

TOUR REPORT



TEXAS: Hill Country and Big Bend

Guide: Josh Engel
April 19 – 28, 2017

INTRODUCTION-----

April in Central and West Texas is a time when migrants are arriving, breeding birds are singing, the weather is mild, and birding is at its very best. This part of Texas is rugged and scenic, with beautiful forested hills, rugged mountains, and vast expanses of desert. The birding was outstanding. Highlights included Colima and Golden-cheeked Warbler, Tropical Parula, Black-capped Vireo, Green and Ringed Kingfisher, Gray, Common Black-, and Zone-tailed Hawks, Olive Sparrow, Varied Bunting, Gray Vireo, Long-billed Thrasher, Couch's Kingbird, Mexican Jay, Blue-throated and Lucifer Hummingbird, Painted Redstart, and Aplomado Falcon. We watched vast hordes of Mexican Free-tailed Bats emerge from a cave; hiked in the Chisos Mountains; and admired the stunning cliffs along the Big Bend of the Rio Grande. We ate Texas Barbeque and Tex-Mex and drove through many cowboy towns with their historic county courthouses. It was a wonderful trip to a wonderful and surprise-filled part of the country.



Golden-cheeked Warbler only breeds in Texas's Hill Country.

DAILY LOG-----

The group arrived just at sunset to our lodge in the small Hill Country town of Concan. We had just enough light to see a few of the common, typically Texas birds, the call the oaks here home before the light diminished, including **Black-crested Titmouse**, **White-eyed Vireo**, **Bewick's Wren**, and **Summer Tanager**. We settled in to the lodge in anticipation of the trip to come.

We had high ambitions for our first morning of the trip: the two flagship species of the Edward's Plateau, both of them federally listed as endangered species: **Golden-cheeked Warbler** and **Black-capped Vireo**. We arrived at Lost Maples State Natural Area (after a stop for a **Ringed Kingfisher** along the way) and set about looking for them, walking on one of the park's beautiful, well-maintained trails. It didn't take long to find **Golden-cheeked Warbler**, a stunning male that everyone had outstanding looks at. A short while later, as the trail climbed in the scrubby oak habitat, we heard, and then saw, a snazzy **Black-capped Vireo**. We would encounter several more of both species over the course of our walk. Although those two species stole the show, we had a whole bunch of other great birds as well, including **White-tipped Doves** at the park's feeding station, a male **Painted Bunting**, a singing **Acadian Flycatcher**, and our first of many **Rufous-crowned Sparrows**.

After lunch in a nearby town, we returned to our lodge for a midday siesta and to bird the grounds in the late afternoon. The lodge grounds were birdy. The hummingbird feeders were full of **Black-chinned Hummingbirds** and we had our first views of **Yellow-breasted Chat** and **Bell's Vireo**, both of which we would see and hear many of over the course of the trip. A **Yellow-throated Warbler** showed beautifully as did a male **Hooded Oriole**. The biggest treat made us wait—a brilliant **Tropical Parula** showed up just outside our cabin in the evening. As night fell, **Chuck-will's-widow** and **Eastern Screech-Owl** called.



Scissor-tailed Flycatchers were a frequent sight on this trip.

The following morning, we packed up the van and headed to Uvalde, with our first stop at Chalk Bluff Park, on the Nueces River. The riverside vegetation here is full of interesting birds, both in

the open habitats of the park and in the adjacent thick scrub. **Vermillion Flycatchers** were conspicuous both in their bright plumage and in their flight displays, but it didn't take long to find the less colorful and less conspicuous **Brown-crested Flycatcher**, a specialty of the border regions. Other Rio Grande birds included **Ringed Kingfisher**, **Great Kiskadee**, and great looks at two skulkers, **Olive Sparrow** and **Long-billed Thrasher**. Yellow-breasted Chats were incredibly common here. On the way out of the park, we had incredible views of that most charismatic desert dweller, **Greater Roadrunner**.

Our next stops were at wetlands in and around the town of Uvalde. At our first stop, we were pleasantly surprised to find a **Green Kingfisher** perched right out in the open, our only one of the trip. **Neotropic Cormorants** were also present, but apart from a few swimming snakes there wasn't too much in the water here. Our next wetland stop was more productive, with a variety of dabbling ducks, including **Cinnamon Teal**, as well as **Black-bellied Whistling Duck**, several species of shorebirds, and a **Bullock's Oriole**. After an afternoon siesta, we headed back out to witness the amazing emergence of **Mexican Free-tailed Bats** from a local cave. They didn't disappoint, and as a bonus we had great looks at **Cave Swallow** while we awaited the bats.



