Eagle-Eye Tours



South Texas Trip Report (Feb 8 - 16, 2025)

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One of my most favorite tour runs of the year is my winter trip to south Texas. The birds are always plentiful and there is an amazing diversity of wintering waterbirds combined with the regional endemic breeders that spill over the border from northern Mexico. We started out in the coastal city of Corpus Christi. This is a great area to begin a tour, and we recorded just over a hundred species before we were done for the day. First up was the park Hazel Bazemore where the flood of birds broke forth with one of the quintessential southern Texan birds, the tropical looking Green Jay. One of those birds you have to see to believe, this multi-hued bird is a feast for the eyes with its green, blues and yellows flashing as they dart through the oaks. A great feeder setup had several of these beauties present, along with a host of other species like White-winged and Inca Doves, Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, a Field Sparrow and a nice selection of hummingbirds, with multiple Rufous, Black-chinned and a rare Anna's Hummingbird which was a first ever for the South Texas tour! We rolled down from the feeders to this marshy pond that had a nice selection of waterbirds such as Black-necked Stilt, Mottled Ducks, Green-winged Teal and Snowy Egrets. A pair of early migrating Barn Swallows dropped in over the pond for a brief moment as they headed north, and perched nearby was an excellent look at a handsome Red-shouldered Hawk. While we were there, we bumped into an old friend of mine who lived close by. He had us over to his yard after we left the park where his carefully tailored yard for wildlife yielded several great birds like Bronzed Cowbird and Audubon's Oriole!



Red-shouldered Hawk © Skye Haas



Audubon's Oriole © Skye Haas

We then shot out to Mustang Island where we had some good looks at a pair of Aplomado Falcons. These are particularly snazzy looking species and everyone got good looks at them at one of the nesting platforms erected to help restore this endangered bird to the coastal plains of Texas. Afterwards we stopped by a sub shop for some lunch where we picked up another new species; there was a small flock of Monk Parakeets hanging out in the parking lot. This species was introduced to

the States from Argentina, and has a thriving population here in Corpus. We then headed downtown to see one of the superstar birds of Corpus Christi; another visitor from South America. Over a year ago now, my old college roommate discovered a Cattle Tyrant eeking out a living on the curbs of the restaurant district. This vagrant was thought to have possibly ridden a shipping freighter up from the Panama Canal. We were driving in when it flew up from the street and over the van. We hustled out but could not refind it until after a diligent search Kyle was able to locate the bird up in a restaurant patio feeding on apple blossoms! It was now time to tear ourselves from Corpus and head up to Rockport.



Apolmado Falcon © Skye Haas

We made a brief stop to look for shorebirds at Indian Point. We had a few species like Willets and a Dunlin, as well as a few Common Loons floating offshore but overall there weren't too many birds present so we kept moving up to Rockport. After we checked into our hotel, we ran over to Goose Island State Park for a little evening birding. Here we encountered big flocks of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks and tons of herons and egrets coming in for their night roost. Lots of Snowy Egrets flew in as well as a nice flock of Roseate Spoonbills. But the real excitement were the multiple Whooping Cranes meandering the fields and rural residence yards. We enjoyed watching these amazing birds in the last light of the day. And only the first day too! Day two was no slouch either! Today we spent the morning taking a boat tour of Aransas National Wildlife Refuge getting an intimate look at the coastal wetlands as well as numerous point blank looks at families of Whooping Cranes! And it was just Whooping Cranes that provided a great show either. There were many Osprey, several with some mullet in their grips. A few Northern Harriers coursed over the marsh and we got our only Merlin of the trip. There were lots of diving ducks, Redhead, Bufflehead, Pintail and even a few Common Goldeneyes which is a species we only rarely get on this tour. A handful of American Oystercatchers and a couple of Lesser Black-backed Gulls were our only ones for the tour.



