

KING RANCH & WHOOPING CRANES

APRIL 5 – 9, 2008

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Leader(s): Kim Eckert (with King Ranch guide Tom Langschied)

Summary

As evidenced by our long species list (nearly 180 species!), there's certainly a lot to see on this brief four-day tour. The most highly sought birds, though, are just four in number and found during our day down in the live oak mottes of the Norias Division of King Ranch. It's here that we concentrate on seeing Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, Tropical Parula, and Audubon's Oriole—all birds found practically nowhere else in the United States.

True, the tyrannulet and oriole can also be seen locally at a few favored places along the nearby Rio Grande River, but to see that owl and parula you normally have to arrange a visit to the King Ranch or one of the other private ranches in Deep South Texas. Over the years, we've found that the oriole tends to be the most difficult of the four to see. For some reason, this species is typically reluctant to respond to recordings of its song, and, should we miss one of the four Norias specialties, it's usually this bird.

Second-hardest is usually that pygmy-owl. I don't think there has ever been a tour when one wasn't at least heard, but there have been a few on which this shy, diurnal owl refused to emerge into view from the thickets. Third in difficulty tends to be the tyrannulet, a bird that's vocal enough, but it can be shy, unresponsive to recordings, and with drab plumage difficult to discern among the vegetation. And easiest of the four is usually the parula, a colorful and persistent singer which readily appears to defend its territory.

So, it was certainly an oddity this year to find these four in exactly the reverse order. The Audubon's Oriole was not only the first one to appear, but it even came a full day before our day at Norias: i.e., on Day Three in the Santa Gertrudis Division, where the species does not normally occur. The species also appeared for us at Norias, and it was again the first of the four specialties to show up that day—and at our very first stop in the oaks. Then, just a few minutes later in this same motte, we tracked down our first Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl. Last year it took us well into the afternoon to see this owl, but this time we had the two hardest specialties almost before we found anything else.

We then moved on to another stand of oaks where a Tropical Parula was singing away. But (and you guessed it) before we all saw this “easiest” of the four specialties, a Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet began singing, and an unusually cooperative pair of them came into view before the parula did. No one was complaining, to be sure, to have seen all four specialties in such a timely fashion, but it was still strange for their timing to be so backwards.

Only four species discussed so far in this summary, with 170+ others to go. Space limitations preclude talking about all of them, of course, but leading the list of other highlights has to be the pair of overwintering Masked Ducks waiting for us at Santa Gertrudis—the first time in many years we’ve seen this exceptional rarity!

Memorable as well were an exceptionally close pair of Whooping Cranes bowing and leaping in courtship display within a few yards of the tour boat. Also significant was our list of no fewer than 29 shorebird species, perhaps our best list ever (and it would be an even 30 if we count that probable golden-plover near Riviera). And a final highlight was our brief visit to Blucher Park near downtown Corpus Christi before returning to the airport: besides eight species of migrant warblers, an overwintering and out-of-place Clay-colored Robin posed on a nearby branch in full view—certainly this had to be the first time ever for this South Texas specialty on this tour!

Itinerary

April 5 - Afternoon arrival at Corpus Christi airport (well, most of us made it anyway), and drive to Rockport/Fulton via stops at Blucher Park and Indian Point; dinner at Latitude’s in Rockport.

April 6 – Morning boat trip aboard the *Skimmer* into Aransas N.W.R.; after lunch at Moondog Restaurant (a lifer restaurant), drive to Kingsville via Connie Hagar Sanctuary/Rockport Beach Park, Sunset Lake Park, and Hazel Bazemore County Park; brief tour and catered dinner at the King Ranch Museum (with former King Ranch Naturalist Tom Langschied).

April 7 – All morning with Tom on the Santa Gertrudis Division of King Ranch, and briefly in the afternoon on the Laureles Division; dinner (with birding en route) at Baffin Bay Cafe (another lifer restaurant).

April 8 – Most of the day with Tom on the Norias Division of King Ranch, return to Kingsville via Hwy 77, FMs 771 & 1120, and briefly at the King Ranch Visitors Center; dinner at Young’s Pizza (yet another lifer).

April 9 – Return to the Corpus Christi airport via 3 Cave Swallow bridges, brief checks of Hazel Bazemore and Pollywog Pond, and successful return to Blucher Park.

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

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck (especially common at Santa Gertrudis)

Gadwall

American Wigeon

Mottled Duck

Blue-winged Teal

Northern Shoveler

Redhead

Ring-necked Duck
Lesser Scaup
(Bufflehead / leader-only from the *Skimmer*)
Common Goldeneye (only seen by Joe from the *Skimmer*)
(Red-breasted Merganser / leader-only, also from the *Skimmer*)
Ruddy Duck
Masked Duck (2 overwintering at Santa Gertrudis, possibly a mated pair)
Wild Turkey (especially numerous at Santa Gertrudis)
Northern Bobwhite (ditto!)
Common Loon
Least Grebe (best views at Santa Gertrudis)
Pied-billed Grebe
Eared Grebe
American White Pelican
Brown Pelican
Double-crested Cormorant
Neotropic Cormorant (Santa Gertrudis)
Anhinga (ditto)
Great Blue Heron
Great Egret
Snowy Egret (standing on a rooftop with Cattle Egrets?!)
Little Blue Heron
Tricolored Heron
Reddish Egret (including white morphs)
Cattle Egret
Green Heron
Black-crowned Night-Heron
Yellow-crowned Night-Heron (immature at Indian Point)
White Ibis
White-faced Ibis
Roseate Spoonbill
Black Vulture
Turkey Vulture
Osprey
White-tailed Kite (especially nice view at Santa Gertrudis)
Northern Harrier
Sharp-shinned Hawk
Cooper's Hawk
Harris's Hawk
Red-shouldered Hawk (heard-only at Norias)
Broad-winged Hawk (several hundred migrants over Santa Gertrudis)
Swainson's Hawk
White-tailed Hawk (including a confusing immature at Laureles)
Red-tailed Hawk
Crested Caracara
American Kestrel

