

# **SPRING IN SOUTH TEXAS**

**APRIL 3-12, 2011**

**LEADER: BARRY ZIMMER**

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*Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc.*

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*We arrived at the King Ranch shortly after 7 a.m., and fifteen minutes later we were making a quick restroom break before our birding started in earnest. While waiting for others to finish up, I casually started whistling a pygmy-owl imitation. I didn't expect a reply (this was not one of the standard areas where we search for this highly prized target), but much to my surprise a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl did respond, and quite close. We quickly rounded up everyone and started walking in the direction of the calling bird. Mellow flute-like whistles to our right stopped us in our tracks. The always elusive Audubon's Oriole was now calling in a large oak across the road. This species can be devilishly hard to find, so we delayed our owl search momentarily. A quick scan of the trees revealed one of the orioles right up on top. It was soon joined by a second bird and we all had wonderful views. An Olive Sparrow began to sing behind us, but we ignored that to pursue our original target, the owl. Fifty yards into the oak thicket, a chunky rust-colored bird darted low across the trail. Within moments someone in the group had spotted the pygmy-owl perched fairly low in an oak to our left. Just as I got it in the scope it moved, but luck was with us, as it landed in a better, more readily viewable spot. We watched this fabulous owl for over fifteen minutes, enjoying spectacular scope views from about 20 feet away, before it finally flew off. This was ultimately voted the favorite bird of the tour by the group.*

*As we returned toward the van, the Olive Sparrow was still singing, so we coaxed it into view in an open brush pile. The Audubon's Orioles reappeared even closer than before and provided more great views. Quickly we hopped into the van and headed to what was supposed to be our first birding stop, Tate Mill. We were no sooner out of the van than our next big target, the Tropical Parula, started singing right next to the road. In a matter of seconds we had the male right down next to the road, singing in a small mesquite tree. A pair of Hooded Orioles swooped in and were quickly joined by a brilliant male Summer Tanager. A Harris's Hawk perched up across the road and a Crested Caracara sailed past. We started chasing after a calling Brown-crested Flycatcher, when suddenly we heard the mournful call of our last target, the Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet. After a little effort we tracked him down, and then realized that a pair of Tropical Parulas was in the same bush with him—both about 10 feet away! A pair of Common Ground-Doves waddled across the dirt path, and a small troop of striking Green Jays skulked by in the thickets. It was 8:40 a.m. and this day was already a smashing success!*

*Of course this was but part of one morning of our wildly successful Spring in South Texas tour. Starting in the Central Coast around Corpus Christi and Rockport, we enjoyed such highlights as a flight of over 300 American White Pelicans sailing by our boat at eye level, Reddish Egrets on the rookery islands, wonderful Roseate Spoonbills, Least Bittern, White-tailed Hawk, Whooping Crane (nearly missed this year, as only two appeared to be left on the wintering grounds), 28 species of shorebirds (including the likes of Piping, Wilson's, and Snowy plovers, Long-billed Curlew, American Avocets by the dozens, Marbled Godwit, American Oystercatcher, and Stilt Sandpiper among others), 8 species of terns, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, a fabulously close Sedge Wren, a pair of Long-billed Thrashers, Seaside Sparrow, and a sprinkling of migrants in coastal traps, such as*

*Northern Parula, Tennessee Warbler, Louisiana Waterthrush, Hooded Warbler, Yellow-throated Warbler, Indigo Bunting, and Baltimore Oriole.*

*In addition to the aforementioned birds seen on the King Ranch, we also marveled at a roosting Barn Owl, an Upland Sandpiper in the road right in front of us, a stunning male Vermilion Flycatcher, and numerous Wild Turkeys, including displaying toms.*

