

WINTER RIO GRANDE VALLEY

FEBRUARY 24 – MARCH 2, 2007

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Leader: Kim Eckert

Summary

Winter? Yes, I suppose both this tour's name and the calendar agreed it was winter. But it sure didn't seem like it much of the time, especially since it hit 91 degrees on two of the days we were there down along the Rio Grande. Many huisaches were in bloom, sporting their yellow blossoms, and just as many mesquites were beginning to leaf out. It also seemed as if a good number of the so-called Winter Texans I had seen earlier that month had already headed north back to the Midwest.

Even some of our most memorable avian encounters and highlights were more reminiscent of spring than winter. A kettle of a few dozen Anhingas rode the thermals above Bentsen State Park. Also at Bentsen, a pair of Gray Hawks put on quite a show for us, calling and circling overhead for several minutes. We nearly missed seeing Ringed Kingfisher, finding just one pair at Salineño—I had nearly forgotten how elusive this normally noisy and conspicuous specialty can be when it starts nesting.

With more natural food out in the brush with the warmer weather, Brown Jays were no longer relying on Gale and Pat DeWind's feeders in Salineño, and it took us three visits before we saw them. Several hundred Chihuahuan Ravens flocked together in a field near San Ygnacio, where none had been earlier in February. Cave Swallows were starting to return north to their nesting culverts. A singing parula at Bentsen—which should have been a Tropical—turned out to be a wintering Northern Parula tricked into song by the weather. And on one of our mornings, we drove by nonstop territories of singing Cassin's Sparrows, many of them launching into aerial courtship displays.

Not all of our significant sightings, though, had much to do with the weather. Nor did they involve turning up the unexpected. To the contrary, some were virtually predictable and curiously so, in that you have to wonder why some ordinary sites almost exclusively attract some birds. What is it about the resaca at Progreso Lakes that attracts several hundreds of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks every winter? Dozens of Yellow-crowned Night-Herons crowd into debris-littered mangroves of Bahia Grande annually. Why have Green Parakeets in San Benito flocked for years to the Wal-Mart? Similarly, that ordinary-looking 1000 block of Indiana Street in Weslaco again attracted roosting Red-crowned Parrots just like last year. Groove-billed Anis are almost entirely absent most winters—unless, of course, you check Sabal Palm Grove and Redhead Overlook at Laguna Atascosa. And there's this very ordinary side road near Zapata, except that Black-tailed Gnatcatchers have been there for years.

Other birds were equally impressive for other reasons. On Day 6, we saw eight species of pigeons/doves, including the always-elusive Red-billed Pigeon—I hadn't thought about this before, but I'll bet there's nowhere else in the U.S. where more than six are reasonably possible. Two of our group saw a very odd Green Jay which had been wintering at Laguna Atascosa; I wish I hadn't missed it, since all of its green plumage was replaced by various shades of blue. For a time we thought we had missed a Brown Jay at the DeWind's feeders at Salineño by 20 minutes, until we discovered another tour group had somehow misidentified a Clay-colored Robin as a jay! And it was both gratifying and disturbing to so easily locate a White-collared Seedeater at the pond by Zapata's library while bulldozers were busy flattening former seedeater habitat just 100 yards away.

Winter? Maybe not so much along the Rio Grande at this time of year, but isn't that a reason to be there? After all, winter was still very much in evidence back in Minnesota. It seems I had managed to miss no less than *38 inches* of snowfall while in Texas that week, and it was still there waiting to be shoveled when I got home!

Itinerary

February 24 – all present for 1:00 afternoon option to Laguna Atascosa N.W.R., with birding en route along FM 106; drive to Weslaco for the first of 4 nights.

February 25 – all morning at Santa Ana N.W.R.; afternoon at Progreso Lakes (for whistling-ducks!), Frontera Audubon's sanctuary in Weslaco, and Estero Llano Grande; dusk at Weslaco's Red-crowned Parrot roost (1000 block of Indiana).

