

BIG BEND SUMMER

JULY 16 - 23, 2007

**LEADER:
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Tour Leader: Barry Zimmer

Our 2007 Summer Big Bend tour could not have been a bigger success. We enjoyed incredible views of every target bird of the tour, including what I would refer to as the “Big Five”: Colima Warbler, Lucifer Hummingbird, Montezuma Quail, Gray Vireo, and Common Black-Hawk. This region of West Texas provides the only opportunity to see one of these species in the United States (the Colima Warbler) and arguably the best opportunity for the other four.

We had an impressive 12 individuals of the highly sought Colima Warbler on our hike to Boot Springs. Several of these gave us prolonged great views, including an adult feeding a recently fledged young. The first of our Colimas was about two-and-a-half-miles up the trail, thus providing the chance of a much shorter hike for those who didn't want to go the whole nine-plus miles.

Lucifer Hummingbirds were likewise cooperative with a stunning adult male down the Window Trail and two more on our Boot Springs hike. One of these was viewed from about 15 feet as it repeatedly came into a large blooming agave blossom to feed at eye level. This species is virtually restricted to the Big Bend region as a breeder (the only other area being a small population in an inaccessible portion of southwestern New Mexico).

Perhaps the most challenging of the “Big Five” is the Montezuma Quail. This species is generally difficult to see anywhere, and many who have visited its range swear it is nothing but a myth. The Davis Mountains offer what I believe to be the best single area to find this very elusive species. We have had superb luck over the years, missing it only twice since 1989. This year, however, all reports (including from locals) were that quail populations were down and no one was seeing them. Undaunted by this bit of bad news, we scoured favorite areas of past tours with no luck. Afternoon light was beginning to fade away and in a last-ditch effort we drove a road through good habitat where I had never seen quail before. Good fortune was on our side as an absolutely stunning male was spotted perched up on a small rock next to the road. We soon realized that another male and a female were just feet away from the first bird. We soaked in the beauty of this magnificent species (one of the most incredible birds of the world in my opinion) for about five minutes in the golden evening sunshine!

Anything after the quail might seem anti-climactic, but we also enjoyed wonderful studies of the localized and highly-sought Gray Vireo at Cibolo Creek Ranch. In addition, we heard two others down the Window Trail at Big Bend. Though it ranges through several southwestern states, this species can be devilishly hard to find. Our success rate over the years with Gray Vireo has been very high on this trip.

Finally, we had walkaway Questar views of an immature Common Black-Hawk about 30 feet away. Its repeated plaintive screams were eventually answered when a stunning adult came in to feed it a small lizard. A pair has been nesting within Big Bend for about the past six years, and another viewable pair occurs along our route in the Davis Mountains.

Of course, this tour is about so much more than the “Big Five.” Other localized species such as Crissal Thrasher, Black-chinned Sparrow, Tropical Kingbird, and Buff-breasted Flycatcher were all seen well. A plethora of colorful birds brightened our list with stunning plum-colored Varied Buntings and gaudy multicolored Painted Buntings seen on numerous occasions, brilliant Blue Grosbeaks seemingly around every corner, three species of tanagers, three species of orioles, and displaying Yellow-breasted Chats. Nightbirds were especially noteworthy with a pair of Elf Owls at 10 feet, superb studies of Western Screech-Owl, an astonishing 45 Burrowing Owls in one day, and a Common Poorwill that was literally a few feet from our van. We also had some rarities including Couch’s Kingbird, Dusky-capped Flycatcher, and Yellow-throated Warbler. Other highlights included wonderful views of an adult Gray Hawk in Big Bend, handsome Mississippi Kites and tiny Calliope Hummingbirds in El Paso, and perched Zone-tailed Hawks at Cibolo Creek.

In addition to birds, this tour also yielded an impressive butterfly list (30 species) with the likes of California Sister, Red Satyr, Mexican Yellow, Two-tailed Swallowtail, and Hackberry Emperor. Reptiles put on a great show with several unusual species including mountain short-horned lizard, Texas alligator lizard, Trans-Pecos rat snake, and mottled rock rattlesnake. Mammals included collared peccaries and pronghorns, as well as some tantalizingly fresh mountain lion tracks! Finally, recent summer rains had resulted in a nice bloom of many flowers and shrubs throughout our journey.