*Farther south in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, we spent the final four days of our trip with highlights almost too numerous to mention. An astounding 60 Least Grebes in one day, Black-bellied and Fulvous whistling-ducks side by side, Cinnamon Teal, a distant male Muscovy Duck, 50 Mississippi Kites in one kettle overhead, a Clapper Rail no more than 8 feet away, a very close Eastern Screech-Owl (McCall's race), Pauraque—both on our night walk and one sitting on a nest at about 10 feet, a group of 3 Groove-billed Anis (rarely seen on this tour), Ringed and Green (oddly only one) kingfishers, Red-billed Pigeon, Red -crowned Parrots and Green Parakeets coming in to roost, Great Kiskadees, Clay-colored Thrush in the scope from 20 feet for over five minutes, a female White-collared Seedeater gathering nesting material, followed shortly by a singing male, and fluorescent Altamira Orioles. In all we tallied 228 species (many found nowhere else in the United States) before heading on to the equally successful Hill Country extension.*

#### **ITINERARY:**

- April 3 - arrival in Corpus Christi; afternoon visit to Tule Lake (43 Species)  
April 4 - Blucher Park, Oso Bay, Hans Suter Park, Paradise Pond, Mustang Island, Port Aransas Birding Center, Rockport Beach Park (115 species; 119 total)  
April 5 - Whooping Crane boat trip to Aransas NWR & Intracoastal Canal, Cavasso Creek, Aransas NWR, Goose Island State Park (95 species; 141 total)  
April 6 - Cape Velero, Paradise Pond, Port Aransas Birding Center, Mustang Island, Packery Channel Park, Chapman Ranch, Sarita, Loyola Beach (119 species; 160 total)  
April 7 - Norias Division of King Ranch, residential McAllen (72 species; 180 total)  
April 8 - South Padre Island (Sheepshead, Convention Center, boardwalk), Frontera Audubon Thicket; evening owling (96 species; 197 total)  
April 9 - Estero Llano Grande State Park, Frontera Audubon Thicket, Edinburgh Scenic Wetlands (75 species; 202 total)  
April 10 - Bentsen State Park, Salineno, Las Palmas (91 species; 219 total)  
April 11 - Santa Margarita Bluff, Falcon State Park, Salineno (70 species; 226 total)  
April 12 - scenic overlook north of San Ygnacio, Las Palmas Park in Laredo; departures for home or continuing on to Hill Country extension (65 species; 228 total)

#### **KEY:**

C = coastal areas around Rockport and Corpus Christi

K = King Ranch, Sarita

V = all valley areas from South Padre Island to Laredo

**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---almost daily with interesting sightings of birds on telephone poles, trees, and buildings

Fulvous Whistling-Duck C,V---close views of about 25 at Edinburgh and another group off the Mustang Island Jetty; often missed entirely

**Muscovy Duck** V---one male from the bluff distantly and briefly

Gadwall C,V

American Wigeon V---one late bird on South Padre

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

Mottled Duck C,K,V

Blue-winged Teal C,K,V

Cinnamon Teal V---pair at Estero Llano Grande plus a hybrid Cinnamon x Blue-winged; uncommon

Northern Shoveler C,V

Northern Pintail C---late female at Cape Velero

Green-winged Teal C

Redhead C,V---late

Ring-necked Duck V---female at Edinburgh; late

Lesser Scaup C---somewhat late

Red-breasted Merganser C---female on boat trip; late

Ruddy Duck C,V

Plain Chachalaca V---many excellent views; our first spotted by Don

Northern Bobwhite V---unusually numerous this year; many great views

Scaled Quail V---seen briefly at Las Palmas by some

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

Common Loon C---great views in Fulton harbor

Least Grebe V---very nice views at Estero Llano Grande & Edinburgh; the most ever for this trip with an estimated 60 in one day!

