



South Texas and the Rio Grande Valley

February 19-22, 2019

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South Texas and the Lower Rio Grande Valley have some of the highest quality birding in the United States. Situated along the Mexico border, birds normally considered rare for much of the country regularly occur only here – making this part of the world a must visit for North American birders. Though only a short exploratory trip, we were able to connect with most of the regional specialties including **Plain Chachalaca, Least Grebe, White-tailed Hawk, Common Parakee, White-tipped Dove, Green Jay, Clay-colored Thrush, Altamira and Audubon's Orioles**, and more. In cold winters, birds in the nearby Mexican mountains tend to leave their regular haunts and explore the neighboring regions a bit more widely, with some occasionally wandering across the border. These rarities were additional targets of ours, and we happily connected with **Red-billed Pigeons, Crimson-collared Grosbeak, Golden-crowned Warbler**, and the highlight of the trip – a continuing first for Texas - **Yellow Grosbeak**.



Green Jay

Day 1, Feb 19: San Antonio to Uvalde/Concan Area to Laredo

Arriving to Texas late the previous evening, we started this morning in San Antonio at a well known birding spot, Mitchell Lake Audubon Center. Here, we were able to begin to note the regional differences that set this area of the country apart from our home base of Chicago. Even before arrival, we had numerous **Great-tailed Grackles** along the wires, and on the drive into the park, a flock of **Neotropic Cormorants** flew over heading to the nearby wetlands. The temperature was a cool 50°F, something we were not expecting given the reputation Texas has for warm weather, but it was still a welcome difference from the frigid winter we had just left.

The ponds throughout the property were covered in ducks, including **Northern Shoveler**, **Green-winged Teal**, **Gadwall**, **Ruddy Duck**, and more. Passerines were numerous in the trees surrounding the ponds, and we began to track down regional specialties including **Ladder-backed Woodpecker** and **Bewick's Wren** mixed in with a more northern suite of **Yellow-rumped Warblers**, **Blue-gray Gnatcatchers**, and **Carolina Wrens**. Swallows also had shown up in recent days, and we were happy to watch **Barn**, **Tree**, and a **Cave Swallow** over the ponds.

Moving west from Mitchell Lake towards Uvalde (the edge of the Texas Hill Country), we stopped a few times to take in the changing birdlife. In a park outside of the town of Hondo, we quickly located a **Golden-fronted Woodpecker**, a pair of **Inca Doves**, and numerous **Western Meadowlarks** on the short grass. On the outskirts of Sabinal, we came across an enormous flock of **Brown-headed Cowbirds** with over 300 **Brewer's Blackbirds** interspersed. Raptors were well-represented on the roadsides, and **Crested Caracara** was another welcome addition to our list.

Arriving in Concan (just north of Uvalde) mid-day, we had a scheduled meeting to try and track down the continuing Yellow Grosbeak at a private residence near Neal's Lodges. After being escorted to the house, we didn't even have time to unbuckle our seatbelts before hearing "the bird's on the feeders! Don't stop even to say hi, get inside!" Dashing through the door, we were treated to a wonderful extended view of Texas' first **Yellow Grosbeak** as it fed on the platform feeder outside. Other seed-eating passerines were also present, including **Black-crested Titmouse**, **Lesser Goldfinches**, and **Pine Siskins**. With the Rio Frio river running in back of the house down a ravine, the views of the landscape here were picturesque.

After high-fives all around (with some birders from as far afield as Colorado and even Canada), we began our journey towards Laredo, where we planned to spend the night. Heading south along some country roads toward Interstate 35, we moved quickly but paused to take in the numerous **Harris's Hawks** perched on telephone polls. At one of these stops, we heard an odd call, and after tracking it down realized they were **Green Jays** - an exciting find.



