

WINTER RIO GRANDE VALLEY

FEBRUARY 12 – 18, 2011

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There are many reasons for birders to visit South Texas in winter, and most of those reasons are birds! Of course, the weather can be quite nice compared to the rest of the country, and this year we lucked out in this department as well. Just the week prior to our visit, the Rio Grande Valley experienced a very powerful cold front that plunged temperatures to below freezing. Earlier in the winter, major flooding closed many of the best birding areas. But by the time we started birding, the temperatures were back into the 80s and almost all of the valley was dry and open for birding.

The Rio Grande Valley of Texas is full of birds that just barely cross the border into the United States. Seeking out these “valley specialties” is reason enough for birders to make the trek to South Texas, but what really gets us excited is the possibility of a rarity, an accidental, a MEGA—some bird so rarely seen north of Mexico that (some) people jump on planes at the drop of a hat to go see it. And again, we were certainly lucky this year. We saw not one, but 4 species that qualify as rarities. I’d like to say that skill was the key ingredient in seeing these great birds, but getting to see staked-out rarities on tour really does require a fair amount of luck. On our very first day we basically walked right up to a White-throated Thrush and got great views for several minutes from about 20 feet away. This is a bird that people were spending *hours* looking for and in many cases never seeing!

A couple of days later we were we looking for a Black-vented Oriole that had been reported for about a month, but that morning it failed to show up at the appointed time. Had our luck already run out? No. We just started walking down the road and pretty soon somebody came riding up to us and told us we better hurry, it had just been seen up ahead. Sure enough, we found it in just a few minutes. More recently a Blue Bunting had been reported in the park, but it was not being seen with any regularity. Could we really get so lucky again? You bet. After a relaxing picnic lunch, we strolled back into the park and within minutes of our arrival at its last known location, we hit pay dirt again. A gorgeous male Blue Bunting creeping around in the shadows, but still offering glimpses of its wonderful iridescent plumage.

Rarity #4 (our 3rd of the day!) was almost too easy. All we had to do was show up at Allen Williams’ house and he did all the work. After putting out a few orange sections and whistling for a bit, there she was, a female Crimson-collared Grosbeak. We sat and watched her for at least 15 minutes as she chewed on leaves back in the bushes before finally coming out into the open for a bit of citrus.

The danger of chasing rarities is that it can often leave you scrambling to find the common birds. Well, I don’t think we could really complain too much about how things turned out. In addition to our rarities we saw about 30 of the “valley specialties” (depending on your definition) and a total of about 170 species. We saw bunches of

gaudy Green Jays (voted favorite bird of the trip), oodles of orioles (5 species!), wonderful aggregations of waterfowl, comical flocks of chachalacas, and 15 species of raptors. It was a fantastic trip, with many great memories, and I can't wait for my next visit to the Rio Grande Valley.

ITINERARY:

February 12: Tour orientation and dinner

February 13: Birding around Weslaco beginning at the Llano Grande, then on to Estero Llano Grande State Park for the rest of the morning; after lunch birding at Frontera Audubon Thicket and parrot watching before dinner

February 14: 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 15: We spent most of our day at Bentsen Rio Grande Valley State Park, but had a very productive stop at Allen Williams' yard in Pharr and at a particularly birdy intersection in McAllen before dinner

February 16: Morning return to Estero Llano Grande SP, then we headed over to Santa Ana NWR before heading up river; we stopped at Santa Margarita Ranch and Salineno before pulling into Zapata; Pre-dinner birding at the Zapata Library Pond and Las Palmas Rd.

February 17: Early morning tire change caused a slight modification to the day's plans so it was morning birding at Salineno before heading over to Starr County Park and Falcon State Park; evening birding at the San Ygnacio rest area

February 18: Morning return to Salineno before our 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

SA - Santa Ana NWR

SN – Salineno

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

Fulvous Whistling-Duck - a small group at ELG

Snow Goose - several large flocks seen in flight from FM 106

(Muscovy Duck) – a bird seen at Bentsen by Mike was of unknown origin; the birds in the lower valley are usually considered to be of feral domestic stock and not countable, but this bird was certainly behaving like a wild bird would...

