

# **WINTER RIO GRANDE VALLEY**

**FEBRUARY 25 – MARCH 3, 2006**

**LEADER:  
KIM ECKERT**

**COMPILED BY:  
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**Leader: Kim Eckert**

**Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc.**

### **Summary**

There never was even a ghost of a chance that this year's bird list could match last year's. And, in a way, this was just as well. There were so many eye-opening vagrants around during that unique and unprecedented South Texas winter of 2005 (e.g., Roadside Hawk, Elegant Trogon, White-throated Robin, Golden-crowned Warbler, Crimson-collared Grosbeak, and others), that it was pretty hectic last February trying to find time to see them all.

This year's tour was much more relaxing; we had more time to pause and appreciate the color and spectacle of those whistling-ducks, chachalacas, parakeets, parrots, kingfishers, kiskadees, kingbirds, jays, and orioles. With such flashy birds comprising the standard daily fare along the Rio Grande River, who needs rarities?

No matter how the birding on this year's tour was going to turn out, I was just happy to be there. After all, on the day that I flew south out of Minnesota, no less than a foot of snow fell there. Certainly, I was willing to trade that weather for a climate that averages temperatures in the 70s, regardless of what the birds would be like. I do admit, though, that the warmth overdid things a bit on two of our days when it reached the mid-90s. And South Texas, like most of the state, has been enduring a pretty serious drought—perhaps a foot of snow there wouldn't be so bad!

The prevailing drought and generally warmer-than-normal winter probably had some impact on the birding. The flocks of wintering warblers and sparrows were noticeably smaller than usual. Sightings of Hook-billed Kites all winter had been nearly nonexistent, presumably due to a drought-induced lack of tree snails. Other highly sought South Texas specialties (like Muscovy Duck, Red-billed Pigeon, Groove-billed Ani, and Tropical Parula) were also scarce to practically absent all season, possibly due to the weather.

To be sure, however, our list of 184+ species did include a healthy array of special birds. The concentration of probably a few thousand Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks at Progreso Lakes was quite amazing. Impressive as well were the numbers of Redheads at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, especially when a Peregrine decided to stir things up. A Zone-tailed Hawk circled low overhead for several minutes at Anzalduas County Park, providing just about the best view I've ever had of this raptor. A Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl calling away for a half-hour at mid-morning at Bentsen State Park was pretty surprising, although all those catclaws and other thorns between us and him precluded an actual sighting.

Among the passerines, the often-elusive Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet was surprisingly easy to find at both Anzalduas and Bentsen. That black-and-blue “Yucatan” Jay, which turned up at San Ygnacio a couple of weeks earlier, showed up right on schedule for us, although there is still much debate about both its identity (some think it’s a San Blas Jay) and origin (most think it’s an escapee). The reliability of a site for Black-tailed Gnatcatchers just off the highway near Zapata never ceases to amaze me—the desert there looks just like everywhere else. That often-uncooperative Gray-crowned Yellowthroat at Sabal Palm Grove was surprisingly easy for us to see and hear (though proving it’s not a hybrid could be a challenge). And we finally had wonderfully close views of a White-collared Seedeater, which, when motionless, proved practically invisible in the patch of grass it fed on.

## **Itinerary**

February 25 - afternoon option to Laguna Atascosa N.W.R. via FM 106, and drive to Weslaco.

February 26 - morning at Santa Ana NWR; afternoon at Military Hwy. & Cannon Road, Llano Grande, and the McAllen parakeet neighborhood; evening at the Weslaco parrot roost.

February 27 - morning at Sabal Palm Grove; afternoon at South Padre Island and Laguna Atascosa N.W.R.

February 28 - Quinta Mazatlan in McAllen, Granjeño, Anzalduas County Park, Edinburg Wetlands, and dusk with pauraques at Llano Grande.

March 1 - morning at Bentsen State Park; drive to Zapata via Salineño, and late afternoon on the gnatcatcher and Las Palmas roads.

March 2 - San Ygnacio (for jays & seedeaters), return to Salineño / Pat & Gale DeWind's yard, Falcon State Park, and Las Palmas.

March 3 - morning return via Bentsen State Park to Harlingen for flights home.

**Bird List** (note underlined South Texas specialties – i.e., those which are absent, rare, or very local elsewhere in the U.S.)

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck (incl. 100s, if not 1000s, at Progreso Lakes)

Greater White-fronted Goose (only seen Saturday afternoon)

Snow Goose

Gadwall

American Wigeon

Mallard (“Mexican”-type ducks at San Ygnacio)

Mottled Duck

Blue-winged Teal

Cinnamon Teal (most at Pintail Lake)

Northern Shoveler

(Northern Pintail / leader-only)

Green-winged Teal

Redhead

Ring-necked Duck

Lesser Scaup

Bufflehead

Hooded Merganser (unexpected at San Ygnacio)

Red-breasted Merganser

Ruddy Duck

Plain Chachalaca

Northern Bobwhite (only seen Saturday afternoon)

Common Loon

Least Grebe

Pied-billed Grebe

Eared Grebe (out of habitat at Pintail Lake)

American White Pelican

Brown Pelican

Double-crested Cormorant

Neotropic Cormorant

Anhinga

Great Blue Heron

Great Egret

Snowy Egret

Little Blue Heron

Tricolored Heron

Reddish Egret

Cattle Egret

Green Heron

Black-crowned Night-Heron

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron

White Ibis

White-faced Ibis

Roseate Spoonbill

Black Vulture

Turkey Vulture

Osprey

White-tailed Kite

Northern Harrier

Cooper's Hawk

(Gray Hawk / probably seen twice: at Anzalduas and Bentsen)

