

SPRING IN SOUTH TEXAS

APRIL 4–13, 2013

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TOUR REPORT
SPRING IN SOUTH TEXAS
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By Barry Zimmer

Our 2013 Spring in South Texas tour was arguably our best ever. From South Texas specialties to rarities to migrant land birds, this trip had it all. We began in Corpus Christi, a day after a cold front had passed through. Rather stout north winds the afternoon of our arrival seemed promising for bringing down migrants. We had an hour to bird before dinner that day and headed to nearby Tule Lake. A quick stop at a roadside pond en route yielded a locally rare Least Grebe (our first South Texas specialty) followed in short order by a pair of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, a perched Crested Caracara, a late Bufflehead, six Scissor-tailed Flycatchers lined up on one fence, and a flyover Swainson's Hawk. We had been birding all of ten minutes! Upon reaching Tule Lake, the new birds came in rapid order: Wilson's Plover, Gull-billed Tern, Roseate Spoonbill, a dozen breeding plumaged American Avocets, and a comical Reddish Egret. No one knew where to look first. In one hour of birding we tallied 53 species before heading off to a delicious seafood dinner.

The next day we scoured migrant traps and coastal estuaries in and around Corpus Christi and Mustang Island. The hoped for fallout of land bird migrants panned out, as we had 16 species of warblers for the day. Paradise Pond (a small oasis in Port Aransas) alone harbored eight Hooded Warblers, a stunning male Prothonotary Warbler, Louisiana Waterthrush, Kentucky Warbler, a male American Redstart, Northern Parula, Black-throated Green Warbler, Nashville Warbler, Tennessee Warbler, White-eyed and Warbling vireos, Wood Thrush, Acadian Flycatcher, Great Crested Flycatcher, two Gray Catbirds, seven Yellow-crowned Night-Herons and more! The nearby Port Aransas Birding Center hosted a male Blue-winged Warbler, several Orchard Orioles, a Yellow Warbler, and a slew of waterbirds including Sora, Tricolored Heron (just feet away), and Cinnamon Teal. Throughout the day the list continued to grow with the likes of Snowy and Piping plovers, Upland Sandpiper, Stilt Sandpiper, White-tailed Hawk, Long-billed Thrasher, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Great Kiskadee, and an estimated 750 Franklin's Gulls leading the highlights. By day's end we had tallied an amazing 130 species of birds!

The trip only got better from there. A boat trip to Aransas National Wildlife Refuge netted 19 Whooping Cranes (two pairs very close to the boat), as well as Seaside Sparrow, a rare Lesser Black-backed Gull, 20 Roseate Spoonbills feeding in one area, and rookeries of herons and egrets. A visit one day to the famed King Ranch produced the likes of Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, two male Tropical Parulas, Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, a pair of Audubon's Orioles, nesting White-tailed Hawks, displaying Vermilion Flycatcher, displaying Wild Turkeys, Olive Sparrow, Greater Roadrunner, and a rare migrant Swallow-tailed Kite.

Heading southward to the Lower Rio Grande Valley, we visited many parks and refuges between McAllen and Brownsville. A very rare vagrant Crimson-collared Grosbeak at Sabal Palm put on a great show (only the third ever for both Kevin and me). Dazzling Green Jays, a cooperative Clay-colored Thrush, Buff-bellied Hummingbirds, Plain Chachalacas, an Altamira Oriole, and numerous White-tipped Doves vied for our attention. Estero Llano Grande was equally birdy with mating Green Kingfishers, three Common Pauragues on day roosts, another Clay-colored Thrush, numerous Least Grebes, and White-tailed Kite. Residential Weslaco yielded fantastic views of Red-crowned Parrot (at a nest) and Green Parakeets, while an evening of night birding produced the tiny Elf Owl and the

McCall's race of Eastern Screech-Owl.

On our last morning in the Valley we headed out to South Padre, as luckily another front had passed through. En route a pair of Aplomado Falcons was spotted roadside, and we had scope views of this seldom seen bird. Migrant traps on the island were very active with Indigo and Painted buntings; Blue Grosbeak; Baltimore, Bullock's, and Orchard orioles; Lark, Clay-colored, Lincoln's, and Chipping sparrows; a very early Blackpoll Warbler; Summer Tanager; and a roosting Lesser Nighthawk. A couple hundred more Franklin's Gulls put down on a small roadside pond. Our luck just kept getting better.

