

SOUTHWEST TEXAS BIRDING FIELD TOUR

Birding the Hill Country, Big Bend, and Davis Mountains

April 26-May 4, 2023

A birding tour organized by *Seven Ponds Nature Center* and *KoziBirding*

Trip Report and Sightings



Left to right: David Sarkozi, Gavin Awerbuch, Daryl Bernard, Jan Giesken, Kathy Kurap, Mickey Kurap, Pat O'Connor, Marlene O'Connor, Lynne Holmgren, Gabriele Pluhar

Southwest Texas by the Numbers

10 intrepid birders · 9 days/8 nights · 1500 van miles · 206 bird species · 6 million bats · 3 Texas state parks · 1 (really big) National Park · hundreds of Life Birds · countless memories!

DAY 1 (April 26) San Antonio, Texas. The first day of a tour can be a bit chaotic, with folks arriving at different times, luggage issues, mix-ups with hotel check-in, and so forth. But today went perfectly. Everyone arrived as scheduled and made it to the hotel quickly, where they were given keys to their rooms. We met in the lobby for introductions and some basic tour info, and off to dinner we went – our first of several meals together over the coming days. We were back to the hotel in time for everybody to get a solid night’s sleep before an early morning departure and the full day that awaited us.



DAY 2 (April 27) Edwards Plateau & The Texas Hill Country.

A 6:30 AM departure from our hotel had us arriving at Friedrich Wilderness Park before 7:00 AM. A casual 1.5-mile walk yielded 22 species, including one of our primary target birds: Golden-cheeked Warbler. We were off to a good start! Our next stop, at a US-90 rest area, was part business, part birding. Here we had good looks at numerous Western Kingbirds,

Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, and Bronzed Cowbirds. We tried Neal’s

Lodges, where a Tropical Parula had been reported, but were not successful. At Chalk Bluff Park we had our picnic lunch, then tallied 34 species, including our first looks at Common Ground Dove, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Vermilion Flycatcher, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Black-crested Flycatcher, Bell’s Vireo, Cactus Wren, Lark Sparrow, Yellow-breasted Chat, Orchard Oriole, Hooded Oriole, and Blue Grosbeak. The day was concluded with a trip to the Concan Frio Bat Cave, where we spotted more than a dozen birds – including Cave Swallows, Painted Bunting, and Pyrrhuloxia – before witnessing the amazing spectacle of six million Mexican Free-tailed Bats emerging from the cave at dusk. What a great way to end a fantastic first full day.



DAY 3 (April 28) Heading to Big Bend. Today was a big travel day, as we headed west then south to Big Bend National Park. Being birders, we made several stops along the route to search for avian treasures. Along Texas RM-674, a rather random stop was quite birdy, producing 16 species, including our first encounters with Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Lark Sparrow, and Crested Caracara. Our next stop was Kickapoo Cavern State Park, where a short walk turned up 29 species. Among them was Black-chinned Hummingbird, Woodhouse’s Scrub-Jay, Canyon Towhee, Summer





Tanager, and a Black-capped Vireo – a skulker seen by a few but not the entire group. At the Pecos River Overlook we enjoyed amazing views of the river far below and the impressive canyon walls. A cooperative Canyon Wren sang and hopped around just below us, White-throated Swifts flew at nearly eye-level, a Peregrine Falcon soared overhead, and far down on the river we scoped Long-billed Dowitchers, Wilson's Phalaropes, Greater Yellowlegs, Great Blue Herons, White-faced Ibises, and Blue-winged Teal. After lunch at the Judge Roy Bean Information Center in Langtry, we made the final push

all the way to Big Bend National Park. After checking in to our rooms at the Chisos Mountains Lodge, we enjoyed dinner at the lodge's restaurant. At dusk we headed to nearby Dugout Wells, where we hoped to encounter nesting Elf Owls. High winds and chilly temps thwarted our efforts for the Elf Owls, but we did find several Lesser Nighthawks and a cooperative Western Screech-Owl as a wonderful consolation. On the slow drive out of the loop we spotted a Mexican Brown-backed Tarantula – the only tarantula we would see during our time in Texas.



DAY 4 (April 29) Hike for Colima Warbler. The cool air continued in the morning but provided comfortable hiking conditions for our long trek up the Pinnacles Trail toward Boot Springs Canyon – and a hoped-for encounter with Colima Warbler. This hike is legendary among birders and is a requirement for anyone wanting to see the Colima Warbler in the United States. We took it slow and easy, with several short rest breaks along the way to catch our breath and take in the ever-expanding view of the world below. Mexican Jays followed us up the trail, entertaining us at each stop with their inquisitive nature. Additional birds seen along the way were beautiful Scott's Oriole, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Black-crested Titmouse, and Black-headed Grosbeak, among others. Nearing the summit of the Pinnacles Trail, four miles from the trailhead, we spotted our prize: a very cooperative Colima Warbler bouncing around in the live oak just over our heads. After resting a bit and

taking in the lunches we had packed up the trail, most of us continued on an additional two miles on toward Boot Springs Canyon. We were rewarded for our effort with great views of Acorn Woodpecker, Dusky Flycatcher, Hutton's Vireo, Townsend's Solitaire, Townsend's Warbler, and Painted Redstart, as well as three additional Colima Warblers. The six-mile descent was slow-going on tired legs, but eventually we all made it down to the lodge for a well-earned and much-enjoyed dinner. And we all enjoyed a restful slumber!



