

**NEW YEAR  
IN  
SOUTH TEXAS**

**DECEMBER 27, 2008 –  
JANUARY 2, 2009**

**LEADER: KIM ECKERT**

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**Leader: Kim Eckert**

It's entirely possible we set some sort of birding tour record—which I'm not exactly proud of.

After all, when it comes to birding the Lower Rio Grande Valley, the first places which invariably come to mind would have to be Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge and Bentsen State Park, and we didn't stop at either place! Nor, for that matter, did we ever find the time for Laguna Atascosa, a refuge almost as venerable as Santa Ana. Certainly, this was a first for me, skipping all three sites on a South Texas tour, and I wouldn't be surprised if this was the first time any tour had skipped them all.

So, what happened? Simple: too many vagrants and too little time. The best birds were showing up at places like the Frontera Audubon Thicket and Estero Llano Grande State Park, birding sites just a few years old with hardly the reputation of a Santa Ana or Bentsen. And birding tours typically schedule just enough time to cover the usual places to find the expected specialties of the region. In a way, it's almost better if there are no rarities around to alter a tour's normal itinerary. There just isn't time enough to see everything, no matter how hard you try.

But try we did, with our first chase a most successful one into Willacy County northwest of Harlingen to view some staked-out Masked Ducks. You guessed it—this site is not a place birding tours normally go, but it was well worth it for a rarity of this magnitude, a species that's simply not around in perhaps nine out of ten years. I might add that while the ducks cooperated, the weather did not, considering that temperatures were pushing 90, with winds earlier that day gusting over 60 m.p.h.! Also newsworthy on Day One were the dozens of juvenile and sub-adult White-tailed Hawks attracted to a harvested sugar cane field near the ducks. Never had I seen so many in one place, and I found it curious that none of those we looked at was a full adult.

As hot as it was the first day, Day Two was just the opposite. Temperatures only peaked in the low 60s, some 25 degrees colder than the day before, with 20-plus m.p.h. winds this time gusting out of the north, and this was our only day to cover Brownsville, South Padre Island, and vicinity. We found Sabal Palm Grove, normally a very birdy place, to be very quiet, and South Padre Island seemed especially uncomfortable with nothing to diminish the winds blowing in off the water. We had hoped to walk out on a jetty to search for another staked-out rarity (Purple Sandpiper), but, needless to say, wind-blown waves crashing over the jetty changed our minds. Still, the Piping Plovers along a nearby beach seemed more numerous than ever, and at least four Clapper Rails cavorted out in the open along a marsh boardwalk despite the cold.

En route to South Padre, by the way, we couldn't resist the lure of a favorite but relatively unknown site. It doesn't even have a name, as far as I know, yet this inlet off Bahia Grande along Highway 48 almost always has something to offer. Waiting for us this time were four nice species not seen elsewhere: perhaps 100 or more (!) Yellow-crowned Night-Herons hunkered in the

mangroves out of the wind, a lone Sandwich Tern (not normally present in winter), a few Gull-billed Terns (uncommon and local in winter), and an entertaining flock of Black Skimmers.

During the next two days in and around Weslaco, McAllen, and vicinity, we added to our list of “Valley specialties”—spectacular and famous birds literally too numerous to mention. We also had at least some success turning up a few hard-to-find specialties: unprecedented numbers of Fulvous Whistling-Ducks (absent many winters), a Common Pauraque sleeping in the exact same place I had seen it in November, and the always-special Tropical Parula at Quinta Mazatlan—yet another relatively new and less-familiar site.

Our next day upriver between Salineño and Zapata produced even better birding, as we started with *both* a Muscovy Duck and eight Red-billed Pigeons flying by about the same time at Chapeño—and it is no exaggeration to say a typical tour misses both. Interestingly, we saw no fewer than *eight* species of pigeons/doves that morning (try doing that anywhere else in the U.S.)! A handsome and easy-to-miss adult Gray Hawk posed along the river at Salineño, and, before heading north and back to the coast, we turned up a White-collared Seedeater in Zapata. Arguably, the seedeater is even harder to find than the Muscovy and Red-billed Pigeon.