February 26 – morning at Sabal Palm Grove near Brownsville and along Boca Chica Rd.; afternoon drive to South Padre Island Convention Center & boardwalk via Bahia Grande inlet on Hwy. 48; dusk Green Parakeet roost by San Benito's WalMart.

February 27 – drive to Bentsen State Park via Granjeño; afternoon at Anzalduas County Park; dusk return to Llano Grande for pauraques.

February 28 – morning at Quinta Mazatlan in McAllen and return to Anzalduas; afternoon drive to Zapata via Salineño, and late afternoon by the Zapata library (for a seedeater) and the gnatcatcher road off Hwy. 83; first of 2 nights in Zapata.

March 1 – morning return to Salineño via desert birding along roads near Falcon Dam; afternoon at Falcon State Park & County Park and Chapeño; return to Zapata with brief late afternoon stops at Las Palmas, San Ygnacio, and the Hwy. 83 overlook north of town.

March 2 – morning return to Salineño (especially for Brown Jays at the DeWind feeders), and drive back 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 (including 100s – if not 1000s! – at Progreso Lakes)

Snow Goose (small northbound flock over Sabal Palm)

Gadwall

American Wigeon

Mallard

Mottled Duck

Blue-winged Teal

Cinnamon Teal

Northern Shoveler

Northern Pintail

Green-winged Teal

Canvasback

Redhead

Ring-necked Duck

Lesser Scaup

Bufflehead

Red-breasted Merganser

Ruddy Duck

Plain Chachalaca (plain noisy at Bentsen!)

Common Loon

Least Grebe

Pied-billed Grebe

Northern Gannet (good views from end of Boca Chica Rd.)

American White Pelican

Brown Pelican

Double-crested Cormorant

Neotropic Cormorant

Anhinga (including a migrating kettle over Bentsen State Park)

American Bittern (mostly hidden near the boardwalk at South Padre)

Great Blue Heron

Great Egret

Snowy Egret

Little Blue Heron

Tricolored Heron

Reddish Egret (including several white morphs)

Cattle Egret

Green Heron

Black-crowned Night-Heron

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron (including dozens concentrated at Hwy. 48 inlet)

White Ibis

White-faced Ibis

Roseate Spoonbill

Black Vulture

Turkey Vulture
Osprey
White-tailed Kite
Northern Harrier
Sharp-shinned Hawk
Cooper's Hawk
Gray Hawk (courting and calling pair showing off at Bentsen)
Harris's Hawk (including one hunting on the ground for several minutes by the van)
Red-shouldered Hawk
White-tailed Hawk
(Zone-tailed Hawk / only on the Mexico side of Salineño)
Red-tailed Hawk
Crested Caracara
American Kestrel
Peregrine Falcon (nice spotting by Diane in McAllen)
Clapper Rail (South Padre's boardwalk)
Sora (ditto)
Common Moorhen
American Coot
Black-bellied Plover
Killdeer
American Oystercatcher (just one pair at South Padre)
Black-necked Stilt
American Avocet
Greater Yellowlegs
Lesser Yellowlegs
Solitary Sandpiper
Willet
Spotted Sandpiper
Long-billed Curlew
Marbled Godwit
Ruddy Turnstone
Sanderling
Western Sandpiper
Least Sandpiper
Dunlin
Stilt Sandpiper
Long-billed Dowitcher
Wilson's Snipe
Laughing Gull
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Gull-billed Tern (along Hwy. 48)
Caspian Tern
Royal Tern
Forster's Tern

