

SUMMER BIG BEND

JULY 9 – 16, 2010

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TOUR REPORT
BIG BEND SUMMER
July 9–16, 2010

By Barry Zimmer

Once again, this year's Big Bend Summer tour was a smashing success. We tallied all the regional targets and had superb views of virtually all the birds we saw. There are five species that I would consider "must-see" birds when visiting this part of the Trans-Pecos: Colima Warbler, Gray Vireo, Lucifer Hummingbird, Common Black-Hawk, and Montezuma Quail. We nailed all of these birds in spectacular fashion.

The Colima Warbler is, of course, THE most important bird of the tour. It is found nowhere else in the United States except for Big Bend National Park and requires a good deal of effort to see. We saw our first about 2 and 3/4 miles up the Pinnacles Trail, and it provided excellent views for all as it sang almost right over our heads. We would go on to tally 12 of these special birds for the day, with repeated fantastic views and, somewhat surprisingly, great photographic opportunities as well.

Gray Vireo was seen the previous day down the Window Trail from as close as 15 feet away as it sang from the top of a small shrub. Lucifer Hummingbirds were perhaps the least cooperative of the "Big Five." It seemed to be a down year for this species, but we still tallied 2 males along the Window Trail, one of which repeatedly buzzed around over our heads from 10–12 feet away. A pair of Common Black-Hawks nested once again at Rio Grande Village this year and we had prolonged scope studies of both adult and immature birds. Finally, the absolute highlight of the tour for me was the show put on by a male Montezuma Quail in the Davis Mountains. This stunning bird actually walked up to within five feet of me as the group watched and photographed from a short distance away. Certainly this is one of the most spectacular birds anywhere in the world!

Of course a trip to Big Bend is about much more than these special five birds. In El Paso we had wonderful views of Mississippi Kites (perched and in flight), Harris's Hawk, colonies of Cave Swallows, 19 Burrowing Owls in one day (including fledged young), and courtship dancing by both species of big grebes (Clark's and Western). At luxurious Cibolo Creek Ranch we enjoyed a pair of Zone-tailed Hawks screaming overhead, a pair of tiny Elf Owls, Common Poorwill, Crissal Thrasher, and gorgeous plum-colored Varied Buntings among others. Big Bend itself yielded a parade of highlights with Gray Hawk, Golden Eagle, Blue-throated Hummingbird, Western Screech-Owl, Lesser Nighthawk, Vermilion Flycatcher, Tropical Kingbird, Mexican Jay, Yellow-breasted Chat, glorious Painted Redstarts, Hepatic Tanager, Black-chinned Sparrow, gaudy Painted Buntings, and Hepatic Tanager among the more noteworthy. Finally, the cool Davis Mountains to the north produced a new set of birds with Gray Flycatcher, Western Scrub-Jay (the soon-to-be split *woodhouseii* subspecies), Mountain Chickadee, Violet-green Swallow, and Grace's Warbler providing the icing on the cake to the Montezuma Quail.

In all we tallied about 150 species of birds, 17 species of mammals, numerous reptiles and amphibians, and nearly 30 species of butterflies. Our weather was for the most part very good, and at times surprisingly pleasant and cool. All in all, a fantastic week in West Texas!

Itinerary:

July 9 - west El Paso, Keystone Heritage Park (35 species)

July 10 - Border Highway, Hwy 20, Tornillo Reservoir, Fort Hancock Sewage Ponds, Fort Hancock Reservoir, McNary Reservoir, Cibolo Creek; owling (69 species; 79 total)

July 11 - Cibolo Creek Ranch, drive to Big Bend National Park via the River Road, evening owling (55 species; 95 total)

July 12 - Window Trail, afternoon to Cottonwood Campground and Santa Elena Canyon overlook (50 species; 112 total)

July 13 - all day hike to Boot Springs via Pinnacles Trail and returning Laguna Meadows Trail (39 species; 124 total)

July 14 - Rio Grande Village, roadside near Marathon, Davis Mountains State Park, McDonald Observatory (61 species; 134 total)

July 25 - Davis Mountains Nature Conservancy Preserve, drive to El Paso with stops at McNary Reservoir & Fort Hancock Sewage Ponds; my yard in late afternoon (76 species; 147 total)

July 26 - departures for home (147 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---localized

Mallard E---mostly of the "Mexican Duck" subspecies (*diazi*)

