

TEXAS: SPRING 2017 TRIP REPORT



Buff-bellied Hummingbird by Luke Tiller

Day 1 - April 15, 2017

We started our Spring tour of Texas with an evening rendezvous in the hotel lobby. From here we swung over to downtown McAllen, where we had just enough time for a delicious dinner and a couple of excellent craft beers before heading for our first birding stop. A box store parking lot might not be the most salubrious of locations to kick off a birding tour, but it's one of the best locations to find roosting Green Parakeets. As well as finding about 200 of this species of intriguing origin, we were treated to flyovers of several other species (from Lesser Nighthawk to Black-bellied Whistling Ducks) and a mixed flock of hundreds of roosting blackbirds that included both Great-tailed Grackles and Bronzed Cowbirds. After enjoying the spectacle of the roosting birds, we headed home to a restful night at our base hotel for the week in Pharr.



Day 2 April 16, 2017

We were up bright and early on our second day to enjoy the dawn chorus at one of the Rio Grande Valley's birding crown jewels: Santa Ana. Here we enjoyed the sights and sounds of this tropical forest as the raucous calls of Plain Chachalacas rang out around us, joining the choir were **Altamira Orioles (pictured at left by Luke Tiller)**, Green Jays, Great Kiskadees and more. We climbed the hawkwatch observation tower to enjoy the liftoff of migrant raptors and soon found ourselves

surrounded by Broad-winged and Swainson's Hawks and were buzzed by a passing female Northern Harrier.

Back on solid ground we enjoyed waterfowl and waders aplenty around the various ponds. Muddy edges to those pools also offered a nice mix of migrant shorebirds including Pectoral, Solitary and Stilt Sandpipers which all lent themselves to an impromptu shorebird workshop. Though difficult to play favorites with the eighty plus species encountered at Santa Ana, highlights for the group included a Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, showing well along the entrance road, and an Olive Sparrow perched singing long enough to enjoy scoped views of this often skulky species.

After an adventure finding lunch (thankfully Chinese buffets in Texas open on Easter Sunday) and an early afternoon siesta, we headed back out to enjoy another of South Texas's hotspots: Bentsen Rio Grande State Park. Streams of raptors passed above us as we enjoyed looks at more of the specialist denizens of this region including Great Kiskadees, Long-billed Thrashers and Golden-fronted Woodpeckers. The almost constant drone of White-tipped Doves giving a tropical feel to our continued adventures.

Day 3 April 17, 2017

Our morning start was an early one as we migrated westwards towards a morning rendezvous along the Rio Grande at Salineno. Breakfast Burritos eaten off the hood of the car gave us the feel of an authentic birding adventure. Salineno is a great spot to observe birds moving along the river, and today would be no exception as we had not one but two separate sightings of Red-billed Pigeon flying by. Working upstream a little we hit on a few nice species including a somewhat cooperative Summer Tanager among a good mix of the regular occurring residents.

As we headed out to the town's church square we picked up numbers of Hooded Orioles and local roads afforded us great driveby views of a couple of Curve-billed Thrashers. Unexpected highlight of the morning however was picking up a stunning male Painted Bunting in a nearby yard.

Next stop was Starr County Park, which was covered in hundreds of migrant Lark Sparrows. As well as the sparrows, there was much else to enjoy with a huge flock of American White Pelicans soaring overhead, Hooded Orioles nesting in one of the sites many lampposts and a wonderful moment where two species of myiarchus flycatchers, Ash-throated and Brown-



crested, perched on a wire next to each other allowing for close scrutiny.

Our next stop was a little-known site that I like for dry habitat species which provided us great views of Chihuahuan Raven, Pyrrhuloxia and most excitingly Scaled Quail (an uncommon and hard to find species in this part of Texas). All that and it was only just time for lunch!

We spent the rest of our day working our way back east along the

river, making a few stops as we went. Highlights included cooperative Cactus Wrens and Black-throated Sparrows at a couple of stops, but most importantly a highly prized White-bellied Seedeater that was singing vociferously from a seemingly unlikely treetop perch at the Zapata Library Park. We also enjoyed stopping in Roma to get a taste of some of the history of this corner of Texas and appreciate the towns fascinating historic buildings.

