

WINTER RIO GRANDE VALLEY

JANUARY 9–15, 2016



Altamira Oriole by David Wolf

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Within the United States the Lower Rio Grande Valley is absolutely unique for birders, a wonderland of subtropical birds and plants on our side of the border. Unfortunately, most of this special region has been altered by development, making every remaining fragment of habitat important. We spent five days checking these special spots, from the largest remaining tract of native forest at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge to the tiny—but productive—Estero Llano Grande State Park and Frontera Audubon Sanctuary. In the process we found almost all of the expected Valley specialties, plus a broad array of more widespread birds. Truly rare in the U.S. were the Crimson-collared Grosbeak seen at Frontera and the very cooperative Northern Jacana studied at length at Santa Ana. Another nice surprise was the out-of-range Greater Pewee at Anazalduas, plus we enjoyed a number of more widespread rarities lingering at various sites, including Black-throated Gray Warbler, Bullock’s Oriole, and Dickcissel. We were lucky with the weather too, and though a bit on the chilly side at times, it was pleasant enough to be outdoors.



Common Pauraque by David Wolf

Our birding began with a visit to what has become the newest “hotspot” in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Estero Llano Grande State Park. We had barely entered the park before we spotted our first Green Jays and chachalacas skulking through the brush, and then, as we rounded a bend in the trail, we found them attacking the feeders at close range, along with a brilliant Altamira Oriole. Welcome to the Valley! By the end of the morning we had become acquainted with many of the regional specialties, including Least Grebe, White-tipped Dove, Green Kingfisher (scope views of a wonderfully cooperative pair), Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Great Kiskadee, and Olive Sparrow, plus there was a nice assortment of waterbirds present. A real treat here

was an amazingly cooperative Common Pauraque sleeping right beside the trail. Even though we were only a few feet away, the bird’s ability to camouflage itself amidst the leaf litter was so perfect that it was remarkably hard to spot! This species is normally only seen in a spotlight at night, or heard as they call at dusk, so to be able to see one like this was a very special treat.

That afternoon found us chasing our first hot-line rarity, a female-plumaged Crimson-collared Grosbeak reported at the Frontera Audubon Sanctuary. Thick it is, but as we quietly strolled the trails through the dense brush, this strange bird suddenly popped up just ahead of us, for good, if brief, views. Very lucky and good spotting Neil! Endemic to northeastern Mexico, this species is not found in the U.S. every year. The Clay-colored Thrushes, a Valley specialty that was formerly quite rare but is now increasing in number, that came out on the trail as we were leaving weren’t too shabby either.

Our second day took us on a long ramble to South Padre Island and the adjacent Laguna Madre. We had barely exited the freeway before the biggest surprise of the day was spotted, a Ringed Kingfisher on a roadside wire over a resaca (oxbow lake). A bit farther along we found our quest bird for the morning, an adult White-tailed Hawk sitting calmly on a roadside pole, posing for photographs. This gorgeous raptor



White-tailed Hawk by David Wolf

is typical of the coastal savannahs of Texas, but isn't found elsewhere north of the border. More numerous along this stretch of road were beautiful Harris's Hawks and Crested Caracaras, always a treat to see. From there it was on to the Laguna Madre and South Padre Island, where various stops produced a good assortment of typical Gulf Coast waterbirds, including Reddish Egret, Roseate Spoonbill, Black Skimmer, and a host of shorebirds, including a dozen or so endangered Piping Plovers.

The morning of our third day found us at Santa Ana NWR, walking through the mesquite woodland to vegetation-choked Willow Lake in search of a Northern Jacana present here for some time. It took some patient waiting, but eventually the bird suddenly flew up from the

marsh and landed in view, walking in and out of the clumps of reeds on long legs and huge feet. Resembling something between a gallinule and a shorebird, this is another very rare and irregular stray to the U.S. An added delight while watching the jacana was an Altamira Oriole singing its loud and rich song right overhead.

Our last morning in the Lower Valley found us starting off at Anzalduas County Park. At first this open grove of large trees seemed quiet, but as the sun warmed things up, the small birds became active and we soon found ourselves stalking a large and very fast-moving mixed-flock of wintering insectivores. A soft "pip-pip-pip" close at hand announced the presence of the sought-after Greater Pewee, another hotline rarity, and we soon had looks at this rather drab flycatcher in a leafless tree. As the numerous kinglets, gnatcatchers, and warblers around it began moving rapidly through the trees, the pewee followed, so we did too, trying our best to keep up with this crazy mixed-flock.



