

WINTER RIO GRANDE VALLEY

FEBRUARY 23 – 29, 2008

LEADERS: KIM ECKERT & BRIAN GIBBONS

COMPILED BY: KIM ECKERT

**VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS, INC.
2525 WALLINGWOOD DRIVE, SUITE 1003
AUSTIN, TX 78746
WWW.VENTBIRD.COM**

WINTER RIO GRANDE VALLEY

February 23 – 29, 2008

Leaders: Kim Eckert & Brian Gibbons

Summary

What can you say about a tour which began with almost everyone having travel delays as they tried to get to Harlingen in the first place, and with perhaps half the group going home at the end with colds (both leaders included)? Well, I'd have to say it was a very successful one, at least the birding part of it in between, once you set aside our arrival and health problems! It seems that no fewer than 14 of the 16 of us—and much of the luggage—were hours late getting into town, even those of us who came in a day early, mostly due to weather problems.

But once the birding got underway on our first afternoon at Laguna Atascosa, thoughts of the weather we left behind back home were quickly forgotten. All it takes is a bunch of Green Jays at Laguna's bird feeders almost within reach to divert one's thoughts far away from wintry weather: no wonder this quintessential South Texas specialty was again voted as the favorite bird of the tour.

Even the South Texas weather helped us forget about winter—and the name of this tour, for that matter. On Day 3, the temperatures reached 93 in Harlingen and 97 in McAllen: both of these record highs for the date and some 20 degrees above normal. Indeed, with migrants like Sandwich Tern, Ash-throated Flycatcher, and several swallows returning for the season, it seemed a bit more like spring at times. And it was even less like winter with such things as Broad-winged Hawk, Least Flycatcher, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak around: all overwintering birds not normally present at this time of year.

Of course, this tour is mostly about those peripheral Mexican birds that reach South Texas and nowhere else in the U.S., with the potential of some genuine rarity always on our minds. But this had been a relatively quiet year for strays, and such rare-regular species like Hook-billed Kite, Brown Jay, and Tropical Parula simply weren't being reported by anyone while we were there. Still, however, in addition to such fancy expected birds as "Plain" Chachalaca, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Green Parakeet and Red-crowned Parrot, Ringed and Green kingfishers, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Great Kiskadee, Tropical and Couch's kingbirds, and Altamira and Audubon's orioles, we came up with an impressive assortment of hard-to-find specialties.

About the only true rarity around was the Dusky-capped Flycatcher that had been wintering at Sabal Palm Grove. There had been only a handful of previous records of this species in the Lower Valley—all of these individuals of the northeastern Mexico *lawrencei* race, possibly a different species from the Dusky-capped seen in Arizona.

Almost as unusual would be the Muscovy Ducks and Red-billed Pigeons we saw at Salineño. The Muscovies were easier to find this year than they had been previously, and one of those always-elusive Red-billeds was calling continually for several minutes (a call I had not heard for several years!). Clay-colored Robins also proved to be more numerous than normal, especially at Quinta Mazatlan. On the other hand, White-collared Seedeaters can never be taken for granted,

but on our last afternoon it was surprisingly easy to find two of them in Zapata where many birders had been coming up empty.

Other tour highlights included a spectacular show put on by a few thousand Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks at Llano Grande in perfect morning light, with a lone Fulvous in their midst. A sleeping-by-day Common Pauraque at Quinta Mazatlan was memorable enough to be voted as the second-favorite bird of the tour. And tied for third-favorite were a Clapper Rail immodestly bathing below the boardwalk at South Padre Island and a Groove-billed Ani quietly minding its own business at Frontera Audubon's sanctuary.

It turned out there was so much to see and the participants were so eager, we admittedly had a hard time adhering to this tour's "Relaxed and Easy" guidelines. And I can find no better way to sum things up than with verse—the following a runaway winning entry by participant Jane Dessecker in our annual City of Pharr Pun Contest:

*On a trip "Pharr" away,
With a bird guide named Kim,
Who liked to hunt for Pauraques
In light that was dim.*

*He convinced us that "orange shine"
Was really their eyes,
And the little screech owl
Did not really cry.*

*Our trusty co-guide
Who every need he met
Even "pished" in
A Beardless Tyrannulet.*

*Red-crowned Parrots,
All so very new!
Clay-colored Robins,
Green Kingfishers, too!*

*A Ferruginous Pygmy Owl,
And Tropical Parula,
Continued to elude us
Alas, we never saw.*

*Over 40 life birds
And who can forget,
That foraging dance
Of the Reddish Egret!*

*I long to return
To a place "Pharr" away,
For a relaxed and easy tour,*

Well, maybe some day.