The tour was punctuated by a most pleasant trip aboard the *M.V. Skimmer* into Aransas National Wildlife Refuge (finally, we were birding where we were supposed to be birding.) Whooping Cranes, of course, are always the highlight here, although equally significant was a white-morph Great Blue Heron, a bird formerly named Great White Heron and normally limited to extreme southern Florida. The weather was just as memorable, with the first sunny skies since Day One, calm winds, and temperatures in the 70s.

It was almost enough to let us forget about that volatile weather of our first two days. Funny, but when I was back in wintry Minnesota the next day complaining about those temperatures in the 80s one day and down in the 60s the next, I somehow failed to elicit any sympathy!

#### ITINERARY:

December 27. Afternoon drive to Willacy County and the Masked Duck ponds by Valley Salt Lakes NWR; then drive to Weslaco and our first check of the Frontera Audubon Thicket. (Dinner at Blue Onion in Weslaco)

December 28. Morning drive east to Sabal Palm Grove in Brownsville; continue on to cold and windy South Padre Island, via Hwy. 48 and Bahia Grande, for lunch (at Blackbeard's) and the convention center beach and boardwalk; return to Weslaco via Hwy. 100 and the Fullers' feeders in San Benito. (Dinner at Lone Star Restaurant in Harlingen)

December 29. Return to Frontera (second visit), then Estero Llano Grande, then back to Frontera for the third time; late afternoon drive to McAllen for the parakeet horde; return to Weslaco and the cowbird roost at HEB. (Dinner at Blue Onion – where else?)

December 30. Brief pre-dawn owling option at Estero Llano Grande; fourth (and final!) stop at Frontera; then drive west to Zapata via Quinta Mazatlan, lunch (for blue jello at Luby's), Anzalduas County Park, and the model airplane/pipit field in Peñitas. (Dinner at Caro's in Rio Grande City)

December 31. Morning at Chapeño, Falcon County Park, and Salineño; lunch and mid-day birding at Falcon State Park; return to Zapata for an unsuccessful check of the seedeater pond, a brief tour of Las Palmas, and our annual New Years Eve dinner until the wee hours of 8-9 pm catered by Zapata's finest restaurant (i.e., Pizza Hut).

January 1. Began the New Year with a successful (!) return to the seedeater pond; drive to Rockport-Fulton (incl. our annual Harris's Hawk vs Crested Caracara contest), with a brief stop at Jim Sinclair's "yard" in Kingsville; afternoon boat trip (clear, calm, and warm for a change!) aboard the M.V. Skimmer for Whooping Cranes et al. in Aransas N.W.R. (Dinner at Paradise Key – not bad for our 3rd choice)

January 2. Hwy. 35 drive in the fog (for grackles!); the Lamar Peninsula (incl. The Big Tree!); Connie Hagar Sanctuary; Cape Valero; Old Port Bay Club Rd and drive to Corpus Christi airport for the end of the tour.

### **BIRDLIST:**

(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 (best views on the San Benito resaca)

Fulvous Whistling-Duck (a couple dozen or so at Llano Grande; 0 or 1 is normal on this tour!)

Greater White-fronted Goose

Snow Goose (mostly seen near Rockport the last morning)

**Muscovy Duck** (a fly-by juvenile at Chapeño; not seen on most tours)

Wood Duck (not seen on most tours)

Gadwall

American Wigeon

Mallard (well, the male at Rockport looked sort-of wild)

Mottled Duck

Blue-winged Teal

Cinnamon Teal (first seen with the Masked Ducks)

Northern Shoveler

Northern Pintail

Green-winged Teal

Canvasback

Redhead

Ring-necked Duck

Lesser Scaup

Bufflehead

Common Goldeneye (from the boat)

Red-breasted Merganser

**Masked Duck** (two staked-out, female-plumaged birds on the first day)

Ruddy Duck

Plain Chachalaca (we barely survived the marauding gang at Frontera!)

quail, sp. (either N Bobwhites or Scaled Quail near Falcon Dam)