Great Kiskadee by David Wolf

Eventually the birds slowed down, allowing us a closer approach, and as we systematically worked through the flock, we had repeated views of a Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, a very scarce and inconspicuous border specialty, and we picked out at least 5 Pine Warblers and a male Black-throated Gray Warbler, both rare locally, plus we got to enjoy the pewee several more times. From here we moved to nearby Bentsen State Park, enjoying great looks at many of the Valley specialties at the feeders, and having a great time with the numerous raptors as we compared perched Sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks, puzzled over the various plumages of juvenile Gray Hawks, and finally spotted a fine adult Gray perched on an emergent snag.



Green Jay by Tom Rust

An exciting last day afield found us in the much wilder Upper Valley in the Falcon Dam region, where it finally “looked like Texas,” with great vistas of thorn-scrub on the rolling hills and tall groves of riparian woodland along the clear Rio Grande (and no strip malls and traffic). The early part of the morning was spent at “The Bluff,” an especially scenic and peaceful spot on the private Santa Margarita Ranch where our best birds were the Ringed and Green kingfishers working this quiet stretch of the river. Leaving the area we stopped to enjoy a flock of Pyrrhuloxia on the roadside—and realized that there were Scaled Quail emerging from the brush, a species rarely seen in this region in recent years. Our next stop was the feeding station at the little village of Salineño, where amidst the Altamira Orioles swarming the feeders we had close-ups of Audubon’s and Hooded orioles, a variety of Valley specialties, a male Northern Bobwhite, and a very out-of-place Dickcissel. Exploration of the uplands and a picnic lunch

at Falcon State Park produced classic southwestern species like Greater Roadrunner, Vermilion Flycatcher, Cactus Wren, and Black-throated Sparrow, while a late afternoon stop in Zapata on a whim was semi-successful, producing a male White-collared Seedeater that only some managed to see before the tiny bird disappeared, not to be found again.

All too soon our week in the Valley was over, but the memories of the many special birds seen here will remain with us for a long time. You were a wonderfully enthusiastic and compatible group to travel with, and we hope to see you again on another Victor Emanuel Nature Tour.

ITINERARY:

January 9: group gathers in McAllen, Texas for orientation meeting and dinner.

January 10: morning excursion to Estero Llano Grande State Park and World Birding Center, a great introduction to the resident and winter birds of the region. Afternoon at the Frontera Audubon Thicket in Weslaco. A chilly morning with a north wind after cool front came through the day before, but pleasantly warm by afternoon and clear skies all day.

January 11: an all-day excursion to the South Padre Island region, with major stops in Laguna Vista and at the South Padre Island Convention Center and nearby. Clouds crept in from the south overnight and today was gray and rather chilly.

January 12: morning at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge and then in the afternoon a return visit to the Frontera Audubon Sanctuary and a “parrot watch” in Pharr.

January 13: Anzalduas County Park until mid-morning and then Bentsen State Park until noon. Afternoon drive upriver to Zapata and a short birding cruise before dinner.

January 14: early morning at “The Bluff” at Santa Margarita Ranch and then a visit to the Salineño feeding station, followed by a picnic lunch and birding at Falcon State Park. Mid-afternoon at San Ignacio and then a brief stop in Zapata.

January 15: a little birding around Zapata town before driving back to McAllen, where the group split up to return home.

LOCATIONS:

ELG = Estero Llano Grande State Park and nearby
Fr = Frontera Audubon Thicket in Weslaco
SPI = from the town of Los Fresnos to South Padre Island, stopping at various viewpoints along the highway and around the southern end of the Laguna Madre, including on South Padre.
SA = Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge and nearby.
Anz = Anzalduas County Park.
BSP = Bentsen State Park
SMR = Santa Margarita Ranch at “The Bluff” and nearby at the Salineño feeding station.
Fal = Falcon State Park and nearby.
Zap = Zapata area.

BIRDS: *Italicized species* = South Texas specialties (i.e. species generally absent, rare or very local elsewhere in the U.S.); **boldfaced species** = trip highlights and rarities; hd = heard.

DUCKS, GEESE & SWANS

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck – SPI
Gadwall – SPI, SA, SMR
Mallard – SMR (good scope studies; this is the race known as the “Mexican Duck”, in which both sexes are “hen-plumaged”).
Mottled Duck – ELG (nice study of a calm pair on the pond at headquarters).
Blue-winged Teal – ELG, SPI, SA, SMR
Cinnamon Teal – ELG, SA (close looks at gorgeous males).
Northern Shoveler – ELG, SPI, SA
Northern Pintail – ELG, SA, SMR
Green-winged Teal – ELG, SPI, SA, SMR
Redhead – ELG, SPI, SA (large rafts on the Laguna Madre, many of them quite close).
Ring-necked Duck – ELG
Lesser Scaup - Anz
Bufflehead – SPI (distant birds on the Laguna Madre).
Red-breasted Merganser – SPI (offshore on the Laguna Madre at several stops).
Ruddy Duck – SPI (on the “highway” pond at the end of the day).

