

BIG BEND SUMMER

JULY 14 - 21, 2008

**LEADERS:
BARRY ZIMMER AND BOB SUNDSTROM**

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Ten feet over our heads, the star of the Chisos Mountains, the Colima Warbler, flitted about in an oak tree above the trail. Constantly pumping its tail and showing off the yellowish-orange undertail coverts, and occasionally tilting its head down to expose the rufous crown, the highly sought Colima seemed to be putting on a show for our group. Vying for our attention, however, was a stunning scarlet-bellied Painted Redstart in the same tree just feet away. Creeping about the thicker trunks and fanning its large white outer retrices, the redstart was impossible to ignore. What to look at first—the warbler found nowhere else in the United States or the stunning gem that was the redstart? This was a good kind of dilemma. Our 2008 Big Bend Summer tour seemed full of such dilemmas. Target species, spectacularly colorful birds, interesting mammals and reptiles, and splendid scenery were ever-present.

Our trip began in El Paso where we enjoyed the likes of Western and Clark's grebes (some dancing), Gambel's and Scaled quail, a rare Least Tern, 34 Burrowing Owls in one morning(!), Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Cave Swallow, the always elusive Crissal Thrasher, and brilliant Painted Buntings and Blue Grosbeaks among others. Luxurious Cibolo Creek Ranch was our next destination, and here our luck continued. A nesting pair of Zone-tailed Hawks performed splendidly with walk-away scope views. Always spectacular Vermilion Flycatchers seemed to be around every corner, and a plum-colored Varied Bunting put on a show. That evening our owling efforts yielded great views of a pair of tiny Elf Owls, a Western Screech-Owl right overhead, Common Poorwill, and both species of nighthawks!

We arrived at Big Bend National Park on our third afternoon, soaking in the rugged splendor of the landscape. While tallying our checklist that evening outside our hotel rooms, a Gray Vireo began singing nearby. The checklist was immediately abandoned and we enjoyed fantastic studies of this localized species from 20 feet or closer! The next morning, on the Window Trail, we may have experienced our ultimate highlight. Someone spotted a mother black bear with four cubs feeding on acorns in a nearby oak tree. We were able to watch these magnificent animals from relatively close range for over 20 minutes as they fed and played unconcernedly. An amazing five Black-capped Vireos, seven Gray Vireos, three female Lucifer Hummingbirds from as close as 10 feet, another male Varied Bunting, and several Black-chinned Sparrows were icing on the cake. In the afternoon we headed down to Cottonwood Campground along the Rio Grande and were treated to Gray Hawk, Tropical Kingbird, an unexpected Lucy's Warbler, and the wonderful scenery of Santa Elena Canyon.

On our second day in the park we made the all-day hike to Boot Springs in search of the Colima Warbler. Not only did we net five Colimas with several marvelous views, but we also saw Blue-throated Hummingbird, male Lucifer Hummingbird, a rare Dusky-capped Flycatcher, Cordilleran Flycatcher, a vagrant Black-and-white Warbler, and Hepatic and Western tanagers among others. On our final morning in the park we went down to Rio Grande Village where the parade of colors

continued. Yellow-breasted Chats, Painted Buntings, Blue Grosbeaks, Vermilion Flycatchers, Summer Tanagers, Hooded and Orchard orioles—every crayon in the box represented!

By midday we were headed north toward the Davis Mountains. Scissor-tailed Flycatchers provided entertainment along the way. In the late afternoon, along Limpia Creek, a pair of Common Black-Hawks quickly became the stars of the day.

Our final morning was spent in the recently acquired Davis Mountains Nature Conservancy Preserve. We added many new birds to our list including Buff-breasted Flycatcher (the only known pair in Texas!), Gray Flycatcher, Violet-green Swallow, Plumbeous Vireo, and Grace's Warbler. Our main target, the incomparable Montezuma Quail, eluded us until mid-morning, when we enjoyed scope views of a calling male from about 100 feet. Later on, a pair of these splendid birds walked right in front of Bob's van and we were able to watch them as they fed along the roadside for 10 minutes or more!