Black Skimmer (Hwy. 48 and South Padre)
Rock Pigeon
Red-billed Pigeon (2 posing in the treetops at Salineño)
Eurasian Collared-Dove
White-winged Dove
Mourning Dove
Inca Dove
Common Ground-Dove
White-tipped Dove
Green Parakeet (Still at the San Benito WalMart)
Red-crowned Parrot (as in 2006, again on the 1000 block of Indiana)
(Lilac-crowned Parrot / “non-countable” exotic in Weslaco)
Greater Roadrunner (only once, at Laguna Atascosa)
Groove-billed Ani (Laguna Atascosa and Sabal Palm Grove)
Eastern Screech-Owl (at roost in Bentsen & heard at Llano Grande; the *mccallii* race, possibly a future split?)
Great Horned Owl (at dusk along Hwy. 83)
Common Pauraque (good spotlight views at Llano Grande)
Buff-bellied Hummingbird (best views at Quinta Mazatlan)
Archilochus hummingbird (either Black-chinned or Ruby-throated at Quinta Mazatlan)
Ringed Kingfisher (only seen at Salineño)
Belted Kingfisher
Green Kingfisher (Pintail Lake and Salineño)
Golden-fronted Woodpecker
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
Ladder-backed Woodpecker
Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet (at Anzalduas, though not in a huisache!)
Black Phoebe (Anzalduas and Salineño)
Eastern Phoebe
Vermilion Flycatcher
Ash-throated Flycatcher (unexpected at Salineño)
Great Kiskadee
Tropical Kingbird (seen & heard at the Fairfield Inn)
Couch's Kingbird
Loggerhead Shrike
White-eyed Vireo
Blue-headed Vireo
Green Jay (including a “blue” Green Jay at Laguna Atascosa!)
Brown Jay (finally at the DeWind’s, on the third try)
Chihuahuan Raven (including hundreds in a field near San Ygnacio)
Purple Martin
Tree Swallow
Northern Rough-winged Swallow
Cave Swallow
Barn Swallow
Black-crested Titmouse

Verdin
Cactus Wren
Carolina Wren
Bewick's Wren
House Wren
Marsh Wren (very close & cooperative at South Padre's boardwalk!)
Ruby-crowned Kinglet
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher
Black-tailed Gnatcatcher (still at the "usual spot" north of Zapata)
Eastern Bluebird
Hermit Thrush
Clay-colored Robin (finally seen at the DeWind's – or was it a Brown Jay?!)
American Robin
Gray Catbird (South Padre)
Northern Mockingbird
(Brown Thrasher / leader-only at South Padre)
Long-billed Thrasher
Curve-billed Thrasher
European Starling
American Pipit
Sprague's Pipit (nice views again at Anzalduas)
Cedar Waxwing
Orange-crowned Warbler
Nashville Warbler
Northern Parula (singing male at Bentsen, but – alas – not a Tropical)
Yellow-rumped Warbler (including Audubon's types at Salineño)
Black-throated Gray Warbler (Bentsen and Quita Mazatlan)
Black-throated Green Warbler
Hermit Warbler (Anzalduas; quite unusual in winter)
Yellow-throated Warbler
Black-and-white Warbler
Ovenbird (Frontera Audubon)
Common Yellowthroat
Wilson's Warbler
White-collared Seedeater (refreshingly easy to find, despite the construction)
Olive Sparrow
Cassin's Sparrow (almost non-stop singing males on Day 6)
Chipping Sparrow
(Clay-colored Sparrow / leader-only with the Lark Buntings)
Lark Sparrow
Black-throated Sparrow
Lark Bunting (flock near Falcon Dam)
Savannah Sparrow
Lincoln's Sparrow
Northern Cardinal
Pyrrhuloxia

Indigo Bunting
Red-winged Blackbird
Eastern Meadowlark
Western Meadowlark
Great-tailed Grackle
Bronzed Cowbird (especially at Granjeño)
Brown-headed Cowbird
Hooded Oriole (at the DeWind's)
Altamira Oriole
Audubon's Oriole (ditto)
House Finch
Lesser Goldfinch
American Goldfinch
House Sparrow

Total = 191 species (plus 2 leader-only species + 1 Mexico-only + 1 exotic)

Also seen:

Eastern Cottontail
Fox Squirrel
Nutria
Coyote (heard-only)
Bobcat (long, leisurely look at Estero Llano Grande)
Javelina (a.k.a. Collared Peccary at Bentsen)
bat, sp.
American Alligator
Red-eared Slider
unidentified spider eyes (in the spotlight at Llano Grande)