

KING RANCH & WHOOPIING CRANES

MARCH 28 – APRIL 1, 2007

LEADER: KIM ECKERT

COMPILED BY: KIM ECKERT

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

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Leader: Kim Eckert

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc.

Summary

One good thing about unfavorable weather during a tour is that the leader at least has something to blame when birds don't cooperate! (Given good weather, you see, the leader has no convenient meteorological alibi for any lack of birds.) Accordingly, I had no shortage of excuses at the ready during this year's King Ranch tour, although fortunately I didn't need to cite them much. It turned out the birding was a lot more decent than was the weather.

You'd think that our first two full birding days with steady winds in the 20-30 m.p.h. range would be a total loss, but such conditions are almost the norm here, and it seems the birds are used to it. Indeed, during our first morning on the Santa Gertrudis Division I can't think of anything missed for which the winds were to blame. Our first significant stop was at Borregos Lake and the feeding station maintained by our guide Jim Sinclair and King Ranch Naturalist Brian Williams. It was here that we had our only looks at Long-billed Thrasher and Olive Sparrow, and our best looks during the tour of Green Jay, Black-crested Titmouse, and Bronzed Cowbird. In addition to these five species, we heard our only White-tipped Doves which failed to appear at the feeder, for a total of six specialties that normally occur nowhere else in the U.S. outside of South Texas.

Once we were able to turn our backs on the feeders, there were Least Grebes, another South Texas exclusive, on Borregos Lake itself, along with our first Roseate Spoonbill, and close looks at both Sora and Virginia Rail. Elsewhere on Santa Gertrudis, we found still more specialties of South Texas: Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, Neotropic Cormorants, Great Kiskadees, Couch's Kingbirds, and the broad cupped nests of Cave Swallows. More mundane finds that morning included Anhingas, several Crested Caracaras, our first Greater Roadrunner, some huge alligators on Escondido Lake, and we never drove far between sightings of Scissor-tailed Flycatchers. If the wind was trying to make things difficult, it wasn't trying hard enough.

Most of the afternoon was spent in the wind-blown agricultural fields of the Laureles Division, where relatively few birds are to be seen even in good years. We missed hoped-for Burrowing Owls and Sprague's Pipits, which this year had already flown north, and the only shorebirds of note were a few American Golden-Plovers.

But the key day on this tour is always down at the Norias Division, our only chance for Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, Tropical Parula, and Audubon's Oriole, and the wind refused to let up. Of these four specialties, only the parula is relatively easy to locate, but we managed to locate everything (sort of—the oriole was mostly heard-only), so I couldn't gripe too much about the high winds. However, the birding was very slow that day, and

it took a long time to find everyone a tyrannulet, and even longer to locate the pygmy-owl. Indeed, we didn't succeed until 1:30 pm, the longest I ever had to search for it (although Jim admitted it once took him until 3:00 to find one.) But both members of a mated pair at different times eventually posed up high and in the open for all to watch at leisure, and they even briefly appeared together on the same branch at one point—something I had never seen before!

Finally and mercifully, the wind subsided during the last day-and-a-half of the tour, which is spent along the coast between Corpus Christi and Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. But the winds were replaced by rains much of this time, and finally I had a legitimate—and two-fold—complaint about the weather. First, along with some abnormally high tides, this resulted in generally high water levels and fewer shorebirds than usual. And second, the precipitation curiously failed to ground any migrant passerines.

Still, the Whooping Cranes were as impressive as ever (and the weather temporarily and surprisingly ideal!) during our boat trip to Aransas; we enjoyed green-loreed egrets, orange-tailed spoonbills, and an oystercatcher chick on the same ride; two Clapper Rails swam across a channel not far from a pair of Fulvous Whistling-Ducks; an unexpected American Bittern flew in circles around our van; and no fewer than nine species of terns were present along the coast.

It was more than enough to make us forget that the weather was lousy, that we somehow nearly missed seeing any Ring-billed Gulls, and that we never did quite make it to Whataburger for lunch!

Itinerary

March 28 - Afternoon arrival at Corpus Christi airport and drive to Kingsville; after motel check-in, brief tour of “dangerous” downtown Kingsville and King Ranch Visitors Center, followed by a full tour and dinner at King Ranch Museum, hosted by Bobbie Roberts, with special guests Jim Sinclair (our guide) and King Ranch Naturalist Brian Williams.

March 29 - Windy morning on the Santa Gertrudis Division of King Ranch with Jim, especially Borregos Lake & THE feeder and Escondido Lake; after lunch at the visitors center (where we meet Beto Maldonado), a stop at Jim's hummingbird feeders en route to a windy afternoon in the cotton fields of the Laureles Division; dinner at Kings Inn.

March 30 – Still windy at the Norias Division of King Ranch with Jim, especially the Tate windmill & vicinity, the artesian well, the Norias Colony/Headquarters, and lunch & owling at Caldora Camp; afternoon return to Kingsville via some ponds along Hwy. 77 and in Riviera; dinner at Joe Cotten's Barbeque (with special guests Brian & Karen Williams).

March 31 – Calm but rainy morning drive to Rockport/Fulton via Dick Kleberg Park in Kingsville, Blucher Park in Corpus Christi, the Corpus waterfront (and alleged “Janis Joplin” statue – I tell you, she's from Port Arthur near Beaumont!), and Indian Point & Sunset Lake parks in Portland; lunch stop at the H.E.B. and afternoon boat trip (without rain or wind – finally!) aboard the M.V. Skimmer with Capt. Tommy Moore to Aransas N.W.R.; dinner at Latitude's.

