

**NEW YEAR
IN
SOUTH TEXAS**

**DECEMBER 27, 2007 –
JANUARY 2, 2008**

LEADERS: KIM ECKERT & BOB SUNDSTROM

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*It was just an innocent typo on the checklist. Obviously, we weren't going to see any Green Ibis in South Texas—or anywhere else in the U.S. for that matter. But there it was on the list, *Mesembrinibis cayennensis*, having somehow fallen through the cracks and onto the page between White-faced Ibis and Roseate Spoonbill, and everyone certainly had a good time during the rest of the tour asking when we were going to see one.*

I tried unsuccessfully to change the subject by pointing out other green birds like Green Jays, that spectacular and quintessential specialty of Deep South Texas, but, just as on all my previous tours here, the participants found themselves ignoring this gaudy bird after a couple of days. Every year it's the bird most participants want to see first; I always warn they'll be taking it for granted soon enough, and they deny that they will. But they always ignore them, and when they did this year the inevitable request arose: "Now, how about a Green Ibis?"

Even the swarm of some 800 noisy Green Parakeets staging late in the afternoon in McAllen couldn't distract the participants for long. This had to be twice the number of them I had ever seen, and one can't help but be amused by their antics on the utility wires above a busy intersection, as some sidled up to their neighbors and preened each other (the parakeets, that is, not the tour people!), while others hung inverted below the wires just for the apparent fun of it. More unexpected, though, were the Red-crowned Parrots which twice happened by our motel in Weslaco. This species, unlike the parakeets, has become much less reliable in their appearances and easy to miss in recent years, and it was certainly serendipitous for this flock to show up after our searches (and everyone else's) had been unable to find any that week.

Green, as well, is one of the kingfishers we always want to see. The conspicuous Ringed Kingfisher, another South Texas specialty, is seldom difficult to find and always a welcome sight, but the tiny and relatively quiet Green Kingfisher chooses less obvious perches and is harder to spot. So it's always a treat when we eventually find them, even if their green iridescence looks black and colorless in the shade, since their oversized and almost comic bills seem as long as their bodies.

The first Green and Ringed kingfishers everyone saw this year happened to be at Estero Llano Grande State Park in Weslaco, which certainly turned out to be one of our key birding spots. Just outside the park was a group of Groove-billed Anis, a species which is rare or entirely absent most winters, quietly minding their own business as we watched. And at dusk there the day before, both a Common Pauraque and an Eastern Screech-Owl couldn't have been more cooperative, as they appeared almost simultaneously in the spotlight within just a few yards of the van! First the pauraque called and flew by, showing its distinctive white wing patches, before settling down nearby to let us take in at leisure his silhouette and orange eye-shine. And just a couple of minutes later, the screech-owl flew in silently to my recordings and perched some 20 feet away for all to watch as long as we cared to.

Another highly productive locale for us was farther upriver at Salineño. I wasn't at all sure we'd have much luck there, since the busy set of bird feeders maintained by Gale and Pat DeWind were under new management, so to speak. After 20+ years, the DeWinds had finally decided they were unable to return this winter, but the new volunteers kept up this famous birding landmark's traditions by attracting consistent Audubon's Orioles among the Altamiras and all the other birds (including Green Jays!) to the feeders.

Even more satisfying was the luck we had at Salineño with Muscovy Ducks (no fewer than 22 of them), a handsome adult Common Black-Hawk, and a tree decorated with Red-billed Pigeons! To find just one of these on a winter's tour is hard enough, but all three species were there this time. Note that I had only seen a black-hawk three or four times previously during my dozens of tours here. And Muscovies are perhaps found only once out of three or four trips, while Red-billed Pigeons are typically absent from the Rio Grande Valley from fall until February.

Eventually, we had to leave the Valley behind and finish the tour up the coast at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. The wintering Whooping Cranes put on another fine show during our boat trip, and they were joined this time by unusually high numbers of Roseate Spoonbills and Sandhill Cranes—the latter not normally found in the refuge's marshlands, and incurring the wrath of the territorial Whoopers. (However—you guessed it!—there was not a single Green Ibis among them.)

ITINERARY:

December 27: All 9 participants (and most of the luggage) arrive in Harlingen by 1:00 for afternoon birding option at Laguna Atascosa NWR; brief return to airport (luggage still missing), and drive to Weslaco for dinner (and the 10:30 arrival of missing luggage).