Gadwall

American Wigeon

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

Blue-winged Teal

Cinnamon Teal – ELG stunning males

Northern Shoveler

Northern Pintail

Green-winged Teal

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

Bufflehead – FSP

Ruddy Duck – ELG, FSP

GUANS, CHACHALACAS & ALLIES

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

NEW WORLD QUAIL

Northern Bobwhite – along FM 106 and FSP

GREBES

Least Grebe – fantastic looks at ELG, we even saw their feet!

Pied-billed Grebe

Eared Grebe – a bit distant at LA

PELICANS

American White Pelican

Brown Pelican

CORMORANTS

Neotropic Cormorant – seen daily

Double-crested Cormorant

ANHINGAS

Anhinga

HERONS, EGRETS & BITTERNs

Great Blue Heron

Great Egret

Snowy Egret

Little Blue Heron

Tricolored Heron

Reddish Egret – SPI, a dark morph bird hanging out near the boardwalk

Cattle Egret – only in fields by Santa Ana

Green Heron

Black-crowned Night-Heron

IBISES & SPOONBILLS

White Ibis

White-faced Ibis

Roseate Spoonbill - breeding plumage adults at LA and closer young birds at SA

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 – some really nice views of feeding birds

White-tailed Kite – 9 at one spot along FM 106 was a personal record, we had many good views of this elegant raptor

Northern Harrier

Sharp-shinned Hawk

Cooper's Hawk

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

Red-shouldered Hawk

Gray Hawk – SN nice looks at this scarce valley specialty

White-tailed Hawk – a couple of distant birds near LA

Zone-tailed Hawk - we had a quick look at this uncommon raptor at SN as it tried to sneak by with some Turkey Vultures

Red-tailed Hawk

FALCONS & CARACARAS

Crested Caracara – great looks at LA then more up river

American Kestrel

(*Aplomado Falcon*) - we had great looks at a hunting bird near LA, unfortunately these birds are all considered uncountable as part of a reintroduction program

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

RAILS, GALLINULES & COOTS

Sora – by air, by land, and by err...lake? We had great looks at several at ELG, including birds in flight and swimming

Common Moorhen
American Coot

CRANES

Sandhill Crane - a small flock in flight near LA

PLOVERS, SANDPIPERS & ALLIES

Black-bellied Plover - SPI
Semipalmated Plover - SPI
Piping Plover - SPI
Killdeer
Black-necked Stilt
American Avocet
Spotted Sandpiper
Solitary Sandpiper - SA
Greater Yellowlegs
Willet - SPI
Lesser Yellowlegs
Long-billed Curlew - big flocks on the way to LA
Ruddy Turnstone - SPI
Sanderling - SPI
Least Sandpiper
Dunlin - SPI
Stilt Sandpiper - Llano Grande
Long-billed Dowitcher

GULLS & TERNS

Laughing Gull
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Gull-billed Tern – SPI a single flyby
Caspian Tern - SPI
Royal Tern - SPI
Forster's Tern - SPI
Black Skimmer – SPI great looks at roosting birds

PIGEONS & DOVES

Rock Pigeon
Eurasian Collared-Dove – only a couple in developed areas
White-winged Dove – SN
Mourning Dove
Inca Dove – fairly common around feeders
Common Ground-Dove – SN
White-tipped Dove – fairly common, but shy, around feeders

PARROTS, MACAWS & ALLIES

Green Parakeet – what a show! We saw hundreds perched together in McAllen

Red-crowned Parrot – A flock of 30 perched very cooperatively for us in Weslaco

CUCKOOS

Greater Roadrunner – great looks at BSP and FSP

OWLS

Eastern Screech-Owl – great scope views of a bird in a nest box at ELG

NIGHTJARS

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

HUMMINGBIRDS

Buff-bellied Hummingbird – ELG, FA, SA, BSP

Ruby-throated Hummingbird – ELG

Anna's Hummingbird - unexpected at ELG

KINGFISHER

Ringed Kingfisher – great views of at least four at SN

Belted Kingfisher

Green Kingfisher – great views at ELG and again at SA

WOODPECKERS

Golden-fronted Woodpecker - lots of great views every day

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker

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

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS

Eastern Phoebe – seen most days

Vermilion Flycatcher – great looks at these stunning birds

Ash-throated Flycatcher - one at the county park upriver high tailed it when the Feds showed up