Pied-billed Grebe C,V

Eared Grebe K---a lone bird on Mustang Island was our only one; late

American White Pelican C,V---including an impressive flight of over 300 on our boat trip

Brown Pelican C,V

Double-crested Cormorant C,V

Neotropic Cormorant C,V

Anhinga C,V---about 30 over the hawk tower at Bentsen

Least Bittern C---a skulky bird along the Port Aransas boardwalk; uncommon

Great Blue Heron C,V

Great Egret C,V

Snowy Egret C,V

Little Blue Heron C,V

Tricolored Heron C,V---with stunning blue lores

Reddish Egret C,V---including many white morphs; up close at rookery islands

Cattle Egret C,V

Green Heron C,V

Black-crowned Night-Heron C,V---our first thanks to Carl

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron V---great views at the “secret alley” rookery; uncommon

White Ibis C,V

White-faced Ibis C,V

Roseate Spoonbill C---spectacular views of many, especially at the rookery islands

Black Vulture C,K,V

Turkey Vulture seen daily in numbers  
 Osprey C,V---20 total  
 White-tailed Kite V---five total  
Mississippi Kite V---flock of **50** over the hawk tower at Bentsen  
 Northern Harrier C,K  
 Sharp-shinned Hawk K,V  
 Cooper's Hawk V  
 Harris's Hawk K,V---many great views  
 Red-shouldered Hawk V  
 Broad-winged Hawk K,V---80 at Bentsen one day were our only ones  
Gray Hawk V---scope views of adult and immature  
 Swainson's Hawk C,K,V  
 White-tailed Hawk C,K,V---five total; exceptional views near Port Isabel  
 Red-tailed Hawk C,K,V  
 Crested Caracara C,K,V---an estimated 50 seen with many excellent close views  
 American Kestrel C---only one the entire trip  
 Peregrine Falcon V---one on tower near Port Isabel  
 Clapper Rail V---superb study on South Padre  
 Virginia Rail C---heard only at Port Aransas  
 Sora C,V---several nice views, our first thanks to Jeff  
 Common Moorhen C,V  
 American Coot C,V  
Whooping Crane C---after missing this species from the boat trip for the first time ever, we headed  
 up to the refuge tour loop where we saw apparently the last two birds present from the  
 observation tower; whew!  
 Black-bellied Plover C,V  
 American Golden-Plover C,V  
Snowy Plover C--- uncommon and declining  
 Wilson's Plover C  
 Semipalmated Plover C  
Piping Plover C---nine total; declining  
 Killdeer C,V  
 American Oystercatcher C---one pair with babies  
 Black-necked Stilt C,K,V  
 American Avocet C  
 Spotted Sandpiper C,V  
 Solitary Sandpiper V  
 Greater Yellowlegs C,K,V  
 Willet C,V  
 Lesser Yellowlegs C,K,V  
 Upland Sandpiper C,K,V--- superb studies on the King Ranch & Chapman Ranch; seven total  
 Whimbrel C---two total  
 Long-billed Curlew C---fifteen total; our first thanks to Jeff  
 Marbled Godwit C,V  
 Ruddy Turnstone C,V  
 Sanderling C,V  
 Semipalmated Sandpiper C---five at Tule Lake were our only ones of the trip  
 Western Sandpiper C  
 Least Sandpiper C,K,V

