

WINTER RIO GRANDE VALLEY

FEBRUARY 23-MARCH 1, 2010

LEADER:

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Leader: Brennan Mulrooney

There are a few destinations in North America that are absolute “must-visits” for birders who want to build a long life list. Inevitably, you must visit the corners of a geographical area if you wish to see the rarities that either just make it over the border, or only do so on occasion. Outside of western Alaska, the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas is probably the most productive (and certainly the most cost-effective!) corner for a birder to visit. With a long list of “specialty birds” and a propensity for producing vagrants from the south, the Lower Rio Grande Valley is hard to beat. This year’s tour was a tremendous success, with great looks at almost every specialty species, including a few of the rarer ones, and a sprinkling of some wonderful vagrants as well.

From our first day we could see that we were going to have an outstanding trip. Not only were we having great experiences with the easier expected species, but we were also having some amazing luck with the more difficult or totally unexpected ones. Our morning started with a pair of bobcats that strolled by and tore our attention away from the busy feeders at Estero Llano Grande State Park. Then, after enjoying our first Buff-bellied Hummingbirds, White-tipped Doves, and Great Kiskadees, we took a leisurely stroll through the park and added birds like Couch’s and Tropical kingbirds side by side, a pair of exquisite Green Kingfishers perching cooperatively in our scopes, and remarkably tame (confident?) Common Pauragues sitting on the ground just a few feet off the trail. After a short break we took another walk, and quickly we were on to our first rarity of the trip, a Rose-throated Becard. This bird had been wintering in the park, but was only being reported sporadically. Not bad for our first morning! Our afternoon was equally successful, as our luck held out for a staked out bird that had been tough to come by—a gorgeous male Tropical Parula. We ended the day with a tree full of Red-crowned Parrots. We watched as they playfully hung from branches, shrieked and squawked, and even engaged in some allopreening before flying off to their evening roost.

The morning of day two found us on the coast visiting Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. White-tailed Hawks and a field full of Wilson’s Snipes slowed our progress, but we eventually made it to the refuge to find feeders absolutely teeming with birds. Gaudy Green Jays, comical Plain Chachalacas, furtive Olive Sparrows, and cheeky Golden-fronted Woodpeckers were putting on quite a show. It was hard to tear ourselves away, but there was business to attend to. A male Blue Bunting had been located on the refuge in prior days, and we knew we would have to commit some time and effort if we wanted to add this gorgeous and rare bird to our rapidly growing list. As luck would have

it, there was another large group of birders there with the same idea, and it wasn't more than 10 minutes after our search began that somebody spotted the bird sitting quietly in a bush not 15 feet off the path. Amazingly the bird remained there for at least 10 minutes while about 40 birders jockeyed for position, with everybody getting stunning looks at this electric-blue gem of a bird.

In the higher and drier upper Valley we continued our remarkable success. At Salineno we experienced feeders absolutely loaded with birds. The real show stealers were the orioles. Altamira Orioles were everywhere, their glowing orange plumage repeatedly drawing gasps of delight and disbelief from the group. Hooded Orioles were just arriving back in the area, and we had nice comparison views of adult and immature males and females. The Audubon's Oriole is the scarcest oriole in the Valley, and Salineno is probably the best spot to get it. Well, it didn't make us work too hard, as we had multiple birds soon after arriving. Down at the river we were surprised and delighted to find a Muscovy Duck sitting on a log at the water's edge. There had been no reports in the Valley for some time, so this was cause for much excitement. Farther north in Zapata we met with stunning success, finding White-collared Seedeater in record time and enjoying close scope views of Red-billed Pigeons during a short birding effort before dinner.

Our last full day of birding was spent mostly in and around Falcon State Park. This was not only because a large number of species favor the more arid, desert-like habitats found there, but also because a Roadside Hawk had taken up residence this winter. We had an excellent day, enjoying flocks of Pyrrhuloxia mixed with Lark, Cassin's, Clay-colored, Chipping, Vesper, Black-throated, and Savannah sparrows. We got point-blank views of an inquisitive Groove-billed Ani and enjoyed the supremely charismatic Greater Roadrunner. But with all of this great birding we tasted our first bit of defeat—we couldn't find that darned Roadside Hawk! Well, we weren't done yet. We had a little bit of time available on our last morning before we had to head to the airport. It was a beautiful morning and birds just seemed to be throwing themselves at us. A mixed sparrow flock added Lark Bunting and White-crowned Sparrow to our list. Then a gorgeous Green-tailed Towhee sat up in a bush in the morning light for us, and I knew we had to give the hawk another try. So we returned to the park for a last-ditch effort, but again the bird was nowhere to be seen. In a last desperate play I announced that we could only spend ten more minutes on this silly bird, and it worked! From out of nowhere the Roadside Hawk flew in and perched on a utility pole right in front of us! We all enjoyed point-blank views, and then it was time to go. What a way to end an already amazing trip.

