

VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS, INC.

SPRING IN SOUTH TEXAS

April 3-14, 2006

Leaders: Barry Zimmer and Kevin Zimmer

Picking a favorite day from our recent Spring in South Texas tour is a difficult task at best. We totaled over 260 species of birds, enjoyed very good weather, and seemed to flow from one spectacular highlight to another. Any serious discussion of “best day of the tour” would have to start with our second day, which began with a boat trip to Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. Here we saw 17 Whooping Cranes, including a family group at about 30 yards for over 15 minutes, and another family in flight. It was an incredible show! In addition we had several Seaside Sparrows perched in full view, numerous Roseate Spoonbills and Reddish Egrets, and we topped the day with a very rare Greater Flamingo that had been present in the area for a few months. This bird, banded in Mexico the previous summer, was a legitimate vagrant and an ABA lifer for everyone, including the leaders.

Another candidate for “best day of the tour” would have to be the one spent in the Falcon Dam area. The first several hours were spent at Santa Margarita Ranch on a bluff overlooking the Rio Grande. In a little over three hours at this spot, we tallied 83 species including stunning Altamira and Audubon’s orioles, very close Red-billed Pigeons, both Green and Ringed kingfishers, Green Jays, abundant Great Kiskadees, Vermilion Flycatcher, Gray Hawk, Zone-tailed Hawk, and a nice view of a male Hook-billed Kite. With the morning light at our backs, we soaked up fabulous studies of most of the Valley specialty birds. A surprise find of a Clay-colored Robin (which performed nicely) was the icing on the cake. Later in the day we added the declining Brown Jay in Chapeno. Still, this didn’t quite make the cut on a tour so filled with special days.

Maybe the days in the scenic Hill Country toward the end of the trip could take top honors. After all, we did see over ten Golden-cheeked Warblers, one within about 15 feet, during the course of one day. In addition we managed to get everyone great views of the always difficult and very handsome Black-capped Vireo. Vermilion Flycatchers in butterfly display flight, a striking male Painted Bunting at a feeder, three out-of-place Audubon’s Orioles, and a bat flight with an estimated ten million individuals all helped to give these days serious consideration.

Surely our day on the King Ranch must have been a candidate. With some great fortune on our side we found all four of the main targets—Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, Tropical Parula, and Audubon’s Oriole—by 8:51 AM! We ended up walking away from scope-filled views of the owl, and had the closest looks at the Tropical Parula ever. Both of these species are seldom seen outside the confines of this ranch. White-tailed Hawk, abundant Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, Hooded Orioles, and Summer Tanagers added to the fun. We concluded this day with over 80 Green Parakeets and a couple of Red-crowned Parrots coming in to roost in the evening in McAllen.

Yes, there were many worthy candidates on this trip, but I think I would have to settle on the sixth day of our tour as the best. We started our morning at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge. In a bare field just outside the refuge entrance we found 343 Swainson’s Hawks roosting on the ground. We had great scope views of both light and dark morph birds, as we were literally surrounded by them. Inside the refuge itself we added Green Kingfisher, Roseate Spoonbill, Least Grebes, and superb studies of about 12 species of shorebirds almost at arm’s length. Included in this mix were Baird’s and Stilt sandpipers.

Later in the morning, Broad-winged Hawks began coming up out of the surrounding forest with hundreds eventually spiraling up into the sky. We had lots of ground to cover on this day, so we headed towards Brownsville and the Sabal Palm Sanctuary. In addition to excellent views of many Valley

specialties at the sanctuary feeders (Green Jays, Plain Chachalacas, White-tipped Doves, Buff-bellied Hummingbirds, etc.), our main target here was the vagrant Gray-crowned Yellowthroat, which had been present for some time at this location. It was nearly midday and the wind was blowing quite strong, so our expectations were not high for success. We hiked out about a quarter-mile on the resaca trail and almost immediately heard the warbling song of the yellowthroat. Within a minute we had spotted the bird perched right in the open by the end of the boardwalk. We had incredible views from about 15 feet of this accidental stray from Mexico!

Greedy for more, we then headed out to South Padre Island, hoping that the north winds which had arrived overnight had dropped some migrants onto the island. We were not disappointed. Although there was no huge fallout, we did have a very good sprinkling of passerine migrants which included warblers (including a rare Prairie), orioles, buntings, and sparrows. Eventually we had to tear ourselves away and head back toward McAllen in time to make our dinner reservations. Fifteen minutes after we started back, I spotted an Aplomado Falcon perched right next to the highway. We immediately piled out and had wonderful studies of this striking species. Although it clearly had bands indicating it was part of the successful and ongoing reintroduction program, it was an unexpected treat and highlight nonetheless.