All in all this was an absolutely wonderful trip. Our success with the birds was unparalleled, our weather was for the most part very cooperative, and we took time to thoroughly enjoy all the other aspects of nature as well.

Itinerary:

July 16 - west El Paso, my yard (37 species)

July 17 - Border Highway, Cattleman’s Restaurant (Fabens), Tornillo Reservoir, McNary Reservoir, Cibolo Creek (64 species; 77 total)

July 18 - Cibolo Creek Ranch, drive to Big Bend National Park via the River Road, evening owling (49 species; 92 total)

July 19 - Window Trail, afternoon to Cottonwood Campground and Santa Elena Canyon overlook (54 species; 107 total)

July 20 - all day hike to Boot Springs via Pinnacles Trail and returning Laguna Meadows Trail (40 species; 120 total)

July 21 - Rio Grande Village, roadside near Marathon, Davis Mountains State Park, McDonald Observatory (69 species; 132 total)

July 22 - Davis Mountains Nature Conservancy Preserve, drive to El Paso with stops at McNary, Fort Hancock Sewage, Tornillo, and Fort Bliss Sewage Ponds (79 species; 150 total)

July 23 - departures for home (150 species)

Key:

E = all areas in and around El Paso (down river as far as McNary)

C = Cibolo Creek Ranch

B = Big Bend National Park

D = Davis Mountains, Marathon/ Alpine

bold-faced species indicate birds of rare, casual, or accidental occurrence

underlined species indicate birds of very uncommon occurrence or species which occur in such low density as to be easily missed

Birds: total species - 150

Wood Duck E

Mallard E,C---mostly of the "Mexican Duck" subspecies (*diazi*)

Cinnamon Teal E---nice male our last afternoon

Ruddy Duck E

Wild Turkey B---one rather tame bird at Cottonwood Campground

Scaled Quail C,B---several nice views

Gambel's Quail E---excellent studies

Montezuma Quail D---in a year when none were being seen even by locals, we had tremendous luck in finding two males and a female along the roadside which cooperated with prolonged wonderful views; voted the second favorite bird of the tour

Pied-billed Grebe E,B---one on a nest

Eared Grebe E---one in breeding plumage at McNary

Western Grebe E---many at McNary

Clark's Grebe E---even more than the preceding species with good comparative views

American White Pelican E

Double-crested Cormorant E

Neotropic Cormorant E---poor, distant views

Great Blue Heron E

Great Egret E

Snowy Egret E

Cattle Egret E

Green Heron B---initially found by Greg

White-faced Ibis E---early migrants

Turkey Vulture seen daily in numbers

Mississippi Kite E---great scope study in west El Paso; easily missed

Cooper's Hawk D

Common Black-Hawk B---fantastic prolonged study of fledged immature in Rio Grande Village being fed by adult

Harris's Hawk E---I think spotted by Roberta; uncommon and localized

Gray Hawk B---two near Cottonwood Campground, one of which posed for some time low next to the road and was voted the favorite bird of the tour!

Swainson's Hawk E,C,D---many good views

Zone-tailed Hawk C,B---exceptional views of a pair at Cibolo Creek, another over the Pinnacles