DAY 5 (April 30) Exploring Big Bend National Park. After spending the entire day on our feet in the Chisos Mountains, today was spent exploring Bend National Park by van, with several stops in the park (in reality, we covered a very small part of this massive park). Scaled Quail scampered across the road in front of us. At Cottonwood Campground, on the banks of the Rio Grande, we saw Greater Roadrunners, nesting Gray Hawks, numerous Vermilion Flycatchers, Lesser Goldfinches, a Black-throated Sparrow, Bullock's Oriole, and Lucy's Warbler, among a total of 30 bird species. At Daniel's Ranch we enjoyed amazing views of nesting Common Black Hawks, plus Black Phoebe, Spotted Sandpiper, and a flock of Northern Shovelers flying up the river. Returning to Dugout Wells after dinner, we were rewarded with much better weather than our previous visit, and immediately heard multiple Elf Owls calling. Eventually we spotted one of the diminutive owls (North America's smallest) peeking out of a tiny nest hole and then flying out and darting about. Back in the Chisos Mountains Lodge parking area we heard a Common Poorwill calling – the perfect ending to a great day.



DAY 6 (May 1) Off to the Davis Mountains. Heading northwest from Big Bend, our destination today was the Davis Mountains area. En route we made several stops. First up was a slow trek down five miles of gravel, rocks, and uneven road to the Christmas Mountains Oasis. Here we enjoyed several first-birds for the trip, including Lucifer Hummingbird, Verdin, Brewer's Sparrow, Lark Bunting, Green-tailed Towhee, Blue Grosbeak, and our first look at Varied Bunting. Our lunch stop at Kokernot Municipal Park in Alpine turned up several birds, including numerous Cassin's Kingbirds as well as Great-tailed Grackle and our only American Robin of the tour. A side trip down Ranch Road at Mitre Peak gave us great looks at Scaled Quail, plus Loggerhead Shrike, Curve-billed Thrasher, and several species of sparrows. After checking into our cabins at the Mountain Trails Resort, we had dinner in town then finished the day in the bird blind at Davis Mountains State Park, where we found 16 species of birds getting their last dinner before turning in for the night – which we did shortly, as well.





DAY 7 (May 2) Exploring the Davis Mountains area. After enjoying a hardy meal of breakfast burritos, thanks to our guide-turned-chef David, we found ourselves just before sunrise at the Lawrence E. Wood Picnic Area. Once the light began hitting the trees, we were able to put our eyes on several birds new for the trip, including Western Wood-Pewee, Gray Flycatcher, Plumbeous Vireo, Western Bluebird, Grace's Warbler, and Hepatic Tanager. A quick stop at TX118 Scenic Overlook – “the Black-chinned Sparrow spot” – did indeed produce Black-chinned Sparrow. Following up on a personal invitation to a private residence in the pleasant Limpia Crossing neighborhood, we were welcomed with wonderful

hospitality and over 60 Pinyon Jays, along with many other birds, including Pine Siskins, Blue Grosbeak, and Lazuli Bunting. Back at Davis Mountains State Park for lunch, we enjoyed views of Scott's Oriole, Spotted Towhee, Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay, and the only White-throated Sparrow of our tour. Next up we ventured out to the Sandia Wetlands, where we spotted a number of new birds for the trip, including American Avocet, Black-necked Stilt, Wilson's Snipe, Green Heron, and a cooperative Chihuahuan Meadowlark. At nearby Lake Balmorhea we racked up 57 species, among which were ten duck species, Eared Grebe, Clark's Grebe, American Coot, Least Sandpiper, Western Sandpiper, Laughing Gull, Franklin's Gull, Forster's Tern, Neotropic Cormorant, American White Pelican, Snowy Egret, Cattle Egret, Yellow-headed Blackbird, and many more.