Harris's Hawk

Red-shouldered Hawk

White-tailed Hawk

**Zone-tailed Hawk** (amazingly close & cooperative at Anzalduas)

Red-tailed Hawk

Crested Caracara

American Kestrel  
Peregrine Falcon (chasing ducks at Laguna Atascosa)  
Clapper Rail (South Padre's boardwalk)  
Sora (heard-only)  
Common Moorhen  
American Coot  
Sandhill Crane  
Black-bellied Plover  
Semipalmated Plover  
Piping Plover (South Padre Island)  
Killdeer  
Black-necked Stilt  
American Avocet  
Greater Yellowlegs  
(Lesser Yellowlegs / leader-only)  
Solitary Sandpiper  
Willet  
Spotted Sandpiper  
Long-billed Curlew  
Marbled Godwit  
Ruddy Turnstone  
Sanderling  
(Western Sandpiper / leader-only)  
Least Sandpiper  
Dunlin  
Stilt Sandpiper (Llano Grande)  
Short-billed Dowitcher (South Padre)  
Long-billed Dowitcher  
Wilson's Snipe  
Laughing Gull  
Ring-billed Gull  
Herring Gull  
Gull-billed Tern  
Caspian Tern  
Royal Tern  
Forster's Tern  
Black Skimmer  
Rock Pigeon  
Eurasian Collared-Dove  
White-winged Dove  
Mourning Dove  
Inca Dove  
Common Ground-Dove  
White-tipped Dove  
Green Parakeet (at 10<sup>th</sup> & Dove in McAllen)  
Red-crowned Parrot (1000 block of Indiana in Weslaco)

Greater Roadrunner (incl. one eating a lizard and singing at Falcon)  
(Groove-billed Ani / probably seen by Jan at Laguna Atascosa)  
Barn Owl (spotlighted fly-by)  
Eastern Screech-Owl (the mccallii race, possibly a future split, in the DeWind's yard)  
Great Horned Owl  
**Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl** (heard-only and nearly seen at Bentsen)  
Burrowing Owl (Granjeño)  
Common Pauraque (good spotlight views)  
Buff-bellied Hummingbird (best at Quinta Mazatlan)  
Ringed Kingfisher  
(Belted Kingfisher / leader-only)  
Green Kingfisher (best at Pintail Lake)  
Golden-fronted Woodpecker  
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker  
Ladder-backed Woodpecker  
**Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet** (at Anzalduas plus 5 more at Bentsen)  
Black Phoebe  
Eastern Phoebe  
Say's Phoebe (out of habitat at Bentsen)  
Vermilion Flycatcher  
Great Kiskadee  
Tropical Kingbird (by Fairfield Inn and Quinta Mazatlan)  
Couch's Kingbird  
Loggerhead Shrike  
White-eyed Vireo  
Blue-headed Vireo  
Green Jay  
**Brown Jay** (at the DeWind's)  
(**Yucatan Jay** / its ID and origin are dubious, but a great bird anyway)  
Chihuahuan Raven (unexpected flocks arrived the last day)  
Purple Martin  
Tree Swallow  
Northern Rough-winged Swallow  
Cave Swallow (best views on the last day)  
Barn Swallow  
Black-crested Titmouse  
Verdin  
Cactus Wren  
Rock Wren (wintering at Anzalduas)  
Carolina Wren  
Bewick's Wren  
House Wren  
Ruby-crowned Kinglet  
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher  
Black-tailed Gnatcatcher (nice looks at a pair at the "usual spot")  
Eastern Bluebird

Hermit Thrush

**Clay-colored Robin** (finally seen at the DeWind's)

American Robin (just one!)

Northern Mockingbird

Long-billed Thrasher

Curve-billed Thrasher

European Starling

American Pipit

**Sprague's Pipit** (nice views of 5 at Anzalduas)

Orange-crowned Warbler

Nashville Warbler

parula, sp. (heard-only at Bentsen, probably a Tropical)

Yellow Warbler

Yellow-rumped Warbler (incl. Audubon's types at Salineño)

Black-throated Green Warbler

Pine Warbler (Anzalduas)

Black-and-white Warbler

Common Yellowthroat

**Gray-crowned Yellowthroat** (especially vocal & cooperative)

**White-collared Seedeater** (it took awhile to get the great view)

Olive Sparrow

Cassin's Sparrow

Chipping Sparrow

Lark Sparrow

Black-throated Sparrow

Savannah Sparrow

Grasshopper Sparrow (on the road to Las Palmas)

Lincoln's Sparrow

Swamp Sparrow

White-crowned Sparrow

Northern Cardinal

Pyrrhuloxia

Indigo Bunting (several at Bentsen)

Red-winged Blackbird

Eastern Meadowlark

Western Meadowlark

Great-tailed Grackle

Bronzed Cowbird

Brown-headed Cowbird

Hooded Oriole (handsome male at the DeWind's)

Altamira Oriole

Audubon's Oriole

House Finch (Las Palmas)

(American Goldfinch / leader-only)

House Sparrow

**Total** = 184 species (plus 5 leader-only species and 3 questionables)

Also seen:

bat, sp.

Mexican Ground Squirrel

Fox Squirrel

Eastern Cottontail

Black-tailed Jackrabbit

Nine-banded Armadillo

Javelina (Collared Peccary)

Coyote

White-tailed Deer

Nilgai

Red-eared Slider

Spiny Softshell Turtle

American Alligator

leafcutter ants

spider eyes (in the spotlight)