Merlin (a female *richardsonii* at Laureles)
Clapper Rail (close and cooperative at Indian Point)
Sora (heard-only at Santa Gertrudis)
Common Moorhen
American Coot
Whooping Crane (including an exceptionally close pair of dancing/displaying adults)
Black-bellied Plover
Snowy Plover (Sunset Lake Park)
Wilson's Plover
Semipalmated Plover
Piping Plover (including a color-banded bird at Indian Point)
Killdeer
American Oystercatcher (including 2 chicks seen from the *Skimmer* – aw!)
Black-necked Stilt
American Avocet
Greater Yellowlegs
Lesser Yellowlegs
Solitary Sandpiper
Willet (including both Eastern [*semipalmatus*] and Western [*inornatus*] forms)
Spotted Sandpiper
Upland Sandpiper (especially at Laureles)
Whimbrel (Norias only)
Long-billed Curlew
Marbled Godwit
Ruddy Turnstone
Sanderling
Semipalmated Sandpiper
Western Sandpiper
Least Sandpiper
Baird's Sandpiper (unexpected at Norias)
Pectoral Sandpiper
Dunlin
Stilt Sandpiper
Short-billed Dowitcher (both dowitchers calling)
Long-billed Dowitcher (= 29 shorebird species!)
Laughing Gull
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Gull-billed Tern
Caspian Tern
Royal Tern
Sandwich Tern
Forster's Tern
Least Tern (especially common at Indian Point)
Black Skimmer
Rock Pigeon

Eurasian Collared-Dove
White-winged Dove
Mourning Dove
Inca Dove
Common Ground-Dove
White-tipped Dove (unusually cooperative at Santa Gertrudis)
Greater Roadrunner
Barn Owl (in two barns)
Eastern Screech-Owl (only seen in flight at Norias)
Great Horned Owl (including a nest with 3 young – aw!)
Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl (relatively easy at our first Norias stop)
Chimney Swift
Buff-bellied Hummingbird (best view away from feeders at Norias)
Ruby-throated Hummingbird
Golden-fronted Woodpecker
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (winter lingerer at Norias)
Ladder-backed Woodpecker
Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet (especially cooperative at Norias)
Say's Phoebe (lingering at Santa Gertrudis)
Vermilion Flycatcher
Brown-crested Flycatcher
Great Kiskadee
Couch's Kingbird
Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (still ubiquitous!)
Loggerhead Shrike
White-eyed Vireo
Blue-headed Vireo (migrant at Blucher Park)
Green Jay
Horned Lark (especially at Laureles)
Purple Martin (nesting at Hazel Bazemore)
Tree Swallow
Northern Rough-winged Swallow
Barn Swallow
Cliff Swallow
Cave Swallow (best views at Dick Kleberg Park)
Black-crested Titmouse
Verdin (nice view at Norias)
Carolina Wren (heard-only)
Bewick's Wren (also heard-only)
Marsh Wren (yet another heard-only wren)
Clay-colored Robin (still overwintering at Blucher Park)
Northern Mockingbird
Long-billed Thrasher
Curve-billed Thrasher (King Ranch Visitors Center)
European Starling
Orange-crowned Warbler (Blucher Park)

Northern Warbler (ditto)
Tropical Parula (close view of a cooperative pair at Norias)
Black-throated Green Warbler (singing migrants at Norias)
Black-and-white Warbler (Norias and Blucher Park)
Worm-eating Warbler (brief view at Blucher)
Ovenbird (ditto)
Northern Waterthrush (also at Blucher)
Kentucky Warbler (guess where?)
Common Yellowthroat (heard-only)
Hooded Warbler (at Blucher, of course)
Summer Tanager (Norias)
Olive Sparrow
Cassin's Sparrow (singing and skylarking males at Norias!)
Vesper Sparrow
Lark Sparrow
Savannah Sparrow
Seaside Sparrow (nice scope views from the *Skimmer*)
Lincoln's Sparrow
Swamp Sparrow
Northern Cardinal
Pyrrhuloxia
Red-winged Blackbird
Eastern Meadowlark
Western Meadowlark
Yellow-headed Blackbird (only seen by Suzanne at Santa Gertrudis)
Brewer's Blackbird
Boat-tailed Grackle (dark-eyed female from the *Skimmer*)
Great-tailed Grackle
Bronzed Cowbird
Brown-headed Cowbird
Hooded Oriole (Norias)
Audubon's Oriole (Norias and unexpected at Santa Gertrudis)
House Sparrow

Also seen:

Nilgai (several at Norias)
White-tailed Deer
Javelina/Collared Peccary (especially common at Santa Gertrudis)
Fox Squirrel
Black-tailed Jackrabbit
Eastern Cottontail
Hispid Cotton Rat
Hispid Pocket Mouse
Bottle-nosed Dolphin (from the *Skimmer*)

American Alligator
Texas Tortoise (Santa Gertrudis)
Red-eared Slider
Texas Horned Lizard (Norias)
Prairie Racerunner
Bullfrog
(W. Diamond-backed Rattlesnake / dead-on-road at Norias)