Yellow Grosbeak at a feeder in Concan



Harris's Hawk on the way to Laredo

We continued down to the Rio Grande and arrived in the early afternoon at the Max Mandel Golf Course just north of Laredo. This golf course is oddly placed right along the river bordering Mexico, and given the dry scrub habitat surrounding it, the manicured greens looked somewhat out of place. The area around the ninth hole had recently been “the spot” to find Red-billed Pigeons in the US this year, yet in our first two hours of searching, **Rock Pigeons** were the only large Columbidae we had to show for our efforts. But the birding was still great, with **Gray Hawks** hunting around the area, **Olive Sparrows** taking a bath in a small puddle, and a couple of **Vermilion Flycatchers** flitting around the tops of trees. Suddenly, while watching up and down the river, we had a large pigeon flying towards us. As it flew directly over our heads, we realized it was a **Red-billed Pigeon**, our target! It eventually landed and then a few more birds joined it on the US side of the riverbank. Some eventually even called from the trees. As if this wasn't good enough, we also tracked down our first **Clay-colored Thrush** of the trip here, with an **Audubon's Oriole** moments after.



Red-billed Pigeon

Satisfied with our efforts, we headed into Laredo to check out a good area for Morelet's Seedeater (once known as White-collared Seedeater), but given the time of day were out of luck. We did however get nice looks at **Mexican Ducks**, a specialty of the Southwest, as well as a **Ringed Kingfisher** which stuck to the Mexico side of the Rio Grande. As dusk came, we found ourselves at a wonderful local Mexican restaurant and soon off to sleep.

Day 2, Feb 20: Laredo to McAllen

An early start to the day had us looking for Morelet's Seedeaters again in the El Tonto area of Laredo. Back where we started yesterday evening, we were still unable to track any down. **Great Kiskadees** and **Long-billed Thrashers** were very vocal this morning however, and we also found both **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker** and a **Golden-crowned Kinglet**, two birds at the southern extent of their wintering range in the US. From this spot, we headed to Zacate Creek, another known area for seedeaters but again could not find them. This was beginning to feel like a trend for the morning... We split up to cover more ground, and Josh tracked down a **Green Kingfisher**, our only one on the trip. With **Verdins**, **Orange-crowned Warblers**, and even a **Wilson's Warbler** around, there were still good birds here.

Our final stop in Laredo was Slaughter Park, which has comfortable paths navigating through a natural corridor adjacent to some baseball fields. Three **Clay-colored Thrushes** made for the major highlight, as well as an early **Ash-throated Flycatcher** and other small passerines.



Clay-colored Thrush, showing well in the underbrush

Already noon, and with no seedeater on our lists, we headed down to San Ygnacio - a small town that borders the river south of Laredo and north of Zapata. The San Ygnacio Bird Sanctuary is well known by visiting birders as yet another spot that has seedeaters, but either due to the heat of the day or the constant wind, we could not turn one up. Heading further south, we did add **Osprey** to the trip list with a bird flying over Falcon Lake in Zapata.

Arriving in McAllen around 2:00 PM, we knew we were a bit behind and hoped to knock out one of the rarities in "the Valley" today. We arrived at Quinta Mazatlan, a small park in the heart of McAllen that has been hosting a young male Crimson-collared Grosbeak for over a month. Watching the feeders for over 2.5 hours, the bird never showed up, but we were still entertained by an assortment of Rio Grande Valley specialties, including **Plain Chachalaca**, **White-tipped Dove**, and **Green Jays**. A wintering **Black-and-white Warbler** was a welcome addition to our trip list as well. We left knowing we would be back in the morning, when the bird was known to regularly come to the feeders each hour.



Plain Chachalaca

Our final stop for the day was a well known roosting site for **Green Parakeets**, another specialty down here. They perch on the wires and trees in the parking lot of an H-E-B (a large grocery store chain in Texas) with over ten thousand **Great-tailed Grackles**. We quickly located roughly a hundred parakeets within the numerous blackbirds, and also found our only **Bronzed Cowbirds** of the trip here as well. Eating some some delicious gorditas for dinner, we prepared for our upcoming day in the Valley tomorrow.

Day 3, Feb 21: McAllen to Brownsville to Port Aransas

This morning had us up with the sun and we only had a 15 minute drive to our first stop of the day. Our target this morning was a pair of Hook-billed Kites that had been seen off and on this winter season from the levee right outside of Bentsen Rio Grande State Park. Unfortunately, after a 2.5 hour vigil, we had no kites to show for our efforts and decided to move on to Quinta Mazatlan to try again for the grosbeak. A short stop at a nearby pond provided us with the trip's first **Least Grebes** as well as some **Ring-necked Ducks**.