Greater Roadrunners can be seen all along the route.

It was finally time to head to Big Bend, where we would be for four nights. We didn't stop much along the way, though one rest stop did have a Ring-billed Gull looking very out of place in the rugged desert. Arriving at the national park, it didn't take long to find our first desert birds, even seeing Black-throated Sparrow and Pyrrhuloxia right at the sign declaring Big Bend National Park.

We made our way down to the Rio Grande to bird along the river. Vermilion Flycatchers were common in the riverside habitat, and we found Verdin, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, and heard the beautiful song of Canyon Wren bouncing off the walls of Santa Elena Canyon.

We awoke early to hike in Blue Creek Canyon. Varied Buntings were common and we had great looks at this beautiful border-zone specialty. Scaled Quail showed nicely from atop a rock. Along the dry creek we found Ash-throated Flycatcher, Pyrrhuloxia, Scott's and Hooded Oriole, and Rufous-crowned Sparrow.

We spent the afternoon birding around Cottonwood Campground and along stretches of the Ross Maxwell Scenic Drive. The campground was hosting a nesting pair of Gray Hawks, which we saw well. We also found Lucy's Warbler, Painted Bunting, Greater Roadrunner, and Javelina here. We also found some typical western migrants, like Plumbeous Vireo, MacGillivray's Warbler, and Western Tanager. As night fell, we heard Elf Owl and Lesser Nighthawks calling.



Varied Buntings were on territory and singing away in Big Bend.

Our second full day in Big Bend started with another beautiful hike, this one on the Windows Trail in Chisos Basin. The higher elevation meant some different birds, and we quickly found Mexican Jay, Acorn Woodpecker, Hepatic Tanager, and Say's Phoebe. Our main goal was Gray Vireo, which took a bit of work, but we eventually had great views of this very localized bird of the Mountain West. Varied Buntings were common and it was great to see them again. Other hikers told us about some Black Bears in the vicinity, so a short detour allowed us wonderful views of a mother bear and two cubs.

For the afternoon we headed back to the Rio Grande, but on the opposite side of the national park from our previous river visits. A stop along the way at Dugout Wells nabbed us our only Crissal Thrasher of the trip and plenty of Wilson's and Audubon's Yellow-rumped Warblers. The temperature rose as the elevation decreased closer to the river. We took advantage of the large trees here to bird from the shade. Our first stop was to see a Common Black-Hawk sitting atop its nest. We then set out to look for migrants and birds typical of the riparian forest. Summer Tanager and Bell's Vireo were common, and flocks of sparrows contained Brewer's, Lark, and Vesper.

Our third full day in Big Bend was a big one: hiking into the Chisos Mountains to look for the park's most famous avian resident, Colima Warbler. We left early to take advantage of the cool temps and early morning bird song. We found some very tame Mexican Jays, as well as Cordilleran Flycatcher and Hutton's Vireo, along the walk, and eventually heard our first Colima Warbler. It wasn't so cooperative. Nor was our second. But the third time was the charm, and a Colima Warbler finally showed brilliantly for the whole group as we ate our lunch at Boot Springs. A Blue-throated Warbler also showed off here, and a mixed flock contained migrant Townsend's and Hermit Warblers. Our way back down into the basin was punctuated, most notably, by great views of a Black-chinned Sparrow. It was a beautiful hike and we returned tired and happy to Chisos Basin.



Mexican Jays are common at higher elevations in Big Bend National Park.

It was time to say good bye to Big Bend, so we packed up early and started our way north to the Davis Mountains, stopping in a café in Terlingua for breakfast. Our first birding destination was Christmas Mountain Oasis en route, a wonderful private setup of bird feeders and water features in a desert oasis. This is just about the best place anywhere to see Lucifer Hummingbird, and today didn't disappoint, with a few very cooperative birds. Varied Bunting also visited the feeders, with Brewer's and Black-throated Sparrows underneath.

We continued north to Davis Mountains State Park. A visit to the feeding stations yielded Black-headed Grosbeak, Pine Siskin, and other typical feeder birds, and our only Phainopepla of the trip showed up just as we were leaving the state park. We were staying at a private residence high in the mountains, so we made our way there, seeing Grace's Warbler along the way. We

spent the afternoon at the feeders of the house, watching Broad-tailed Hummingbird, Acorn Woodpecker, and Black-headed Grosbeaks enjoying the setup. Zone-tailed Hawks joined the ever-present Turkey Vultures in the evening. Western Screech-Owl, Common Poorwill, and Mexican Whip-poor-will also started calling as darkness fell.