Our return to El Paso the last afternoon produced more highlights still. The locally uncommon Mississippi Kites on the west side of town appeared in record time, so we headed quickly to the hummingbird feeders in my yard. We closed out our trip with an hour of feeder-watching which yielded several brilliant Rufous and one stunning and feisty Calliope among the many Black-chinneds. Surely, this Big Bend tour will be hard to top in the future!

Itinerary:

July 14 - my yard, Wilderness Park Museum (24 species)

July 15 - Border Highway, Hwy 20, Tornillo Reservoir, Fort Hancock Sewage Ponds, McNary Reservoir, Cibolo Creek (83 species; 85 total)

July 16 - Cibolo Creek Ranch, drive to Big Bend National Park via the River Road, evening owling (63 species; 103 total)

July 17 - Window Trail, afternoon to Cottonwood Campground and Santa Elena Canyon overlook (61 species; 123 total)

July 18 - all day hike to Boot Springs via Pinnacles Trail and returning Laguna Meadows Trail (41 species; 132 total)

July 19 - Rio Grande Village, roadside near Marathon, Limpia Creek, Davis Mountains State Park, McDonald Observatory (78 species; 140 total)

July 20 - Davis Mountains State Park, Davis Mountains Nature Conservancy Preserve, drive to El Paso with stops in west El Paso and my yard (65 species; 152 total)

July 21 - departures for home (152 species)

Key:

E = all areas in and around El Paso (down river as far as McNary)

C = Cibolo Creek Ranch, Presidio

B = Big Bend National Park

D = Davis Mountains, Marathon/ Alpine

bold-faced species indicate birds of rare, casual, or accidental occurrence

underlined species indicate birds of very uncommon occurrence or species which occur in such low density as to be easily missed

Birds: total species - 152

Wood Duck E

Mallard E,C,D---mostly of the “Mexican Duck” subspecies (*diazi*)

Ruddy Duck E

Wild Turkey D---two sizable flocks along roadsides

Scaled Quail E,C,B---several nice views

Gambel’s Quail E---excellent studies in my yard

Montezuma Quail D---seemingly another down year for this species; we really struggled to find any, but eventually had a nice calling male thanks to Paul and another pair that crossed right in front of Bob’s van; voted the favorite bird of the tour!

Pied-billed Grebe E,B

Eared Grebe E---a few in breeding plumage at McNary

Western Grebe E---many at McNary

Clark’s Grebe E--- good comparative views with Westerns; some dancing

American White Pelican E

Double-crested Cormorant E

Neotropic Cormorant E

Great Blue Heron E,C,B

Snowy Egret E

Green Heron E,B

Black Vulture B---one spotted by Jeff near Santa Elena

Turkey Vulture seen daily in numbers

Mississippi Kite E---nice views in west El Paso; easily missed

Cooper’s Hawk D

Common Black-Hawk D---wonderful flight views of pair near Fort Davis

Harris’s Hawk E--- uncommon and localized

Gray Hawk B---an immature at Cottonwood campground and an adult at RGV

Swainson’s Hawk E,C,D---many good views

Zone-tailed Hawk C,B---exceptional views of a pair at Cibolo Creek, another near Presidio

Red-tailed Hawk almost daily; the southwestern *fuertes* race

American Kestrel E

Peregrine Falcon C---along the river near Presidio

American Coot E

Semipalmated Plover E---by Jeff only I believe

Killdeer E,C

Black-necked Stilt E

American Avocet E

Long-billed Curlew E---a nice find at McNary

Western Sandpiper E

Least Sandpiper E

Black Tern E---about 20 early migrants at McNary

Forster’s Tern E---about a dozen

Least Tern E---one spotted by Jeff at McNary was a nice rarity

Rock Pigeon urban areas throughout

Band-tailed Pigeon B

Eurasian Collared-Dove seen in virtually every town throughout the tour; spreading at an alarming rate