At dinner, our checklist session revealed that we had seen 138 species for the day—a staggering amount for anywhere in the United States! Yes, among a list of strong contenders, this day was the champion.

Itinerary:

- April 3 - arrival in Corpus Christi; afternoon visit to Tule Lake (43 Species)
- April 4 - Blucher Park, Oso Bay, Hans Suter Park, Paradise Pond, Mustang Island, Port Aransas Birding Center, Oystercatcher Point (121 species; 123 total)
- April 5 - Whooping Crane boat trip to Aransas NWR, Rockport Beach, Goose Island State Park, Cape Velero (97 species; 138 total)
- April 6 - Cape Velero, Port Aransas Birding Center, Packery Channel Park, Chapman Ranch, Sarita (110 species; 158 total)
- April 7 - Norias Division of King Ranch, Frontera Audubon House & Thicket in Weslaco, residential McAllen (77 species; 185 total)
- April 8 - Santa Ana NWR, Sabal Palm Sanctuary, South Padre Island (138 species; 208 total)
- April 9 - Bentsen SP, Santa Margarita Ranch, Las Palmas (80 species; 221 total)
- April 10 - Santa Margarita Bluff, Chapeno, Falcon SP; evening owling (102 species; 230 total)
- April 11 - Chapeno, drive to Concan, Frio Bat Cave (101 species; 239 total)
- April 12 - Hwy 337 near Leakey, the PD Ranch, Utopia, Neal's Lodge (70 species; 252 total)
- April 13 - Neal's Lodge, Sabinal Feed Lot, Castroville Regional Park, drive to San Antonio (82 species; 262 total)
- April 14 - departure for home

Key:

C = coastal areas around Rockport and Corpus Christi

K = King Ranch, Sarita

V = all valley areas from South Padre Island to San Ygnacio

H = Hill Country, Uvalde, Sabinal

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

underlined species indicate birds of very uncommon occurrence in the area or species which occur regularly but in such low densities as to be easily missed

Birds: Total species - 262

Common Loon C---one in full breeding plumage

Least Grebe V---unusually scarce this year with a few on Pintail Lake and a pair on the Rio Grande from the bluff being the only ones seen

Pied-billed Grebe C,V,H

Eared Grebe C---unusually numerous with about a hundred seen along Mustang Island; often missed entirely this late

American White Pelican C,V

Brown Pelican C

Double-crested Cormorant C,V

Neotropic Cormorant C,V---nice side-by-side comparisons with Double-crested

Least Bittern C---seen by Lyn and I at Port Aransas

Great Blue Heron C,V,H

Great Egret C,V,H

Snowy Egret C,V

Little Blue Heron C,V

Tricolored Heron C,V

Reddish Egret C---including a white morph bird

Cattle Egret C,K,V

Green Heron C,V

Black-crowned Night-Heron C---our first thanks to Kirsten

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron C---great views at Port Aransas Birding Center; spotted by Carolyn

Greater Flamingo C---young bird seen off Goose Island that had been present for a few months; known to have been of wild origin due to band on leg tracing it to Yucatan Peninsula the previous summer; a ABA lifer for everyone (including the leaders), Leonie's 400th, and tied for third favorite bird of the tour

White Ibis C

White-faced Ibis C,V

Roseate Spoonbill C,V---spectacular views of many

Black Vulture C,K,V,H

Turkey Vulture seen daily in numbers

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck C,K,V,H---almost daily

Fulvous Whistling-Duck C---two small flocks in the Rockport area; often missed entirely

Muscovy Duck V---nice fly-by at Chapeno with only 17 minutes to go before our departure; rare in U.S. and often not present at all

Gadwall C,V

American Wigeon C,V

Mallard V---the "Mexican Duck" race along the Rio Grande

Mottled Duck C,V

Blue-winged Teal C,V

Cinnamon Teal C,V---several nice views of this uncommon species

Northern Shoveler C,V

Northern Pintail C---very late

Green-winged Teal C,V

Redhead C---late

Ring-necked Duck V---late

Lesser Scaup C,V

Bufflehead C---late female at Hans Suter

Common Goldeneye C---several very late individuals around Rockport

Red-breasted Merganser C---a few late birds around Rockport

Ruddy Duck C---scarcer than normal

Osprey C,V,H---almost daily

Hook-billed Kite V---good flight views of a pair at Bentsen (distant) and a male from the bluff; often missed