ITINERARY:

February 23: Tour orientation and dinner

February 24: Birding around Weslaco beginning at Estero Llano Grande State Park, then after lunch birding at Frontera Audubon Thicket and parrot watching before dinner

February 25: All day at the coast with birding along FM 106, at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, and on South Padre Island, especially the World Birding Center boardwalk

February 26: Early morning Parakeet stop in Weslaco followed by birding at Anzalduas County Park, Bentsen Rio Grande Valley State Park, NABA Butterfly Gardens, “Mattress Rd”, and Quinta Mazatlan

February 27: Morning return to Bentsen then we headed up river stopping at Roma Bluffs, and Salineno. Pre-dinner birding at the Zapata Library Pond and Las Palmas Rd.

February 28: Early morning birding at Salineno then the bulk of the day at Falcon State Park; afternoon visit to Chapeno then more hawk searching at Falcon

March 1: Birding along Las Palmas Rd and FM 2098, then sparrow madness in Falcon County Park before a triumphant return to Falcon State Park. Return drive to Harlingen for flights home.

BIRD LIST

Note: *italicized* birds are South Texas specialties = species generally absent, rare, or very local elsewhere in the U.S.; **boldfaced species** = rarities or hard-to-find specialties.

Abbreviations:

ELG – Estero Llano Grande State Park

FA – Frontera Audubon Thicket

LA – Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge

SPI – South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center and adjacent seashore

BSP – Bentsen Rio Grande State Park

AZ – Anzalduas County Park

QM – Quinta Mazatlan

SN – Salineno and Chapeno

FSP – Falcon State Park and vicinity

DUCKS, GEESE & SWANS

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck – several flocks in flight and one flock on the water near Harlingen

Muscovy Duck – we were very lucky to see one sitting on a log just upstream from SA; nobody had been seeing them anywhere in the valley

Gadwall – AZ, SN most common on the river

American Wigeon – AZ, SN and various other spots

Mallard – we saw several “Mexican Duck” type Mallards and at least one normal male Northern Mallard which is actually a rare bird in the valley

Mottled Duck – ELG, SPI, AZ, fairly common on ponds and the river

Blue-winged Teal – seen most days

Cinnamon Teal – ELG stunning males

Northern Shoveler – seen most days

Northern Pintail – SPI, FSP
Green-winged Teal - ELG
Redhead – SPI huge flocks on the Laguna Madre where the majority of the North American population winters
Ring-necked Duck – ELG and upriver on the Rio Grande
Lesser Scaup - SN
Bufflehead – SN, FSP
Red-breasted Merganser - SPI
Ruddy Duck – ELG, FSP

GUANS, CHACHALACAS & ALLIES

Plain Chachalaca – ELG, FA, LA, BSP, QM fairly common around feeders

NEW WORLD QUAIL

Northern Bobwhite – FSP and along Mattress Rd

GREBES

Least Grebe – fairly common this year, seen on most freshwater ponds

Pied-billed Grebe – seen most days

Eared Grebe – leader only at BSP

GANNETS & BOOBIES

Northern Gannet – distant feeding birds off SPI

PELICANS

American White Pelican – seen most days

Brown Pelican - SPI

CORMORANTS

Neotropic Cormorant – seen daily

Double-crested Cormorant – seen daily

ANHINGAS

Anhinga – ELG, SN

HERONS, EGRETS & BITTERNs

Great Blue Heron

Great Egret

Snowy Egret

Little Blue Heron – blue ones and white ones

Tricolored Heron

Reddish Egret – SPI, both white and dark morphs feeding near the boardwalk

Cattle Egret – only on our last day driving back to the airport

Green Heron – ELG, exquisite looks at a perched bird in the scope

Black-crowned Night-Heron

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron – point blank looks on the SPI boardwalk

IBISES & SPOONBILLS

White Ibis – LA, SPI

NEW WORLD VULTURES

Black Vulture – more common in the upper valley

Turkey Vulture – seen daily, the roosting flock at FA was rather imposing

HAWKS, EAGLES & KITES

Osprey – seen almost daily

Hook-billed Kite – we were very fortunate to see a pair soaring above the hawk tower at BSP, this is a scarce bird in the valley and more often missed than seen

White-tailed Kite – good looks at this elegant raptor

Northern Harrier – seen most days

Sharp-shinned Hawk - ELG

Cooper's Hawk – seen most days

Harris's Hawk – some really marvelous looks at this handsome raptor

Roadside Hawk – voted favorite bird of the tour, but would it have been if we had seen it in the first 10 minutes? We spent a whole day in and around FSP looking for this juvenile that had been present for a couple of weeks, but we came up empty. A return visit struck gold right at the very last minute before we had to head for the airport, nothing like a little drama! Probably fewer than 10 documented records for the ABA area.

