

KING RANCH & WHOOPING CRANES

MARCH 29 – APRIL 2, 2006

**LEADERS:
KIM ECKERT
BRENNAN MULROONEY**

**COMPILED BY:
KIM ECKERT**

**VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS, INC.
2525 WALLINGWOOD DRIVE, SUITE 1003
AUSTIN, TX 78746
WWW.VENTBIRD.COM**

KING RANCH & WHOOPING CRANES

March 29 - April 2, 2006

Leader: Kim Eckert and Brennan Mulrooney

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc.

Summary

What drought conditions? You would never know it from all that standing water we saw in the cotton fields of the Laureles Division of the King Ranch. But it seems there were some pretty substantial rains both the day this tour started and on the previous day, enough so that this leader's flight was delayed, and everyone finally met an hour and a half late at the airport for our drive to Kingsville and the start of the tour.

Still, it would take more than just these rains to break the long-term drought currently prevailing in much of Texas. Indeed, King Ranch was just emerging from its driest fall-winter season in 115 years, and, despite the flooded fields at Laureles, Escondido Lake in the Santa Gertrudis Division was the lowest I had ever seen, and now mostly mudflats. More disturbing was the condition of all those live oaks in the Norias Division, on which pygmy-owls, tyrannulets, parulas, and orioles depend: many trees had lost most of their leaves.

Besides being somewhat apprehensive regarding the drought's effect on the birding, I admit I was also somewhat uncertain about how the tour would go without Tom Langschied's guidance. Tom had been King Ranch Naturalist for ten years before recently moving on to another position, and his replacement, Brian Williams, was still learning the ranch's uncharted roads and wide array of wildlife. My doubts couldn't have been more misplaced, as Brian and Beto Maldonado (lifelong resident, employee, and now part-time guide) escorted us around the Santa Gertrudis and Laureles divisions on our first full day of birding. Beto was his usual knowledgeable and amicable self, and Brian was every bit as skilled and personable as Tom.

At Santa Gertrudis, Scissor-tailed Flycatchers seemed to be everywhere, whistling-ducks and several large alligators loafed in the mud at Escondido Lake, and we had our first (and sometimes best) looks at several South Texas specialties at the Borregos Lake feeding station: White-tipped Dove, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Green Jay, Black-crested Titmouse, Long-billed Thrasher, Olive Sparrow, and Bronzed Cowbird.

Laureles is the least scenic King Ranch division, mostly just miles of cotton fields which are worth a couple of hours at best; it has even been skipped entirely some years. This time, though, Laureles was well worth our attention. Dozens of migrant Swainson's Hawks stood around one of the flooded sections, several migrant Upland Sandpipers walked along the roadside, a group of quite unexpected Baird's Sandpipers and a few Franklin's Gulls appeared in temporary ponds, and Brian successfully stalked and flushed a Sprague's Pipit into the open for all to see.

Our next day at the Norias Division is always the most important of the tour, as this division's live oaks provide habitat for the Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl and Tropical Parula, two highly local specialties which normally nest in the U.S. exclusively in South Texas ranchlands. Hearing this diurnal owl is not too difficult, but seeing one is always a challenge, and Brian and the other guides had been having more trouble than usual finding them—possibly because the owls were bothered by the lack of leaves and cover. But on this day, with Brian's guidance, we saw two calling pygmy-owls, and there were several singing Tropical Parulas for us to see. Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, another specialty of these oaks, was also seen (though less cooperative than the parulas).

After stops the next morning at Jim (part-time King Ranch guide) and Margaret Sinclair's hummingbird feeders, and at Corpus Christi's Blucher Park (for migrant warblers and an unexpected Green-tailed Towhee), we headed for Rockport and an afternoon boat trip to see the famed Whooping Cranes at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. They certainly did not disappoint. Some were in flight, others were heard calling, juveniles were visible, and one group of three foraged only 65 feet from the boat (according to the reading on one camera)—the closest I've ever been after dozens of trips here! The boat also took us to see an exceptionally unusual vagrant: an immature Greater Flamingo banded the previous summer in the Yucatan, which had been wintering in the vicinity since November.

