

BIG BEND SUMMER

JULY 14 – 21, 2009

LEADER: BARRY ZIMMER

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Summer Big Bend

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Leader: Barry Zimmer

Superlatives are easy to throw around when describing the highlights of any given tour; however, I think I can say without question that this year's Big Bend Summer tour was our most successful ever! Not only did we see every target species, but we tallied an amazing number of rarities, including the discovery of two great Mexican vagrants!

Our tour began in El Paso where we netted a pair of Mississippi Kites, Harris's Hawk, Clark's and Western grebes side by side, Gambel's and Scaled quail, two locally rare Laughing Gulls, a colony of Cave Swallows, and an impressive 13 Burrowing Owls among others. By mid-afternoon we had reached the luxurious Cibolo Creek Ranch south of Marfa. After a short break, we headed out to a nearby cottonwood grove where Zone-tailed Hawks often nest. We were not disappointed, as a pair of these majestic raptors greeted us upon arrival. En route it seemed as if there was a Vermilion Flycatcher every hundred yards. Other ranch highlights included point-blank views of Western Screech-Owl, Common Poorwill, Canyon Wren, Summer Tanager, plum-colored Varied Buntings, Blue Grosbeak, and an early flock of Yellow-headed Blackbirds.

We had the better part of three days to enjoy Big Bend National Park. The first morning we headed down the Window Trail. Birds were everywhere, with Gray Vireo as close as ten feet away, a half-dozen or more Lucifer Hummingbirds, a male Black-capped Vireo, more Varied Buntings, prolonged views of singing Black-chinned Sparrow, and numerous Scott's Orioles and Western Tanagers. The star of the show, however, was the discovery of a pair of Rufous-capped Warblers. We found these cooperative birds right next to the trail and were able to watch them for about ten minutes. It was only the second time I had seen this Mexican visitor in the state and the first park record in over five years! We couldn't believe our luck. That afternoon we visited Cottonwood Campground in the southwestern portion of the park where we enjoyed two Gray Hawks, Golden-fronted and Ladder-backed woodpeckers, Tropical and Couch's kingbirds side by side, Bell's Vireo, and brilliant Painted Buntings. Another evening of owling produced great studies of the tiny Elf Owl and another Western Screech-Owl.

Our second day was devoted to the all-day hike for the Colima Warbler, a species found nowhere else in the United States. Though often tough, we netted an impressive 17 individuals, several of which provided stunning views. A very rare pair of Dusky-capped Flycatchers, an even rarer male Black-throated Green Warbler, Blue-throated Hummingbird, two more Lucifer Hummingbirds, Cordilleran Flycatcher, a fabulous Painted Redstart, and Hepatic Tanager rounded out the list. Once again, however, it was an unexpected vagrant that topped off an already incredible day. A Flame-colored

Tanager appeared in one of the flocks near Boot Springs and sat long enough for everyone to get a good view. This species, another Mexican stray, is even rarer in Texas than the Rufous-capped Warbler, and is one I had never seen in the state despite nearly 35 years of birding here!

The next morning found us at Rio Grande Village where an adult Common Black-Hawk, another Gray Hawk, countless Greater Roadrunners, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, a perched Lesser Nighthawk, a Verdin building a nest, a very cooperative Crissal Thrasher, Yellow-breasted Chats, and many more Painted Buntings were among the treats. After lunch we left the park and headed north toward the Davis Mountains. En route we tallied Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, here at the western limit of their range. After a mid-afternoon break we went out in search of our prime target in this area, the nearly mythical Montezuma Quail. Over two hours of searching initially failed to produce this amazing species, but persistence paid off. Right at dusk a male came out on a rock next to the road and posed for about ten minutes as we watched, spellbound. This incomparable species was voted the favorite bird of the tour.

On our last day we visited the Davis Mountains Nature Conservancy Preserve where we added Buff-breasted Flycatcher (very rare in Texas), Gray Flycatcher, Western Bluebird, Violet-green Swallow, and Grace's Warbler. On our way back into El Paso we rechecked some reservoirs with Little Blue Heron, Long-billed Curlew, and Black Tern as nice additions. As a finale we watched the feeders in my yard, and although we missed the Calliope Hummingbird that we hoped for, we enjoyed many stunning Rufous Hummingbirds amongst the abundant Black-chinneds, and added Hooded Oriole.