DAY 8 (May 3) Back to San Antonio. We faced a long drive back to San Antonio today, so we were sure to break it up with some birding stops along the way. First up was River Road in Crockett County, where Rock Wren never sang, but good looks were had at a beautiful Swainson's Hawk, Northern Bobwhite were calling, a Greater Roadrunner was road running, and Painted Buntings were painting the canyon wall with their song. At the Fort Lancaster Overlook/Sheffield Rest Area we had a close flyover Zone-tailed Hawk, and close great looks at a Gray Vireo. A walk at Easter Pageant Hill in Junction proved frustrating for the group, as once again an elusive Black-capped Vireo showed itself briefly and incompletely to just a few people in the group. We concluded our birding for the tour at nearby South Llano River State Park, where Purple Martins zipped overhead, and numerous birds visited the feeder and water station at the park's Agarita Bird Blind.



DAY 9 (May 4) Heading home. All tours come to an end. Today was departure day for everyone. Most headed back home to Michigan. Gavin and Daryl had made the drive down to the Lower Rio Grande Valley after dinner the night before, where Pat and Marlene would be headed the following day as well. Daryl would be meeting up with his son for some south Texas birding. David also ventured to the Valley, for some post-tour birding with Gavin, Pat, and Marlene before head flew to Belize with his wife. Eventually, everyone made it home for some well-earned rest and time to reflect on their amazing birding adventure in beautiful southwest Texas.

LEADER & GUIDE

- **Daryl Bernard** – Executive Director – *Seven Ponds Nature Center*
- **David Sarkozi** – Professional Birding Guide & Beer Connoisseur Extraordinaire – *KoziBirding*

PARTICIPANTS

- **Gavin Awerbuch** – Hypoluxo, Florida
- **Jan Giesken** – Lapeer, Michigan
- **Lynne Holmberg** – Traverse City, Michigan
- **Mickey & Kathy Kurap** – Grosse Pointe Farms, Michigan
- **Patrick & Marlene O'Connor** – Suttons Bay, Michigan
- **Gabriele Pluhar** – Grosse Pointe, Michigan



LODGING

La Quinta Inn & Suites

San Antonio – April 26

Days Inn

Uvalde TX – April 27

Chisos Mountains Lodge

Big Bend NP – April 28-29-30

Mountain Trails Lodge

Fort Davis, TX – May 1-2

La Quinta Inn & Suites

San Antonio – May 4

RESTAURANTS

Tlahco Mexican Kitchen – *San Antonio – April 26*

Whataburger – *Uvalde – April 27*

Chisos Mountain Lodge Restaurant – *Big Bend NP – April 28-29-30*

Cueva De Leon – *Fort Davis – May 1*

Blue Mountain Bar & Grill – *Fort Davis – May 2*

Casa Sol – *San Antonio – May 3*



BIRDING LOCATIONS

Thursday, April 27

- Friedrich Wilderness Park
- Medina Co.—US90 Rest Area
- Neal’s Lodges—Dining Room area
- Chalk Bluff Park (lunch)
- Concan Frio Bat Cave

Friday, April 28

- RM-674 roadside birding
- Kickapoo Cavern State Park
- Pecos River Overlook
- Judge Roy Bean Info Center (lunch)
- Big Bend National Park—Dugout Wells

Saturday, April 29

- Big Bend National Park—Pinnacles Trail
- Big Bend National Park—Boot Canyon Trail

Sunday, April 30

- Big Bend National Park—Cottonwood Campground
- Big Bend National Park—Daniel’s Ranch Road (lunch)
- Big Bend National Park—Rio Grande Village
- Big Bend National Park—Dugout Wells

Monday, May 1

- Christmas Mountains Oasis
- Kokernot Municipal Park (lunch)
- Mitre Peak / Ranch Road
- Davis Mountains State Park

Tuesday, May 2

- Lawrence E. Wood Picnic Area
- TX118 Scenic Overlook
- Limpia Crossing neighborhood
- Davis Mountains State Park (lunch)
- Wild Rose Pass picnic area
- Sandia Wetlands
- Balmorhea Lake

Wednesday, May 3

- River Road
- Fort Lancaster Overlook
- Sonora – I-10 Rest Area (lunch)
- Junction—Easter Pageant Hill
- South Llano River State Park—Agarita Bird Blind



TRIP BIRDS - 206 (your personal total may differ)

