

BIRDING THE TEXAS LOWER RIO GRANDE VALLEY

November 10-15, 2021

A birding tour organized by Seven Ponds Nature Center and East West Birding Tours

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!"

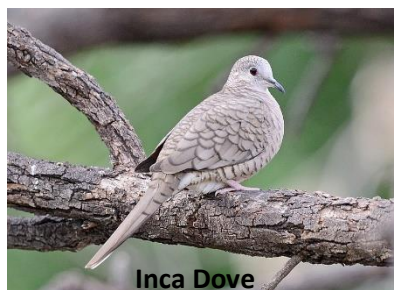


Great Kiskadee

Join us for a short autumn 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, Resaca de la Palma State Park, Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, Edinburg Scenic Wetlands, Salineño, and others. These hotspots will give us access a wide variety of habitats and put us in contact with a huge array of birds in November. Our tour will be led by professional birding guide Ken Blankenship of *East West Birding Tours* and *Seven Ponds Nature Center* Executive Director Daryl Bernard.



Green Jay



Inca Dove



Clay-colored Thrush

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. Plans are subject to change based on rare bird sightings, weather conditions, and road/park closures. Besides the main stops each day, there will be other stops along the way for specific target birds. Note: the birds listed each day are not intended to be an exhaustive list – just a sampling of what may be found at each location.

DAY 1 – Wednesday, November 10 – Arrival in McAllen After your arrival in McAllen, take the complimentary shuttle to our nearby hotel for a 2:00 PM check-in. Once you have settled in, feel free to take the short walk to Quinta Mazatlan, just a few minutes from our hotel. Quinta Mazatlan is a suburban nature center with an impressive bird list, and you'll start seeing South Texas specialties as soon as you arrive! Your first Valley birds could be Great Kiskadee, Green Jay, Inca Dove, Curve-billed Thrasher, or Golden-fronted Woodpecker, among others. The grounds are loaded with flowers, and you may see the restricted-range Buff-bellied Hummingbird. Quinta Mazatlan closes at 5:00 PM, and we'll meet in the hotel lobby at 5:30 for quick introductions before heading out for dinner.



Buff-bellied Hummingbird



Plain
Chachalaca



Green
Kingfisher

DAY 2 – Thursday, November 11 – 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. Our birding will start at the park headquarters amidst lush gardens of native vegetation before venturing to the feeders at the nature center, where we'll hope for an active morning with Plain Chachalaca, Green Jay, Clay-colored Thrush, Altamira Oriole, and so much more. As we bird our way into the park, we'll search for forest birds like Olive Sparrow and Long-billed Thrasher. There is always the potential for a rarity at Bentsen! After lunch we will visit the Edinburg Scenic Wetlands, where we'll start working on sorting out Neotropical and Double-crested Cormorant, look for some Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, and hopefully a diminutive Green Kingfisher! Weather permitting, we will search for local flocks of Red-crowned Parrot or Green Parakeet coming in to roost at sunset.



Olive Sparrow

DAY 3 – Friday, November 12 – Salineño, Falcon State

Park This morning we will be up early for our drive an hour and a half west to Salineño, 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 Oriole 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 Morelet's 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 be on the lookout for desert species in the extensive brush, including Verdin, Cactus Wren, Black-throated Sparrow, and Pyrrhuloxia.



Altamira Oriole



Audubon's Oriole



Aplomado Falcon



Pyrrhuloxia

DAY 4 – Saturday, November 13 – Coastal birding

Our first target bird of the day is the strikingly marked Aplomado Falcon, which favors the extensive coastal prairies of Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. Continuing on to South Padre Island and the adjacent Laguna Madre, we will explore tidal flats and the extensive boardwalks of the South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center, hoping to see or hear Clapper Rail, Roseate Spoonbill, Snowy and Reddish egrets, Willet, Royal Tern, Sandwich Tern, and more. We'll make a few stops to look for additional coastal birds including Black Skimmer, Gull-billed Tern, Wilson's Plover, American Oystercatcher, and raptors including White-tailed and Harris's Hawk.

DAY 5 – Sunday, November 14 – 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 on the trails and wintering warblers in the tropical zone. Santa Ana's 2,000 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. Before dinner we can make another attempt for parrots.

DAY 6 – Monday, November 15 – Departure from McAllen Plan your departure for any time today. Hotel checkout is 12:00 PM.

TOUR LEADERS



Ken Blankenship is a full-time professional birding guide and the owner-operator of East West Birding Tours. Ken has been birding across the southern tier of the United States for almost 20 years, from Arizona to SoCal, from south Texas to the Florida Keys, and throughout the Southern Atlantic states. East West Birding Tours is based in southeast Arizona, but Ken is at home guiding throughout the south and southwest. Ken is a self-admitted “ear-birding addict,” and has obsessively studied bird vocalizations for years, both in the field and recorded media; this includes everything from songs, to chips, to flight calls, to scolds, and every “seet” and “tsip” in-between.

Daryl Bernard is a long-time birder and nature enthusiast 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 has organized and led numerous birding field tours throughout North America, many local birding trips in Michigan, and bird walks for Seven Ponds as well as birding festivals. Daryl is the Executive Director at Seven Ponds Nature Center in southeast Michigan, and regularly presents birding programs at Audubon clubs, libraries, and birding festivals.



ACCOMMODATIONS

Lodging for the entire tour will be at the Radisson Hotel 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, and is within easy walking distance of Quinta Mazatlan – a great location for many Valley specialties. 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 passenger van. Keeping the group together in one van allows everybody to get on the same birds while traveling and helps develop group camaraderie. Since we will be staying in the same accommodation the entire tour, our daily load of equipment will be minimal (no luggage!). Daily commutes to our targeted birding locations will range from 30-90 minutes.

MEALS

Breakfast will be served each morning at our hotel. On the mornings we plan an early departure, we will enjoy a selection of breakfast pastries and fruits in the van. In order to maximize our birding time, lunches will be picnic-style local parks or birding locations. We’ll finish each day of birding by sampling a different area restaurant, taking in as much of the local flavor as possible. You will not go hungry on this tour!

COVID-19

Please note that there may be ongoing COVID-19 measures in place. It is expected that all participants on the tour will have received their vaccination prior to departure. At this time it is difficult to say what airlines, restaurants, and other public facilities will be requiring. We will need to remain flexible in our planning to account for such requirements. Be sure to bring at least two face coverings for times when those are necessary.

FEE and REGISTRATION INFORMATION

- Tour Fee: \$1,400 per person in double occupancy from McAllen, Texas
- Single Supplement: \$300 (subject to availability)
- Deposit: \$300 (due within three weeks of registration)
- Final Payment Due: September 1, 2021
- Group size is limited to **10 individuals** and early registration is encouraged

WHAT THE TOUR FEE INCLUDES:

- Four days of professional birding guide service
- Hotel accommodations for seven nights
- All meals from dinner on Day 1 to breakfast on Day 6
- Van transportation in a single, 15-passenger van
- All park entrance fees
- 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 (optional) for our professional birding guide, Ken Blankenship

REGISTRATION WILL OPEN BY THE FOLLOWING SCHEDULE

SEVEN PONDS MEMBERS ONLY ON TUESDAY, MAY 4, 2021 at 9:00 AM

NON-MEMBERS ON WEDNESDAY, MAY 5, 2021 at 9:00 AM*

***if space remains**

Seven Ponds Birding Field Tours often fill quickly. Registration for this tour may take place in-person or by phone at (810) 796-3200.

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

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