Hitting all the major targets of the region, tallying easily ten rarities, and discovering two Mexican vagrants combined to make this tour our best ever in Big Bend!

Itinerary:

July 14 - west El Paso, Keystone Heritage Park, my yard (29 species)

July 15 - Wilderness Park Museum, Border Highway, Hwy 20, Tornillo Reservoir, Fort Hancock Sewage Ponds, McNary Reservoir, Cibolo Creek; owl (66 species; 74 total)

July 16 - Cibolo Creek Ranch, drive to Big Bend National Park via the River Road, evening owl (54 species; 93 total)

July 17 - Window Trail, afternoon to Cottonwood Campground and Santa Elena Canyon overlook (57 species; 115 total)

July 18 - all day hike to Boot Springs via Pinnacles Trail and returning Laguna Meadows Trail (48 species; 126 total)

July 19 - Rio Grande Village, roadside near Marathon, Davis Mountains State Park, McDonald Observatory (62 species; 136 total)

July 20 - Davis Mountains State Park, Davis Mountains Nature Conservancy Preserve, drive to El Paso with stops at McNary Reservoir, Fort Hancock Reservoir, Fort Hancock Sewage Ponds, Tornillo Reservoir and my yard (90 species; 155 total)

July 21 - departures for home (155 species)

Key:

E = all areas in and around El Paso (down river as far as McNary)
C = Cibolo Creek Ranch, Presidio
B = Big Bend National Park
D = Davis Mountains, Marathon/ Alpine

bold-faced species indicate birds of rare, casual, or accidental occurrence

underlined species indicate birds of very uncommon occurrence or species which occur in such low density as to be easily missed

Birds:

Wood Duck E---including a family of fledged young
Mallard E---mostly of the "Mexican Duck" subspecies (*diazii*)
Cinnamon Teal E
Northern Shoveler E
Ruddy Duck E
Scaled Quail E,C,B---several nice views
Gambel's Quail E---two different family groups
Montezuma Quail D---seemingly another down year for this species; we really struggled to find any, but eventually had a fantastic calling male from twenty feet away right at dusk!!!!; voted the favorite bird of the tour
Pied-billed Grebe E
Eared Grebe E
Western Grebe E---many at McNary
Clark's Grebe E--- good comparative views with Westerns
American White Pelican E
Double-crested Cormorant E
Neotropic Cormorant E---unusually numerous this year
Great Blue Heron E
Great Egret E---one on a nest at McNary (very few area nesting records)
Snowy Egret E
Little Blue Heron E---one calico immature bird at Fort Hancock was a real rarity
Cattle Egret E
Green Heron B

Black-crowned Night-Heron E
Black Vulture C---three on a carcass near Presidio were our only ones
 Turkey Vulture seen daily in numbers
Mississippi Kite E---nice flight views in west El Paso; easily missed
 Cooper's Hawk D
Common Black-Hawk D---wonderful flight views of adult at Rio Grande Village
Harris's Hawk E--- uncommon and localized
Gray Hawk B---immature and adult at Cottonwood Campground, another adult at RGV
 Swainson's Hawk E,C,B,D---many good views
Zone-tailed Hawk C---exceptional views of a pair at Cibolo Creek
 Red-tailed Hawk C,B,D---the southwestern *fuertes* race
 American Kestrel E---only a couple
 Common Moorhen E
 American Coot E
 Killdeer E,D
 Black-necked Stilt E---some with mostly grown young
 American Avocet E---ditto
 Spotted Sandpiper E
Long-billed Curlew E---six near McNary were a nice find at McNary
 Western Sandpiper E---early migrants
 Least Sandpiper E
Laughing Gull E---two at McNary; another good rarity
Ring-billed Gull E---very early
 Black Tern E---three at Tornillo our last afternoon
 Forster's Tern E
 Rock Pigeon urban areas throughout
 Band-tailed Pigeon B---exceptional views down the Window Trail
 Eurasian Collared-Dove seen in virtually every town throughout the tour; spreading at an alarming rate
 White-winged Dove seen daily in numbers
 Mourning Dove ditto
 Inca Dove E,C,B
 Common Ground-Dove B---uncommon
 Yellow-billed Cuckoo B---nice views in RGV
 Greater Roadrunner E,C,B---an impressive total of 24 seen!
Western Screech-Owl C,B---point blank views of two; often hard to get in late summer
Elf Owl C,B---after some effort we finally had nice views of this tiny species; generally hard in late summer; tied for third favorite bird of the tour
 Burrowing Owl E---13 individuals our first morning; incredible studies
 Lesser Nighthawk C,B---many around dusk and a great daytime study at RGV
 Common Nighthawk C,D---one in each location
 Common Poorwill C---very close flight views of male
 White-throated Swift B

