket.

As remarkable as all the birds were, the weather was perhaps equally interesting. Though this tour includes the word “winter” in its name, consider that temperatures on two of the days hit the mid-80s, Day 4’s high reached 93°, and the next day it even made it all the way up to 101! A bit too much winter warmth, I’d have to say, when the temperature approaches 30 degrees higher than it should be. But even more disconcerting was the wind. With sustained winds over 20 mph on parts of each day and gusts around 30 on all but one, you have to admit we were fortunate to see as much as we did.

One final aspect of our tour’s Shakespearean theme of excess involved the birding sites: there were simply too many of them. Indeed, the best places to go this winter didn’t even exist for birding purposes until just the last few years. Accordingly, we spent much of our time at relatively unfamiliar places such as San Miguelito Ranch (now the best pygmy-owl site), Edinburg Wetlands (our only ani and Spotted Towhee), Frontera Audubon Thicket (Clay-colored Thrush and Blue Bunting—plus a no-show Crimson-collared Grosbeak), and Estero Llano Grande (the becard, that magpie-jay, both Tropical and Northern parulas...*plus* spoonbills, parrots, Barn Owls and Eastern Screech-Owls, pauraques, and Tropical Kingbirds).

With so many places to go, and I’m almost ashamed to admit this, we never found time at all to bird Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge—the most famous of all the Rio Grande Valley sites. It was indeed a tragedy of Shakespearean proportions!

Itinerary

February 23 (high 74°, E winds 7-18 mph, gusts to 23) – All but two participants are along for the afternoon option to San Miguelito Ranch with Leticia and her pygmy-owl, including birding en route along U S Hwy 77; drive to Weslaco's Fairfield Inn for the first of four nights, and dinner at Blue Onion.

February 24 (high 87°, S winds 13-24 mph, gusts to 31) – Birding all day in Weslaco: the morning at Estero Llano Grande, late afternoon at Frontera Audubon Thicket, and pre-dusk parrot pursuit near Valley Nature Center; dinner at Ciro’s & Milano's.

February 25 (high 84°, S winds 21-31 mph, gusts to 38) – Morning at Laguna Atascosa N.W.R. and birding en route along FM 106; lunch and afternoon birding at South Padre Island (mostly the Purple Sandpiper jetty and the Convention Center boardwalk), and the Fullers' hummingbird feeders in San Benito; dinner at Lone Star Restaurant.

February 26 (high 93°, S winds 19-24 mph, gusts to 35) – Morning at Edinburg Wetlands and Bentsen State Park; afternoon at Anzalduas County Park and with the parakeets along 10th Street in McAllen; dinner at Blue Onion.

February 27 (high 101° (!), S winds 13-23 mph, gusts to 29) – Morning return to Estero Llano Grande and Frontera Audubon Thicket; afternoon drive to Zapata via late lunch/early dinner at Caro's, the view at Roma Bluffs, and birding at Salineño; first of two nights at Zapata's Best Western.

February 28 (high 74°, N winds 10-26 mph, gusts to 33) – Morning return to Salineño and Falcon County Park; afternoon at Chapeño, along FM 2098, the alleged seedeater pond in Zapata, the alleged gnatcatcher spot along Old Hwy 83, and Las Palmas; picnic dinner catered by Zapata's finest restaurant.

March 1 (high 69°, N winds 12-24 mph, gusts to 32) – Morning return to the Harlingen airport via FM 2098 and the Peñitas pipit patch.

Bird List (note underlined South Texas specialties = species generally absent, rare, or very local elsewhere in the U.S.; **boldfaced** species = tour highlights, unusual species, or hard-to-find specialties)

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck (100s – perhaps 1000s – along Hwy 77 north of Harlingen)

Greater White-fronted Goose

Snow Goose (among all the whistling-ducks....)

Ross's Goose (...and these, in turn, among the Snow Geese)

Gadwall

American Wigeon

Mottled Duck

Blue-winged Teal

Northern Shoveler

Green-winged Teal

Canvasback

Redhead

Ring-necked Duck

Lesser Scaup

Bufflehead

Red-breasted Merganser

Ruddy Duck

Plain Chachalaca

Scaled Quail (heard-only)

Northern Bobwhite

Least Grebe (especially close at Estero Llano Grande and Edinburg Wetlands)

Pied-billed Grebe

American White Pelican

Brown Pelican

Double-crested Cormorant

Neotropic Cormorant

Anhinga

Great Blue Heron

Great Egret
Snowy Egret
Little Blue Heron
Tricolored Heron
Reddish Egret
Cattle Egret
Black-crowned Night-Heron

White Ibis
White-faced Ibis
Roseate Spoonbill (our best views at Llano Grande)