Pulling into Quinta Mazatlan, we booked it quickly over to the feeder set up and mentally prepared ourselves to sit and stare at it until the bird showed up. But before we even got to the feeders, we found some birders searching some dense brush along the path and saying they had heard the grosbeak calling moments ago. We quickly located the bird for some brief but quality views before it flew over our heads and towards the feeders. 15 minutes later, the young male **Crimson-collared Grosbeak** was perched on the feeders providing great looks to all present.

With our first major rarity in the Valley down, we quickly headed over to the town of Weslaco, where Valley Nature Center is located. Only minutes after arriving, we located the continuing **Golden-crowned Warbler** as it hopped within feet of us feeding and calling. With numerous **Inca Doves** present feeding on the ground and in the trees, **Plain Chachalacas** in the middle of the trail, and **Green Parakeets** flying all around loudly calling, it was quite a tropical experience.



Golden-crowned Warbler at Valley Nature Center

Pleased with our progress so far, we moved on to Estero Llano Grande State Park for a few more targets and birds for the trip list. Once we got to the main building, we quickly understood what makes this park so special to birders. The pond directly in front of the visitor's center was full of ducks, wading birds, and shorebirds for us to look at. **Mottled Ducks, Blue-winged Teal, Roseate Spoonbill, White Ibis, Stilt Sandpipers, Long-billed Dowitchers,** and more made up some of the new birds for our list, and it was difficult to keep our eyes in one place for long.

A quick conversation with a park ranger provided us with information as to where we might find a species of goatsucker we were hoping to track down, and after searching for a few moments at the right brush pile in the park, we located our first and only **Common Pauraque** for the trip. Nearby, we found both **Yellow-** and **Black-crowned Night-Herons** as well as an **Anhinga** airing out its wings. On one of the boardwalks, we also were able to get great views and photographs of both a **Sora** and **Virginia Rails** as they fed and walked out of the reeds, showing off for a few special moments.



Sora at Estero Llano Grande State Park

Exploring the park a bit more, we found the Tropical Zone and in it located a fantastic blind and feeder setup for birders. **Green Jays** offered some of the best views all trip as did a bold **White-tipped Dove**, and some **Altamira Orioles** looking for nesting material provided the first of this species for our trip.



Common Pauraque doing its best to camouflage into the leaf litter



Altamira Oriole searching for nesting material

Continuing east, we headed over to Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. Our first taste of the Gulf of Mexico and its influence on the coast of Texas, we spent some time exploring in the late afternoon. Wandering the trails around the Headquarters did not turn up much, but we did have a few **Ruby-crowned Kinglets**, **Long-billed Thrashers**, and a flyover **Purple Martin**. Only a half-mile away we found a large lake covered with over 30,000 **American Coots**, and smaller numbers of **Ruddy Duck** and **Lesser Scaup**. A **Tricolored Heron** here was another new pickup for the trip.

With limited daylight left, we headed towards Oliveira Park in Brownsville, where there is a large parrot roost at dusk. Stopping on the way to check for Aplomado Falcons, we were unable to turn one up but did get a good sense of the area and will surely be back again. We arrived in Brownsville with about 30 minutes left of light, and quickly found a group of birders and locals looking at the impressive parrot flock calling from the trees and wires. The bulk of the flock were the ABA countable **Red-crowned Parrots**, and intermixed with them were “uncountable” **White-fronted** and **Red-lored Parrots**. Other species can be found day-to-day in this park, but these were the three we confirmed this evening.



Red-crowned Parrots in Oliveira Park

After stopping for dinner at El Ultimo Taco Taqueria in the city of Brownsville, we headed north for the evening driving up to Port Aransas for our final leg of the trip.

Day 4, Feb 22: Port Aransas to Houston

Waking up to the salty air of the Gulf Coast was quite a change from the tropical/scrub habitat we had been exploring in the prior days. Our first stops of the morning were along the inland side of the peninsula, where shorebirds and ducks were concentrated. We quickly found **Long-billed Curlew, Dunlin, Western Sandpipers, Willets, Laughing and Herring Gulls, Forester's, Caspian**, and even a **Gull-billed Tern**. Driving to the coastal side of Port Aransas, we were unable to track down a Little Gull that had been seen the day before, but did find **Brown Pelicans, Reddish Egret, Ruddy Turnstones**, and a pair of **American Oystercatchers**.