Itinerary

February 23 –all but two participants arrive in time (well, sort of on time) for the afternoon option to Laguna Atascosa NWR, with birding en route along FM 106; drive to Weslaco for the first of four nights, and dinner at Milano's.

February 24 – all the participants (and luggage!) present for morning birding by the Fairfield Inn and mostly at Santa Ana NWR; lunch at the Blue Onion, afternoon at Frontera Audubon's sanctuary in Weslaco, and dusk at Valley Nature Center for staging/roosting Red-crowned Parrots; dinner at Ciro's.

February 25 – morning drive to Sabal Palm Grove (via a brief stop at VNC); drive via Bahia Grande inlet on Hwy. 48 to South Padre Island's Isla Blanca Park (for lunch and gannets), and afternoon birding at the Convention Center boardwalk, and return to Weslaco; early dinner at Blue Onion, and post-sunset at Estero Llano Grande for a screech-owl and spotlighted pauraque (and bunny & spider!) eyeballs.

February 26 – morning drive (via Starbuck's) to Quinta Mazatlan in McAllen and Bentsen State Park; lunch and afternoon birding at Anzalduas County Park; late afternoon to Edinburg's Wetlands and 10th & Dove in McAllen for parakeets, and dinner at Teri's Bistro.

February 27 – morning at Llano Grande (for whistling-ducks!) and return (again via Starbuck's) to Bentsen State Park; afternoon drive to Zapata via the Peñita Pipit Patch, a late lunch/early supper at Caro's in Rio Grande City, and birding for ducks and pigeons at Salineño; first of two nights in Zapata.

February 28 – morning return to Salineño via desert birding at Falcon County Park and vicinity; return to Zapata for a "picnic" lunch, and late afternoon stops at Zapata's seedeater pond, the gnatcatcher side road, and Las Palmas; "picnic" dinner catered by Zapata's finest (formerly just the 2nd-best) restaurant.

February 29 – morning return to Salineño (especially for a better Red-billed Pigeon view), and drive back to Harlingen for flights home.

Bird List (note underlined South Texas specialties – i.e., species which are absent, rare, or very local elsewhere in the U.S.)

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck (including a few thousand at Llano Grande!)

Fulvous Whistling-Duck (among the 1000s of Black-bellieds)

Muscovy Duck (almost easy – for a change! – at Salineño)

Wood Duck (Edinburg Wetlands)

Gadwall (including a partial albino at Salineño)

American Wigeon

Mottled Duck

Blue-winged Teal

Cinnamon Teal (Santa Ana)

Northern Shoveler
Northern Pintail
Green-winged Teal
Redhead
Ring-necked Duck
Lesser Scaup
Bufflehead
Red-breasted Merganser
Ruddy Duck
Plain Chachalaca (including some playing hoops at Valley Nature Center?)
(Northern Bobwhite / leader-only, heard-only)
Common Loon
Least Grebe (closest views at Sabal and Edinburg)
Pied-billed Grebe
Northern Gannet (good views from South Padre)
American White Pelican
Brown Pelican
Double-crested Cormorant
Neotropic Cormorant
Anhinga (only at Bentsen State Park)
Great Blue Heron
Great Egret
Snowy Egret
Little Blue Heron
Tricolored Heron
Reddish Egret (“dancing” at South Padre)
Cattle Egret
Green Heron
Black-crowned Night-Heron
Yellow-crowned Night-Heron (Edinburg Wetlands)
White Ibis
White-faced Ibis
Roseate Spoonbill (South Padre)
Black Vulture
Turkey Vulture
Osprey
White-tailed Kite
Northern Harrier
Sharp-shinned Hawk
Cooper’s Hawk
Gray Hawk (Anzalduas and Salineño)
Harris’s Hawk
Red-shouldered Hawk
Broad-winged Hawk (immature at Sabal; not normally present in winter)
White-tailed Hawk (mostly immatures)
Red-tailed Hawk
Crested Caracara
American Kestrel