After dinner, we returned to Bentsen to search for Elf Owl, however apart from one suspicious hoot there was no sign at the regular roost site. A vocalizing Chuck-Wills-Widow and a couple of **Common Pauraques** (pictured above by Luke Tiller) were however some slight recompense for the mosquito bites.

Day 4 April 18, 2017

We started our day at the wonderful Estero Llano State Park. Here we enjoyed a smattering of neotropical migrants which included a couple of beautiful buntings: Indigo and Painted. There was an almost constant flow of raptors overhead with a handful of spectacular Mississippi kites joining the throngs of Broad-winged Hawks. As well as the migrants, local specialties put on quite the show, with a roosting McCall's Eastern Screech Owl drawing suitably appreciative oohs and ahhs and multiple Clay-colored Thrushes putting on quite the show.

It's always exciting to find a Common Pauraque but add in the extra excitement of discovering that the bird had two little chicks snuggled up underneath it and it quickly became the morning's show stopper. In the end, we found three different adult birds and two pairs of chicks. If there was just one good reason to go to Southern Texas in April it would have to be baby Pauraques!

A quick stop at a nearby sod farm added to our growing shorebird list with American Golden Plovers and Baird's Sandpipers both discovered. A constant stream of raptors continued to pass overhead allowing Alex and I to offer a quick workshop on identifying hawks in flight. After an excellent lunch at Nana's we headed for a well-earned midday siesta.

Our afternoon exploration was undertaken at Edinburg Scenic Wetlands. Among the exciting local specialties we enjoyed close encounters with Green Kingfishers and great scoped views of Least Grebes. While relishing the mix of water birds, including roving flocks of Forster's and Gull-billed Terns, we also stumbled upon a handful of migrant species including a couple of intricately patterned Clay-colored Sparrows and perhaps most excitingly a Yellow-breasted Chat. Park waders included Green, Tricolored and Black-crowned Night Herons in all their

finery as well as Snowy and Great Egrets in the height of breeding color, skin respectively flushed neon pink and green.

We ended our day scarfing down delicious Tandoori Chicken at an Indian Restaurant, another new and novel adventure for some in the group.



Day 5 April 19, 2017

We started our day along Old Port Isabel Rd. Here we connected easily with our main target, Apolomado Falcon, while witnessing them connecting with one of their main targets: a sparrow. While the female tended the nest, we watched the slightly unchivalrous male pluck and devour his morning snack. This important grassland habitat was different to much that we'd explored before and opened up the opportunity of neat new encounters including vocalizing Northern

Bobwhites and multiple flyover Long-billed Curlews. As well as the falcons, there were other raptors to enjoy including Harris's Hawks, White-tailed Hawks and an Osprey gliding by with fish in tow (or talon).

It was still early as we arrived at Palo Alto Battlefield. Here surrounded by history and among wonderfully restored open country habitat we picked up two wonderful little sparrows: Cassin's and Botteri's. The Cassin's lived up to their somewhat skulky reputation, but at least one recently arrived **Botteri's Sparrow (pictured above by Luke Tiller)** put on quite the show for us as it sang vociferously from a clump of nearby shrubs. Overhead we also picked up a huge flock of migrant Franklin's Gulls, their pink bellies glowing in the early morning sunlight. Signs that birds were again on the move.

Next stop was an opportune one at the Shrimp Bay Bridge. Here we enjoyed wonderful views of an array of coastal birds that included: Black Skimmer, Reddish Egret (both dark and light birds), Roseate Spoonbill, Least and Sandwich Terns and American Avocet.

We had just enough time prior to lunch to arrive on South Padre Island to enjoy perhaps the most accommodating Least Bitterns of all time. The group enjoying incredible views of this often hard to see species as three juvenile birds crept through the marshes around us almost oblivious to our presence. A handful of neotropical species visiting a water feature at the same site gave us enthusiasm for possible migrant encounters post lunchtime burgers.

As we had hoped, the next couple of stops were a riot of neotropical color as we unearthed a variety of stunning migrants at every stop. These included a wonderful mix of warblers: Worm-eating, Kentucky and Hooded as well as a mix of other beautiful and brightly colored birds: Orchard Oriole, Yellow-breasted Chat, Summer Tanager and Painted Buntings aplenty.