Black-bellied Whistling Duck

Canada Goose

Blue-winged Teal

Cinnamon Teal

Northern Shoveler

Gadwall

American Wigeon

Mexican Duck

Green-winged Teal

Lesser Scaup

Bufflehead

Ruddy Duck

Northern Bobwhite

Scaled Quail

Wild Turkey

Eared Grebe

Clark's Grebe

Rock Pigeon

Band-tailed Pigeon

Eurasian Collared-Dove

Inca Dove

Common Ground Dove

White-winged Dove

Mourning Dove

Greater Roadrunner

Yellow-billed Cuckoo

Lesser Nighthawk

Common Nighthawk

Common Poorwill

Chuck-will's-widow

Chimney Swift



White-throated Swift

Lucifer Hummingbird

Ruby-throated Hummingbird

Black-chinned Hummingbird

American Coot

Black-necked Stilt

American Avocet

Killdeer

Least Sandpiper

Western Sandpiper

Long-billed Dowitcher

Wilson's Snipe

Wilson's Phalarope

Spotted Sandpiper

Greater Yellowlegs

Laughing Gull

Franklin's Gull

Ring-billed Gull

Forster's Tern

Neotropic Cormorant

American White Pelican

Great Blue Heron

Great Egret

Snowy Egret

Cattle Egret

Green Heron

White-faced Ibis

Black Vulture

Turkey Vulture

Osprey

Northern Harrier

Cooper's Hawk

Common Black Hawk



Harris's Hawk

Gray Hawk

Swainson's Hawk

Zone-tailed Hawk

Red-tailed Hawk

Western Screech-Owl

Elf Owl

Belted Kingfisher

Acorn Woodpecker

Golden-fronted Woodpecker

Ladder-backed Woodpecker

Northern Flicker

Crested Caracara

American Kestrel

Peregrine Falcon

Olive-sided Flycatcher

Western Wood-Pewee

Eastern Wood-Pewee

Hammond's Flycatcher

Gray Flycatcher

Dusky Flycatcher

Black Phoebe

Eastern Phoebe

Say's Phoebe

Vermilion Flycatcher

Ash-throated Flycatcher

Brown-crested Flycatcher

Couch's Kingbird

Cassin's Kingbird

Western Kingbird

Scissor-tailed Flycatcher

Black-capped Vireo

White-eyed Vireo



Bell's Vireo
Gray Vireo
Hutton's Vireo
Yellow-throated Vireo
Blue-headed Vireo
Plumbeous Vireo
Warbling Vireo
Red-eyed Vireo
Loggerhead Shrike
Pinyon Jay
Blue Jay
Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay



Mexican Jay

Chihuahuan Raven
Common Raven
Carolina Chickadee
Black-crested Titmouse
Verdin
Northern Rough-winged Swallow
Purple Martin
Tree Swallow
Bank Swallow
Barn Swallow
Cliff Swallow



Cave Swallow

Bushtit
Ruby-crowned Kinglet
White-breasted Nuthatch
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher
Black-tailed Gnatcatcher
Rock Wren

Canyon Wren

Carolina Wren



Bewick's Wren

Cactus Wren

European Starling

Curve-billed Thrasher

Long-billed Thrasher

Northern Mockingbird

Eastern Bluebird

Western Bluebird

Townsend's Solitaire

Hermit Thrush

American Robin

House Sparrow

House Finch

Pine Siskin

Lesser Goldfinch

Cassin's Sparrow

Grasshopper Sparrow

Olive Sparrow

Chipping Sparrow

Clay-colored Sparrow

Black-chinned Sparrow

Field Sparrow

Brewer's Sparrow

Black-throated Sparrow

Lark Sparrow

Lark Bunting

White-crowned Sparrow

White-throated Sparrow

Savannah Sparrow

Lincoln's Sparrow

Canyon Towhee

Rufous-crowned Sparrow

Green-tailed Towhee



Spotted Towhee

Yellow-breasted Chat

Yellow-headed Blackbird

Chihuahuan Meadowlark

Orchard Oriole

Hooded Oriole

Bullock's Oriole

Baltimore Oriole

Scott's Oriole

Red-winged Blackbird

Bronzed Cowbird

Brown-headed Cowbird

Brewer's Blackbird

Common Grackle

Great-tailed Grackle

Black-and-white Warbler

Tennessee Warbler

Orange-crowned Warbler

Colima Warbler

Lucy's Warbler

Nashville Warbler

MacGillivray's Warbler

Common Yellowthroat

Yellow Warbler

Yellow-rumped Warbler

Yellow-throated Warbler

Grace's Warbler

Townsend's Warbler

Golden-cheeked Warbler

Black-throated Green Warbler

Wilson's Warbler

Painted Redstart

Hepatic Tanager



Summer Tanager

- Western Tanager
- Northern Cardinal
- Pyrrhuloxia
- Black-headed Grosbeak
- Blue Grosbeak
- Lazuli Bunting
- Indigo Bunting
- Varied Bunting
- Painted Bunting



MAMMALS

- Mexican Free-tailed Bat
- Whitetail Deer
- Mule Deer
- Pronghorn**
- Black Bear (Gavin & David)
- Barbary Sheep (introduced species)
- Raccoon (swimming)



REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

- Common Checkered Whiptail (lizard)
- Texas Spiny Softshell (turtle)
- Checkered Garter Snake
- Western Diamondback Rattlesnake**
- Red-spotted Toad



OTHER FAUNA

- Mexican Brown-backed Tarantula
- Sonoran Bumblebee

BOLD = pictured

Group photos by David Sarkozi; all other photos by Daryl Bernard