Eagle-Eye Tours



Winter in South Texas 2024 Trip Report

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The winter 2024 South Texas tour is not one that will be quickly forgotten! Always full of interesting and notable birds, this winter will be remembered as downright legendary. A veritable host of rarities from Mexico had taken up winter residence in the Rio Grande Valley and while we on a normal year hope to get one to two of these special visitors to this area, we had no less than ten amazing vagrants from south of the border! If that wasn't enough, it was an all around good winter for a diverse array of species, and we broke our all time trip high count with 201 species of birds observed on the tour! The first two days of this tour were focused on waterbirds in the Corpus Christi area. We quickly became accustomed to seeing the ubiquitous Brown Pelicans and Laughing Gulls. More notable species included an adult Brown Booby, both light and dark color morphs of Reddish Egret, Roseate Spoonbills, Snowy and Piping Plovers, American Oystercatchers, Gull-billed Terns, Lesser Black-backed Gulls, and Long-billed Curlews.



Reddish Egret (white morph) © Skye Haas



Brown Booby © Skye Haas

At Aransas National Wildlife Refuge we had fantastic looks at Whooping Cranes, both stately adults and orange-tinged immatures. Our total of 75 individuals, some seen from land, but most from the popular boat tour of the refuge, likely represented close to 15% of the world population of this slowly recovering species.



Whooping Crane boat tour in Aransas NWR © Skye Haas



Whooping Cranes © Skye Haas

It wasn't all about waterbirds though. We stopped to admire a pair of handsome Aplomado Falcons perched obligingly on a nesting platform built for them and had our first sightings of Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Couch's Kingbird, Black-crested Titmouse, and Vermilion Flycatcher. The most unusual passerine sighting was in downtown Corpus Christi, where a Cattle Tyrant, an unusual ground-foraging South American flycatcher that preys on insects scared up by cows and other

vertebrates, has taken up residence. This bird, on nobody's list of new species likely to show up in North America, has gained a legion of local fans and nationwide notoriety among birders. The Cattle Tyrant proved confiding as ever, as it walked among us, not seeming concerned at all about the bipedal "cattle" pointing cameras and binoculars at it.



Cattle Tyrant © Skye Haas



Watching the Cattle Tyrant © Skye Haas

Then it was off to Brownsville, where we arrived in the early evening, in time to see hundreds of Red-crowned Parrots settling in to roost, along with dozens of White-crowned Parrots, a huge Yellow-headed Parrot and a quick flyover of two Red-lored Parrots.



Red-crowned Parrot © Skye Haas

For our first morning in Brownsville we hit the ground running by visiting Resaca de la Palma State Park. We soon got used to the colorful backdrop of Great Kiskadees, Green Jays, Altamira Orioles, Long-billed Thrashers and Northern Cardinals. Plain Chachalacas, White-tipped Doves and Olive Sparrows emerged from cover on the ground at feeding stations and openings in the forest, as they would at other wooded locations for the rest of the tour.



Green Jay © Skye Haas

While these aforementioned species are all south Texas specialties, this winter the region has been visited by an unusual number of even rarer species. Resaca de la Palma harbored two of these, and all participants got good looks at them: a Roadside Hawk (the first in Texas since 2018) and Texas's first record (and only North America's third) of Gray-collared Becard!



Roadside Hawk © Skye Haas



Gray-collared Becard © Skye Haas

From here it was on to the University of Texas Brownsville campus where we sat in the forested edge of a resaca at the stakeout spot for another super-rarity, the lower Rio Grande Valley's first record (and only second Texas record) of Fan-tailed Warbler. Filled with anticipation as we were, we couldn't believe our incredible luck as we breathlessly watched the warbler appear from the shadows and proceed to dance along a stick six inches off the ground just a few feet from us! We would repeat our good fortune a few hours later with another warbler rarity, the closely related Golden-crowned Warbler, making its second ever appearance on a Eagle-Eye winter Texas tour!



Fan-tailed Warbler © Skye Haas



Golden-crowned Warbler © Skye Haas

Before heading to McAllen for the last leg of the tour, we took a side trip to South Padre Island for in-your-face looks at Black-bellied Whistling Ducks and wading birds such as Tricolored Heron, Reddish Egret, and Roseate Spoonbill. From the boardwalk at the island's Birding and Nature Center we observed the unique feeding behavior of Black Skimmers and watched a Cattle Egret warily foraging in the alligator enclosure. As we continued birding the valley we saw Buff-bellied, Ruby-throated and Rufous Hummingbirds, Tropical Parulas, and Carolina Wrens. We spotted a few well-camouflaged Common Paraques on their daytime ground roosts at Estero Llano State Park and saw one McCall's Eastern Screech-Owl (a possible candidate for full species status) perched in a nest box cavity at the Salineno Nature Preserve. A hike at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge produced Least Grebes and Cinnamon Teals. We picked up an Audubon's Oriole at the National Butterfly Center and also saw a hybrid Audubon's x Altamira Oriole there.



Common Pauraque © Skye Haas



McCall's Eastern Screech-Owl © Skye Haas

For a special treat, we took a trip to the private Santa Margarita Ranch where we were joined by excellent local guide Cameron Cox. From a bluff overlooking the Rio Grande we eyed both Ringed and Green Kingfishers, a very rare for Texas Limpkin, and for a real taste of the American tropics, watched a flock of Brown Jays swoop into a cypress tree thirty feet from us after stopping to mob a Gray Hawk! Elsewhere on the ranch we picked up a Dusky-capped Flycatcher, a flock of Scaled Quail, a male Rose-throated Becard, and a courting pair of Red-billed Pigeons!



Scanning the Rio Grande River © Skye Haas



Green Kingfisher © Skye Haas



Brown Jay © Skye Haas



Rose-throated Becard © Skye Haas

But the real highlight of this day came near the end when Cameron expertly spotted our main quarry, an overwintering Bare-throated Tiger-Heron. This tropical wader is only the third time it's been seen in the United States, and while distant, provided a birding crescendo to our adventure onto this ranch. For our last birding trip we ventured into farm country north of McAllen where we saw numerous White-tailed Hawks and Harris's Hawks at close range and encountered a flock of several Mountain Plovers, a first for the Texas Winter Eagle-Eye Tour and our 8th "first ever" to the all time trips list I've been maintaining since I began to guide this tour in 2017! Certainly a trip of a lifetime and one that I do not think will repeat this level of highlights!



White-tailed Hawk © Skye Haas



Group photo 2024

Texas 2024 species list