Cinnamon Teal E

Northern Pintail E---early migrants
Ring-necked Duck E---male at Keystone; rare in summer
Canvasback E---female at Fort Hancock; very rare in mid-summer
 Ruddy Duck E
 Scaled Quail C,B
 Gambel's Quail E---several nice views
Montezuma Quail D---incredible views of a lone male that was literally as close as five feet away from me!!!!; voted the second favorite bird of the tour; a truly amazing experience
 Wild Turkey D---uncommon
 Pied-billed Grebe E
 Eared Grebe E---two breeding-plumaged birds at McNary
 Western Grebe E---including dancing birds!
 Clark's Grebe E--- good comparative views with Westerns; also dancing!
American White Pelican E
 Neotropic Cormorant E---very well at Keystone
 Double-crested Cormorant E
 Great Blue Heron E
 Snowy Egret E
 Cattle Egret E
 Green Heron E,B
 Black-crowned Night-Heron E
 Turkey Vulture seen daily in numbers
Mississippi Kite E---great scope study of perched bird views in west El Paso, plus several others in flight; easily missed
 Cooper's Hawk D
Common Black-Hawk B---wonderful views of adult & fledged young at Rio Grande Village
Harris's Hawk E--- uncommon and localized
Gray Hawk B--- adult at RGV put on a nice show; very uncommon to rare
 Swainson's Hawk E,C,D
Zone-tailed Hawk C---exceptional views of a pair at Cibolo Creek, plus two more in the Chisos
 Red-tailed Hawk C,B,D---the southwestern *fuertes* race
Golden Eagle B---unusual was one seen at the Window and at Laguna Meadows (possibly the same individual); rare in summer
 American Kestrel E
 Common Moorhen E---with babies
 American Coot E---more babies
 Killdeer E,C---cute, fuzzy little baby at Keystone
 Black-necked Stilt E---many with young
 American Avocet E---ditto
 Solitary Sandpiper C---early migrants
Long-billed Curlew E---one in west El Paso was a surprise
 Lesser Yellowlegs C---two in a flooded field near Presidio
 Western Sandpiper E---early migrant at Keystone
 Least Sandpiper E,C
Laughing Gull E---two at McNary; another good rarity

Rock Pigeon urban areas throughout
 Band-tailed Pigeon B
 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 B,E
 Common Ground-Dove B---uncommon; quick fly-by views
 Yellow-billed Cuckoo C,B
 Greater Roadrunner E,C,B---an impressive total of 23 seen!
Western Screech-Owl B---point blank views; often hard to get in late summer
Elf Owl C,B--- nice views of this tiny species; generally hard in late summer
 Burrowing Owl E---19 individuals our first morning including some fledged young; incredible studies
 Lesser Nighthawk C,B---many around dusk and a great daytime study at RGV thanks to Dave
 Common Nighthawk C
 Common Poorwill C---close flight views of male
 White-throated Swift B
 Blue-throated Hummingbird B---one male was seen from about eight feet away
Lucifer Hummingbird B---two males down the Window Trail were our only ones; seemingly a down year for this species
 Black-chinned Hummingbird seen daily in numbers
 Broad-tailed Hummingbird B,D
 Rufous Hummingbird E---oddly only one immature male in my yard
 Acorn Woodpecker B,D
 Golden-fronted Woodpecker C,B
 Ladder-backed Woodpecker daily in small numbers
Northern Flicker D---uncommon at this season; the “red-shafted” variety
 Western Wood-Pewee D
 Gray Flycatcher D---nice studies
 Cordilleran Flycatcher B
 Black Phoebe E,C,B,D
 Say’s Phoebe E,B,D
 Vermilion Flycatcher C,B---up to 12 in one day!
 Ash-throated Flycatcher E,C,B,D
Brown-crested Flycatcher B---uncommon but increasing
Tropical Kingbird B---great views of a pair returning to Cottonwood Campground for about the ninth year
 Cassin’s Kingbird C,D
 Western Kingbird E,C,B,D
 Scissor-tailed Flycatcher D---six near Marathon
 Loggerhead Shrike B---scarcer than usual with only two seen
 Bell’s Vireo C,B---many good views
Gray Vireo B---excellent views; four total
 Plumbeous Vireo D
 Hutton’s Vireo B,D