We spent the early part of the morning enjoy the private property on which we were staying. Lazuli Bunting, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Painted Redstart, and Plumbeous and Hutton's Vireos were all part of the early morning fray. After breakfast we headed back out into the lowlands, stopping for a Cassin's Kingbird along the way. A hike in the juniper-laden hills revealed Western Bluebird, Western Wood-Pewee, and our target for the hike, Gray Flycatcher. With that success, we returned up the mountains for the evening.



Lucifer Hummingbird is a specialty of the Big Bend area.

We woke up for the last day of the trip, headed back down the mountains, and made our way to Lake Balmorhea and some nearby wetlands. We had done very little wetland birding on this trip, so we found many new species here. No doubt the highlight and biggest surprise was an Aplomado Falcon, possible a vagrant from the Mexican population, that zipped us and was fortunately photographed by another group present at the lake this morning. We also saw a Peregrine Falcon munching on a Blue-winged Teal, Long-billed Dowitcher, Western and Baird's Sandpiper, Wilson's Phalarope, Western, Clark's, and Eared Grebes, and White-faced Ibis.

With that, it was time to head to the airport. Texas treated us well, with wonderful birding, spectacular landscapes, and many memorable experiences.

BIRD LIST-----

210 species, including 7 heard only. Taxonomy followed the *Clements Checklist of Birds of the World 6th Edition, 2016 Update*.

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck - *Dendrocygna autumnalis*