Reddish Egret hunting fish on the coast

Taking the short 5 minute ferry across the channel, we worked our way north while stopping at some spots to add new birds to our trip list. In a small channel we found a **Common Loon**, while **Belted Kingfishers** lined the wires. Our destination was Goose Island State Park, where one of our last target birds resided. Looking through the fog into the fields and ponds, we located **Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, White-faced Ibis, Snowy Egrets, Sandhill Cranes**, and our target, **5 Whooping Cranes**. These birds are part of the original flock that was saved from the brink of extinction in the 1940s, and have been doing much better recently. Now, they can even be seen feeding and resting in peoples' backyards as we found them here.

With a long drive left to Houston, we began our journey northeast. Stopping in the town of Hungerford, we added some eastern woodland species to our trip list near the gas station including **Blue Jay**, **Carolina Chickadee**, and **American Crow**. While not very notable in many parts of the country, these birds do not make it into the Valley all that commonly and were a fun change of pace for us.

With time before our departure from Houston, we headed directly to Stude Park on the northwest side of town. Here we quickly tracked down a fun exotic species, a **Red-vented Bulbul**, which has become established in Houston and is sustained without human interference. Another site we decided to check out was the W.G. Jones State Forest, north of Houston. Here with some concentration, one can track down the closest population of **Red-cockaded Woodpeckers** to Houston. After a bit of searching, we found both the woodpecker as well as **Brown-headed Nuthatches**, another specialty of this Piney Woods habitat. It is always great to wrap up a trip on a success, and we then headed to the airport to make our way home after a whirlwind of a trip.

BIRD LIST. 188 species. Taxonomy follows the Clements/eBird Checklist, 2018 update. Former (or alternate) English names are in parentheses. The global IUCN red list status is listed for threatened and near-threatened species: CR=Critically Endangered, EN=Endangered, VU=Vulnerable, NT=Near-threatened.

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck - *Dendrocygna autumnalis*

Snow Goose - *Anser caerulescens*

Muscovy Duck (Domestic type) - *Cairina moschata*

Blue-winged Teal - *Spatula discors*

Cinnamon Teal - *Spatula cyanoptera*

Northern Shoveler - *Spatula clypeata*

Gadwall - *Mareca strepera*

American Wigeon - *Mareca americana*

Mallard - *Anas platyrhynchos*

Mexican Duck - *Anas diazi*

Mottled Duck - *Anas fulvigula*

Northern Pintail - *Anas acuta*

Green-winged Teal - *Anas crecca*

Redhead - *Aythya americana*

Ring-necked Duck - *Aythya collaris*

Lesser Scaup - *Aythya affinis*

Ruddy Duck - *Oxyura jamaicensis*

Plain Chachalaca - *Ortalis vetula*

Least Grebe - *Tachybaptus dominicus*

Pied-billed Grebe - *Podilymbus podiceps*

Rock Pigeon - *Columba livia*
Red-billed Pigeon - *Patagioenas flavirostris*
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*
Common Pauraque - *Nyctidromus albicollis*
Ruby-throated/Black-chinned Hummingbird - *Archilochus colubris/alexandri*
Rufous/Allen's Hummingbird - *Selasphorus rufus/sasin*
Buff-bellied Hummingbird - *Amazilia yucatanensis*
Virginia Rail - *Rallus limicola*
Sora - *Porzana carolina*
American Coot - *Fulica americana*
Sandhill Crane - *Antigone canadensis*
Whooping Crane (EN) - *Grus americana*
Black-necked Stilt - *Himantopus mexicanus*
American Avocet - *Recurvirostra americana*
American Oystercatcher - *Haematopus palliatus*
Black-bellied Plover - *Pluvialis squatarola*
Killdeer - *Charadrius vociferus*
Long-billed Curlew - *Numenius americanus*
Ruddy Turnstone - *Arenaria interpres*
Stilt Sandpiper - *Calidris himantopus*
Sanderling - *Calidris alba*
Dunlin - *Calidris alpina*
Least Sandpiper - *Calidris minutilla*
Western Sandpiper - *Calidris mauri*
Long-billed Dowitcher - *Limnodromus scolopaceus*
Wilson's Snipe - *Gallinago delicata*
Spotted Sandpiper - *Actitis macularius*
Solitary Sandpiper - *Tringa solitaria*
Greater Yellowlegs - *Tringa melanoleuca*
Willet - *Tringa semipalmata*
Lesser Yellowlegs - *Tringa flavipes*
Bonaparte's Gull - *Chroicocephalus philadelphia*
Laughing Gull - *Leucophaeus atricilla*
Ring-billed Gull - *Larus delawarensis*
Herring Gull - *Larus argentatus*