Great Kiskadee – seen and heard (!) daily

Couch's Kingbird – only told from Tropical by voice, we heard a couple and saw several frustrating silent ones

SHRIKES

Loggerhead Shrike – seen most days

VIREOS

White-eyed Vireo

Blue-headed Vireo - ELG

CROWS, JAYS & MAGPIES

Green Jay – these gaudy birds are always a highlight, voted favorite bird of the trip

SWALLOWS

Purple Martin – returning migrants were back already

Tree Swallow – multiple days

Northern Rough-winged Swallow – upriver only

Cave Swallow – several good looks, best at ELG

CHICKADEES & TITS

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

WRENS

Cactus Wren – good looks in the upper valley

Carolina Wren – brief views at ELG; this subspecies is known at the Mexican Carolina

Wren or Lomita Wren

House Wren – SN

Marsh Wren – heard only at BSP

KINGLETS

Golden-crowned Kinglet - SA, rare this far south, probably pushed south by the previous cold snap

Ruby-crowned Kinglet – seen daily

OLD WORLD WARBLERS

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher – seen most days

THRUSHES & ALLIES

Hermit Thrush

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

White-throated Thrush - a real rarity! We were very fortunate to find this stealthy bird feeding in the leaf litter at ELG

MOCKINGBIRDS & THRASHERS

Northern Mockingbird – seen daily

Long-billed Thrasher – seen most days

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

STARLINGS

European Starling

PIPITS & WAGTAILS

American Pipit – FSP

NEW WORLD WARBLERS

Orange-crowned Warbler – common and widespread

Yellow-rumped Warbler – seen daily, all were “Myrtle Warblers”

Black-throated Gray Warbler - ELG

Pine Warbler

Ovenbird – LA great looks at this charismatic warbler that thinks it's a chicken

Common Yellowthroat – seen in various location near water

Wilson's Warbler - FA

SPARROWS & BUNTINGS

Olive Sparrow – LA, BSP, SA, SN great looks at this secretive valley specialty

Cassin's Sparrow – excellent view of a single bird along Las Palmas Rd

Chipping Sparrow – FSP

Clay-colored Sparrow – FSP

Vesper Sparrow - FSP

Lark Sparrow - FSP

Black-throated Sparrow - Las Palmas Rd

Lark Bunting - FSP

Savannah Sparrow – seen almost daily

Lincoln's Sparrow – many nice views around feeders in the lower valley

Swamp Sparrow - ELG

SALTATORS, CARDINALS & ALLIES

Crimson-collared Grosbeak - close views in Pharr!

Northern Cardinal

Pyrrhuloxia

Blue Bunting – we were very lucky to get views of this sneaky skulker as it (a male!) repeatedly came out to some water at BSP

Indigo Bunting

BLACKBIRDS & ALLIES

Red-winged Blackbird

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 – a flock in Zapata

Brown-headed Cowbird - FSP

Black-vented Oriole - what a stunner! Great looks at a gorgeous and very rare bird at BSP, only a handful of records north of Mexico for this bird

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

Baltimore Oriole - LA, rare in winter

FINCHES

House Finch – SN

Lesser Goldfinch - best views were in Zapata
American Goldfinch - BSP

OLD WORLD SPARROWS

House Sparrow – seen daily

MAMMALS

Bottle-nosed Dolphin - SPI
White-tailed Deer
Eastern Fox Squirrel
Eastern Cottontail – and maybe Desert Cottontail as well
Javalina – AKA Collared Peccary
Texas Longhorn

BUTTERFLIES

Pipevine Swallowtail
Little Yellow
Sleepy Orange
Red Admiral
Gray Hairstreak
Checkered Skipper sp.
Mexican Bluewing
Brown Longwing
Queen

REPTILES

American Alligator
Yellow Mud Turtle – on a log with the latter at BSP
Red-eared Slider

OTHERS

Common Carp
Leafcutter Ants – the colony at Allen Williams' House was especially impressive
Jupiter and its moons (Io, Callisto, Ganymede, and Europa)
The full moon at night
The full moon in the morning...oh wait, that was the sun.
Fine dining in Zapata