Red-shouldered Hawk – seen most days

Gray Hawk – BSP, SN nice looks at this scarce valley specialty

White-tailed Hawk – best looks near LA

Red-tailed Hawk – seen daily, at least two birds looked like Krider's type

FALCONS & CARACARAS

Crested Caracara – definitely easier in TX, we saw a bunch, especially in the upper valley

American Kestrel – seen most days

Merlin – one of our last additions

Peregrine Falcon – especially well perched on the water tower at SPI

RAILS, GALLINULES & COOTS

Sora – we heard several at SPI, but couldn't coax them out into view

Common Moorhen – seen most days

American Coot – seen daily

PLOVERS, SANDPIPERS & ALLIES

Black-bellied Plover - SPI

Killdeer – seen most days

Black-necked Stilt - ELG

Spotted Sandpiper – ELG, AZ, SN
Greater Yellowlegs – SPI, AZ, SN
Willet - SPI
Lesser Yellowlegs - SPI
Long-billed Curlew – LA
Sanderling- SPI
Least Sandpiper – AZ, SN
Pectoral Sandpiper – a surprising bird at SPI was maybe the first reported in TX this year
Long-billed Dowitcher – SPI calling birds at the boardwalk
Wilson's Snipe – LA, a flock of 34 hiding in a marsh was impressive

GULLS & TERNS

Laughing Gull – SPI, FSP
Ring-billed Gull – SPI, FSP
Gull-billed Tern – SPI a single flyby was not seen by all
Caspian Tern - SPI
Royal Tern - SPI
Forster's Tern - SPI
Black Skimmer – SPI a huge flock was impressive when they took flight together

PIGEONS & DOVES

Rock Pigeon – seen daily
Red-billed Pigeon – scarce in winter, we had great looks north of Zapata and also saw a couple in the morning at SN
Eurasian Collared-Dove – only a couple in developed areas
White-winged Dove – upper valley only
Mourning Dove – seen daily
Inca Dove – fairly common around feeders
Common Ground-Dove – seen around feeder, but not common
White-tipped Dove – fairly common, but shy, around feeders

PARROTS, MACAWS & ALLIES

Green Parakeet – nice spotting Susan! We had great looks at perched birds in Weslaco
Red-crowned Parrot – A flock of 30 perched very cooperatively for us in Weslaco

CUCKOOS

Greater Roadrunner – an unbelievable show from one at FSP was a highlight
Groove-billed Ani – usually absent in winter, we had a very cooperative bird at FSP

OWLS

Eastern Screech-Owl – great looks at a sleepy individual at QM

NIGHTJARS

Common Pauraque – ELG, Absolutely exquisite looks at roosting birds right next to the trail

HUMMINGBIRDS

Buff-bellied Hummingbird – ELG, FA

Ruby-throated Hummingbird – ELG, BSP

KINGFISHER

(Ringed Kingfisher) – unfortunately leader only, heard only

Belted Kingfisher - SPI

Green Kingfisher – ELG, FA

WOODPECKERS

Golden-fronted Woodpecker – seen daily

Ladder-backed Woodpecker – not as common as the former, but we saw several

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS

Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet – AZ, fantastic views of this diminutive flycatcher

Least Flycatcher – BSP, rare in winter

Black Phoebe – AZ, SN

Eastern Phoebe – seen most days

Vermilion Flycatcher – great looks at these stunning birds

Great Kiskadee – seen and heard (!) daily

Tropical Kingbird – side by side with the latter, calling for us

Couch's Kingbird – only told from Tropical by voice, which we heard a few times

Rose-throated Becard – ELG, we were very fortunate to see this great rarity

SHRIKES

Loggerhead Shrike – seen most days

VIREOS

White-eyed Vireo – ELG, FA, LA

CROWS, JAYS & MAGPIES

Green Jay – these gaudy birds are always a highlight, seen most days

Chihuahuan Raven – scarce this year, we saw one near Port Isabel then a couple up river