Finally, we moved upriver to the Zapata area. Here, from a nearby bluff overlooking the Rio Grande, we had arguably our best morning yet. Perched Red-billed Pigeons, Green and Ringed kingfishers, a fly-by male Muscovy Duck, a very early Groove-billed Ani, Altamira and Audubon's orioles, Clay-colored Thrush, Gray Hawk, and a striking male Scarlet Tanager were among the many highlights. We finished our trip in Laredo where we enjoyed close views of several White-collared Seedeaters.

In all we saw 265 species for the tour. We tallied virtually every South Texas specialty bird, had a host of rarities, and marveled at the spectacle of spring migration. Who could ask for more?

Itinerary:

April 4 - arrival in Corpus Christi; afternoon visit to Tule Lake (53 Species)

April 5 - Blucher Park, Oso Bay, Hans Suter Park, Mustang Island, Paradise Pond, Port Aransas Birding Center, Rockport Beach Park, Connie Hagar Sanctuary (130 species; 142 total)

April 6 - Whooping Crane boat trip to Aransas NWR & Intracoastal Canal, Cavasso Creek, Goose Island State Park, Indian Point (93 species; 160 total)

April 7 - Cape Velero, Paradise Pond, Nature Preserve at Charlie's Pasture, Mustang Island Beach, Chapman Ranch, Sarita (95 species; 168 total)

April 8 - Norias Division of King Ranch, residential McAllen (62 species; 187 total)

April 9 - Sabal Palm Sanctuary, South Padre Island (Sheepshead, SPI World Birding Center, Convention Center), Edinburgh Scenic Wetlands (104 species; 195 total)

April 10 - Weslaco, Estero Llano Grande, Quinta Mazatlan, evening owling at Bentsen (82 species; 207 total)

April 11 - Laguna Vista, South Padre Island, drive to Zapata, Las Palmas (104 species; 227 total)

April 12 - Santa Margarita Bluff, Zapata library pond, San Ygnacio, CR 3169 (90 species; 238 total)

April 13 - CR 3169 out of San Ygnacio, Las Palmas trail in Laredo; flights home or continuing on to the Hill Country extension (48 species; 239 total)

Key:

C = coastal areas around Rockport, Port Aransas 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 up to 80 in a day

Fulvous Whistling-Duck V---about 75 at Edinburgh and another nine at Estero Llano Grande; often missed entirely

Muscovy Duck V--- male flying by on the river at Santa Margarita was spectacular; none had been reported of late

Gadwall C,V

American Wigeon C---somewhat late

Mallard V---two pair of the "Mexican Duck" race along the Rio Grande, plus a "**regular**" Mallard at Estero Llano Grande where very rare

Mottled Duck C,V

Blue-winged Teal C,V

Cinnamon Teal V---Port Aransas & Estero Llano Grande; uncommon

Northern Shoveler C,V

Northern Pintail V---a very late bird for some

Green-winged Teal C

Redhead C,V---somewhat late, especially in the numbers we had (75+ in one day)

Lesser Scaup C---somewhat late, especially the 500+ at Hans Suter

Bufflehead C---late birds at a couple of locations

Red-breasted Merganser C---twelve between boat trip; & Indian Point; somewhat late

Ruddy Duck C,V

Plain Chachalaca V---many excellent views

Northern Bobwhite V---in this dry year we only had one pair near San Ygnacio, but excellent views of those

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

Common Loon C---great views of several on the boat trip

Least Grebe C,V---one near Tule Lake the first afternoon was a real surprise and we had more at Edinburgh & Estero Llano Grande; some years can be very tough

Pied-billed Grebe C,V

Eared Grebe two at Charlie's Pasture; uncommon

Neotropic Cormorant C,V

Double-crested Cormorant C,V

Anhinga V---nice studies at Estero Llano Grande & Santa Margarita

American White Pelican C,V---almost daily

Brown Pelican C,V

American Bittern C---heard only by Florence at Port Aransas

Great Blue Heron C,V---of special note was a white morph "**Great White Heron**" from the boat; this morph is accidental in Texas

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; fantastic studies of many

Cattle Egret C,K,V

Green Heron C,V---including one on a nest and another eating a skink!