Red-tailed Hawk seen daily; the southwestern *fuertes* race

American Kestrel E,D

American Coot E

Black-necked Stilt E---including tiny chicks

American Avocet E

Spotted Sandpiper E
Willet E---one at McNary was a relative rarity here in fall
Western Sandpiper E
Least Sandpiper E
Baird's Sandpiper E
Wilson's Phalarope E
Rock Pigeon urban areas throughout including one east of Presidio along the River Road
Band-tailed Pigeon B---a few around the Pinnacles; nice perched views
Eurasian Collared-Dove seen in virtually every town throughout the tour; spreading at an alarming rate as evidenced by the **300+** at one location in Alpine
White-winged Dove seen daily in numbers
Mourning Dove ditto
Inca Dove E---oddly the only ones seen were one in west El Paso and about ten in my yard
Yellow-billed Cuckoo C,B---seen especially well at Rio Grande Village
Greater Roadrunner E,C,B,D---an impressive total of 36 seen!
Western Screech-Owl B---point blank views of a pair; often hard to get in late summer
Elf Owl C---very cooperative pair within ten feet; exceptional luck for late summer; voted the third favorite bird of the tour!
Burrowing Owl E---an absolutely insane total of 46 birds in an hour and a half our first morning; incredible studies of several families
Lesser Nighthawk B---many around dusk and a great daytime study at RGV thanks to Becky
Common Nighthawk two south of Marathon in with numerous Lessers
Common Poorwill C---superb study of male within a few feet of the van!
White-throated Swift B
Blue-throated Hummingbird B---several quick views at agaves and rapid fly-bys; one seen perched by some
Magnificent Hummingbird D---two females in the nature conservancy area; uncommon
Lucifer Hummingbird B---a male down the Window Trail and two more near Boot Springs; a female near the Pinnacles was seen only by me
Black-chinned Hummingbird seen daily in numbers
Calliope Hummingbird E---a male and female in my yard the first afternoon was a real bonus!
Broad-tailed Hummingbird B,D
Rufous Hummingbird E,B---stunning adult male in my yard
Acorn Woodpecker B,D
Golden-fronted Woodpecker C,B
Ladder-backed Woodpecker seen daily in small numbers
Northern Flicker D---the red-shafted variety
Western Wood-Pewee D
Buff-breasted Flycatcher D---excellent views; the only known pair in Texas
Gray Flycatcher D---great scope study
Cordilleran Flycatcher B
Black Phoebe E,C,B
Say's Phoebe E,C,B,D
Vermilion Flycatcher C,B---up to 15 in one day!
Dusky-capped Flycatcher B---a casual visitor to Texas; we had a pair near the Pinnacles
Ash-throated Flycatcher C,B,D
Brown-crested Flycatcher B---uncommon but increasing
Tropical Kingbird B---a pair returning to Cottonwood Campground for about the sixth year
Couch's Kingbird B---a pair at Cottonwood campground since May represented a tour first

Cassin's Kingbird C,D
 Western Kingbird E,C,B,D
 Scissor-tailed Flycatcher D---three near Marathon; scarcer than normal
 Loggerhead Shrike E,D---scarcer than usual with only about five seen
 Bell's Vireo C,B---many good views
Black-capped Vireo B---amazingly we had six of these rare vireos--a family group and then another pair; exceptional views for this skulking species on the western extreme of its range; missed more often than seen
Gray Vireo C,B---nice views at Cibolo Creek, heard two others in Big bend; uncommon & localized
 Plumbeous Vireo D
 Hutton's Vireo B,D
 Western Scrub-Jay D---subspecies *woodhouseii*
 Mexican Jay B
 Chihuahuan Raven E,D
 Common Raven C,B
Tree Swallow one early migrant near Marathon
 Violet-green Swallow D---nice scope studies
 Cliff Swallow B
 Cave Swallow E,D---great views near Fort Hancock
 Barn Swallow E,C,B,D
 Mountain Chickadee D
 Black-crested Titmouse B,D---recently resplit from Tufted Titmouse
 Verdin C,B---our nemesis bird for much of the trip finally provided good views at RGV
 Bushtit B,D---less numerous than usual, but nice views including at least one "black-eared" bird
 White-breasted Nuthatch B,D
 Cactus Wren seen daily
 Rock Wren C---oddly only one seen
 Canyon Wren C,B,D---my favorite song in North America!
Carolina Wren B---at the extreme western edge of their range
 Bewick's wren C,B,D
 Blue-gray Gnatcatcher B
 Black-tailed Gnatcatcher E,B
 Western Bluebird D
 American Robin E---three in el Paso first spotted by Roberta
 Northern Mockingbird seen daily in numbers
 Curve-billed Thrasher C
Crissal Thrasher E,B---great luck with this typically difficult species; we had good views in three different spots
 European Starling E,D---always a tough find on this tour
Colima Warbler B---a total of twelve (two heard only) on our hike with some excellent views; the twenty year average for this trip is about 7 individuals
Yellow-throated Warbler D---a super rarity on the nature conservancy preserve
 Grace's Warbler D---one dull individual on preserve
 Common Yellowthroat B
Painted Redstart B---superb views on the Boot Springs Trail; not present every year
 Yellow-breasted Chat C,B---excellent scope studies of this often shy bird
 Hepatic Tanager B,C
 Summer Tanager C,B
 Western Tanager B,D