Gull-billed Tern - *Gelochelidon nilotica*
Caspian Tern - *Hydroprogne caspia*
Forster's Tern - *Sterna forsteri*
Royal Tern - *Thalasseus maximus*
Common Loon - *Gavia immer*
Anhinga - *Anhinga anhinga*
Neotropic Cormorant - *Phalacrocorax brasilianus*
Double-crested Cormorant - *Phalacrocorax auritus*
American White Pelican - *Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*
Brown Pelican - *Pelecanus occidentalis*
Great Blue Heron - *Ardea herodias*
Great Egret - *Ardea alba*
Snowy Egret - *Egretta thula*
Little Blue Heron - *Egretta caerulea*
Tricolored Heron - *Egretta tricolor*
Reddish Egret (NT) - *Egretta rufescens*
Cattle Egret - *Bubulcus ibis*
Black-crowned Night-Heron - *Nycticorax nycticorax*
Yellow-crowned Night-Heron - *Nyctanassa violacea*
White Ibis - *Eudocimus albus*
White-faced Ibis - *Plegadis chihi*
Roseate Spoonbill - *Platalea ajaja*
Black Vulture - *Coragyps atratus*
Turkey Vulture - *Cathartes aura*
Osprey - *Pandion haliaetus*
White-tailed Kite - *Elanus leucurus*
Northern Harrier - *Circus hudsonius*
Sharp-shinned Hawk - *Accipiter striatus*
Cooper's Hawk - *Accipiter cooperii*
Harris's Hawk - *Parabuteo unicinctus*
White-tailed Hawk - *Geranoaetus albicaudatus*
Gray Hawk - *Buteo plagiatus*
Red-shouldered Hawk - *Buteo lineatus*
Red-tailed Hawk - *Buteo jamaicensis*
Ringed Kingfisher - *Megaceryle torquata*
Belted Kingfisher - *Megaceryle alcyon*
Green Kingfisher - *Chloroceryle americana*
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker - *Sphyrapicus varius*
Golden-fronted Woodpecker - *Melanerpes aurifrons*
Red-bellied Woodpecker - *Melanerpes carolinus*

Downy Woodpecker - *Dryobates pubescens*
Ladder-backed Woodpecker - *Dryobates scalaris*
Red-cockaded Woodpecker (NT) - *Dryobates borealis*
Crested Caracara - *Caracara cheriway*
American Kestrel - *Falco sparverius*
Merlin - *Falco columbarius*
Red-crowned Parrot - *Amazona viridigenalis*
Lilac-crowned Parrot (EN) - *Amazona finschi*
Red-lored Parrot - *Amazona autumnalis*
White-fronted Parrot - *Amazona albifrons*
Green Parakeet - *Psittacara holochlorus*
Black Phoebe - *Sayornis nigricans*
Eastern Phoebe - *Sayornis phoebe*
Say's Phoebe - *Sayornis saya*
Vermilion Flycatcher - *Pyrocephalus rubinus*
Ash-throated Flycatcher - *Myiarchus cinerascens*
Great Kiskadee - *Pitangus sulphuratus*
Tropical Kingbird - *Tyrannus melancholicus*
Couch's Kingbird - *Tyrannus couchii*
Loggerhead Shrike (NT) - *Lanius ludovicianus*
White-eyed Vireo - *Vireo griseus*
Blue-headed Vireo - *Vireo solitarius*
Green Jay - *Cyanocorax yncas*
Blue Jay - *Cyanocitta cristata*
American Crow - *Corvus brachyrhynchos*
Chihuahuan Raven - *Corvus cryptoleucus*
Common Raven - *Corvus corax*
Northern Rough-winged Swallow - *Stelgidopteryx serripennis*
Purple Martin - *Progne subis*
Tree Swallow - *Tachycineta bicolor*
Barn Swallow - *Hirundo rustica*
Cave Swallow - *Petrochelidon fulva*
Carolina Chickadee - *Poecile carolinensis*
Tufted Titmouse - *Baeolophus bicolor*
Black-crested Titmouse - *Baeolophus atricristatus*
Verdin - *Auriparus flaviceps*
Brown-headed Nuthatch - *Sitta pusilla*
House Wren - *Troglodytes aedon*
Carolina Wren - *Thryothorus ludovicianus*
Bewick's Wren - *Thryomanes bewickii*