White-tailed Kite C,V---only two seen the whole trip; declining in this area?
 Northern Harrier C,V
 Sharp-shinned Hawk C,V
 Cooper's Hawk V
Gray Hawk V---our first thanks to Carolyn; three total
 Harris's Hawk K,V---numerous in the valley
 Red-shouldered Hawk V---two at Santa Margarita and one at Chapeno
 Broad-winged Hawk V---nice flight of a few hundred over Pintail Lake
 Swainson's Hawk C,V,H---over three hundred in view at once in fields around Santa Ana, including several dark morphs
 White-tailed Hawk C---two seen
Zone-tailed Hawk V---one from the bluff was a real bonus!
 Red-tailed Hawk C,K,V,H
 Crested Caracara C,K,V,H---an estimated 57 seen with many excellent close views
Plomado Falcon V---superb scope views of one near Port Isabel; obvious bands placed it as an individual from the very successful reintroduction program around Laguna Atascosa; a first for this tour; voted the second favorite bird of the tour
 American Kestrel V,H
Merlin C,H---three at the bat cave and another on Mustang Island
 Peregrine Falcon C---three in one afternoon on Mustang Island
 Plain Chachalaca V---fantastic close studies
 Wild Turkey K,H
 Northern Bobwhite K---good views
 Scaled Quail V---seen only by Joyce & Carolyn
 Clapper Rail C---up close and personal at Velero
Black Rail C---heard only from as close as ten feet away near Rockport; a tour first!
 Virginia Rail C,V---heard only
 Sora C---nice views at Port Aransas
 Common Moorhen C,V
 American Coot C,V
Whooping Crane C---17 seen from the boat including a family within 30 yards; one of the best shows ever!
 Black-bellied Plover C,V
 American Golden-Plover C---scarcer than normal
Snowy Plover C---uncommon and declining
 Wilson's Plover C
 Semipalmated Plover V---oddly only seen on South Padre
Piping Plover C---only one on Mustang Island; declining Killdeer almost daily
 American Oystercatcher C,V---our first thanks to Linda
 Black-necked Stilt C,V
 American Avocet C
 Greater Yellowlegs C,V
 Lesser Yellowlegs C,V
 Solitary Sandpiper V
 Willet C,V
 Spotted Sandpiper C,V
 Upland Sandpiper C ---a total of 20 seen our first thanks to Kirsten
 Whimbrel C---one from boat
 Long-billed Curlew C
 Marbled Godwit C
 Ruddy Turnstone C,V
 Red Knot V---one on South Padre
 Sanderling C,V
 Semipalmated Sandpiper C,V---uncommon

Western Sandpiper C,V
 Least Sandpiper C,V
Baird's Sandpiper V---uncommon
 Pectoral Sandpiper C
 Dunlin C,V
 Stilt Sandpiper C--- can be tough
 Long-billed Dowitcher C,V
 Wilson's Snipe V---one seen by Leonie at Santa Ana; late
 Laughing Gull C,V
 Franklin's Gull C---scarce this year with the only ones seen being about ten on South Padre
 Ring-billed Gull C,V
 Herring Gull C,V
 Gull-billed Tern C,V
 Caspian Tern C,V
 Royal Tern C,V
 Sandwich Tern C,V
 Forster's Tern C,V
 Least Tern C
 Black Skimmer C,V
 Rock Pigeon urban areas throughout
 Eurasian Collared-Dove C,K,V,H---after getting our first ones for this tour just five years ago, this species has
 become a regular fixture in most areas
 Red-billed Pigeon V---great views from the bluff
 White-winged Dove almost daily in numbers
 Mourning Dove seen daily
 Inca Dove almost daily
 Common Ground-Dove K,V,H
 White-tipped Dove V
 Green Parakeet V---prolonged scope views of **87** in north McAllen
 Red-crowned Parrot V---good study at last possible minute in fading light
 (Lilac-crowned Parrot) V---two in with Red-crowns; not countable
 Greater Roadrunner K,V,H---several nice studies (13 total seen)
 Eastern Screech-Owl H---excellent views at roost; subspecies *mccalli*
 Great Horned Owl K,V
Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl K---two seen well; fantastic scope views of one for over 10 minutes at about 50
 feet!!!
 Lesser Nighthawk V
 Pauraque V---after much effort!
 Chuck-will's-widow H---heard only
Whip-poor-will H---heard only at the bat cave where unexpected
 Chimney Swift scattered throughout
 Buff-bellied Hummingbird K,V---several nice views
 Ruby-throated Hummingbird C,V,H
 Black-chinned Hummingbird C,V,H---common at Neal's
 Ringed Kingfisher V
 Belted Kingfisher C,H
 Green Kingfisher V,H---nice studies
 Golden-fronted Woodpecker K,V,H
 Yellow-bellied Sapsucker V---late migrant
 Ladder-backed Woodpecker C,K,V,H
Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet K---very nice views of this uncommon and local species
 Black Phoebe H
 Eastern Phoebe H