GUANS, CHACHALACAS & ALLIES

Plain Chachalaca – ELG, SA, BSP, SMR (these rather strange birds are a favorite Valley specialty; 40 of them around the feeders at Bentsen SP at once was an amazing sight. We also enjoyed their early morning chorus at “The Bluff”).

NEW WORLD QUAIL

Scaled Quail – SMR (a covey of at least 7 came out along the roadside).
Northern Bobwhite – Fal (great looks at a male at the Salineno feeding station).

LOONS

Common Loon – SPI (distant birds offshore in the Laguna Madre).

GREBES

Least Grebe – ELG, SPI, SA (with good rains this past year the ponds are full – and pairs of these birds were widespread and readily observed).
Pied-billed Grebe – ELG, SPI, SA, SMR

CORMORANTS

Neotropic Cormorant – SPI, SMR, Zap
Double-crested Cormorant – SPI, SMR, Zap

ANHINGAS

Anhinga – ELG, SPI (en route)

PELICANS

American White Pelican – ELG, SPI, SA, Fal, Zap
Brown Pelican – SPI

HERONS, EGRETS & BITTERNES

Great Blue Heron – SPI, SA, Anz, SMR
Great Egret – ELG, SPI, SA, Anz, SMR
Snowy Egret – SPI
Little Blue Heron – SPI
Tricolored Heron – ELG, SPI
Reddish Egret – SPI (two white morph birds on the tidal flats; a Gulf Coast specialty).
Green Heron - Fr
Yellow-crowned Night-Heron – ELG (very close looks at beautiful adults).

IBISES & SPOONBILLS

White Ibis – SPI
White-faced Ibis – ELG, SA (very difficult to separate from the rare-in-Texas Glossy Ibis, but those studied carefully had the red iris of this species, which is the expected one here).
Roseate Spoonbill – SPI (always a treat to see this beautiful bird).

NEW WORLD VULTURES

Black Vulture – Fr, Anz
Turkey Vulture – over all areas and a very frequent sight.

OSPREY

Osprey – SPI, Anz, SMR

HAWKS, EAGLES & KITES

White-tailed Kite – Fr (quick look from the freeway), BSP (nice looks at perched birds).
Northern Harrier – SA (seen by some over nearby field)
Sharp-shinned Hawk – ELG, SA, BSP (great scope view at Bentsen, with a perched Cooper's nearby for direct comparison).
Cooper's Hawk – Fr (by a few), Anz, BSP (great looks), SMR.
Harris's Hawk – SPI, SA, Anz, BSP, SMR, Fal, Zap (this beautiful southwestern raptor was very widespread and numerous).
Red-shouldered Hawk – SA, SMR
Gray Hawk – BSP (4 immatures and finally a gorgeous adult of this uncommon border specialty at Bentsen), SMR (distant adults in the scope).
White-tailed Hawk – SPI (adult studied at close range on a roadside telephone pole; a beautiful specialty of the Texas coastal savannahs and inland fields).
Red-tailed Hawk – Fal, Zap (surprisingly scarce).

RAILS, GALLINULES & COOTS

Sora – ELG (out in the open!), SA (heard)
Common Gallinule – ELG, SPI, SA
American Coot – seen daily and present in all areas with ponds.

STILTS & AVOCETS

Black-necked Stilt – SA

PLOVERS & LAPWINGS

Black-bellied Plover – SPI
Semipalmated Plover – SPI
Piping Plover – SPI (about a dozen of this endangered species running around on the tidal flats, in direct comparison with the less numerous Semipalmated).
Killdeer – SA, Anz

JACANAS

Northern Jacana – SA (molting into adult plumage; present here for some time).

SANDPIPERS & ALLIES

Spotted Sandpiper – ELG, SMR

Greater Yellowlegs – SA
Willet – SPI
Lesser Yellowlegs – SA
Marbled Godwit - SPI
Ruddy Turnstone - SPI
Sanderling – SPI
Dunlin - SPI
Least Sandpiper – SPI
Western Sandpiper – SPI (perhaps leader only).
Long-billed Dowitcher - SA
Wilson’s Snipe – ELG (nice scope study of a close bird), SA.