SWALLOWS

Purple Martin – several days

Tree Swallow – multiple days

Northern Rough-winged Swallow – more common along the river

Bank Swallow – ELG, quite rare in winter

Cave Swallow – several good looks, best at ELG

Barn Swallow – several in the upper valley

CHICKADEES & TITS

Black-crested Titmouse – several good looks at this cute TX specialty

PENDULINE TITS

Verdin – fairly common, especially in drier habitat up river

WRENS

Cactus Wren – good looks in the upper valley

Rock Wren – rare in South TX, we had a very cooperative bird at AZ

Carolina Wren – FA heard only

Bewick's Wren – seen best at the feeders at SN

House Wren – great looks at the NABA feeders

Marsh Wren – heard only at BSP

KINGLETS

Ruby-crowned Kinglet – seen daily

OLD WORLD WARBLERS

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher – seen most days

THRUSHES & ALLIES

Clay-colored Thrush – excellent looks at BSP, also seen at Roma Bluffs

MOCKINGBIRDS & THRASHERS

Gray Catbird – FA, LA

Northern Mockingbird – seen daily

Long-billed Thrasher – seen most days

Curve-billed Thrasher – more common in the upper valley, more of a desert bird

PIPITS & WAGTAILS

American Pipit – good looks at SPI and AZ

Sprague's Pipit – excellent looks at AZ, they looked so surprised to see us, but then they always look like that

WAXWINGS

Cedar Waxwing - FSP

NEW WORLD WARBLERS

Orange-crowned Warbler – common and widespread

Nashville Warbler – QM nice side by side views with the former

Tropical Parula – FA, These birds are rare in winter, we were very lucky to find an adult male at Frontera

(Yellow Warbler) – leader only

Yellow-rumped Warbler – seen daily, we saw mostly Myrtle Warblers, but at least one was at least mostly an Audubon's

Yellow-throated Warbler - FA

Black-and-white Warbler - ELG, FA, QM

Ovenbird – FA good looks at this charismatic warbler that thinks it's a chicken

Common Yellowthroat – seen in various location near water
Wilson's Warbler - ELG, FA

SPARROWS & BUNTINGS

White-collared Seedeater – a very cooperative female at the Zapata Library Pond
Olive Sparrow – LA, NG, QM great looks at this secretive valley specialty
Green-tailed Towhee – FSP, one of our last new birds
Cassin's Sparrow – excellent view of a single bird near FSP
Chipping Sparrow – FSP
Clay-colored Sparrow – FSP
Vesper Sparrow - FSP
Lark Sparrow - FSP
Black-throated Sparrow - FSP
Lark Bunting - FSP
Savannah Sparrow – seen almost daily
Grasshopper Sparrow – stunning views at LA
Lincoln's Sparrow – many nice views around feeders in the lower valley
White-crowned Sparrow - FSP

SALTATORS, CARDINALS & ALLIES

Northern Cardinal – ELG, FA
Pyrrhuloxia – super common up around FSP
Black-headed Grosbeak – a rarity at BSP
Blue Bunting – we had stunning success with this great rarity, this gorgeous male just sat
in a bush 20 feet away while 30 giddy birders drooled
Indigo Bunting – ELG, BSP great looks at some spotty molting males

BLACKBIRDS & ALLIES

Red-winged Blackbird – seen daily
Eastern Meadowlark – singing birds at LA were easy to identify
Western Meadowlark – more common as we moved up river
Great-tailed Grackle – most common bird of the trip?
Bronzed Cowbird – along the road in Weslaco
Hooded Oriole – SN, newly arrived migrants
Altamira Oriole – stunning glowing orange birds, common around the feeders up river
Audubon's Oriole – uncommon and shy at the feeders at SN

FINCHES

House Finch – AZ, scarce in South TX
American Goldfinch - AZ

OLD WORLD SPARROWS

House Sparrow – seen daily

MAMMALS

Raccoon

Coyote

Bobcat – fantastic close up views at ELG

Eastern Fox Squirrel

Eastern Cottontail – and maybe Desert Cottontail as well

Javalina – AKA Collared Peccary

BUTTERFLIES

Pipevine Swallowtail

Lyside Sulphur

Sulphur sp.

Red Admiral

Empress Leilia

Checkered Skipper sp.

REPTILES

American Alligator – one at LA was an absolute monster!

Yellow Mud Turtle – on a log with the latter at BSP

Red-eared Slider

OTHERS

Common Carp – the big fish below the Roma Bluff (an introduced, invasive species)

Leafcutter Ants – we saw a couple different colonies of these tropical ants

SHAMPOOZIE!