Pectoral Sandpiper C,V---seven total  
 Dunlin C  
 Stilt Sandpiper C,V--- can be tough, but we had 22 total at four different locations  
 Long-billed Dowitcher C,V  
 Laughing Gull C,K,V  
 Franklin's Gull C---only two seen this year, but good views  
 Ring-billed Gull C,V  
 Herring Gull C,V  
 Least Tern C,V  
 Gull-billed Tern C  
 Caspian Tern C,V  
Black Tern C---unusual and early were about 25 on Mustang Island  
 Common Tern C---a couple on Mustang Island  
 Forster's Tern C,V  
 Royal Tern C,V  
 Sandwich Tern C,V  
 Black Skimmer C,V---amazing views at nesting colony  
 Rock Pigeon urban areas throughout  
Red-billed Pigeon V---nice scope views at Santa Margarita; a dozen total  
 Eurasian Collared-Dove seen daily; after getting our first ones for this tour just ten years ago, this species has become a regular fixture in most areas  
 White-winged Dove seen daily  
 Mourning Dove seen daily  
 Inca Dove almost daily  
 Common Ground-Dove C,K,V---scope views on King Ranch  
 White-tipped Dove V  
 Green Parakeet V---flock of 18 in north McAllen  
Red-crowned Parrot V---20 or so in south McAllen and two more at Estero Llano Grande; John spotted our perched birds  
 Greater Roadrunner V---four total  
**Groove-billed Ani** V---nice scope views of three from the hawk tower; only the fourth time on this tour in 25 years (this species normally arrives in late April)  
 Barn Owl K---a roosting bird on the King Ranch was voted the third favorite bird of the tour  
 Eastern Screech-Owl V---excellent views; subspecies *mccalli*  
 Great Horned Owl K  
Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl K---we had unusually good luck with this often difficult species this year; we found one within thirty minutes and had walk away scope views; voted the favorite bird of the tour!  
 Lesser Nighthawk K,V  
 Pauraque V---very nice show on night walk, plus one on a nest in daylight!  
Chuck-will's-widow V---heard only  
 Chimney Swift scattered throughout  
 Buff-bellied Hummingbird C,V---our first thanks to Sally; eleven total  
 Ruby-throated Hummingbird C,V  
 Black-chinned Hummingbird C  
 Ringed Kingfisher V---Jeff's 600th bird!  
 Belted Kingfisher C,V---only two seen  
Green Kingfisher V---one in flight at Edinburgh was oddly our only one of the entire trip  
 Golden-fronted Woodpecker C,K,V

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker V---Las Palmas Park  
 Ladder-backed Woodpecker C,K,V  
Northern Flicker K---by Ruth in Sarita  
Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet K---very nice views of this uncommon and local species  
**Black Phoebe** V---unusual was a pair at Bentsen  
 Vermilion Flycatcher K,V---spotted by Ruth & Sally on the King Ranch  
 Ash-throated Flycatcher V  
 Brown-crested Flycatcher K,V  
 Great Kiskadee K,V---many superb views; up to 15 in a day; one eating a frog!  
**Tropical Kingbird** V---rare but increasing; pair in Port Isabel  
 Couch's Kingbird C,K,V  
 Western Kingbird V  
 Eastern Kingbird C---three at Packery Channel  
 Scissor-tailed Flycatcher C,K,V---almost everyday with a high count of 138 in one day!  
 Loggerhead Shrike C,K,V---our first official bird of the tour  
 White-eyed Vireo C,K,V---many nice studies  
 Blue-headed Vireo C---three total  
 Green Jay K,V---always stunning  
 Chihuahuan Raven V  
 Horned Lark C---one on Mustang Island  
 Purple Martin C,V  
 Tree Swallow C,K  
 Northern Rough-winged Swallow V  
 Bank Swallow V  
 Cliff Swallow C,V  
 Cave Swallow C,V  
 Barn Swallow daily  
 Black-crested Titmouse C,K,V---recently resplit from Tufted  
 Verdin V  
 Carolina Wren C,V  
 Bewick's Wren K  
 House Wren C,V---scattered migrants  
Sedge Wren V---great views of this normally skulky bird at Cape Velero; late  
 Marsh Wren C,V  
 Blue-gray Gnatcatcher C  
Black-tailed Gnatcatcher V--- uncommon & local  
Clay-colored Thrush V---great looks in McAllen and another bird at Santa Margarita  
**American Robin** V---very surprising was one on South Padre  
 Gray Catbird C,V---our first thanks to Carl  
 Northern Mockingbird seen daily in numbers  
Brown Thrasher C---Goose Island & Blucher Park  
 Long-billed Thrasher C,K,V---many superb views  
 Curve-billed Thrasher V---unusually scarce  
 European Starling seen daily  
 Tennessee Warbler C,V---four total; great study on South Padre  
 Orange-crowned Warbler C,V---fifteen total  
 Nashville Warbler C,V---six total  
 Northern Parula C,V---wonderful studies on South Padre; eighteen total

Tropical Parula K--incredible views on King Ranch from ten feet away; voted the second favorite bird of the tour