Common Loon (from the boat)

Least Grebe (especially close at Estero Llano Grande)  
 Pied-billed Grebe  
 Eared Grebe (from the boat)  
 American White Pelican  
 Brown Pelican  
Neotropic Cormorant (some already showing their white nuptial plumes)  
 Double-crested Cormorant  
 Anhinga (including "serenading" males at Estero Llano Grande)  
 (American Bittern / leader-only fly-by at Salineño)  
 Great Blue Heron (incl. a **Great White Heron** seen from the boat)  
 Great Egret  
 Snowy Egret  
 Little Blue Heron  
 Tricolored Heron  
 Reddish Egret  
 Cattle Egret  
 Green Heron (Frontera)  
 Black-crowned Night-Heron  
 Yellow-crowned Night-Heron (dozens – perhaps 100 or more – at Bahia Grande!)  
 White Ibis  
 White-faced Ibis  
 Roseate Spoonbill (nicest views on the last morning near Rockport)  
 Black Vulture  
 Turkey Vulture  
 Osprey  
 White-tailed Kite  
 Northern Harrier  
 Sharp-shinned Hawk  
 Cooper's Hawk  
 Harris's Hawk (69 of them = first-place on the Zapata-Kingsville raptor contest)  
 Red-shouldered Hawk  
Gray Hawk (handsome adult on the Mexican side of the river at Salineño)  
White-tailed Hawk (incl. dozens of immatures at the harvested cane field on Day 1)  
 Red-tailed Hawk  
 Crested Caracara (53 individuals = 2nd-place from Zapata to Kingsville)  
 American Kestrel  
 Merlin (cooperative *richardsoni* bird at Anzalduas)  
 Peregrine Falcon  
 Clapper Rail (at least 4 running around in the cold at South Padre)  
 Sora  
 Common Moorhen  
 American Coot  
 Sandhill Crane (incl. a flock of 26 over Estero Llano Grande; normally not seen in the Valley)  
Whooping Crane (total of 18 seen from the boat)  
 Black-bellied Plover  
 Snowy Plover (from the boat)  
 Semipalmated Plover  
 Piping Plover (unusually numerous at South Padre)  
 Killdeer

American Oystercatcher  
 Black-necked Stilt  
 American Avocet  
 Spotted Sandpiper  
 Greater Yellowlegs  
 Willet  
 Lesser Yellowlegs  
 Long-billed Curlew (almost the first species of the tour, by the Harlingen airport)  
 Marbled Godwit  
 Ruddy Turnstone  
 Sanderling  
 Western Sandpiper  
 Least Sandpiper  
 Dunlin  
 Stilt Sandpiper (Llano Grande)  
 Short-billed Dowitcher (calling at Bahia Grande, but no Long-billeds for sure)  
 Wilson's Snipe  
 Laughing Gull  
 Ring-billed Gull  
 Herring Gull  
 Gull-billed Tern (only at Bahia Grande)  
 Caspian Tern  
 Forster's Tern  
 Royal Tern  
**Sandwich Tern** (unexpected at Bahia Grande; normally not present in winter)  
 Black Skimmer (Bahia Grande – where else?)  
 Rock Pigeon  
**Red-billed Pigeon** (total of 8 fly-bys at Chapeño; not seen on most tours)  
 Eurasian Collared-Dove (more common and widespread than ever)  
 White-winged Dove (many more than usual present this winter)  
 Mourning Dove  
 Inca Dove  
 Common Ground-Dove  
White-tipped Dove (= 8 pigeon/dove species on Day 5!)  
Green Parakeet (staging – and bathing! – at 10<sup>th</sup> & Dove in McAllen)  
Red-crowned Parrot (brief and distant views of Weslaco fly-bys)  
 Greater Roadrunner (sharing our lunch at Falcon State Park)  
 (Groove-billed Ani / leader-only, heard-only – alas – at Salineño)  
 (Barn Owl / mostly leader-only – alas again – at Estero Llano Grande)  
 Eastern Screech-Owl (heard-only)  
**Common Pauraque** (asleep in the same spot since Nov. at Estero Llano Grande)  
Buff-bellied Hummingbird  
 Anna's Hummingbird (brief view at Jim Sinclair's house in Kingsville)  
 Broad-tailed Hummingbird (heard-only at the Fullers' in San Benito)  
Ringed Kingfisher  
 Belted Kingfisher  
Green Kingfisher (only at Estero Llano Grande)  
Golden-fronted Woodpecker

