

BIRDING THE TEXAS LOWER RIO GRANDE VALLEY

A mid-winter escape to a birding mecca – what could be better?

January 18-25, 2018

A birding tour organized by Seven Ponds Nature Center

THE VALLEY. Two words that conjure classic images in birders' minds: Green Jay, Plain Chachalaca, Great Kiskadee, Clay-colored Thrush, Green Kingfisher, Olive Sparrow, Long-billed Thrasher, Altamira Oriole... the list goes on and on. The Lower Rio Grande Valley is where east meets west, where north meets south, where Mexican species regularly show up on U.S. soil. A place, as author Pete Dunne notes in his book *The Feather Quest*, "Where check marks grow on trees!"



Join us for a mid-winter trip to this special place, which regularly shows up on top ten of lists of U.S. birding destinations. The wide variety of habitats in the Lower Rio Grande Valley – including desert scrub, riparian woodlands, tropical forest, coastal shoreline and estuaries, and others – attracts one of the greatest diversities of birds in North America: over 520 species have been documented in the Valley. We will visit such hotspots as Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park, Falcon Dam, South Padre Island, Sabal Palm Sanctuary, Quinta Mazatlan, Laguna Atascosa NWR, Santa Ana NWR, and others. These hotspots will give us access a wide variety of habitats, and put us in contact with upwards of 300 species of birds in January. Our tour will be led by south Texas birding guide Mary Gustafson, Seven Ponds Nature Center Executive Director Daryl Bernard, and Seven Ponds Naturalist Nancy Kautz.

TOUR ITINERARY

Our daily activities will be flexible based on species we've seen to date and recent bird reports, but the following daily outline provides a preliminary plan of how we will spend our days. Our plans are subject to change based on rare bird sightings, weather conditions, and road closures. Note: the birds listed are not intended to be an exhaustive list – just a sampling of what may be found at each location.

DAY 1 – Thursday, January 18 – Arrival in McAllen; shuttle to hotel; afternoon birding at Quinta Mazatlan, McAllen Nature Center Plan your arrival in McAllen by 1:00 p.m., and check-in at the hotel by 2:00 p.m. We'll bird the first afternoon at nearby Quinta Mazatlan and McAllen Nature Center. Quinta Mazatlan is a suburban nature center with an impressive bird list. We'll hope to start seeing South Texas specialties as soon as we arrive! Our first birds could be Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Great Kiskadee, Curve-billed Thrasher, and Tropical Kingbird. The grounds are loaded with flowers, and we'll look for the restricted range Buff-bellied Hummingbird. Weather permitting, we'll look for local flocks of either Red-crowned Parrot or Green Parakeet coming in to roost at sunset.



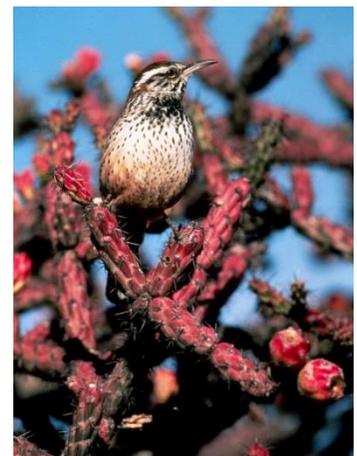
DAY 2 – Friday, January 19 – Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park, Edinburg Scenic Wetlands



Bentsen's extensive thorn forest was slowly changing to thorn scrub due to altered flood regime. A massive flood in 2010 inundated the park for four months, hurrying the process. It remains a gem for birders to explore, in part because it is closed to vehicles. We'll start at the new park headquarters amidst lush gardens of native vegetation before venturing to the feeders at the Nature Center. We'll hope for an active morning with Plain Chachalaca, Green Jay, Clay-colored Thrush, Altamira Oriole, and so much more. We'll bird our way into the park, in search of forest birds like Olive Sparrow and Long-billed Thrasher. There is always the potential for a rarity at Bentsen! After lunch we'll visit the Edinburg Scenic

Wetlands, where we'll start working on sorting out Neotropical and Double-crested Cormorant, hope for some Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, and perhaps – if we're lucky – a diminutive Green Kingfisher!