Merlin (Zapata)
Peregrine Falcon (several sightings)
Clapper Rail (including one bathing at South Padre's boardwalk)
Sora
Common Moorhen
American Coot
Semipalmated Plover
Killdeer
American Oystercatcher (Bahia Grande inlet)
Black-necked Stilt
American Avocet (Llano Grande)
Spotted Sandpiper
Greater Yellowlegs
Lesser Yellowlegs
Willet
Long-billed Curlew (including birds greeting us at the airport)
Marbled Godwit
Ruddy Turnstone
Western Sandpiper
Least Sandpiper
Dunlin
Stilt Sandpiper (Llano Grande)
Long-billed Dowitcher
Laughing Gull
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Gull-billed Tern (along Hwy. 48 en route to South Padre)
Caspian Tern
Royal Tern
Sandwich Tern (spring migrants at South Padre)
Forster's Tern
Black Skimmer (especially at South Padre)
Rock Pigeon
Red-billed Pigeon (even calling at Salineño)
Eurasian Collared-Dove
White-winged Dove
Mourning Dove
Inca Dove
Common Ground-Dove
White-tipped Dove
Green Parakeet (bathing on Dove Ave. in McAllen)
Red-crowned Parrot (roosting at Valley Nature Center)
Greater Roadrunner
Groove-billed Ani (most cooperative at Frontera Audubon)
Eastern Screech-Owl (*mccallii* individuals in Bentsen and by spotlight at Llano Grande)
Common Nighthawk (great view by day at Quinta Mazatlan; also orange eyeballs in Weslaco)
Buff-bellied Hummingbird (best views at Frontera Audubon)
Ruby-throated Hummingbird (WBC's feeders at Bentsen State Park)

Rufous Hummingbird (ditto)
Ringed Kingfisher (best views at Salineño)
Belted Kingfisher
Green Kingfisher (cooperative and handsome male at Edinburg!)
Golden-fronted Woodpecker
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
Ladder-backed Woodpecker
Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet (at Bentsen and Anzalduas – though not in a huisache!)
Least Flycatcher (Sabal Palm Grove; not normally present in winter)
Black Phoebe (pair at Anzalduas)
Eastern Phoebe
Vermilion Flycatcher
Dusky-capped Flycatcher (a *lawrencei* individual wintering at Sabal)
Ash-throated Flycatcher
Great Kiskadee
Tropical Kingbird (especially at the Fairfield Inn)
Couch's Kingbird
Loggerhead Shrike
White-eyed Vireo
Blue-headed Vireo
Green Jay (including a “blue” jay at Laguna Atascosa)
Chihuahuan Raven
Purple Martin
Tree Swallow
Northern Rough-winged Swallow
Cliff Swallow
Cave Swallow (several spring migrants)
Barn Swallow
Black-crested Titmouse
Verdin
Cactus Wren
Carolina Wren
Bewick's Wren
House Wren
Marsh Wren (mostly heard at Santa Ana)
Ruby-crowned Kinglet
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher
Black-tailed Gnatcatcher (still at the “usual spot” north of Zapata!)
Clay-colored Robin (at least 5 at Quinta Mazatlan plus another at Frontera)
Northern Mockingbird
Long-billed Thrasher
Curve-billed Thrasher
European Starling
American Pipit
Sprague's Pipit (at the Peñitas pipit patch)
Orange-crowned Warbler
Yellow-rumped Warbler (including Audubon's types at Bentsen and Salineño)
Black-throated Green Warbler

Yellow-throated Warbler (with the Tropical Kingbird at the Fairfield Inn)
Black-and-white Warbler
Common Yellowthroat
Wilson's Warbler
White-collared Seedeater (unexpectedly cooperative in Zapata)
Olive Sparrow
Cassin's Sparrow
Chipping Sparrow
Vesper Sparrow
Black-throated Sparrow
Lark Bunting (Falcon County Park)
Savannah Sparrow
Lincoln's Sparrow
Swamp Sparrow (brief fly-by at South Padre)
(White-crowned Sparrow / leader-only)
Northern Cardinal
Pyrrhuloxia
Rose-breasted Grosbeak (Frontera Audubon; not normally present in winter)
Indigo Bunting
Red-winged Blackbird
Eastern Meadowlark
Western Meadowlark
Great-tailed Grackle
Bronzed Cowbird (best view at Falcon County Park)
Brown-headed Cowbird
Altamira Oriole
Audubon's Oriole (at Salineño's feeders)
House Finch (quite unexpected at the county park)
Lesser Goldfinch
American Goldfinch
House Sparrow

Total = 182 species (plus 2 leader-only species + 2 exotics)

ALSO SEEN:

Yellow-headed and Lilac-crowned parrots (among the Red-crowneds)

Bobcat (seen by Bill at Sabal)
Javelina (a.k.a. Collared Peccary)
Black-tailed Jackrabbit
Eastern Cottontail
Fox Squirrel

American Alligator (Laguna Atascosa)
Red-eared Slider
Spiny Softshell Turtle
spider eyes (in the spotlight at Estero Llano Grande)