GULLS, TERNS & SKIMMERS

Laughing Gull – SPI
Ring-billed Gull - SPI
Herring Gull – SPI
Gull-billed Tern - SPI
Caspian Tern – SPI
Forster’s Tern - SPI
Royal Tern – SPI
Black Skimmer – SPI (especially beautiful in flight).

PIGEONS & DOVES

Rock Pigeon – seen daily in cities and towns throughout the region.
Eurasian Collared-Dove – SPI, San Ignacio, Zap
Inca Dove – ELG, Fr, Anz, BSP, SMR, Zap
White-tipped Dove – ELG, SA, Fr, BSP, SMR (this Valley specialty skulks on the ground in the thick brush, occasionally waddling out into the open at the feeding stations).
White-winged Dove – SMR (quite scarce in the winter for a bird that is so abundant in the Valley from spring through autumn).
Mourning Dove – SPI, Anz, BSP, Fal

CUCKOOS

Greater Roadrunner – Fal (nice long looks at this comical bird by the roadside).

NIGHTJARS & ALLIES

Common Pauraque – ELG, Mc (amazing look at a well-camouflaged bird on its day roost right next to the trail, literally just a few feet from us).

HUMMINGBIRDS

Ruby-throated Hummingbird – ELG (a carefully-studied female).
Black-chinned Hummingbird – ELG (several female/immature birds, very difficult to tell from the preceding but the more frequent of the two).
Buff-bellied Hummingbird – ELG, Fr, BSP

KINGFISHERS

Ringed Kingfisher – SPI (surprise bird on a roadside wire over a resaca near Los Fresnos), SMR.
Belted Kingfisher – ELG, SPI, SA, BSP
Green Kingfisher – ELG, SA, SMR (at all three sites we had good scope studies of a bird that is often very shy and inconspicuous).

WOODPECKERS

Golden-fronted Woodpecker – ELG, SA, Anz, BSP, SMR, Zap
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker – Fr, Pharr, Anz
Ladder-backed Woodpecker – SA, Fr, Anz, SMR, Zap

FALCONS & CARACARAS

Crested Caracara – SPI, Fal, SMR, Zap
American Kestrel – a widespread winter visitor seen daily, especially on roadside wires.

Peregrine Falcon – SPI (scope views of a stunning adult perched on a water tower).

PARROTS

Green Parakeet – ELG, Roma (we were very lucky to have close studies of 4 perched birds feeding on the berries of an anacua (“sandpaper tree”) at Estero Llano Grande; this species was also glimpsed from the van in Roma).

Red-crowned Parrot – Pharr (a fast-moving flock of ca 40 birds in the late afternoon, thanks to the waiter at Pappadeaux’s. This species is now “countable” on your ABA Lifelist).

TYRANT-FLYCATCHERS

Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet – Anz (this tiny and obscure sprite was seen repeatedly as it moved around Anzalduas with an insane mixed-flock of small insectivores in the treetops).

Greater Pewee – Anz (one of the great rarities of the trip and a new Texas bird for your leader).

Least Flycatcher – SA (heard only).

Black Phoebe – Anz, Zap (at the extreme southeastern limit of their range).

Eastern Phoebe – widespread and seen daily.

Say’s Phoebe – Fal (nice look at one in the uplands).

Vermilion Flycatcher – BSP, Fal, Zap (wow!).

Great Kiskadee – ELG, Fr, SA, Anz, BSP, SMR/Fal (this favorite Valley specialty was seen often and well, plus its amusing calls were heard a lot).

Tropical Kingbird – SPI (pond near Los Fresnos), Anz (this species has increased tremendously in the Valley over the last few decades and is now widespread, if not common, in the winter),

SHRIKES

Loggerhead Shrike – SPI, Anz, Fal

VIREOS

White-eyed Vireo – Fr, SPI, SA, Anz

Blue-headed Vireo – SPI (behind the gas station in Laguna Vista).

CROWS, JAYS & MAGPIES

Green Jay – ELG, SA, Fr, Anz, BSP, SMR (one of the iconic Valley specialties).

Chihuahuan Raven – San Ignacio

SWALLOWS

Cave Swallow – SA

CHICKADEES & TITS

Black-crested Titmouse – ELG, Fr, SA, Anz, BSP, SMR

PENDULINE-TITS

Verdin – SMR, San Ignacio

WRENS

House Wren – ELG, Anz

Marsh Wren – Zap (great study of a “western-type” our final morning, both seen and heard).

Carolina Wren – SA (heard), Fr (heard) (heard only).

Bewick’s Wren – Fal, SMR

Cactus Wren - Fal

GNATCATCHERS

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher – SA, Fr, Anz, BSP, SMR, Zap (one of the more common and widespread winter passerines in the woodlands and brush).