Spotted Towhee B,D
 Canyon Towhee C,B,D
 Cassin's Sparrow C,D---breeding at this time of year
 Rufous-crowned Sparrow C,B
 Chipping Sparrow D
Black-chinned Sparrow B---a good year for this generally uncommon & localized species
 Lark Sparrow roadsides near Marfa, D
 Black-throated Sparrow C,B
 Northern Cardinal C,B
 Pyrrhuloxia E,C,B
 Black-headed Grosbeak B,D
 Blue Grosbeak E,C,B,D---up to 20 in one day!
 Varied Bunting C,B---a total of eleven seen including one particularly memorable male at Cibolo
 Creek; my favorite of all the buntings
 Painted Bunting B---several brilliant males
 Red-winged Blackbird E,B
 Eastern Meadowlark D---several of the subspecies *liliana* in the grasslands in and around the Davis
 Mts
Yellow-headed Blackbird B,E---stunning male very out-of-place on fence post in desert north of Big
 Bend; early migrants
 Great-tailed Grackle E,Presidio,D
 Bronzed Cowbird C
 Brown-headed Cowbird C,B,D
 Orchard Oriole C,B
 Hooded Oriole E---female at feeders in my yard; very uncommon
 Scott's Oriole C,B---several great looks
 House Finch seen daily in numbers
 Lesser Goldfinch B,D---the black-backed variety
 House Sparrow E,C,D

Leader only birds:

Common Ground-Dove
 Great Horned Owl

Mammals: total species - 9

Rock Squirrel
Spotted Ground Squirrel
Desert Cottontail
Eastern Cottontail
Black-tailed Jackrabbit
Striped Skunk
Collared Peccary (Javelina)
Mule Deer
White-tailed Deer

Exotic Mammals: total species - 5

Elk
Bison
Fallow Deer
Aoudad (Barbary) Sheep
Camel

Reptiles & Amphibians: total species - 11

Red-spotted Toad---in-hand inspections
Bullfrog---heard only
Canyon Tree Frog
Greater Earless Lizard
Plateau-striped (Rusty-rumped) Whiptail
Texas Alligator Lizard---uncommon
Short-horned Lizard---uncommon; in-hand views thanks to Anna
Trans-Pecos Rat Snake---a lifer for me at Rio Grande Village
Mountain Patch-nosed Snake
Mojave Rattlesnake---uncommon
Mottled Rock Rattlesnake---rarely seen

Butterflies: total species - 30 (plus others left unidentified)

Giant Swallowtail
Pipevine Swallowtail
Black Swallowtail
Two-tailed Swallowtail
Sleepy Orange
Mexican Yellow
Dainty Sulphur
Checkered White
Marine Blue
Gray Hairstreak
Red Satyr
Bordered Patch
Texan Crescent
Elada Checkerspot
California Sister
Red Admiral
American Lady

Hackberry Emperor
Empress Leilia
Variegated Fritillary
Gulf Fritillary
Queen
White-striped Longtail---rare?
Northern Cloudywing
skipper species---possibly Desert Cloudywing
Funereal Duskywing
Golden-banded Skipper
checkered skipper species---Desert?
Tropical Least Skipper
orange & brown skipper species---Fiery?

Significant others:

Flame Skimmer (large red dragonfly)
Desert Whitetail (white-bodied dragonfly)
Spangled or Common Skimmer
American Rubyspot (dragonfly with red patches at wing base at Cibolo Creek)
bluet species (bright blue damselfly, possibly Azure Bluet)
scorpion species (thanks to Wilbur)
black widow spider
Vinegaroon
Desert Millipede
walking stick species
Leaf-footed Bug
Tarantula Wasp
shiny green beetle in genus plusiotis
black & lime swirled beetle on mallow plants at Cibolo
red, gray, & black beetle above Cibolo
Lubber Grasshopper
“blue-winged” grasshopper
“red-winged” grasshopper
“painted” grasshopper
sphinx moth species

mountain lion paw prints
distant melon sighting
Dairy Queen blizzards in Alpine