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker  
 Ladder-backed Woodpecker  
 (Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet / leader-only, heard-only)  
 Black Phoebe (incl. the usual pair by Anzalduas Dam)  
 Eastern Phoebe  
 Vermilion Flycatcher (especially bright at overcast Falcon State Park)  
Great Kiskadee  
Tropical Kingbird (best looks and listens at Estero Llano Grande)  
Couch's Kingbird  
 Loggerhead Shrike  
 White-eyed Vireo (why so few?)  
 Blue-headed Vireo  
Green Jay (those we ignored were a "jaded" shade of green)  
 Horned Lark (from the boat)  
 swallow, sp. (probably some of them were Cave Swallows – alas)  
Black-crested Titmouse  
 Cactus Wren  
 Carolina Wren  
 Bewick's Wren (why so few?)  
 House Wren  
 Sedge Wren (brief views the last morning near Rockport)  
 Marsh Wren (heard-only near Rockport)  
 Ruby-crowned Kinglet  
 Blue-gray Gnatcatcher  
 Black-tailed Gnatcatcher (Falcon State Park, thanks to a tip from Roy)  
 Eastern Bluebird  
Clay-colored Thrush (close views at Frontera Audubon's feeders)  
 American Robin (brief fly-by at Zapata)  
 Northern Mockingbird  
Long-billed Thrasher  
 Curve-billed Thrasher  
 European Starling  
 American Pipit  
 Sprague's Pipit (sneakier-than-normal at Anzalduas and Peñitas)  
 Cedar Waxwing  
 Orange-crowned Warbler  
 Nashville Warbler  
**Tropical Warbler** (finally tracked down at Quinta Mazatlan)  
 Yellow-rumped Warbler (incl. "Audubon's" types)  
 Black-throated Green Warbler  
 Yellow-throated Warbler  
 Pine Warbler (Anzalduas)  
 Black-and-white Warbler  
 Ovenbird (Frontera)  
 Northern Waterthrush (Frontera; not seen most winters)  
 Common Yellowthroat  
 Wilson's Warbler (almost common)  
**White-collared Seedeater** (on our second attempt in Zapata)  
Olive Sparrow (easiest to see at Cheryl's in Salineño)

Cassin's Sparrow  
Chipping Sparrow  
Vesper Sparrow  
Lark Sparrow  
Black-throated Sparrow  
Savannah Sparrow  
Seaside Sparrow (brief views from the boat)  
Lincoln's Sparrow  
Swamp Sparrow  
Northern Cardinal  
Pyrrhuloxia (especially common at Falcon State Park)  
(Indigo Bunting / leader-only at Frontera)  
**Rose-breasted Grosbeak** (male at Frontera; not present most winters)  
Red-winged Blackbird  
Eastern Meadowlark  
Western Meadowlark  
Boat-tailed Grackle (in the fog along Hwy. 35 north of Fulton)  
Great-tailed Grackle  
Bronzed Cowbird (best views in the HEB parking lot – where else?)  
Brown-headed Cowbird  
Hooded Oriole (again in Salineño; not normally present in winter)  
Altamira Oriole  
Audubon's Oriole (thanks to Cheryl's feeders in Salineño)  
House Finch (unexpected at Anzalduas)  
Pine Siskin (ditto)  
American Goldfinch  
House Sparrow

**Also seen:**

Coyote (residential Weslaco)  
White-tailed Deer  
Feral Hog (from the boat)  
Eastern Cottontail  
Desert Cottontail  
Black-tailed Jackrabbit  
Fox Squirrel  
Bottle-nosed Dolphin (from the boat)  
American Alligator (Estero Llano Grande)  
Red-eared Slider