Whooping Cranes © Skye Haas

After a fun morning cruising out on the boat, we came back to land and headed to a nearby park for a picnic lunch. We had a long afternoon drive so we tried to have a quick lunch, but did pause to appreciate a pair of Couch's Kingbirds that came in as we were packing up. We then headed out to the highway to drive down to Brownsville and the Rio Grande Valley. We saw lots of raptors on our drive down, mostly Red-tailed Hawks, Turkey and Black Vultures, but there were quite a few Crested Caracaras and even a few White-tailed Hawks. We stopped at a ranch where there were several hundred Snow Geese present with dozens of their cuter cousins Ross's Geese feeding in a grain lot for cattle. Upon arrival in Brownsville, we beelined straight for Olivera Park to see the nightly parrot roost which is always chaos incarnate. While waiting for the parrots to come in (they always keep you waiting!),we enjoyed our first Vermilion Flycatchers, a distant Zone-tailed Hawk and strings of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks flying over. The parrots finally arrived which involved us hopping in the vans and driving back and forth across the park before the parrots finally settled down. There were a couple hundred birds present, their screeching a cacophony in our ears. The majority of the birds were Red-crowned Parrots, the semi-native species, augmented by a plethora of released/escaped cage birds. The other abundant species were White-fronted Parrots, a smaller but just as loud species. Within these flocks we plucked out singles of Red-lored and Yellow-headed Parrot, cage released birds from Central America. We finished out the night by picking up some pizza and headed to our hotel for dinner and bed.



Red-crowned Parrots © Skye Haas

The next morning we started our birding near the hotel, taking a leisurely drive through a marshy scrub plain. This had a fun mix of birds with numerous Northern Mockingbirds, White-eyed Vireos and some more Couch's Kingbirds in the mesquites, while on the many small ponds along the road were flocks of Gadwall, Northern Shovelers and Mottled Ducks along with our first Least Grebes of the trip. A real thrill was a great look at a perched Harris's Hawk, a desired bird for many on the trip. We then headed out towards the Laguna Madre to try for some more waterbirds we were still missing before we left the Gulf Coast. We stopped at a boat launch that was chock full of some interesting birds like large flocks of Black Skimmers, Marbled Godwits, and Black-necked Stilts. A great score were a couple pairs of Gull-billed Terns, a not often gotten species for this tour!



Marbled Godwit © Skye Haas



Black-necked Stilt © Skye Haas

Arriving at South Padre Island, a barrier island between the Laguna Madre and the Gulf of Mexico, we went to a birding center featuring a long boardwalk weaving through mangroves and both salt and fresh water marshes making for a good array of species diversity. This boardwalk provided intimate looks at birds like Sora, Green Heron, Yellow-crowned Night Herons, and the stunning Reddish Egret.



Reddish Egret © Skye Haas

After another picnic lunch, we headed up the coast a little to Laguna Madre National Wildlife Refuge. It was a bit on the quiet side being late afternoon, but we did briefly get eyes on a pair of rarities, an overwintering Magnolia Warbler (first ever for the winter Texas tour) and a Tropical Parula. The entrance road had some good sightings too with a Coyote, a Nine-banded Armadillo, and a very surprising count of six Greater Roadrunners! Satisfied with a solid day, we headed back to the ranch for dinner and some rest. We started out the next day going to Boca Chica, a long rural highway that used to end in a tiny village on the Gulf of Mexico. I always loved birding this road, its extensive coastal prairie habitat was some of the more extensive remaining in Texas. However I was disappointed to see this formerly quiet road was now a busy highway of trucks going back and forth to SpaceX which had plopped itself down and eaten the village of Boca Chica. Due to the extreme volume of traffic and habitat destruction, I doubt I'll come back this way again. But we did explore a side road I had never gone down before and it yielded some fun gets like Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and a hunting family of Harris's Hawks. A really unexpected sighting was a herd of Nylgali, a cow-sized antelope from India that has an established population in the wilds of Texas. We then headed over to a great park on the west side of Brownsville- Resaca de la Palma. We had a picnic lunch by a set of feeders that were pulling in a bunch of Green Jays and our first Altamira Orioles, a flashy tropical species that just barely enters the US here in south Texas. We hit the birding trail after lunch, where we did hear a singing Tropical Parula but it remained just out of sight. We had to wrap it up sooner than we normally would have, but the heat was raging this afternoon, and we were starting to wilt. So we packed it in and turned the rest of the day over to birding from the vans. We scoured some sod farms chasing the ghosts of Burrowing Owls from days earlier, but a good find was a Sprague's Pipit that was foraging alongside the road. An amazing sight was a flock of over 200 Long-billed Curlews that flew in and started to forage in the field right in front of us!