White-winged Dove seen daily in numbers

Mourning Dove ditto

Inca Dove E,C,B---best in my yard, including one on a nest
 Common Ground-Dove B---uncommon
 Yellow-billed Cuckoo E,C,B---very surprising was one found by Jeff at the Wilderness Park Museum; great views
 Greater Roadrunner E,C,B---an impressive total of 18 seen!
Western Screech-Owl C,B---point blank views of two pairs; often hard to get in late summer
Elf Owl C---after some effort we finally had great views of this tiny species; generally hard in late summer
 Burrowing Owl E---an impressive 34 individuals our first morning; incredible studies
 Lesser Nighthawk C,B---many around dusk and a great daytime study at RGV
 Common Nighthawk C---less numerous than the preceding species
 Common Poorwill C---flight views of male
 White-throated Swift B
 Blue-throated Hummingbird B---male seen perched at Boot Springs
Lucifer Hummingbird B---three females down the Window Trail at point blank range and spectacular views of a male just below Laguna Meadows; voted the second favorite bird of the tour!
 Black-chinned Hummingbird seen daily in numbers
Calliope Hummingbird E---a male in my yard the last afternoon was a real bonus!
 Broad-tailed Hummingbird B,D
 Rufous Hummingbird E---stunning adult males in my yard
 Acorn Woodpecker B,D
 Golden-fronted Woodpecker C,B
 Ladder-backed Woodpecker seen daily in small numbers
 Western Wood-Pewee C,D---an early migrant at Cibolo
Buff-breasted Flycatcher D---excellent views; only one pair known in Texas
 Gray Flycatcher D---great study
 Cordilleran Flycatcher B
 Black Phoebe E,C,B
 Say's Phoebe C,B,D
 Vermilion Flycatcher C,B---up to 20 in one day!
Dusky-capped Flycatcher B---a casual visitor to Texas; we had one near the Pinnacles
 Ash-throated Flycatcher C,B,D
Brown-crested Flycatcher B---uncommon but increasing
Tropical Kingbird B---great scope views of one of a pair returning to Cottonwood Campground for about the seventh year
 Cassin's Kingbird E,C,D---unusual were a seemingly territorial pair at Fort Hancock
 Western Kingbird E,C,B,D
 Scissor-tailed Flycatcher D---five near Marathon; scarcer than normal
 Loggerhead Shrike E,B---scarcer than usual with only about five seen
 Bell's Vireo C,B---many good views
Black-capped Vireo B---amazingly we had five of these rare vireos; exceptional views for this skulking species on the western extreme of it's range; missed more often than seen; tied for third favorite bird of the tour!
Gray Vireo B---excellent views of seven (a tour record) in Big Bend including one most notably from the motel parking lot!; uncommon & localized
 Plumbeous Vireo C,D---very early migrant at Cibolo
 Hutton's Vireo B,D
 Western Scrub-Jay D---subspecies *woodhouseii*

Mexican Jay B
 Chihuahuan Raven E,D
 Common Raven C,B
Tree Swallow E---early migrants at Tornillo
 Violet-green Swallow D
 Northern Rough-winged Swallow E
 Cliff Swallow E,C,D
 Cave Swallow E,D---great views near Fort Hancock
 Barn Swallow E,C,B,D
 Mountain Chickadee D
 Black-crested Titmouse B,D---recently resplit from Tufted Titmouse
 Verdin E,C,B--- good views at RGV
 Bushtit B,D---less numerous than usual, but nice views including at least one “black-eared” bird
 White-breasted Nuthatch B,D
 Cactus Wren seen daily
 Rock Wren C,B---oddly only two seen
 Canyon Wren C,B,D---my favorite song in North America!
Carolina Wren B---at the extreme western edge of their range
 Bewick’s Wren C,B,D
 Blue-gray Gnatcatcher B
 Black-tailed Gnatcatcher E,C
Hermit Thrush D---a surprise was one or two at the quail spot in the Davis Mts; breeding?
 Western Bluebird D
 American Robin D,E
 Northern Mockingbird seen daily in numbers
 Curve-billed Thrasher E,C,B
Crissal Thrasher E---after much effort good views were had near Tornillo; always tough in late summer
 European Starling E---always a tough find on this tour
 Phainopepla D---only one seen; seemingly declining in this area
Colima Warbler B---a total of five (one heard only) on our hike with several excellent views; the twenty one year average for this trip is about 7 individuals
Lucy’s Warbler B---one lingering at Cottonwood Campground was a surprise
Grace’s Warbler D---pair on the preserve
Black-and-white Warbler B---rare was one seen along the Pinnacles Trail by some
 Common Yellowthroat B
Painted Redstart B---superb views on the Boot Springs Trail; not present every year
 Yellow-breasted Chat E,C,B---excellent views of this often shy bird
 Hepatic Tanager B,C---brilliant
 Summer Tanager C,B
 Western Tanager B,D---less numerous than usual
 Spotted Towhee B,D
 Canyon Towhee C,B,D
 Cassin’s Sparrow C---breeding at this time of year
 Rufous-crowned Sparrow C,B
 Chipping Sparrow C,D
Black-chinned Sparrow B---a good year for this generally uncommon & localized species
 Lark Sparrow E,C,D---the first in my yard
 Black-throated Sparrow E,C,B