Yellow-rumped Warbler C,K,V---Myrtle types except for one Audubon's at Sheepshead

Black-throated Green Warbler C,V---heard only

Yellow-throated Warbler C---one at Paradise Pond

**Palm Warbler** C---rare was one on Oso Bay

Black-and-white Warbler C---only one

Northern Waterthrush V---Bentsen; early

Louisiana Waterthrush C---great views at Paradise Pond

Kentucky Warbler V---one briefly at Sheepshead spotted by Jeff

Common Yellowthroat C,V

Hooded Warbler C---three total with stunning views at Packery Channel Park

White-collared Seedeater V---after missing this species last year, we had wonderful views of both male & female on our last morning

Olive Sparrow K,V---several nice views

Cassin's Sparrow V---one at Las Palmas

Chipping Sparrow C,V

Clay-colored Sparrow V

Vesper Sparrow V---late

Lark Sparrow K,V

Black-throated Sparrow V---the most handsome sparrow?

Savannah Sparrow C,K,V

Seaside Sparrow C---scope views from boat

Lincoln's Sparrow C,V

Swamp Sparrow C---late migrant

Summer Tanager K,V---great scope views

Northern Cardinal almost daily

Pyrrhuloxia K,V

Blue Grosbeak V---male at the bluff; early

Indigo Bunting C,V---four total

Red-winged Blackbird daily

Eastern Meadowlark C,K,V

Brewer's Blackbird K---getting late

Boat-tailed Grackle C---at its southern limit

Great-tailed Grackle everywhere

Bronzed Cowbird C,K,V

Brown-headed Cowbird C,K,V

Orchard Oriole C,V---from just feet away on South Padre; seven total

Hooded Oriole K,V

Baltimore Oriole C---female at Paradise Pond spotted by Ruth

Bullock's Oriole V---incredibly cooperative male at the Salineno Cemetery

Altamira Oriole V---fluorescent orange

Audubon's Oriole K---good views of this uncommon & local species

House Finch V

Lesser Goldfinch C,K---black-backed race

House Sparrow seen daily

total species - 228 (259 in combination with the Hill Country extension)



**MAMMALS:** total species - 13 (counting exotics)

Atlantic Bottle-nosed Dolphin  
Eastern Fox Squirrel  
Mexican Ground Squirrel---leader only  
Desert Cottontail  
Black-tailed Jackrabbit---leader only  
Collared Peccary (Javelina)  
White-tailed Deer  
Nilgai---introduced  
Impala---introduced  
Feral Hog---introduced  
Raccoon  
Coyote  
bat species

**REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS:** total species - 14

Texas Spotted Whiptail  
Rose-bellied Lizard  
Carolina Anole  
American Alligator---with babies  
Diamond-backed Water Snake  
Gulf Coast Ribbon Snake  
Checkered Garter Snake  
snake species---possibly a racer  
Indigo Snake---Estero Llano Grande  
Coral Snake---found by Ruth in the “ladies room”  
Western Diamond-backed rattlesnake---a huge one at Bentsen from the trolley  
Red-eared Slider  
Spiny Soft-shelled Turtle  
toad species

**BUTTERFLIES:** total species - 23

Monarch  
Queen  
Pipevine Swallowtail  
Palamedes Swallowtail  
Giant Swallowtail  
Cloudless Sulphur  
Large orange Sulphur  
Southern Dogface  
Mimosa Yellow  
Little Yellow  
Checkered White  
Great Southern White  
Eastern Tailed Blue  
Reakirt's Blue

Gray Hairstreak  
Bordered Patch  
lady species  
Buckeye  
Turk's Cap Skipper  
Common Checkered Skipper  
Brown Longtail  
Fiery Skipper  
Orange Skipperling

**SIGNIFICANT OTHERS:**

the original Whataburger  
the Mustang Island Beach incident  
the Boiling Pot  
the olive oil guy  
the aurora highwayalis  
neon palm trees in Las Palmas  
bluff list of 49