Vermilion Flycatcher K,V,H---always a treat!
 Ash-throated Flycatcher V,H
 Great Crested Flycatcher V
 Brown-crested Flycatcher K,V,H
 Great Kiskadee K,V---#500 for Joyce!
 Couch's Kingbird C,K,V
 Western Kingbird H---one of our last new birds
 Scissor-tailed Flycatcher C,K,V,H---everyday with a high count of 225 on one day!
 Loggerhead Shrike C,K,V,H
 White-eyed Vireo C,K,V,H---unusually good views
 Bell's Vireo H---nice study at Neal's
Black-capped Vireo H---after much effort good looks for all of this skulking Hill Country specialty
 Blue-headed Vireo C,V,H---migrants
 Yellow-throated Vireo H---exceptional study
 Green Jay K,V---always stunning
Brown Jay V---we had great luck with this declining species seeing two or three at Chapeno; sadly this
 species seems to be on its way out and may not be around for future tours
Blue Jay H---after much effort; easily missed on this trip
 Western Scrub-Jay H---subspecies *woodhouseii*
 Chihuahuan Raven V
 Common Raven H
 Purple Martin seen daily in numbers
 Tree Swallow C,V
 Northern Rough-winged Swallow C,V,H
 Bank Swallow C,V
 Barn Swallow seen daily
 Cliff Swallow C,V,H
 Cave Swallow V,H---by the hundreds at the bat cave
 Carolina Chickadee H
 Black-crested Titmouse C,K,V,H---recently resplit from Tufted
 Verdin V,H
 Bushtit H
 Cactus Wren V
 Rock Wren H---heard only at the bat cave
 Canyon Wren H
 Carolina Wren C,K,V,H
 Bewick's Wren K,V,H
 House Wren C,V
 Marsh Wren C,V
 Ruby-crowned Kinglet C,H
 Blue-gray Gnatcatcher C,K,V,H
Black-tailed Gnatcatcher V--- uncommon & local
 Eastern Bluebird H
 Hermit Thrush V,H
Clay-colored Robin V---nice find at Santa Margarita; although increasing in regularity this recent invader is
 still best considered an unexpected vagrant
 Gray Catbird C,V---great study at Goose Island
 Northern Mockingbird seen daily in numbers
 Long-billed Thrasher C,K,V,H---many superb views
 Curve-billed Thrasher K,V,H
 European Starling almost daily
 Cedar Waxwing V,H
Blue-winged Warbler V---uncommon migrant; seen by some on South Padre

Orange-crowned Warbler C,V,H
 Nashville Warbler C,V,H
 Northern Parula C,V---#400 for Rich
Tropical Parula K,V,H--great views of two males; amazingly one at Neal's as well where it is completely unheard of
 Yellow-rumped Warbler C,H---Myrtle types
 Golden-cheeked Warbler H---excellent views; about ten seen
 Yellow-throated Warbler H
Prairie Warbler V---one on South Padre was a tour first; rare
 Black-and-white Warbler C,H
 Common Yellowthroat C,V
Gray-crowned Yellowthroat V---unbelievable views of this vagrant at Sabal Palm
 Wilson's Warbler C,V---one at Blucher & one on South Padre Yellow-breasted Chat V,H
 Summer Tanager K,H
White-collared Seedeater V---great show at Bentsen with male at about 40 feet for several minutes; very rare at this location; #500 for Alan
 Olive Sparrow K,V,H
Green-tailed Towhee C---one at Blucher seen by a few was a real rarity
 Spotted Towhee H
 Canyon Towhee H
 Cassin's Sparrow C,K,V
 Rufous-crowned Sparrow H
 Chipping Sparrow V,H
 Clay-colored Sparrow K,V,H
 Field Sparrow H
 Vesper Sparrow K,V,H
 Lark Sparrow K,V,H
 Black-throated Sparrow V,H
 Savannah Sparrow C,V
 Grasshopper Sparrow K,V
 Seaside Sparrow C---nice views from boat
 Lincoln's Sparrow C,V,H
 Swamp Sparrow C
 Song Sparrow V---seen by Drew; very uncommon this late
 White-throated Sparrow H
 White-crowned Sparrow V,H
 Northern Cardinal seen daily
 Pyrrhuloxia C,K,V,H
 Blue Grosbeak V---one on South Padre
 Indigo Bunting C,V
Painted Bunting V,H---not typically seen on this tour as they usually arrive a bit later
 Red-winged Blackbird almost daily
 Eastern Meadowlark C,V
Yellow-headed Blackbird K---very uncommon in this area this late; one female seen
 Brewer's Blackbird K,H
Common Grackle H---scarce; our last new bird of the trip; seen by some in San Antonio
 Boat-tailed Grackle C---at its southern limit
 Great-tailed Grackle everywhere but Neal's
 Bronzed Cowbird C,K,V
 Brown-headed Cowbird C,K,V,H
 Orchard Oriole C,V---many on South Padre
 Hooded Oriole K,V,H
 Altamira Oriole V---including a pair nest-building