December 28: Morning at Rancho Viejo and Sabal Palm Grove, and lunch (at Luby's!); brief post-lunch birding at Resaca Blvd. in Brownsville, unsuccessful late afternoon parrot search in Weslaco, but highly successful pauraque & screech-owl search at Estero Llano Grande at dusk.

December 29: All morning at Santa Ana NWR; afternoon birding at Frontera Audubon, unscheduled Red-crowned Parrot visit (!) at the Fairfield Inn, and the Green Parakeet horde in McAllen at dusk.

December 30: Unexpected return visit by the parrots in the morning, Llano Grande (both the park and the ani-infested resaca!), a Burrowing Owl detour in McAllen, birding and lunch at Anzalduas County Park; afternoon drive to Zapata.

December 31: Falcon County Park/Falcon Heights area, Salineño, birding and lunch at Falcon State Park, back to Zapata for unsuccessful seedeater search, and successful optional return to Salineño at dusk for Muscovys and Red-billed Pigeons (!); New Year's Eve dinner/party/checklist session at the hotel lasts until 9:00 pm!

January 1: Morning drive to Rockport-Fulton (incl. a Harris's Hawk vs Crested Caracara contest) for afternoon boat trip aboard the M.V. Skimmer for Whooping Cranes et al. in Aransas N.W.R.

January 2: Morning birding at Rockport City Park, Cape Valero, and Sunset Lake Park before our drive to the Corpus Christi airport.

Bird List:

(Note: underlined species indicate South Texas specialties, which are generally rare, local, or absent elsewhere in the U.S.; **boldfaced species** indicate special highlights, either unexpected vagrants or hard-to-find area specialties.)

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck (incl. 100s at Llano Grande)

Greater White-fronted Goose (flock over Falcon Heights)

Snow Goose (small flock at Laguna)

Muscovy Duck (total of 22 at Salineño)

Gadwall

American Wigeon

Mottled Duck

Blue-winged Teal

Cinnamon Teal (Santa Ana)

Northern Shoveler

Northern Pintail

Green-winged Teal

Canvasback

Redhead

Lesser Scaup

Bufflehead

Common Goldeneye

Red-breasted Merganser

Plain Chachalaca

Northern Bobwhite

Common Loon (from the Skimmer)

Least Grebe (closest views at Sabal Palm)

Pied-billed Grebe

Eared Grebe (from the Skimmer)

American White Pelican

Brown Pelican

Neotropic Cormorant

Double-crested Cormorant

Anhinga

Great Blue Heron

Great Egret

Snowy Egret

Little Blue Heron

Tricolored Heron

Reddish Egret (incl. white-morphs)

Cattle Egret

White Ibis

White-faced Ibis

Roseate Spoonbill (more than usual from the Skimmer)

Black Vulture

Turkey Vulture

Osprey

White-tailed Kite (best view at King Ranch)

Northern Harrier
Sharp-shinned Hawk
Cooper's Hawk
Common Black-Hawk (quite unexpected adult over Salineño)
Harris's Hawk (“only” 32 from Zapata to Kingsville)
Red-shouldered Hawk (heard-only)
Gray Hawk (more than usual, incl. a juvenile on a pole near Anzalduas)
White-tailed Hawk (incl. a close view of a handsome dark juvenile)
Red-tailed Hawk
Crested Caracara (52 from Zapata to Kingsville)
American Kestrel
Merlin
Peregrine Falcon (from the Skimmer)
Clapper Rail (Rockport City Park)
Common Moorhen
American Coot
Sandhill Crane (out-of-place in the Whoopers’ marshes!)
Whooping Crane (incl. birds seen in flight and defending territory from Sandhills)
Black-bellied Plover
Snowy Plover (Sunset Lake Park)
Semipalmated Plover (ditto)
Piping Plover (ditto again)
Killdeer
American Oystercatcher (more than usual from the Skimmer)
Black-necked Stilt
American Avocet
Spotted Sandpiper
Solitary Sandpiper (in the Clay-colored’s pond)
Greater Yellowlegs
Willet
Lesser Yellowlegs
Long-billed Curlew (best flock as we left the Harlingen airport)
Marbled Godwit
Ruddy Turnstone
Sanderling
(Western Sandpiper / leader-only at Sunset Lake)
Least Sandpiper
Dunlin
Stilt Sandpiper (Santa Ana)
Long-billed Dowitcher
Wilson's Snipe (with the Stilts at Santa Ana)
Laughing Gull
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Gull-billed Tern (Laguna Atascosa, and from the Skimmer)
Caspian Tern
Royal Tern
Forster's Tern