Western Scrub-Jay D---subspecies *woodhouseii* which is supposed to be a certain future split
 Mexican Jay B---eating from my hand
 Chihuahuan Raven E,D---mostly grown babies on nest
 Common Raven C,B,D
 Violet-green Swallow B,D
 Cliff Swallow E,C,B---nests on bridge in El Paso
 Cave Swallow E,D---nice nesting colony in Kent
 Barn Swallow E,C,D---nests at Fort Davis
 Mountain Chickadee D
 Black-crested Titmouse B,D---recently resplit from Tufted Titmouse
 Verdin E,C,B
 Bushtit B,D---nice views including a few “black-eared” birds
 White-breasted Nuthatch D
 Cactus Wren C,B---normally an everyday bird, but we had only a handful total
 Rock Wren C,B
 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
 Northern Mockingbird seen daily in numbers
 Curve-billed Thrasher C,B,E
Crissal Thrasher C,B---we missed this species in El Paso where we normally get it, but had
 one at Cibolo Creek and another briefly in Laguna Meadows; always tough in late summer
 European Starling E---always a tough find on this tour
 Phainopepla D---one female seen very briefly near Marathon was our only one
Colima Warbler B---a total of 12 (four heard only) on our hike with several excellent views;
 the twenty two year average for this trip is just over 7 individuals; voted the favorite bird of the
 tour
Grace’s Warbler D---nice studies
 Common Yellowthroat B
Painted Redstart B---superb views at Boot Springs; not present every year
 Yellow-breasted Chat E,C,B---good views of this often shy bird
 Spotted Towhee B,D
 Canyon Towhee C,B,D
 Cassin’s Sparrow C,D---breeding at this time of year; great views
 Rufous-crowned Sparrow B,D
 Chipping Sparrow D
Black-chinned Sparrow B---uncommon & localized; excellent study
 Lark Sparrow E,C,D
 Black-throated Sparrow E,C,B---the handsomest sparrow?
 Hepatic Tanager B,D---brilliant
 Summer Tanager E,C,B
 Western Tanager C,B,D
 Northern Cardinal C,B

Pyrrhuloxia E,C,B
Black-headed Grosbeak B,D---our first from the dining room!
Blue Grosbeak E,C,B,D
Varied Bunting C,B---a total of eight seen including four stunning males; my favorite of all the buntings
Painted Bunting E,B---several brilliant males
Red-winged Blackbird E
Eastern Meadowlark D---subspecies *liliana*
Yellow-headed Blackbird E--- early migrants
Great-tailed Grackle E,C,D
Bronzed Cowbird C,B
Brown-headed Cowbird E,C,B,D
Orchard Oriole C,B
Hooded Oriole E---gorgeous *sennetti* male at Cottonwood thanks to Sandy and several others in my yard; very uncommon
Scott's Oriole C,B---several great looks
House Finch seen daily in numbers
Lesser Goldfinch C,B,D---the black-backed variety
House Sparrow E,C,B,D

total species - 147

Leader only birds:

Greater Yellowlegs

Mammals:

Rock Squirrel
Spotted Ground Squirrel---babies near McNary
Texas Antelope Squirrel
kangaroo rat species
Desert Cottontail
Eastern Cottontail
Black-tailed Jackrabbit
Striped Skunk
Collared Peccary (Javelina)---less numerous than usual
Gray Fox---leader only
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 (small---probably Mexican free-tailed, and medium to large)

total species - 16

Exotic Mammals:

Elk
Blackbuck
Scimitar-horned Oryx
Auodad Sheep (Barbary Sheep)
Camel
Feral Hog

total species - 6

Reptiles & Amphibians:

Bullfrog---heard only
Big Bend Slider
Spiny Soft-shelled Turtle
Red-spotted Toad
Canyon Tree Frog---good spotting by Kathryn
Rio Grande Leopard Frog
Greater Earless Lizard---stunning
Southern Prairie Lizard
Crevice Spiny Lizard
Big Bend Canyon Lizard
Chihuahuan Spotted Whiptail
Marbled Whiptail
Trans-Pecos Striped Whiptail
Plateau-striped (Rusty-rumped) Whiptail
Great Plains Skink
Glossy Snake

total species - 16

Butterflies:

Pipevine Swallowtail
Two-tailed Swallowtail
Black Swallowtail
Large Orange Sulphur
Sleepy Orange
Mexican Yellow
Dainty Sulphur
Southern Dogface
Checkered White
Marine Blue
Reakirt's Blue
Western Pygmy Blue

Gray Hairstreak
American Snout
lady species
Red Satyr
Dark Tropical Buckeye
Texan Crescent
Mylitta Crescent
Variegated Fritillary
California Sister
Empress Leilia
Queen
Small Checkered Skipper
Northern Cloudywing
duskywing species---either Funereal or Mournful
Golden-banded Skipper
Orange Skipperling

total species - 28 (plus others left unidentified)

Significant others:

Flame Skimmer (large red dragonfly)
bluet species (bright blue damselfly, possibly Azure Bluet)
Desert Millipede
Leaf-footed Bug
Cockerel's Blue-winged Grasshopper
Tarantula Wasp
Walking Stick---being eaten by a Hepatic Tanager!
Velvet Mite
Diesel Fried Chicken