Northern Cardinal C,B
 Pyrrhuloxia E,C,B
 Black-headed Grosbeak B,D
 Blue Grosbeak E,C,B,D---up to 12 in one day!
 Varied Bunting C,B---a total of four seen including two stunning males; my favorite of all the buntings
 Painted Bunting E,B---several brilliant males; tied for third favorite bird of the tour
 Red-winged Blackbird E
 Eastern Meadowlark E,D---several of the subspecies *liliana*
Yellow-headed Blackbird E,C,B--- early migrants
 Great-tailed Grackle E,C,D
 Bronzed Cowbird C,D---some saw the helicopter display flight of this species
 Brown-headed Cowbird E,C,B,D
 Orchard Oriole C,B
Hooded Oriole E,B---male in my yard, female in Big Bend; very uncommon
 Bullock's Oriole E
 Scott's Oriole C,B---several great looks
 House Finch seen daily in numbers
 Lesser Goldfinch B,D---the black-backed variety
 House Sparrow E,C,B,D

Mammals: total species - 16

Rock Squirrel
 Spotted Ground Squirrel
 Texas Antelope Squirrel---found by Sandy & Simon
 kangaroo rat species
 rodent species---probably White-throated Woodrat (leader only)
 Desert Cottontail
 Eastern Cottontail
 Black-tailed Jackrabbit
 Striped Skunk
Hog-nosed Skunk---one thought to be this species seen briefly in Big Bend showing an all white back and tail
 Collared Peccary (Javelina)
 Coyote---one spotted by Mike near Valentine
 Mule Deer---one in my yard the first afternoon
 White-tailed Deer---the small Carmen Mountain race
 Pronghorn---several in grasslands around Valentine
Black Bear---mother with **four** cubs along the Window Trail spotted by Jeff; we watched them eat acorns in an oak tree for about twenty minutes from less than 50 yards!!!!

Exotic Mammals: total species - 7

Elk
 Bison
 Aoudad (Barbary) Sheep
 Blackbuck
 Scimitar-horned Oryx
 Wild Donkey
 Camel

Reptiles & Amphibians: total species - 12

Bullfrog---heard only
Big Bend Slider
Greater Earless Lizard---absolutely spectacular!
Southern Prairie Lizard
Checkered Whiptail
Chihuahuan Spotted Whiptail
Plateau-striped (Rusty-rumped) Whiptail
Crevice Spiny Lizard
Big Bend Tree Lizard
Chihuahuan Collared Lizard---by Bob's van in the Cibolo Mts
Western Black-necked Garter Snake
Western Diamond-backed Rattlesnake---not seen by most; night drive

Butterflies: total species - 19 (plus others left unidentified)

Giant Swallowtail
Pipevine Swallowtail
Two-tailed Swallowtail
Sleepy Orange
Mexican Yellow
Checkered White
Marine Blue (leader only)
Reakirt's Blue
Western Pygmy Blue
Red Satyr
Bordered Patch
California Sister
Painted Lady
Empress Leilia
Queen
Monarch
Northern Cloudywing
Golden-banded Skipper
Eufala Skipper

Significant others:

Flame Skimmer (large red dragonfly)
large blue darner species
bluet species (bright blue damselfly, possibly Azure Bluet)
Vinegaroon
Desert Millipede
Leaf-footed Bug
Tarantula Wasp
Tarantula---spotted by Mike
"painted" grasshopper
White-lined Sphinx Moth
mountain lion scat on Colima Trail
Rosie
Tuxedo