

**NEW YEAR IN SOUTH TEXAS
December 27, 2005 – January 2, 2006**

Leader: Kim Eckert

I would be willing to wager there has never been a birding tour anywhere which included both a Greater Flamingo and a Snow Bunting on its trip list! But these two unlikely birds from entirely different directions were indeed listed among the 180+ species we found on this year's New Year in South Texas tour. The flamingo, present since early November just outside Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, was a banded immature which was traced back to the Yucatan, thus establishing its status as a "countable" natural vagrant. This also represented only the fifth accepted record for Texas.

Then, the day following our boat trip and flamingo sighting, we found ourselves down on South Padre Island where, of all things, a Snow Bunting was waiting for us. This sixth state record, the first ever for South Texas, had been found just a few days previously. Curiously, the bird was eating ants at the time, and I have to wonder how often individuals of this species had ever encountered ants before! I doubt ants are present where the species breeds up in the Arctic, and it's too cold for ants at the latitudes where buntings normally winter.

Besides these two rarities, another remarkable thing about our tour involved the nearly perfect weather. Without exception, every day was sunny, in the 80s, and with relatively light winds—not to have a single windy day here is quite atypical. (However, we did encounter fog each morning along the Rio Grande.) And, curiously, despite serious drought conditions prevailing in much of Texas, somehow and simultaneously the water levels of both the river below Falcon Dam and the reservoir behind it were higher than I had ever seen them.

As always, the birding was great. There may not have been nearly as many vagrants around as there had been during the previous unprecedented winter, but just to see the usual birds here is special enough. In Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, the Whooping Cranes were especially close, vocal, and active. At Sabal Palm Grove near Brownsville we found a Groove-billed Ani, and watched an unexpected Zone-tailed Hawk make a pass at a night-heron. An actual count of 148 Red-crowned Parrots gathering at dusk in Weslaco was truly remarkable, considering this number is three or four times higher than I have ever seen in any parrot flock in South Texas. At Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge we found the first of three Clay-colored Robins (none or one is normal), while at Anzalduas County Park we saw the often-elusive Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, a pair of Black Phoebes, another Clay-colored Robin, and five relatively easy-to-see Sprague's Pipits.

Farther upriver, the highlights included another Zone-tailed Hawk at Chapeño, our third Clay-colored Robin plus an out-of-season Wood Thrush at nearby Salineño, and an unexpected Painted Bunting at San Ygnacio. On our last day, the tour ended with a flock of Scaled Quail waiting for us as we drove into Las Palmas, and not far from there were three elusive Black-tailed Gnatcatchers.

By the time we returned to the Corpus Christi airport, Dave, one of the tour participants, had managed to tally no fewer than 78 life birds, while I was more than content with my lone flamingo lifer. Again, just the ordinary birds of South Texas were extraordinary enough.

Itinerary:

December 27 – all participants arrive in Corpus Christi by 2:00 for afternoon waterbirding excursion to Indian Point, Sunset Lake Park, and Aransas Pass / Hwy. 361.

December 28 – morning boat trip aboard the Skimmer for Whooping Cranes et al. (including a flamingo!) in Aransas N.W.R.; brief birding around Rockport/Fulton (Hwy. 35 grackles, Rockport Beach Park, Old Port Bay Club Rd.), and afternoon drive to Weslaco via Hwy. 77 and Sarita.

December 29 – Rancho Viejo, Sabal Palm Grove, Hwy. 48 wetlands en route to South Padre I. / Isla Blanca Park (for a Snow Bunting!); afternoon return to Weslaco via Hwy. 100, Russellville (?), Hwy. 281, and Llano Grande (S. side); pre-dusk Red-crowned Parrot flock (!) and post-dusk pauragues in Weslaco.

December 30 – Santa Ana N.W.R., Llano Grande (N. side), brief hummingbird tries at Frontera Audubon and 6th & Laurel in McAllen, and the parakeet roost at 10th & Dove in McAllen.

December 31 – morning at the Starbuck's cowbird roost, Quinta Matalan, a McAllen Buff-bellied (finally), Anzalduas County Park, and Granjeño's Burrowing Owl; afternoon drive to Zapata via a stop at the Pat & Gale DeWind feeders in Salineño; a New Year's Eve celebration / checklist session which lasted into the wee hours (9:00 pm).

January 1 – morning at Chapeño, Falcon County Park, and return to Salineño; unsuccessful afternoon seedeater search in San Ygnacio.

January 2 – return to San Ygnacio, the gnatcatcher side road, and the Las Palmas quail flock before our return drive to the Corpus Christi airport.