April 1 – Morning birding at Cape Valero, Aransas Pass, Port Aransas (including the beach, Birding Center & Paradise Pond), Mustang Island, and Tule Lake en route to Corpus Christi airport.

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

Fulvous Whistling-Duck (pair at Cape Valero)

Gadwall

American Wigeon

Mottled Duck

Blue-winged Teal

Cinnamon Teal (Port Aransas)

Northern Shoveler

Northern Pintail

Green-winged Teal

Ring-necked Duck

Bufflehead

(Common Goldeneye / leader-only)

Red-breasted Merganser

Ruddy Duck

Wild Turkey (abundant at Norias)

Northern Bobwhite (seen at Laureles, heard elsewhere)

Common Loon

Least Grebe (Borregos L.)

Pied-billed Grebe

American White Pelican

Brown Pelican

Double-crested Cormorant

Neotropic Cormorant

Anhinga (Escondido L.)

American Bittern (circling the van on Sunday)

Great Blue Heron

Great Egret (with green lores!)

Snowy Egret

Little Blue Heron

Tricolored Heron

Reddish Egret (including white morphs)

Cattle Egret

Green Heron

Black-crowned Night-Heron

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron (Port Aransas)

White Ibis

White-faced Ibis
Roseate Spoonbill (with orange tails!)
Black Vulture
Turkey Vulture
Osprey
White-tailed Kite (brief view at Santa Gertrudis)
Northern Harrier
Harris's Hawk
Swainson's Hawk
White-tailed Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk
Crested Caracara (almost common)
American Kestrel
Clapper Rail (swimming at Cape Valero!)
Virginia Rail (seen at Borregos L.)
Sora (ditto)
Common Moorhen
American Coot
Sandhill Crane (late migrants at Santa Gertrudis)
Whooping Crane (including dancing adults)
American Golden-Plover (Laureles)
Killdeer
American Oystercatcher (including a chick seen from the boat)
Black-necked Stilt
American Avocet
Greater Yellowlegs
Lesser Yellowlegs
Solitary Sandpiper
Willet (including both Eastern [*semipalmatus*] and Western [*inornatus*] forms)
Spotted Sandpiper
Whimbrel (from the boat)
Long-billed Curlew
Ruddy Turnstone
Sanderling
Western Sandpiper
Least Sandpiper
Stilt Sandpiper
Long-billed Dowitcher
Wilson's Snipe
Wilson's Phalarope (only briefly at Tule L.)
Laughing Gull
Ring-billed Gull (almost missed!)
Herring Gull
Gull-billed Tern
Caspian Tern
Royal Tern

Sandwich Tern
Common Tern (on the beach at Port Aransas)
Forster's Tern
Least Tern
Black Tern (also on the beach)
Black Skimmer (= 9 tern species!)
Rock Pigeon
Eurasian Collared-Dove (Rockport)
White-winged Dove
Mourning Dove
Inca Dove (Paradise Pond – finally!)
Common Ground-Dove
White-tipped Dove (heard-only near Borregos L. feeder)
Greater Roadrunner
Great Horned Owl
Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl (pair at lunch at Caldora Camp – finally!)
Buff-bellied Hummingbird (best view at Jim's feeders)
Ruby-throated Hummingbird (also at Jim's)
Black-chinned Hummingbird (ditto)
Belted Kingfisher
Golden-fronted Woodpecker
Ladder-backed Woodpecker
Downy Woodpecker (heard-only; unusual wintering individual at Paradise Pond)
Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet (seen by all in the scope – finally)
Vermilion Flycatcher
Brown-crested Flycatcher (Norias)
Great Kiskadee
Couch's Kingbird
Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (as common as ever)
Loggerhead Shrike
White-eyed Vireo (mostly heard at Norias)
Green Jay (best views at Borregos L. feeder)
Horned Lark (Laureles)
Purple Martin
Tree Swallow
Northern Rough-winged Swallow
Barn Swallow
Cliff Swallow
Cave Swallow (close view of nests under Hwy. 141)
Black-crested Titmouse (also best at the feeder)
Carolina Wren (heard-only)
Bewick's Wren
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher
Eastern Bluebird
Gray Catbird
Northern Mockingbird

Long-billed Thrasher (another Borregos L. feeder specialty)
European Starling
Tropical Parula (close & cooperative by Tate Windmill)
Yellow-rumped Warbler (only at Port Aransas)
(Yellow-throated Warbler / leader-only at Norias)
Summer Tanager
Olive Sparrow (yet another Borregos L. specialty!)
Lark Sparrow
Savannah Sparrow
Lincoln's Sparrow
Northern Cardinal
(Pyrrhuloxia / leader-only at Norias)
Red-winged Blackbird
Eastern Meadowlark
Brewer's Blackbird (only along Hwy. 77)
Boat-tailed Grackle (unexpected female in Fulton)
Great-tailed Grackle
Bronzed Cowbird (guess where the best view was)
Brown-headed Cowbird
Hooded Oriole (Norias)
Audubon's Oriole (mostly heard at Norias, but seen by Marty)
House Sparrow

Also seen:

Fox Squirrel
Nutria (Port Aransas)
Coyote (from the boat)
White-tailed Deer
Javelina (a.k.a. Collared Peccary)
Feral Hog
Hispid Cotton Rat
Bottle-nosed Dolphin

American Alligator (mostly at Escondido L.)
Red-eared Slider
Green Anole (on Jim's "lawn")