Gadwall - *Anas strepera*

American Wigeon - *Anas americana*

Mallard - *Anas platyrhynchos*

Blue-winged Teal - *Anas discors*

Cinnamon Teal - *Anas cyanoptera*

Northern Shoveler - *Anas clypeata*

Green-winged Teal - *Anas crecca*

Ring-necked Duck - *Aythya collaris*

Ruddy Duck - *Oxyura jamaicensis*

Scaled Quail - *Callipepla squamata*

Northern Bobwhite - *Colinus virginianus*

Wild Turkey - *Meleagris gallopavo*

Pied-billed Grebe - *Podilymbus podiceps*

Eared Grebe - *Podiceps nigricollis*

Western Grebe - *Aechmophorus occidentalis*

Clark's Grebe - *Aechmophorus clarkii*

Neotropic Cormorant - *Phalacrocorax brasilianus*

Great Blue Heron - *Ardea herodias*

Great Egret - *Ardea alba*

Snowy Egret - *Egretta thula*

Little Blue Heron - *Egretta caerulea*

Black-crowned Night-Heron - *Nycticorax nycticorax*

White-faced Ibis - *Plegadis chihi*

Black Vulture - *Coragyps atratus*

Turkey Vulture - *Cathartes aura*

Osprey - *Pandion haliaetus*

Northern Harrier - *Circus cyaneus*

Sharp-shinned Hawk - *Accipiter striatus*

Cooper's Hawk - *Accipiter cooperii*

Common Black Hawk - *Buteogallus anthracinus*

Gray Hawk - *Buteo plagiatus*

Red-shouldered Hawk - *Buteo lineatus*

Swainson's Hawk - *Buteo swainsoni*

Zone-tailed Hawk - *Buteo albonotatus*

Red-tailed Hawk - *Buteo jamaicensis*

Common Gallinule - *Gallinula galeata*

American Coot - *Fulica americana*

Semipalmated Plover - *Charadrius semipalmatus*

Killdeer - *Charadrius vociferus*
Baird's Sandpiper - *Calidris bairdii*
Least Sandpiper - *Calidris minutilla*
Western Sandpiper - *Calidris mauri*
Long-billed Dowitcher - *Limnodromus scolopaceus*
Wilson's Phalarope - *Phalaropus tricolor*
Spotted Sandpiper - *Actitis macularius*
Solitary Sandpiper - *Tringa solitaria*
Lesser Yellowlegs - *Tringa flavipes*
Ring-billed Gull - *Larus delawarensis*
Rock Pigeon - *Columba livia*
Eurasian Collared-Dove - *Streptopelia decaocto*
Inca Dove - *Columbina inca*
Common Ground-Dove - *Columbina passerina*
White-tipped Dove - *Leptotila verreauxi*
White-winged Dove - *Zenaida asiatica*
Mourning Dove - *Zenaida macroura*
Greater Roadrunner - *Geococcyx californianus*
Western Screech-Owl - *Megascops kennicottii*
Eastern Screech-Owl - *Megascops asio*
Great Horned Owl - *Bubo virginianus*
Elf Owl - *Micrathene whitneyi*
Burrowing Owl - *Athene cunicularia*
Lesser Nighthawk - *Chordeiles acutipennis*
Common Poorwill - *Phalaenoptilus nuttallii*
Chuck-will's-widow - *Antrostomus carolinensis*
Mexican Whip-poor-will - *Antrostomus arizonae*
Chimney Swift - *Chaetura pelagica*
White-throated Swift - *Aeronautes saxatalis*
Magnificent Hummingbird - *Eugenes fulgens*
Blue-throated Hummingbird - *Lampornis clemenciae*
Lucifer Hummingbird - *Calothorax lucifer*
Ruby-throated Hummingbird - *Archilochus colubris*
Black-chinned Hummingbird - *Archilochus alexandri*
Broad-tailed Hummingbird - *Selasphorus platycercus*
Ringed Kingfisher - *Megaceryle torquata*
Belted Kingfisher - *Megaceryle alcyon*
Green Kingfisher - *Chloroceryle americana*
Acorn Woodpecker - *Melanerpes formicivorus*
Golden-fronted Woodpecker - *Melanerpes aurifrons*
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker - *Sphyrapicus varius*
Ladder-backed Woodpecker - *Picoides scalaris*
Northern Flicker - *Colaptes auratus*

Crested Caracara - *Caracara cheriway*
American Kestrel - *Falco sparverius*
Aplomado Falcon - *Falco femoralis*
Peregrine Falcon - *Falco peregrinus*
Olive-sided Flycatcher - *Contopus cooperi*
Western Wood-Pewee - *Contopus sordidulus*
Eastern Wood-Pewee - *Contopus virens*
Acadian Flycatcher - *Empidonax virescens*
Gray Flycatcher - *Empidonax wrightii*
Cordilleran Flycatcher - *Empidonax occidentalis*
Black Phoebe - *Sayornis nigricans*
Eastern Phoebe - *Sayornis phoebe*
Say's Phoebe - *Sayornis saya*
Vermilion Flycatcher - *Pyrocephalus rubinus*
Ash-throated Flycatcher - *Myiarchus cinerascens*
Brown-crested Flycatcher - *Myiarchus tyrannulus*
Great Kiskadee - *Pitangus sulphuratus*
Couch's Kingbird - *Tyrannus couchii*
Cassin's Kingbird - *Tyrannus vociferans*
Western Kingbird - *Tyrannus verticalis*
Scissor-tailed Flycatcher - *Tyrannus forficatus*
Loggerhead Shrike - *Lanius ludovicianus*
Black-capped Vireo - *Vireo atricapilla*
White-eyed Vireo - *Vireo griseus*
Bell's Vireo - *Vireo bellii*
Gray Vireo - *Vireo vicinior*
Hutton's Vireo - *Vireo huttoni*
Yellow-throated Vireo - *Vireo flavifrons*
Cassin's Vireo - *Vireo cassinii*
Plumbeous Vireo - *Vireo plumbeus*
Red-eyed Vireo - *Vireo olivaceus*
Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay - *Aphelocoma woodhouseii*
Mexican Jay - *Aphelocoma wollweberi*
Common Raven - *Corvus corax*
Northern Rough-winged Swallow - *Stelgidopteryx serripennis*
Purple Martin - *Progne subis*
Violet-green Swallow - *Tachycineta thalassina*
Bank Swallow - *Riparia riparia*
Barn Swallow - *Hirundo rustica*
Cliff Swallow - *Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*
Cave Swallow - *Petrochelidon fulva*
Carolina Chickadee - *Poecile carolinensis*
Black-crested Titmouse - *Baeolophus atricristatus*