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher - *Polioptila caerulea*
Red-vented Bulbul - *Pycnonotus cafer*
Golden-crowned Kinglet - *Regulus satrapa*
Ruby-crowned Kinglet - *Regulus calendula*
Eastern Bluebird - *Sialia sialis*
Clay-colored Thrush - *Turdus grayi*
American Robin - *Turdus migratorius*
Gray Catbird - *Dumetella carolinensis*
Curve-billed Thrasher - *Toxostoma curvirostre*
Long-billed Thrasher - *Toxostoma longirostre*
Northern Mockingbird - *Mimus polyglottos*
European Starling - *Sturnus vulgaris*
American Pipit - *Anthus rubescens*
Cedar Waxwing - *Bombycilla cedrorum*
House Finch - *Haemorhous mexicanus*
Pine Siskin - *Spinus pinus*
Lesser Goldfinch - *Spinus psaltria*
American Goldfinch - *Spinus tristis*
Olive Sparrow - *Arremonops rufivirgatus*
Chipping Sparrow - *Spizella passerina*
Lark Sparrow - *Chondestes grammacus*
White-crowned Sparrow - *Zonotrichia leucophrys*
Savannah Sparrow - *Passerculus sandwichensis*
Song Sparrow - *Melospiza melodia*
Lincoln's Sparrow - *Melospiza lincolni*
Eastern Towhee - *Pipilo erythrophthalmus*
Western Meadowlark - *Sturnella neglecta*
Eastern Meadowlark (NT) - *Sturnella magna*
Altamira Oriole - *Icterus gularis*
Audubon's Oriole - *Icterus graduacauda*
Red-winged Blackbird - *Agelaius phoeniceus*
Bronzed Cowbird - *Molothrus aeneus*
Brown-headed Cowbird - *Molothrus ater*
Brewer's Blackbird - *Euphagus cyanocephalus*
Great-tailed Grackle - *Quiscalus mexicanus*
Black-and-white Warbler - *Mniotilta varia*
Orange-crowned Warbler - *Oreothlypis celata*
Nashville Warbler - *Oreothlypis ruficapilla*
Common Yellowthroat - *Geothlypis trichas*
Pine Warbler - *Setophaga pinus*

Yellow-rumped Warbler - *Setophaga coronata*
Golden-crowned Warbler - *Basileuterus culicivorus*
Wilson's Warbler - *Cardellina pusilla*
Crimson-collared Grosbeak - *Rhodothraupis celaeno*
Northern Cardinal - *Cardinalis cardinalis*
Yellow Grosbeak - *Pheucticus chrysopleus*
Indigo Bunting - *Passerina cyanea*
House Sparrow - *Passer domesticus*

MAMMAL LIST. 4 species. As there is no standard list of names for mammals, the names used here are simply commonly used names. Alternate names are in parentheses.

Eastern Cottontail - *Sylvilagus floridanus*
Hispid Cotton Rat - *Sigmodon hispidus*
Fox Squirrel - *Sciurus niger*
Common Bottlenose Dolphin - *Tursiops truncatus*



A 1,000+ year old Live Oak we visited at Goose Island State Park



Birding W.G. Jones State Forest looking for Red-cockaded Woodpeckers



Nathan pointing to his lifer Whooping Crane, his 650th bird in the Lower 48!