Black Vulture
Turkey Vulture

Osprey
White-tailed Kite
Northern Harrier
Sharp-shinned Hawk
Cooper's Hawk
Harris's Hawk (including two juveniles playing in the street in San Benito)
Gray Hawk (vocal territorial pair at Anzalduas; also at Salineño)
White-tailed Hawk (two sub-adults serendipitously along FM 2098)
Red-tailed Hawk

Crested Caracara
American Kestrel
Peregrine Falcon

Clapper Rail (as the song goes: "under the boardwalk" at South Padre)
Virginia Rail (seen by Harold in Zapata)
Sora
Common Moorhen
American Coot

Sandhill Crane (heard-only at San Miguelito Ranch)

Black-bellied Plover
Piping Plover (South Padre Island)
Killdeer

Black-necked Stilt
American Avocet (best at Llano Grande)

Spotted Sandpiper
Greater Yellowlegs
Willet
Lesser Yellowlegs

Long-billed Curlew
Marbled Godwit
Ruddy Turnstone
Sanderling
Least Sandpiper
Purple Sandpiper (overwintering with turnstones at South Padre Island)
Dunlin
Short-billed Dowitcher
Long-billed Dowitcher

Laughing Gull
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Caspian Tern
Royal Tern
Black Skimmer (South Padre Island)

Rock Pigeon
Red-billed Pigeon (seen on both days at Salineño)
Eurasian Collared-Dove
White-winged Dove
Mourning Dove
Inca Dove
Common Ground-Dove
White-tipped Dove

Green Parakeet (still consistent along 10th Street in McAllen....)
Red-crowned Parrot (...but these still inconsistent in Weslaco)

Greater Roadrunner
Groove-billed Ani (Edinburg Wetlands; not present most winters)

Barn Owl (well hidden at Estero Llano Grande)

Eastern Screech-Owl (a *mccallii* individual, also at Estero Llano Grande)
Great Horned Owl (two San Miguelito nests)
Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl (on Leticia's tour of San Miguelito)

Common Pauraque (asleep no more than 6 feet off the trail)

Buff-bellied Hummingbird (best looks at the Fullers' feeder in San Benito)
Archilochus hummingbird (probably a Black-chinned at Frontera Audubon)
Rufous Hummingbird (seen by Bob and Beth at Bentsen)

Ringed Kingfisher
Belted Kingfisher
Green Kingfisher

Golden-fronted Woodpecker
Ladder-backed Woodpecker

Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet (unusually cooperative at Bentsen)

Eastern Phoebe
Vermilion Flycatcher

Great Kiskadee

Tropical Kingbird (Estero Llano Grande's parking lot)

Couch's Kingbird

Rose-throated Becard (young male wintering at Estero Llano Grande)

Loggerhead Shrike

White-eyed Vireo
Blue-headed Vireo

Green Jay

Chihuahuan Raven (including one showing its white neck feathers)

Purple Martin
Tree Swallow
Northern Rough-winged Swallow
Bank Swallow
Cave Swallow
Barn Swallow

Black-crested Titmouse

Verdin (San Miguelito)

Cactus Wren
Carolina Wren
House Wren

Ruby-crowned Kinglet

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher

Clay-colored Thrush (Frontera Audubon)

Northern Mockingbird
Long-billed Thrasher
Curve-billed Thrasher

European Starling

American Pipit

Sprague's Pipit (pursued and perceived at Peñitas' pipit patch)

Orange-crowned Warbler

Northern Parula

Tropical Parula (singing male at Estero Llano Grande)

Yellow-rumped Warbler

Black-throated Green Warbler

Black-and-white Warbler

(Ovenbird / leader-only)

Common Yellowthroat

Wilson's Warbler

Olive Sparrow

Spotted Towhee (Edinburg Wetlands; quite unusual in winter)

Cassin's Sparrow (even singing from a fence wire on FM 2098)

Chipping Sparrow

(Vesper Sparrow / leader-only)

Lark Sparrow

Black-throated Sparrow

Savannah Sparrow

Lincoln's Sparrow

Northern Cardinal

Pyrrhuloxia

Blue Bunting (exceptionally secretive at Frontera Audubon)

Indigo Bunting

Red-winged Blackbird

Eastern Meadowlark

Western Meadowlark

Great-tailed Grackle

Bronzed Cowbird (entertaining displaying males in the HEB parking lot)

Brown-headed Cowbird

Altamira Oriole

Audubon's Oriole (thanks to Cheryl's feeders in Salineño)

House Finch

Lesser Goldfinch

American Goldfinch

House Sparrow

ALSO SEEN:

Black-throated Magpie-Jay (the escaped bird wintering at Estero Llano Grande)

Coyote

Feral Hog

Javelina (a.k.a. Collared Peccary)

White-tailed Deer

Black-tailed Jackrabbit

Eastern Cottontail

Fox Squirrel

American Alligator (especially at Estero Llano Grande)

Red-eared Slider

(Indigo Snake / heard-only: i.e., we heard the shrieks of others as the snake was seen)