Blue-throated Hummingbird B---male seen perched near Boot Springs and another feeding at blooming agave
Lucifer Hummingbird B---five females and a male down the Window Trail and two males on the Boot springs hike; more numerous than usual
Black-chinned Hummingbird seen daily in numbers
Broad-tailed Hummingbird B,D
Rufous Hummingbird E,B---stunning adult males in my yard
Acorn Woodpecker B,D
Golden-fronted Woodpecker C,B
Ladder-backed Woodpecker almost daily in small numbers
Northern Flicker B,D---uncommon at this season; the "red-shafted" variety
Western Wood-Pewee D
Buff-breasted Flycatcher D---excellent views; only one pair known in Texas
Gray Flycatcher D---nice studies
Cordilleran Flycatcher B
Black Phoebe C,B,E
Say's Phoebe C,B,D
Vermilion Flycatcher C,B---up to 12 in one day!
Dusky-capped Flycatcher B---a casual visitor to Texas; we had a pair near the Pinnacles
Ash-throated Flycatcher C,B,D
Brown-crested Flycatcher B---uncommon but increasing
Tropical Kingbird B---great scope views of a pair returning to Cottonwood Campground for about the eighth year
Couch's Kingbird B---incredibly a pair at Cottonwood Campground nesting adjacent to the Tropicals---at one point they were side-by-side and both calling!
Cassin's Kingbird C,D
Western Kingbird E,C,B,D
Scissor-tailed Flycatcher D---five near Marathon and one near Kent
Loggerhead Shrike B---scarcer than usual with only about five seen
Bell's Vireo C,B---many good views
Black-capped Vireo B---two down the Window Trail; very uncommon this far west (the absolute edge of their range)
Gray Vireo B---excellent views; four total
Plumbeous Vireo D
Hutton's Vireo B,D
Western Scrub-Jay D---subspecies *woodhouseii*
Mexican Jay B
Chihuahuan Raven E,D
Common Raven C,B
Horned Lark C---one along the runway
Violet-green Swallow D
Cliff Swallow C,B
Cave Swallow E,D---great views near Fort Hancock
Barn Swallow E,C,D
Black-crested Titmouse B,D---recently resplit from Tufted Titmouse