Altamira Oriole © Skye Haas



Green Jay © Skye Haas

We had to hold on to those memories of the heat from the day before, for our next day was a stark contrast with a cold north wind blowing and a significant temperature drop. We spent the morning at another great park, Estero Llano Grande. Even with the cold, we racked in a bunch of great sightings. A large flock of Blue-winged Teal held a snazzy looking male Cinnamon Teal was our only for the tour. Several species of hummingbirds were present including a few new ones like Ruby-

throated, the tropical looking Buff-bellied Hummingbird and a ratty looking bird that was a good candidate for a Allen’s Hummingbird. We had some fantastic looks at a particularly elegant species of raptor in the form of a pair of White-tailed Kites. Another gorgeous bird we saw was a roosting Common Pauraque, an incredibly patterned goatsucker that just thrilled our entire group!



White-tailed Kite © Skye Haas



Common Pauraque © Skye Haas

The temps stayed on the cool side the next day for our trip up river to edge of the Chihuahuan desert. This actually made for great day long birding with no slow down due to afternoon heat. We spent the morning at the sleepy village of Salineno right on the banks of the Rio Grande River. This is always dynamite birding here. We had some great new birds for the tour here such as Ringed Kingfisher, Gray Hawk and Purple Martin. A nearby feeding station was rocking with birds like Great Kiskadees, Audubon's and Altamira Orioles, Green Jays and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers. Photo opps here are most excellent and we had to tear ourselves away to keep moving up the river. At a boat launch up at Chapeno, we had a great mixed flock of Orange-crowned Warblers, Blue-gray Gnatcatchers and Verdins that pulled in a female Morelet's Seedeater, a really good rarity I've only had a couple times on this tour! Very exciting!



Morelet's Seedeater © Skye Haas

For our afternoon birding we went up to Falcon State Park, of which is true desert habitat and the birds we encountered reflected the arid country. We had some real bangers like Black-throated Sparrow, Cactus Wren and Black-tailed Gnatcatcher. Another highlight was having an excellent study of Northern Bobwhites, a surprisingly beautiful bird when looked at closely. And while we thought our count of 6 Roadrunners from the other day was notable, we blew past that with a minimum of 10 Greater Roadrunners seen here! Certainly the most Ive ever seen in a day!



Northern Bobwhite © Skye Haas



Greater Roadrunner © Skye Haas

For our final day, we spent it doing some cleanup for our lists, and that meant targeting a bird in particular; finding a Green Kingfisher. We tried first at Bentsen State Park, which is a great park and though it gave us species like Clay-colored Thrush, Indigo Bunting and all the Plain Chachalacas we could want, no luck on a Green Kingfisher. We tried over at the Butterfly Center- a delightful spot to bird, where we got some killer looks at Curve-billed and Long-billed Thrashers, but again no

Green Kingfisher. We then headed up to Edinburg Wetlands, a surefire kingfisher spot. But of course.. No kingfisher. We did get Lesser Goldfinch and Pine Warbler here so that was nice to pick up a couple new trip birds. So we went and tried at my final spot, Anzulduas County Park. A surprise was an inland Royal Tern here on the river, and more good looks at Least Grebe. But what I thought would be a last minute save of getting our Green Kingfisher seemed to be sadly eluding us. So time to pack it in and head back to the hotel. I got everyone loaded only to see a participant waving us back! Chaos erupted and we all spilled out of the van in time to see not one but three Green Kingfishers! Victory was snatched out of the jaws of defeat in the very last second! Amazing! Well worth it after all the hard work we put in today! And with that we could call this a successful trip completed!



Long-billed Thrasher © Skye Haas

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