



## South Texas Trip Report (Feb 8 - 16, 2023)

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**Guides: Skye Haas and Louie Dombroski**



*Roseate Spoonbill at South Texas Birding Center © Dana Thomas*

We had a full house for this year's always popular winter get-away in south Texas. With a route that

started along the Texas coast in the Corpus Christi area and then throughout the breadth of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, we were able to find a diverse array of northern breeding birds that winter along the Gulf of Mexico, along with colorful collection of subtropical species that just barely make it over the border into the US. With some notable highlights like Hook-billed Kites, Whooping Cranes, Sprague's Pipits, Clay-colored Robins and Buff-bellied Hummingbirds as well as large flocks of egrets, terns and shorebirds, we tallied in just under 200 species this year- the 3rd highest ever for this tour! We began at Hazel Bazemore, a park featuring quite the sampler plate of what was in store for the tour - waterbirds like Black-bellied Whistling Duck, Anhinga and Black-necked Stilt and Mexican specialties like Green Jay and Golden-fronted Woodpecker. Our only Sedge Wrens and Green Kingfishers of the trip showed well for us and these normally shy birds even offered some photo opps!



*Anhinga* © Dana Thomas



*Green Jay © Robert Scheer*



*Green Kingfisher © Skye Haas*

We then headed off into the brush country away from the coast. Out here in the ranchlands we had lots of open country birds like Lark Sparrow, Sandhill Crane, Greater White-fronted Goose and tons of raptors including a Ferruginous Hawk and a nearly completely white Red-tailed Hawk! We then flipped around and headed to the barrier isle of Mustang Island. It took us a little while of cruising the marshes and dunes here but eventually we discovered a pair of Aplomado Falcons! Also

observed were White-tailed Hawks, Bonaparte's Gulls and Reddish Egrets of both light and dark morphs.



*Aplomado Falcon © Robert Scheer*



*White-tailed Hawk © Mark Siebers*

The next morning we were scheduled to go on a morning boat tour into Aransas National Wildlife Refuge to seek out the flagship of the Endangered Species Act, the regal Whooping Crane, but gale

force winds forced the captain to cancel the trip. However we were able to track some down in an area near the refuge where Whoopers are known to feed and we ended up seeing several of these stately birds!



*Whooping Crane © Skye Haas*

We then birded some coastal marshes looking at herons, egrets and shorebirds. We were able to get some great looks at Reddish Egret, Little Blue Heron and some Mottled Ducks at one location, and at another, we had textbook comparison looks of Snowy and Piping Plovers, but the wind was so fierce we decided to call it a morning and start our drive down to Brownsville.



*Little Blue Heron © Mark Siebers*

Along the way we stopped briefly for a large flock of Snow and Ross's Geese feeding in a ranch lot. We finished out our day at a park in Brownsville to witness the onslaught of a few hundred Red-crowned Parrots coming in at dusk for their evening roost. Madness in feathered form, these parrot flocks are a shrieking mob of chaos, changing positions, jostling each other and taking mass flight when spooked as they try to decide where they will sleep for the night.



*Red-crowned and White-fronted Parrots © Mark Siebers*

The next couple days we spent exploring Brownsville as well as the coastal region of South Padre Island. We started to really get to know some of the valley birds like Great Kiskadee, Olive Sparrow and Long-billed Thrasher, saw some rarer waterbirds like Gull-billed Tern, American Oystercatcher and Long-billed Curlew. A stroll on the Texas A&M campus yielded Hooded Orioles, Tropical Kingbirds and several species of warblers, while at picnic lunch one afternoon we were treated to a Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, a small flycatcher barely as long as its name. Meandering around the farm fields and prairies produced some charismatic species like Chihuahuan Raven, White-tailed Kite, Harris's Hawk and a fantastic look at a little Burrowing Owl!



*Chihuahuan Raven © Mark Siebers*

We made our final hotel change and headed up the valley to base out of McAllen for the rest of the tour. We spent the next day spending hours exploring Bentsen State Park where Plain Chachalaca and Altamira Oriole are some of the more common birds present. We did well for hummingbirds here, getting good looks at Black-chinned and the tropical looking Buff-bellied Hummers. But the main treat here was the fantastic show put on by a group of Hook-billed Kites. Easily the star of the tour, these paddle-winged tropical raptors were having a banner winter and we had multiple looks and even up to four birds in the air at once!



*Hook-billed Kite © Mark Siebers*

When we returned to the park in the evening for a dusk walk, we were treated to the quiet trills of McCall's Eastern Screech Owl and the loud and breezy calls of the Common Parakeets. And on another evening, we headed into the heart of McAllen to look at Green Parakeets coming into roost along with tens of thousands of Great-tailed Grackles! We took one day to head up the river to the edge of the Chihuahuan Desert along the Rio Grande River to try for a different suite of birds. The river's edge at Salineno yielded great looks at Ringed Kingfisher and Mexican Duck, and less cooperative but still exciting Zone-tailed Hawk and Morelet's Seedeater. We then headed over to Falcon State Park where we had good looks at some classic desert birds like Pyrrhuloxia, Black-throated Sparrow and Greater Roadrunner. A real surprise was a local rarity for the region in the form of a cooperative female Mountain Bluebird in the campground. Our final day was a fun low-key runaround where we got to try for some birds infrequently encountered on this tour. Having done so well with our targets this week, it gave us time to search for local rarities which we did quite well for. Patience proved to be key as we were treated to wonderfully close looks at Sprague's Pipits after scoping some distant ones playing hide-and-seek in the grasses.



*The gang looks for pipits © Skye Haas*

Other treats included Black Phoebe, Fulvous Whistling Duck, Gray Hawk, Dickcissel and wonderful looks at a roosting Parakeet from just a few feet away from the trail! Everyone departed satisfied from their week of birding, with some participants gaining over 50 birds to their lifelists!



*Armadillo © Robert Scheer*



*Audubon's Oriole © Dana Thomas*



*Clay-colored Thrush © Brian Clegg*