Verdin E,C,B--- great views of pair nest-building at RGV
Bushtit B,D---nice views including at least one "black-eared" bird
White-breasted Nuthatch D
Cactus Wren seen daily
Rock Wren B---heard only
Canyon Wren C,B,D---my favorite song in North America!
Bewick's Wren B,D
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher B
Black-tailed Gnatcatcher C,B
Western Bluebird D
American Robin E---by some the first afternoon
Northern Mockingbird seen daily in numbers
Curve-billed Thrasher E,C,B
Crissal Thrasher B---we missed this species in El Paso where we normally get it, but had two in the park (the first thanks to David); always tough in late summer
European Starling E,D---always a tough find on this tour
Colima Warbler B---a total of 17 (three heard only) on our hike with several excellent views; the twenty two year average for this trip is just over 7 individuals
Black-throated Green Warbler B--- extremely rare was a male along the Pinnacles Trail; a tour first
Grace's Warbler D---one on the preserve
Common Yellowthroat B---heard only
Rufous-capped Warbler B---amazingly, we discovered a pair of these accidental Mexican vagrants down the Window Trail and had superb views from as close as ten feet; a tour first and the first I have seen in Texas in over 30 years!; voted the second favorite bird of the tour
Painted Redstart B---superb views on the Boot Springs Trail; not present every year
Yellow-breasted Chat B---good views of this often shy bird
Hepatic Tanager B,D---brilliant
Summer Tanager C,B
Western Tanager C,B,D
Flame-colored Tanager B---the day after finding the Rufous-capped Warblers we then discovered a female Flame-colored Tanager near Boot Springs; only about 3 or 4 previous state records (a first in the state for me!!)
Spotted Towhee B,D
Canyon Towhee C,B,D
Cassin's Sparrow C,D---breeding at this time of year
Rufous-crowned Sparrow C,B
Chipping Sparrow D
Black-chinned Sparrow B,D---a good year for this generally uncommon & localized species
Lark Sparrow C,D
Black-throated Sparrow E,C,B---the handsomest sparrow?
Northern Cardinal C,B
Pyrrhuloxia E,C,B
Black-headed Grosbeak B,D

Blue Grosbeak E,C,B,D---up to 12 in one day!
Indigo Bunting B---three singing males down the Window Trail were unusual; tied for third favorite bird of the tour
Varied Bunting C,B---a total of seven seen including three or four stunning males; my favorite of all the buntings
Painted Bunting E,B---several brilliant males
Red-winged Blackbird E
Eastern Meadowlark D---several of the subspecies *lilianae*
Yellow-headed Blackbird C,E--- early migrants
Great-tailed Grackle E,C,D
Bronzed Cowbird C,D
Brown-headed Cowbird E,C,B,D
Orchard Oriole C,B
Hooded Oriole E---female in my yard; very uncommon
Scott's Oriole C,B,D---several great looks
House Finch seen daily in numbers
Lesser Goldfinch B,D---the black-backed variety
House Sparrow E,C,B,D

total species - 155

Leader only birds:

Stilt Sandpiper

Mammals:

Rock Squirrel
kangaroo rat species
Desert Cottontail
Eastern Cottontail
Black-tailed Jackrabbit
Collared Peccary (Javelina)
Coyote
Mule Deer
White-tailed Deer---the small Carmen Mountain race
Pronghorn---a few in grasslands around Marfa; less numerous than usual
bat species---of at least two sizes

total species - 11

Exotic Mammals:

Elk
Blackbuck

Scimitar-horned Oryx
Camel

total species - 4

Reptiles & Amphibians:

Bullfrog---heard only
Big Bend Slider
Southern Prairie Lizard
Chihuahuan Spotted Whiptail
Plateau-striped (Rusty-rumped) Whiptail
Big Bend Canyon Lizard
snake species---crossing road ahead of us; likely a gopher snake

total species - 7

Butterflies:

Giant Swallowtail
Pipevine Swallowtail
Two-tailed Swallowtail
Black Swallowtail
Sleepy Orange
Mexican Yellow
Dainty Sulphur
Lyside Sulphur
Southern Dogface
Checkered White
Marine Blue
Reakirt's Blue
American Snout
Red Satyr
Bordered Patch
Crimson Patch---very rare here
Dark Tropical Buckeye
Texan Crescent
Pearl Crescent
Vesta Crescent
metalmark species (Fatal?)
Variegated Fritillary
California Sister
Empress Leilia
Queen
Northern Cloudywing
duskywing species---either Funereal or Mournful

Golden-banded Skipper
checkered skipper species
Orange Skipperling

total species - 30 (plus others left unidentified)

Significant others:

Flame Skimmer (large red dragonfly)
bluet species (bright blue damselfly, possibly Azure Bluet)
Vinegaroon
Desert Millipede
Leaf-footed Bug
Tarantula Wasp
Tarantula
Walking Stick
Horse Lubber Grasshopper
Rosie