Bird List:

- 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 at Llano Grande)

Greater White-fronted Goose

Snow Goose

Gadwall

American Wigeon

Mottled Duck

Blue-winged Teal

Cinnamon Teal (Santa Ana)

Northern Shoveler

Northern Pintail

Green-winged Teal

Canvasback

Redhead
 Ring-necked Duck
 Lesser Scaup
 Bufflehead
 (Common Goldeneye / leader-only)
 Hooded Merganser
 Red-breasted Merganser
 Ruddy Duck
Plain Chachalaca (especially noisy at San Ygnacio!)
 Scaled Quail (resident flock still at Las Palmas)
 Common Loon
Least Grebe
 Pied-billed Grebe
 Eared Grebe (unexpected at Santa Ana)
 American White Pelican
 Brown Pelican
Neotropic Cormorant
 Double-crested Cormorant
 Anhinga
 American Bittern
 Great Blue Heron
 Great Egret
 Snowy Egret
 Little Blue Heron
 Tricolored Heron
 Reddish Egret
 Cattle Egret
 Black-crowned Night-Heron
 Yellow-crowned Night-Heron (not seen most winters)
 White Ibis
 White-faced Ibis
 Roseate Spoonbill
 Black Vulture
 Turkey Vulture
Greater Flamingo (wild & countable imm. seen well from the Skimmer)
 Osprey
 White-tailed Kite (2 close photogenic birds on wires)
 Northern Harrier
 Sharp-shinned Hawk
 Cooper's Hawk
 Harris's Hawk
 Red-shouldered Hawk
White-tailed Hawk (best view en route to the airport)
Zone-tailed Hawk (2: one chasing a night-heron at Sabal Palm, and one at Chapeño)
 Red-tailed Hawk
 Crested Caracara
 American Kestrel
 Peregrine Falcon
 Clapper Rail (close view along Hwy. 361)

Common Moorhen
American Coot
Sandhill Crane
Whooping Crane (a better-than-average show, with birds close by, calling, and flying)
Black-bellied Plover
Snowy Plover (nice plover comparisons at Sunset Lake)
Semipalmated Plover
Piping Plover
Killdeer
American Oystercatcher
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 (Llano Grande)
Long-billed Dowitcher
Wilson's Snipe
Laughing Gull
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Gull-billed Tern
Caspian Tern
Royal Tern
Forster's Tern
Black Skimmer (Rockport Beach Park)
Rock Pigeon
Eurasian Collared-Dove
White-winged Dove
Mourning Dove
Inca Dove
Common Ground-Dove
White-tipped Dove
Green Parakeet (staging at 10th & Dove)
(Rose-ringed Parakeet / an escape roosting with the Greens)
Red-crowned Parrot (an incredible/unprecedented flock of 148 in Weslaco)
Greater Roadrunner
Groove-billed Ani (nice spotting, Barb, at Sabal Palm Grove)
Eastern Screech-Owl (Anzalduas and at the DeWinds in Salineño)
Great Horned Owl

Burrowing Owl (Granjeño)
Common Pauraque (mostly glowing eyeballs seen at Llano Grande)
Buff-bellied Hummingbird (it took awhile to find one!)
Rufous Hummingbird (unexpected at Quinta Mazatlan)
Ringed Kingfisher
Belted Kingfisher
Green Kingfisher (best at Llano Grande)
Golden-fronted Woodpecker
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
Ladder-backed Woodpecker
Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet (at Anzalduas County Park, though not in an anacua tree!)
Black Phoebe (twice: an Anzalduas pair and at Salineño)
Eastern Phoebe
Vermilion Flycatcher
Great Kiskadee
Tropical Kingbird (best at Rancho Viejo; also in McAllen)
Couch's Kingbird
Loggerhead Shrike
White-eyed Vireo
Blue-headed Vireo
Green Jay
Brown Jay (at feeders in both Salineño & Chapeño)
Tree Swallow
Northern Rough-winged Swallow
Black-crested Titmouse
Verdin
Cactus Wren
Carolina Wren
Bewick's Wren
House Wren
Sedge Wren (only briefly near Rockport and at Santa Ana)
Marsh Wren (ditto)
Ruby-crowned Kinglet
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher
Black-tailed Gnatcatcher (at the usual spot on old Hwy. 83)
Wood Thrush (at the DeWind feeders; quite rare in winter)
Clay-colored Robin (seen 3 times: Santa Ana, Anzalduas, and Salineño)
Northern Mockingbird
Long-billed Thrasher
Curve-billed Thrasher
European Starling
American Pipit
Sprague's Pipit (easier than normal at Anzalduas)
Orange-crowned Warbler
Nashville Warbler
Yellow-rumped Warbler (incl. Audubon's types at Salineño)
Black-throated Green Warbler
Yellow-throated Warbler (only once, unexpectedly at the Sarita wayside)
Pine Warbler (Anzalduas)

Black-and-white Warbler
Common Yellowthroat
(Wilson's Warbler / leader-only)
Olive Sparrow
Cassin's Sparrow
Chipping Sparrow
Lark Sparrow
Black-throated Sparrow
Savannah Sparrow
Lincoln's Sparrow
Snow Bunting (first record for South Texas)
Northern Cardinal
Pyrrhuloxia
Painted Bunting (quite unexpected at San Ygnacio)
Red-winged Blackbird
Eastern Meadowlark
Western Meadowlark
Brewer's Blackbird
Great-tailed Grackle
Boat-tailed Grackle (N. of Fulton on Hwy. 35)
Bronzed Cowbird (during breakfast at Starbuck's in McAllen)
Hooded Oriole (at the DeWind feeders; not normally present in winter)
Altamira Oriole
Audubon's Oriole (best at Salineño)
House Finch
Lesser Goldfinch
American Goldfinch
House Sparrow

ALSO SEEN (a partial list):

Coyote (heard-only)
Feral Hog
Black-tailed Jackrabbit
Fox Squirrel
Bottle-nosed Dolphin (from the Skimmer)
American Alligator (Llano Grande)
Diamondback Water Snake (ditto)
Red-eared Slider