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron C,V--- generally uncommon; especially well at Paradise Pond

White Ibis C,V

White-faced ibis V---very distant late evening views for some at Bentsen

Roseate Spoonbill C,V---always spectacular; many superb looks

Black Vulture C,K,V

Turkey Vulture seen daily in numbers

Osprey C,V---25 total

Swallow-tailed Kite K---one low over the oak mottes was a real bonus!

White-tailed Kite V---only one seen, along the Estero Llano Grande levee

Northern Harrier C,V---a few late lingerers

Sharp-shinned Hawk V---one at Estero Llano Grande

Cooper's Hawk C,V

Harris's Hawk K,V---this species seemed greatly reduced in numbers from normal, though we had several excellent views

Red-shouldered Hawk V---Santa Margarita Ranch

Broad-winged Hawk C,V---scarce this year with only six seen the entire trip

Gray Hawk V---immature bird at Santa Margarita

Swainson's Hawk C,K,V

White-tailed Hawk C,K---six total

Red-tailed Hawk C,K

Crested Caracara C,K,V---an estimated 45 seen with many excellent close views

American Kestrel C,V---only three the entire trip

Merlin C---three total; uncommon

Apomado Falcon V---a real surprise were a pair west of Laguna Vista, one of which allowed scope views; only the third time for this tour; part of the successful reintroduction program; voted the second favorite bird of the tour

Clapper Rail C---superb studies near Cape Velero & on South Padre

King Rail C---heard only, tantalizingly close

Sora C,V

Common Gallinule C,V

American Coot C,V---Chris's favorite bird?

Whooping Crane C---19 total including stunningly close views two one pair (including flight views)

Black-bellied Plover C,V

American Golden-Plover C,K---Tule Lake, Rockport Beach, and Norias

Snowy Plover C--- uncommon and declining

Wilson's Plover C,V

Semipalmated Plover C

Piping Plover C,V---two total; declining

Killdeer C,V

American Oystercatcher C

Black-necked Stilt C,V
 American Avocet C,V---many excellent views of breeding plumaged birds
 Spotted Sandpiper C,V
 Greater Yellowlegs C,V
 Willet C,V
 Lesser Yellowlegs C,K,V
 Upland Sandpiper C,K---exceptional views of a lone bird in Port Aransas and several more on the King Ranch
 Whimbrel C
 Long-billed Curlew C---nineteen total
 Marbled Godwit C,V
 Ruddy Turnstone C,V
 Sanderling C,V
 Semipalmated Sandpiper C---close studies at Charlie's Pasture
 Western Sandpiper C,V
 Least Sandpiper C,K
 Pectoral Sandpiper C,V---nine total
 Dunlin C,V
 Stilt Sandpiper C,K--- can be tough, but we had 21 total at four different locations
 Short-billed Dowitcher C
 Long-billed Dowitcher C,V
Wilson's Phalarope C---one at Charlie's Pasture; very uncommon migrant here
 Laughing Gull C,V
 Franklin's Gull C,V---absolutely ridiculous, record-setting numbers this year with up to **750** in one day; seen on three days; last year we only saw three!
 Ring-billed Gull C,V
 Herring Gull C,V
Lesser Black-backed Gull C---quite unexpected was an adult bird we found from the Whooping Crane boat trip; rare
 Least Tern C,V
 Gull-billed Tern C,V
 Caspian Tern C,V
 Forster's Tern C
 Royal Tern C,V
 Sandwich Tern C,V
 Black Skimmer C,V---amazing views at nesting colony; 200 in one day
 Rock Pigeon urban areas throughout
Red-billed Pigeon V---nice scope views at Santa Margarita
 Eurasian Collared-Dove seen daily; after getting our first ones for this tour about twelve years ago, this species has become a regular fixture in most areas
 White-winged Dove almost daily
 Mourning Dove seen daily
 Inca Dove C,V---seen most days
 Common Ground-Dove K,V
 White-tipped Dove K,V
 Green Parakeet V---only high flying flocks in north McAllen, but great views of perched birds in Weslaco
Red-crowned Parrot V---singles in Brownsville and Weslaco; fantastic studies at nest hole
 Greater Roadrunner K,V---six total