Before returning to the airport in Corpus at noon the next day, there was still time for more birding. In a Rockport neighborhood before dawn, both Common Pauraque and Eastern Screech-Owl eventually cooperated and posed for us in the spotlight. On this morning we also rounded out our list of 30 shorebird species, probably the most ever for this tour. But most impressive of all was a totally unexpected Black Rail calling continually in a marsh near Rockport. Though it never came out into view, at one point it approached and called within 10–15 feet of the road. I had once gotten a glimpse of this highly elusive species a few decades ago, but I had never heard its distinctive territorial call before!

Itinerary

March 29 - Afternoon arrival at Corpus Christi airport, and a side trip for most with Brennan to nearby Tule Lake while waiting for the other delayed tour leader; drive to Kingsville (finally!) for a brief tour and fine dinner at King Ranch Museum, hosted by Cathy Henry and Bobbie Roberts, where we meet our guides Beto Maldonado and Brian Williams and former King Ranch Naturalist Tom Langschied.

March 30 - All morning on Santa Gertrudis Division of King Ranch with Beto and Brian, especially Borregos Lake & feeders, Escondido Lake, and the visitors center; afternoon at the flooded cotton fields of the Laureles Division; dinner at Kings Inn.

March 31 - Norias Division of the King Ranch with Brian, especially the Tate windmill & vicinity and the Norias Colony/Headquarters; afternoon return to Kingsville and dinner at Joe Cotten's Barbeque.

April 1 - drive to Rockport via Jim & Margaret Sinclair's hummingbird feeders, a Cave Swallow bridge on Highway 141, and Blucher Park in Corpus Christi; afternoon boat trip aboard the M.V. Skimmer with Capt. Tommy Moore to Aransas NWR; dinner at Latitude's.

April 2 – pre-dawn option to Country Club Estates and Port Bay Club Road; return to Corpus Christ airport via Hwy. 361 causeway east of Aransas Pass and Sunset Lake Park.

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

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck (especially at Escondido L. & Rockport)

Gadwall

Mottled Duck

Blue-winged Teal

Northern Shoveler

Green-winged Teal

Redhead

Lesser Scaup

Bufflehead

Common Goldeneye

Red-breasted Merganser

Wild Turkey

Northern Bobwhite

Common Loon (from the boat)

Pied-billed Grebe

Eared Grebe

American White Pelican

Brown Pelican

Double-crested Cormorant

Neotropic Cormorant

Anhinga (Borregos L.)

Great Blue Heron

Great Egret

Snowy Egret

Little Blue Heron

Tricolored Heron

Reddish Egret

Cattle Egret

Green Heron

White Ibis

White-faced Ibis

Roseate Spoonbill

Black Vulture

Turkey Vulture

Greater Flamingo (from the boat; present since early November)

Osprey
Northern Harrier
Cooper's Hawk
Harris's Hawk (why so few?)
Broad-winged Hawk (migrant kettles)
Swainson's Hawk (dozens of migrants at Laureles Division)
White-tailed Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk
Crested Caracara
American Kestrel
Peregrine Falcon (from the boat)
Black Rail (an amazing, close, heard-only bird on Port Bay Club Rd.)
Clapper Rail (seen along Hwy. 361)
Sora (seen at Borregos L.)
Common Moorhen
American Coot
Whooping Crane (juveniles, flying birds, calling birds, and 3 within 65 feet)
Black-bellied Plover
American Golden-Plover
Snowy Plover (Sunset Lake Park)
Wilson's Plover
Semipalmated Plover
Piping Plover (Sunset Lake Park)
Killdeer
American Oystercatcher (best along Hwy. 361)
Black-necked Stilt
American Avocet
Greater Yellowlegs
Lesser Yellowlegs
Solitary Sandpiper (Tate windmill)
Willet
Spotted Sandpiper
Upland Sandpiper (many migrants, especially at Laureles)
Long-billed Curlew
Marbled Godwit (from the boat)
Ruddy Turnstone
Sanderling
Semipalmated Sandpiper
Western Sandpiper
Least Sandpiper
Baird's Sandpiper (unexpected flock at Laureles)
Pectoral Sandpiper
Dunlin
Stilt Sandpiper
Long-billed Dowitcher (plus probable Short-billed)
Wilson's Snipe (in an Aransas Pass ditch with the ibis)