Audubon's Oriole K,V,H---excellent views of this uncommon & local species; particularly noteworthy were three in the **Hill Country** where accidental

Bullock's Oriole V,H

Scott's Oriole H

House Finch V,H

Pine Siskin H---heard only

Lesser Goldfinch K,V,H---black-backed race

House Sparrow seen daily

Mammals: Total species - 19

Atlantic Bottle-nosed Dolphin

Eastern Fox Squirrel

Rock Squirrel

Mexican Ground Squirrel

Desert Cottontail

Eastern Cottontail

Black-tailed Jackrabbit

Coyote---heard only

Raccoon

Striped Skunk

Armadillo---amazingly about ten were seen; often missed entirely

Collared Peccary (Javelina)

Feral Hog

White-tailed Deer

Nilgai---introduced

Impala---introduced

Spotted Deer---introduced

Mexican (Brazilian) Free-tailed Bat---excellent flight of an estimated 10,000,000!!!!

Cave Bat

Reptiles & Amphibians: Total species – 15

Carolina Anole

Mediterranean (House) Gecko

Rose-bellied Lizard

Texas Spotted Whiptail

Ground Skink

Diamond-backed Water Snake

American Alligator

Red-eared Slider

Rio Grande Cooter

Yellow Mud Turtle

Texas Spiny Soft-shelled Turtle

Texas Tortoise

Gulf Coast Toad

Cane Toad---heard only

Blanchard's Cricket Frog---heard only

Butterflies: Total species – 17

Monarch

Queen

Pipevine Swallowtail

Black Swallowtail

Giant Swallowtail

California Sister
Cabbage White
Checkered White
sulphur species
Empress Leilia
Red Admiral
White Peacock
Julia
metalmark species
Gulf Fritillary
Reakirt's Blue
skipper species (long-tailed)

Significant others:

The Boiling Pot
A bluff list of 83
Hershey's kissmoblie
Spuds McKenzie
The longhorn on the King Ranch
Dung beetles
Roseate Skimmer (dragonfly)
Cinnamon Xango
Hawaiian gorilla (Kevin's favorite)
The popeye statue
Neon palm trees
Carolyn's centipede
Air hockey tournaments (Drew was the champion)
The peanut eating dog at Neal's

SUMMARY:

We had a spectacular trip through South Texas seeing virtually all of the specialty birds of the region and enjoying the spectacle of migration. We had a good showing of 17 Whooping Cranes at Aransas, a few of which were amazingly close, and we even got to see three in flight. We had a very impressive 31 species of shorebirds along the coast and had a decent showing of migrant landbirds on South Padre Island (including a rare Prairie Warbler). A "heard only" Black Rail (first ever for this tour) was tantalizingly close (ten feet!) but did not show itself. The King Ranch was at its best providing excellent views of Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, Tropical Parula, Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, and Audubon's Oriole, all by 8:51 AM! The valley was also spectacular with highlights including a Gray-crowned Yellowthroat at Sabal Palm (accidental in the United states), a very responsive Clay-colored Robin at Santa Margarita, three Hook-billed Kites (including a fairly close one from the bluff), an out of place White-collared Seedeater at Bentsen, and a last minute Muscovy Duck and the last Brown Jays at Chapeno. We ended with two wonderful days in the Hill Country where everyone got to see the Black-capped Vireo and Golden-cheeked Warbler well (no small feat), in addition to Painted Bunting, three Audubon's Orioles (accidental in the Hill Country), and over ten million Mexican Free-tailed Bats. We posted a fairly high species total for birds with 262 seen and enjoyed generally good weather throughout!