Groove-billed Ani V---one at Santa Margarita was an unexpected, early treat; only the fourth time ever for this tour (the species usually arrives in late April/ early May
 Eastern Screech-Owl V--- subspecies *mccalli*
 Great Horned Owl K,V
Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl K---after a little searching we had this species at our first King ranch stop!
 Elf Owl V---great views at nest hole; very uncommon; voted the favorite bird of the tour!
 Lesser Nighthawk V---particularly well at Sheepshead on day roost
 Common Pauraque V---unsurpassed views of three roosting birds in the daytime at Estero Llano Grande just feet off the trail!; tied for third favorite bird of the tour
 Chimney Swift C,V
 Buff-bellied Hummingbird K,V---eleven total
 Ruby-throated Hummingbird C,V
 Black-chinned Hummingbird C,V
Ringed Kingfisher V---this species seems to be declining with only two seen, both at Santa Margarita; could be missed on future trips; tied for third favorite bird of the tour!
 Belted Kingfisher C
Green Kingfisher V---excellent views at Edinburg, Estero Llano Grande & Santa Margarita; our best luck with this species in years
 Golden-fronted Woodpecker C,K,V
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker C---one at Sarita; somewhat late
 Ladder-backed Woodpecker C,K,V
Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet K--- nice views for most of this uncommon and local species
 Eastern Wood-Pewee V---for a few at Sheepshead
Acadian Flycatcher C---one at Paradise Pond; uncommon this early
Least Flycatcher C---one at Paradise Pond; uncommon this early
Black Phoebe V---unusual was one at Bentsen and another at Zapata
 Vermilion Flycatcher K---always stunning
 Great Crested Flycatcher C,V---six total
 Brown-crested Flycatcher K,V
 Great Kiskadee K,V---many superb views; up to 10 in a day
Tropical Kingbird V---rare but increasing
 Couch's Kingbird C,K,V
 Western Kingbird V
 Eastern Kingbird C,V
 Scissor-tailed Flycatcher C,K,V---seen everyday; spectacular!
 Loggerhead Shrike C,K,V---almost daily
 White-eyed Vireo C,K,V
 Blue-headed Vireo V---one at Estero Llano Grande
 Red-eyed Vireo V---one on South Padre
 Warbling Vireo C,V---one at Port Aransas and another on South Padre
 Green Jay K,V---always stunning
 Chihuahuan Raven V
 Purple Martin C,K,V
 Tree Swallow C,V
 Bank Swallow V
 Cliff Swallow C,V
 Cave Swallow C,V
 Barn Swallow almost daily
 Black-crested Titmouse C,K,V---recently resplit from Tufted

Verdin V
 Cactus Wren V---heard only
 Carolina Wren V
 Bewick's Wren V
 House Wren C,V---scattered migrants
Sedge Wren C---heard only
 Marsh Wren C,V---mostly heard
 Blue-gray Gnatcatcher C,V
Black-tailed Gnatcatcher V--- uncommon & local
 Ruby-crowned Kinglet C---only one; a little late
Wood Thrush C---one at Paradise Pond
Clay-colored Thrush V---seven total with several great views!
 Gray Catbird C---two at Paradise Pond
 Northern Mockingbird seen daily in numbers
 Brown Thrasher C---Goose Island
 Long-billed Thrasher C,V---superb views
 Curve-billed Thrasher K,V
 European Starling seen daily
Worm-eating Warbler V---one by Uly & Warren at Sabal Palm; uncommon migrant
 Louisiana Waterthrush C---Blucher Park & Paradise pond; great studies
Blue-winged Warbler C---Port Aransas Birding center; uncommon migrant
 Black-and-white Warbler C---eight in one day
Prothonotary Warbler C---stunning male at Paradise Pond; uncommon
 Tennessee Warbler V---two total
 Orange-crowned Warbler C,V---five total
 Nashville Warbler C,V---twenty six total; our most common migrant warbler
Kentucky Warbler C---one at Paradise Pond seen well; uncommon migrant
 Common Yellowthroat V---ten total
 Hooded Warbler C,V---a very impressive twelve total with many great views (particularly at Paradise Pond)
American Redstart C---male at Paradise Pond; early
 Northern Parula C,V---seventeen total; great views at Paradise Pond in particular
Tropical Parula K--wonderful scope views of two singing males on King Ranch
 Yellow Warbler C---three
 Yellow-rumped Warbler C,V---Myrtle types
 Yellow-throated Warbler C---one at Goose Island
Blackpoll Warbler V---very early male at the SPI convention center was a tour first
 Black-throated Green Warbler C,V---Paradise Pond & SPI
 Yellow-breasted Chat C,V---good views of this skulker
White-collared Seedeater V---great looks at five in Laredo after failing to find the species around Zapata or San Ygnacio
 Olive Sparrow K,V---several nice views
 Cassin's Sparrow V---only one in this dry year
 Chipping Sparrow C,V
 Clay-colored Sparrow V
 Lark Sparrow K,V---nice studies
 Black-throated Sparrow V---the most handsome sparrow?
 Savannah Sparrow C,V
 Grasshopper Sparrow C,K