KINGLETS

Ruby-crowned Kinglet – widespread and common; seen daily.

THRUSHES & ALLIES

Eastern Bluebird - BSP

Hermit Thrush - Fr

Clay-colored Thrush – Fr, BSP (multiple birds skulking in the thickets at Frontera on both visits, plus a bold one at Bentsen; we had great looks and scope studies. This specialty has slowly become more

numerous and well-established in the U.S. in the Lower Rio Grande Valley in recent years, but is still a great find).

MOCKINGBIRDS & THRASHERS

Gray Catbird – SPI

Sage Thrasher – SMR (seen by a few).

Curve-billed Thrasher – ELG

Long-billed Thrasher – Fr, SMR, Zap (a real skulker).

Northern Mockingbird – all areas and seen often every day.

STARLINGS

European Starling – cities and towns throughout

WAGTAILS & PIPITS

American Pipit – SA (heard only)

NEW WORLD WARBLERS

Black-and-white Warbler – Fr, Anz, Zap

Orange-crowned Warbler – all areas and seen daily (a very widespread and typical winter resident throughout the woodlands and brush).

Nashville Warbler – Fr (a rare lingerer in the winter).

Common Yellowthroat – ELG, SPI, SA, SME, San Ignacio, Zap.

Pine Warbler – Anz (at least 5, including several bright males, in the crazy mixed-flock).

Yellow-rumped Warbler – recorded daily and seen in all areas; all of those seen were of the “Mrytle” race except for 2 “Audubon’s” in Zapata).

Yellow-throated Warbler – ELG (great looks as it foraged around a light pole at the park).

Black-throated Gray Warbler – Anz (in the crazy mixed-flock).

Black-throated Green Warbler – Fr (a rare lingerer).

Wilson’s Warbler – BSP (by some).

BUNTINGS, SPARROWS & ALLIES

White-collared Seedeater – Zap (unfortunately not seen by all)..

Olive Sparrow – ELG, Fr, SMR, San Ignacio (another skulker in the heavy brush).

Chipping Sparrow – BSP, Fal

Vesper Sparrow - Zap

Lark Sparrow – Anz, Zap, Fal

Black-throated Sparrow – Zap

Savannah Sparrow – SPI, Fal

Lincoln’s Sparrow – ELG, Anz

CARDINALS & ALLIES

Crimson-collared Grosbeak – Fr (female-plumaged; a great rarity north of the border).

Northern Cardinal – ELG, Fr, SPI, Anz, BSP, SMR, Fal, Zap

Pyrrhuloxia – SPI, Pharr, Zap, Fal (remarkably numerous in the brushy uplands this year).

Indigo Bunting – SA (one glimpsed after its callnote was heard; perhaps leader only).

Dickcissel – SMR (an unexpected stray lingerer at the feeders at Salineno).

TROUPIALS & ALLIES

Red-winged Blackbird – all areas and seen daily, in abundance.

Western Meadowlark – Fal (identified at close range by the pattern of the tail feathers).

meadowlark sp? – ELG, SPI, Anz (those near South Padre were almost certainly Eastern).

Great-tailed Grackle – all areas and seen daily, in abundance.

Brown-headed Cowbird – SMR

Bullock’s Oriole – ELG (close study of immature male at the feeders; very rare winter visitor).

Hooded Oriole – SPI (a surprise immature male in heavy brush in Laguna Vista), SMR (beautiful male at Salineño).

Altamira Oriole – ELG, SA, BSP (a big, bold and brilliant Valley specialty that was enjoyed every time that we saw it; we were treated to one singing its lovely song right overhead at Santa Ana).

Audubon's Oriole – SMR (this lovely, inconspicuous and uncommon South Texas specialty was seen at super-close range at the feeders at Salineño).

SISKINS, CROSSBILLS & ALLIES

House Finch – Anz, Zap

Lesser Goldfinch – Anz, SMR, San Ignacio, Zap

American Goldfinch – Anz, BSP

OLD WORLD SPARROWS

House Sparrow – all areas and seen daily.

MAMMALS:

Eastern Fox Sparrow (introduced) – ELG, SA, Fr, Anz, BSP

Desert? Cottontail – Fal (likely this species in the uplands).

Gray Fox – Zap (Neil saw one behind the motel).

Coyote – SMR (heard only; a chorus of howls from The Bluff).

Javelina – SA, BSP

White-tailed Deer - Fal

REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS:

Red-eared Slider – the common turtle around the ponds; the only reptile seen.