Black Skimmer (Rockport City Park)
Rock Pigeon
Red-billed Pigeon (at least 8 quite unexpectedly at Salineño)
Eurasian Collared-Dove (eating Red Ants in Progreso?)
(White-winged Dove / leader-only)
Mourning Dove
Inca Dove
Common Ground-Dove
White-tipped Dove
Green Parakeet (an estimated 800 staging at 10th & Dove!)
Red-crowned Parrot (twice at the Fairfield Inn in Weslaco)
Greater Roadrunner (especially at lunch at Falcon State Park)
Groove-billed Ani (4 or 5 minding their own business at Llano Grande)
Eastern Screech-Owl (a great, close view at Llano Grande. . .)
Burrowing Owl
Common Pauraque (. . .and ditto just a few minutes previously!)
Buff-bellied Hummingbird (best at Estero Llano Grande)
Archilochus, sp. (Black-chinned/Ruby-throated female)
Ringed Kingfisher
Belted Kingfisher
Green Kingfisher (all 3 kingfishers at Estero Llano Grande)
Golden-fronted Woodpecker
Ladder-backed Woodpecker
Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet (at Anzalduas County Park....though not in a huisache!)
Empidonax, sp. (probably a Least at Sabal Palm Grove)
(Black Phoebe / leader-only at Salineño)
Eastern Phoebe
Vermilion Flycatcher
Dusky-capped Flycatcher (heard-only at Sabal)
Great Kiskadee
Tropical Kingbird (Resaca Blvd. in Brownsville)
Couch's Kingbird (only one, at Rancho Viejo)
Loggerhead Shrike
White-eyed Vireo
Blue-headed Vireo
Green Jay (ignored, as usual, after a couple days!)
Tree Swallow
Cave Swallow (brief look at Santa Ana fly-bys)
Black-crested Titmouse
Verdin
Cactus Wren
Carolina Wren
Bewick's Wren
House Wren (heard-only)
Ruby-crowned Kinglet
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher
Eastern Bluebird
Clay-colored Robin (at least 5 together at Santa Ana)
Gray Catbird

Northern Mockingbird
Long-billed Thrasher
Curve-billed Thrasher
European Starling
American Pipit
Sprague's Pipit (most cooperative at Anzalduas)
Orange-crowned Warbler
Yellow-rumped Warbler (incl. "Audubon's types")
Black-throated Green Warbler
Yellow-throated Warbler (Frontera Audubon and Anzalduas)
Black-and-white Warbler
Ovenbird (Sabal Palm)
Common Yellowthroat
Wilson's Warbler
Olive Sparrow
Cassin's Sparrow ("downtown" Falcon Heights)
Chipping Sparrow
Black-throated Sparrow (ditto)
Lark Bunting (Falcon County Park)
Savannah Sparrow
Lincoln's Sparrow
(White-crowned Sparrow / leader-only)
Northern Cardinal
Pyrrhuloxia (lots around Falcon)
Rose-breasted Grosbeak (Santa Ana; not normally present in winter)
Red-winged Blackbird
Eastern Meadowlark
Western Meadowlark
Boat-tailed Grackle (female in the Best Western parking lot)
Great-tailed Grackle
Bronzed Cowbird
Brown-headed Cowbird
Hooded Oriole (at the Salineño feeders; not normally present in winter)
Altamira Oriole
Audubon's Oriole (Salineño)
House Finch
American Goldfinch
House Sparrow

Also seen:

Bobcat (seen by Phil at Anzalduas)
Armadillo (Anzalduas)
Eastern Cottontail
Fox Squirrel
Hispid Cotton Rat
Bottle-nosed Dolphin (from the Skimmer)
Red-eared Slider
Indigo Snake / Diamond-backed Water Snake (ID? at Estero Llano Grande)