DAY 3 – Saturday, January 20 – Salineno, Falcon State Park This morning we'll be up early for our drive an hour and a half west to Salineno, a famous birder's colony right on the Rio Grande. The feeding station is now managed by volunteers from Santa Ana NWR, who cater to the hordes of colorful birds dominated by Green Jay, Altamira Oriole, and Great Kiskadee. Many other species visit the feeders, and we'll look for Audubon's and perhaps a Hooded Oriole as well as birds on the river, including the massive and LOUD Ringed Kingfisher. If we're very lucky we may see a Red-billed Pigeon or Muscovy Duck fly by! In recent years, the tiny White-collared Seedeater has wintered in the reeds along the river, and we'll hope for a calm day to look for it. Gray Hawks patrol the river's edge. At nearby Falcon State Park, we'll look for desert species in the extensive brush, including Verdin, Cactus Wren, Black-throated Sparrow, and Pyrrhuloxia.



DAY 4 – Sunday, January 21 – South Padre Island and vicinity



We'll start out looking for the strikingly marked Aplomado Falcon in the extensive coastal prairies east of Harlingen before continuing on to South Padre Island and the adjacent Laguna Madre. We'll explore the extensive boardwalks of the South Padre Island Bird and Nature Center, hoping to see or hear Clapper Rail, Roseate Spoonbill, Snowy and Reddish Egret, Willet, Royal Tern, Sandwich Tern, and more. We'll make a few stops to look for coastal birds including Black Skimmer, Gull-billed Tern, Wilson's Plover, American Oystercatcher, and raptors including White-tailed and Harris's Hawk.



DAY 5 – Monday, January 22 – Rockport for Whooping Cranes and more! Today we will venture out of the Valley, up the Gulf Coast to Rockport. Once there, we will board the Skimmer, operated by Rockport Birding Adventures, for a *Whooping Crane and Coastal Birding Tour*. Our target bird will be the magnificent Whooping Crane, whose entire world population winters in the Texas Gulf Coast area. By 1941, the world's population of wild Whooping Cranes had been reduced to 21 birds. Through intensive conservation and management efforts, the population has steadily risen to its current level of ~600, but the Whooping Crane is still one of the rarest birds in North America.

DAY 6 – Tuesday, January 23 – Estero Llano Grande State Park, Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge

Beautiful Estero Llano Grande State Park opened in 2006 with a network of trails, wetlands, and a forested tropical zone. We'll spend time looking for roosting Common Pauraque and Eastern Screech-Owls on the trails, and wintering warblers in the tropical zone. Santa Ana's 2000 acres of wetlands and Spanish moss festooned forest hosts a wide diversity of birds including the diminutive Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet. We'll walk up the Tree Tower to get a view over the extensive forest to Mexico.



DAY 7 – Wednesday, January 24 – Sabal Palm Sanctuary, Laguna Atascosa NWR



Today we'll start at Sabal Palm Sanctuary, where one of the last natural stands of Sabal Palm forest is found; this habitat was estimated at 40,000 acres historically, now we have less than 80 acres in the USA. Sabal Palm Sanctuary has a system of resacas (oxbow lakes) surrounded by forest, and many of the area specialty birds are found here, in case we have missed anything! We'll spend the afternoon at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, the refuge with the longest bird list of any NWR! We'll bird the forested headquarters for Altamira Oriole and Green Jay, scan the fresh water Laguna Atascosa for a spectacle of waterfowl, coots, and wading birds; and bird the coastal mottes for winter flocks.

DAY 8 – Thursday, January 25 – Departure from McAllen

Plan your departure for any time today.