Verdin - *Auriparus flaviceps*
Bushtit - *Psaltriparus minimus*
White-breasted Nuthatch - *Sitta carolinensis*
Rock Wren - *Salpinctes obsoletus*
Canyon Wren - *Catherpes mexicanus*
House Wren - *Troglodytes aedon*
Carolina Wren - *Thryothorus ludovicianus*
Bewick's Wren - *Thryomanes bewickii*
Cactus Wren - *Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus*
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher - *Polioptila caerulea*
Black-tailed Gnatcatcher - *Polioptila melanura*
Ruby-crowned Kinglet - *Regulus calendula*
Eastern Bluebird - *Sialia sialis*
Western Bluebird - *Sialia mexicana*
Hermit Thrush - *Catharus guttatus*
Curve-billed Thrasher - *Toxostoma curvirostre*
Brown Thrasher - *Toxostoma rufum*
Long-billed Thrasher - *Toxostoma longirostre*
Crissal Thrasher - *Toxostoma crissale*
Northern Mockingbird - *Mimus polyglottos*
European Starling - *Sturnus vulgaris*
American Pipit - *Anthus rubescens*
Cedar Waxwing - *Bombycilla cedrorum*
Phainopepla - *Phainopepla nitens*
Louisiana Waterthrush - *Parkesia motacilla*
Black-and-white Warbler - *Mniotilta varia*
Orange-crowned Warbler - *Oreothlypis celata*
Colima Warbler - *Oreothlypis crissalis*
Lucy's Warbler - *Oreothlypis luciae*
Nashville Warbler - *Oreothlypis ruficapilla*
MacGillivray's Warbler - *Geothlypis tolmiei*
Common Yellowthroat - *Geothlypis trichas*
Tropical Parula - *Setophaga pitiayumi*
Yellow-rumped Warbler - *Setophaga coronata*
Yellow-throated Warbler - *Setophaga dominica*
Grace's Warbler - *Setophaga graciae*
Townsend's Warbler - *Setophaga townsendi*
Hermit Warbler - *Setophaga occidentalis*
Golden-cheeked Warbler - *Setophaga chrysoparia*
Wilson's Warbler - *Cardellina pusilla*
Painted Redstart - *Myioborus pictus*
Yellow-breasted Chat - *Icteria virens*
Olive Sparrow - *Arremonops rufivirgatus*

Chipping Sparrow - *Spizella passerina*
Clay-colored Sparrow - *Spizella pallida*
Black-chinned Sparrow - *Spizella atrogularis*
Field Sparrow - *Spizella pusilla*
Brewer's Sparrow - *Spizella breweri*
Black-throated Sparrow - *Amphispiza bilineata*
Lark Sparrow - *Chondestes grammacus*
Dark-eyed Junco - *Junco hyemalis*
White-crowned Sparrow - *Zonotrichia leucophrys*
Vesper Sparrow - *Pooecetes gramineus*
Savannah Sparrow - *Passerculus sandwichensis*
Lincoln's Sparrow - *Melospiza lincolnii*
Canyon Towhee - *Melospiza fusca*
Rufous-crowned Sparrow - *Aimophila ruficeps*
Spotted Towhee - *Pipilo maculatus*
Hepatic Tanager - *Piranga flava*
Summer Tanager - *Piranga rubra*
Western Tanager - *Piranga ludoviciana*
Northern Cardinal - *Cardinalis cardinalis*
Pyrrhuloxia - *Cardinalis sinuatus*
Black-headed Grosbeak - *Pheucticus melanocephalus*
Blue Grosbeak - *Passerina caerulea*
Lazuli Bunting - *Passerina amoena*
Indigo Bunting - *Passerina cyanea*
Varied Bunting - *Passerina versicolor*
Painted Bunting - *Passerina ciris*
Dickcissel - *Spiza americana*
Red-winged Blackbird - *Agelaius phoeniceus*
Eastern Meadowlark - *Sturnella magna*
Yellow-headed Blackbird - *Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*
Brewer's Blackbird - *Euphagus cyanocephalus*
Great-tailed Grackle - *Quiscalus mexicanus*
Bronzed Cowbird - *Molothrus aeneus*
Brown-headed Cowbird - *Molothrus ater*
Orchard Oriole - *Icterus spurius*
Hooded Oriole - *Icterus cucullatus*
Bullock's Oriole - *Icterus bullockii*
Scott's Oriole - *Icterus parisorum*
House Finch - *Haemorhous mexicanus*
Pine Siskin - *Spinus pinus*
Lesser Goldfinch - *Spinus psaltria*
House Sparrow - *Passer domesticus*

MAMMAL LIST-----

Mexican free-tailed bat - *Tadarida brasiliensis*

Coyote - *Canis latrans*

American black bear - *Ursus americanus*

Raccoon - *Procyon lotor*

Collared peccary - *Pecari tajacu*

White-tailed deer - *Odocoileus virginianus*

Pronghorn - *Antilocapra americana*

Virginia opossum - *Didelphis virginiana*

Black-tailed jackrabbit - *Lepus californicus*

Desert cottontail - *Sylvilagus audubonni*

Fox squirrel - *Sciurus niger*

Mexican ground squirrel - *Spermophilus mexicanus*

Rock squirrel - *Spermophilus variegatus*

Texas antelope squirrel - *Ammospermophilus interpres*

Nutria - *Myocastor coypus*



Black Bears in Big Bend.