Wilson's Phalarope (Escondido L.; = 30 shorebird species!)
Laughing Gull
Franklin's Gull (Laureles Division)
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Gull-billed Tern
Caspian Tern
Royal Tern
Sandwich Tern
Forster's Tern
Least Tern (best at Sunset Lake Park)
Black Skimmer
Rock Pigeon
Eurasian Collared-Dove
White-winged Dove
Mourning Dove
Inca Dove
Common Ground-Dove
White-tipped Dove (best at Borregos L. feeder)
Greater Roadrunner
Eastern Screech-Owl (nice spotlighted view in Rockport)
Great Horned Owl
Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl (2 seen & heard at Norias)
Common Pauraque (close & cooperative in the spotlight in Rockport)
Chimney Swift
Buff-bellied Hummingbird (best view at the Sinclairs' feeders)
Ruby-throated Hummingbird
Black-chinned Hummingbird (male at Blucher Park)
Belted Kingfisher
Golden-fronted Woodpecker
Ladder-backed Woodpecker
Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet (close views of mostly uncooperative birds)
Vermilion Flycatcher
Brown-crested Flycatcher (Norias Division)
Great Kiskadee
Couch's Kingbird
Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (almost everywhere!)
Loggerhead Shrike
White-eyed Vireo
Blue-headed Vireo (Blucher Park)
Green Jay (a jaded shade of green?)
Horned Lark (Laureles Division)
Purple Martin
Tree Swallow
Northern Rough-winged Swallow
Barn Swallow

Cliff Swallow
Cave Swallow (best views at a Hwy. 141 bridge)
Black-crested Titmouse
Carolina Wren (heard-only)
(Bewick's Wren / leader-only)
House Wren
Marsh Wren (heard-only)
Ruby-crowned Kinglet
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher
Eastern Bluebird
Gray Catbird
Northern Mockingbird
Long-billed Thrasher (best views at Borregos L. & Blucher Park)
European Starling
Sprague's Pipit (carefully stalked by Brian at Laureles)
Orange-crowned Warbler
Northern Parula (at the Sinclairs' yard)
Tropical Parula (close views & many heard at Norias)
Yellow-rumped Warbler (incl. an "Audubon's" at the Sinclairs' yard)
Black-and-white Warbler
Common Yellowthroat
Hooded Warbler (Blucher Park)
Wilson's Warbler (ditto)
Summer Tanager
Olive Sparrow (best looks at Borregos Lake)
Green-tailed Towhee (unusual at Blucher Park)
Cassin's Sparrow (great views at Santa Gertrudis Division)
Chipping Sparrow
Clay-colored Sparrow (King Ranch Visitors Center)
Vesper Sparrow
Lark Sparrow
Savannah Sparrow
Seaside Sparrow (heard-only along Hwy. 361)
Lincoln's Sparrow
Swamp Sparrow (Port Bay Club Rd.)
Northern Cardinal
Pyrrhuloxia
Red-winged Blackbird
Eastern Meadowlark
Western Meadowlark
Brewer's Blackbird
Great-tailed Grackle
Bronzed Cowbird
Brown-headed Cowbird
Hooded Oriole (many at Norias)
(Audubon's Oriole / leader-only)

House Sparrow

Also seen:

Bottlenosed Dolphin

Nilgai

White-tailed Deer

Javelina

Armadillo

Eastern Cottontail

Fox Squirrel

American Alligator

Texas Tortoise

Red-eared Slider

Spiny Softshell Turtle

road-kill Western Diamondback Rattlesnake

.....plus these butterflies seen by Brennan:

Pipevine Swallowtail (*Battus philenor*)

Giant Swallowtail (*Papilio cresphontes*)

Cabbage White (*Pieris rapae*)

Large Orange Sulphur (*Phoebis agarithe*)

Little Yellow (*Eurema lisa*)

Ceraunus Blue (*Hemiargus ceraunus*)

Red Admiral (*Vanessa atalanta*)

Common Buckeye (*Junonia coenia*)

Common Mestra (*Mestra amymone*)