Seaside Sparrow C
 Lincoln's Sparrow C,V
 White-crowned Sparrow C
 Summer Tanager C,K,V
Scarlet Tanager V---a fabulous male at Santa Margarita Bluff; on the early side plus at an odd, inland location
 Northern Cardinal almost daily
 Pyrrhuloxia V
 Blue Grosbeak V---three males at Sheepshead and another near San Ygnacio
Crimson-collared Grosbeak V---prolonged study of female plumaged bird at Sabal Palm Grove; only the third time ever for this trip for this Mexican vagrant; tied for third favorite bird of the tour
 Indigo Bunting V---twenty in one day on SPI
Lazuli Bunting V---a vagrant male found by Kevin on South Padre was a tour first!
Painted Bunting V---male on South Padre for some; early
 Red-winged Blackbird daily
 Eastern Meadowlark C,K,V
 Boat-tailed Grackle C---at its southern limit
 Great-tailed Grackle everywhere
 Bronzed Cowbird C,K,V---perhaps less numerous than usual
 Brown-headed Cowbird C,K,V
 Orchard Oriole C,V---twenty two seen
 Hooded Oriole K,V
 Bullock's Oriole V---six total
Baltimore Oriole V---male at the SPI convention center
 Altamira Oriole V---fluorescent orange beauties
Audubon's Oriole K,V---fantastic views of this uncommon & local species; seven total
 House Finch V
 Lesser Goldfinch V---the black-backed subspecies
 American Goldfinch C---Goose Island
 House Sparrow seen daily

Total species - **239 (a new tour record)** (265 in combination with the Hill Country extension)

Mammals:

Atlantic Bottle-nosed Dolphin
 Eastern Fox Squirrel
 Mexican Ground Squirrel
 Desert Cottontail
 Eastern Cottontail
 Raccoon
 Collared Peccary (Javelina)
 Feral Hog---big ones at Aransas; introduced
 White-tailed Deer
 Waterbuck---introduced
 Nilgai---introduced
 Impala---introduced
 Coyote

bat species

Total species - 14 (counting exotics)

Reptiles & Amphibians:

Texas Spotted Whiptail

skink species---in the mouth of a Green heron but still alive (Ground Skink?)

Rose-bellied Lizard

Carolina Anole

anole species

ribbon snake/ garter snake species

American Alligator

Red-eared Slider

Yellow Mud Turtle

Total species - 9

Butterflies:

Pipevine Swallowtail

Giant Swallowtail

Cloudless Sulphur

Large Orange Sulphur

Sleepy Orange

Southern Dogface

Little Yellow

Lyside Sulphur

Checkered White

Great Southern White

Reakirt's Blue

Western Pygmy Blue

metalmark species---Fatal?

Gulf Fritillary

Variiegated Fritillary

Texan Crescent

Phaon Crescent

Bordered Patch

White Peacock

Buckeye

Monarch

Queen

Common Checkered Skipper

Teelus Longtail

White-striped Longtail---BZ only

Fiery Skipper

unidentified skipper

Total species - 27

Significant others:

the original Whataburger

the giant crab statue

unidentified puffer fish in Rockport

the Boiling Pot

the Freddy Fender water tower

the albino pygmy gorilla---Kevin's favorite

the "pucker up" sign

fireflies

neon palm trees in Las Palmas

bluff list of 64