Still we were not sated. Our next port of call harbored a wonderful mix of shorebirds and other species including two much sought-after beauties named for Alexander Wilson: the somewhat peculiar looking Wilson's Plover and the stunning Wilson's Phalarope.

We ended a long day over Oliviera Park in Brownsville where we enjoyed the boisterous arrival of a couple of hundred parrots of four different species at their nighttime roost. Personal highlight for me was picking out the odd calls of an arriving White-fronted Parrot and the low drone of the Yellow-headed Parrots among the throngs of mainly Red-crowned and a few Red-ored.

Day 6 April 20, 2017

After a long day prior, we enjoyed a rather late morning start at Santa Ana. Here we bee-lined for the hawkwatch platform and this time among an impressive mid-morning liftoff of migrant raptors we picked up our intended quarry: Hook-billed Kite.

Next stop was at a different local sod farm where we soon found ourselves among a mix of exciting birds. "Grasspipers" were of course our main goal here and we were not to be disappointed. Among large numbers of American Golden Plover were a nice mix of other exciting species including Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Baird's sandpiper and Upland Sandpiper. Most exciting though were two rare Hudsonian Godwits that Alex picked out, one in stunning alternate plumage. Unfortunately, they weren't kind enough to stick around for the arriving twitchers, the birds perhaps spooked by the stirring Swainson's Hawks that had also decided to loaf on the turf farm fields.

After a good noontime siesta, we ended our day with a rather uncooperative Tropical Kingbird, a rather more accommodating White-tailed Kite and enjoyed a few groups of Monk Parakeets nesting in a local community. The best parrot nests kindly pointed out to us by a little group of young kids, perhaps local birding guides of the future?



Day 7 April 21, 2017

Our final day saw us heading north towards some open country and agricultural habitat where we were delighted to add a bunch of exciting species including Northern Bobwhite, Dickcissel, Blue Grosbeak and Lark Sparrow at our first stop. Further driving of country roads provided such species as Common Ground Dove, Bronzed Cowbird, Crested Caracaras and more.

Our first real stop for the day was Sal Del Rey, an interesting "salt lake" that provides breeding habitat

for Snowy Plover. Our hike out was eventful enough to keep spirits up thanks to multiple Painted Bunting sightings as well as smattering of other species which included a rather surprisingly late Eastern Phoebe. Finding three diminutive, and dare I say cute, little Snowy Plovers at the end of the hike was a welcome reward and a life bird for all concerned.

After filling up on breakfast burritos we headed out to continue our exploration of the area. We soon picked off a small group of Wild Turkeys a bird somewhat locally limited in its distribution and enjoyed a bunch of roadside flycatchers including both Eastern and Western Kingbirds (amusingly on appropriate sides of the road), **Scissor-tailed Flycatchers (pictured above by Luke Tiller)** as well as vocalizing Tropical and Couch's Kingbirds.

Our final afternoon run included a quick stop outside the Alamo Inn to enjoy slightly better looks and photo opportunities for Tropical Kingbird before a rather uneventful visit to Anzalduas Park (beyond a couple of Gray Hawks).

Our final stop for the tour was the National Butterfly Center. It's sometimes hard to persuade birders to make this stop (put off by the butterfly in the name perhaps?) though it can be a wonderful place to enjoy some of the areas specialist species. True to form we were soon enjoying great views of Olive Sparrows, Green Jays, Altamira Orioles, Black-crested Titmice and Plain Chachalacas. In my experience, the National Butterfly Center always turns up something interesting among the common stuff too, during my February visit it had been a beautiful Varied Bunting, this time it was a roving troop of Groove-billed Anis. With a face that only a mother could love, this seasonally uncommon bird species was a nice pick up and a great way to round out a wonderful trip.

This was my first time in Southern Texas during Spring and it was very different from Fall/Winter. Less focus on feeders and more time just birding. The usual mix of great local birds and a variety of exciting migrants left us with a trip list north of 200 species. It's easy to see why the region is one of Greg Miller's favorite Spring spots, if you haven't hit Southern Texas in Spring before, put it on your to do list now.