TOUR LEADERS

Mary Gustafson is a self-employed, full-time birding guide in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, and has been birding the area for over two decades. Mary's guiding services are well-established and highly-regarded – she knows the birds and birding hotspots of deep south Texas and loves sharing them with others. Mary also leads pelagic trips in Monterey, California for Shearwater Journeys. She currently serves on the American Birding Association Checklist Committee, and has formerly served on the Maryland/DC and Texas bird record committees. Mary is an eBird editor for several south Texas counties, works as one of the eBird state portal editors for Texas (www.ebird.org/tx), runs the Lower Rio Grande Valley Rare Bird Alert (rgvbirds.blogspot.com), and formerly volunteered for the RGV Birding Festival, organizing leaders and field trips. Mary's world Life List is over 3600, and her ABA Life List is approaching 800 – a number very few birders have achieved.



Daryl Bernard is a long-time birder and amateur naturalist who loves being outdoors and embraces every opportunity to share nature with others. He enjoys organizing trips and tours, and strives to ensure that every participant has a thoroughly enjoyable experience. Daryl is the Executive Director at Seven Ponds Nature Center in Lapeer County, Michigan.

Nancy Kautz has been a naturalist at Seven Ponds Nature Center for over a decade. She is a passionate birder, but equally interested in all aspects of natural history. A consummate interpreter, Nancy takes every opportunity to help others enjoy the natural world around them. In preparation for this trip she will not only be studying the birds and bird songs of the LRGV, but the plants and other animals as well.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Lodging for the entire tour will be in one location in McAllen, located near the McAllen International Airport. Staying in one location will allow us to establish a “home base” and provide us the luxury of not needing to pack and unpack each day. Our central location puts us within easy reach of numerous birding hotspots. Most of our destinations are under two hours from our lodging, so mileage for daily treks will be relatively limited. Eliminating packing time and reducing driving time will increase our birding time!

LOCAL TRANSPORTATION

We will be venturing out from our McAllen lodging for each day's birding in a large, 15-passenger van. Keeping the group together in one van allows everybody to get on the same birds while traveling, and develops group camaraderie. Since we will be staying in the same accommodations the entire tour, our daily load of equipment will be minimal (no luggage!). Daily commutes will range from 20 minutes (to Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park) to three hours (driving to Rockport for the Whooping Crane tour). Most of our drives will be in the 30-90 minute range.

FEE and REGISTRATION INFORMATION

- Tour Fee: \$1750 per person in double occupancy from McAllen, Texas
- Single Supplement: \$350 (subject to availability)
- Deposit: \$300
- Final Payment Due: December 1, 2017
- Group size is limited to **10 individuals** and early registration is encouraged

WHAT THE TOUR FEE INCLUDES:

- full guide service – Mary will be with us every birding step of the way
- hotel accommodations for seven nights
- all meals from dinner on Day 1 to breakfast on Day 8
- van transportation in a single, 15-passenger van
- all park entrance fees
- boat fee for Whooping Crane trip
- pre-trip information and a post-trip mailing with a list of all species observed by the group
- eBird checklist sharing (for those using eBird)

WHAT THE TOUR FEE DOES NOT INCLUDE:

- your airfare to/from McAllen, Texas
- snacks and additional drinks
- alcoholic beverages
- laundry
- other items of a personal nature
- gratuity for local birding guide services (optional)

REGISTRATION WILL OPEN ON TUESDAY, JUNE 13, 2017 at 9:00 a.m.

Registered participants will be mailed a registration form to return with their tour deposit.

To register for this tour, please call SEVEN PONDS NATURE CENTER at (810) 796-3200.

For more information, contact Daryl Bernard at (810) 796-3200 or (989) 513-5195 (cell) or via e-mail at dbernard@sevenponds.org.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF:

Juan Sebastian: *Green Jay, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Great Kiskadee, Long-billed Thrasher, Altamira Oriole*

Simon Kiacz: *Red-crowned Parrot, Common Pauraque*

Mary Gustafson: *Rick Nirchl*

Seven Ponds Nature Center photo archives: *Cactus Wren, American Oystercatcher, Reddish Egret*