

ITINERARY
South Texas Rarities
January 11-17, 2020



The Long-billed Thrasher is only found in the US in south Texas. The Rio Grande Valley is one of the best places to find these attractive thrashers, as well as many other species with limited US ranges. Photograph by guide Chris Benesh.

We include here information for those interested in the 2020 Field Guides South Texas Rarities tour:

- a general introduction to the tour
- a description of the birding areas to be visited on the tour
- an abbreviated daily itinerary with some indication of the nature of each day's birding outings

Those who register for the tour will be sent this additional material:

- an annotated list of the birds recorded on a previous year's Field Guides trip to the area, with comments by guide(s) on notable species or sightings (may be downloaded from our web site)
- a detailed information bulletin with important logistical information and answers to questions regarding accommodations, air arrangements, clothing, currency, customs and immigration, documents, health precautions, and personal items
- a reference list
- a Field Guides checklist for preparing for and keeping track of the birds we see on the tour
- after the conclusion of the tour, a list of birds seen on the tour

The subtropical habitats along the lower Rio Grande are like a part of Mexico north of the border. Biogeographically, this region represents the northernmost extension of the Tamaulipan Biotic Province. The bird life of South Texas is thus characteristic of northeastern Mexico; within the United States, many resident species and Mexican vagrants are known only from South Texas. For this reason, South Texas has become a "must" for every North American birder.

We operate our South Texas Rarities tours in mid-winter because experience has shown that this is the season most likely to produce the unpredictable vagrants that spice up the already extremely rich resident avifauna. Normal post-breeding dispersal and irregular dispersal caused by environmental stress (for example, climatic extremes leading to food resource failures) combine to make winter the most exciting season in South Texas. One can never be sure what species may turn up next. One season may bring a scattering of Masked Ducks and Northern Jacanas, as did 1993. Another may produce species never before recorded north of the Mexican border, as in 1990 when North America's first Masked Tityra, White-throated Thrush, and Yellow-faced Grassquit were found in the area.

During the last few decades, an average of one species per year new to the ABA Area list has been added from the region. Add to that the large numbers of wintering waterfowl, sparrows, warblers, raptors, and coastal birds and you have a winter birding adventure of major proportions. During six days of birding along the lower Rio Grande, we'll look for all the specialties for which South Texas is famous, from such common birds as the striking Great Kiskadee to outstanding rarities like the Hook-billed Kite. About forty species of essentially Mexican birds are regularly found along the Rio Grande, and a number of others are irregular vagrants to the area. Residents include Least Grebe, Neotropic Cormorant, White-tailed Kite, White-tailed and Harris's hawks, Crested Caracara, Plain Chachalaca, Ringed and Green kingfishers, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, Green Jay, Clay-colored Thrush, Long-billed Thrasher, Tropical Parula, Olive Sparrow, Morelet's Seedeater (recently split from White-collared Seedeater), and Altamira and Audubon's orioles. In past years, rarities have included Roadside, Short-tailed, and Crane hawks, Green-breasted Mango, Green Violet-ear, Golden-crowned Warbler, Crimson-collared Grosbeak, and Blue Bunting. 2012 saw Golden-crowned Warblers, Blue Buntings, Crimson-collared Grosbeaks, and a Black-vented Oriole make appearances in the valley, as well as the return of Brown Jay to the Falcon area. The highlight in 2015 was a Gray-crowned Yellowthroat. Highlights in 2016 included Crimson-collared Grosbeak and Northern Jacana.

Special Note: A couple of recent trends in bird populations in south Texas include the following: In 2013, there were no overwintering Tropical Parulas in the valley. This species has been in a steady decline. A single Tropical Parula showed well for us in 2014. Parulas have been a bit more widespread since then. Sightings of Hook-billed Kite have dropped considerably since major flooding that took place in 2010. They are still seen from time to time, but have become far more difficult to see and are by no means guaranteed. Lastly, Muscovy sightings along the Rio Grande have all but dried up, perhaps owing to greatly increased border patrol presence there. We did sight one in 2017 so it's not totally out of the question.



*The interesting Groove-billed Ani is another tropical species that can only be found in the US in south Texas. These cooperative breeders are not common, but can be found in the lower Rio Grande Valley.
Photograph by guide Chris Benesh.*

About the Physical Requirements & Pace: We will enjoy full birding days while in South Texas. This will require being out early most days, and generally we will head out at dawn to take advantage of the early morning hours of bird activity. Given that we are in the vast state of Texas, some afternoons and an occasional morning will demand a drive of an hour or more to reach the next birding locale. While we'll make every effort to see all species encountered, we will concentrate in some areas on the specialties that make South Texas unique. This might entail returning to an area we have already visited to increase our chances of finding a rarity or specialty. Most of our birding will consist of walking on fairly level ground. We will average a few miles of walking most days, and a fair bit of standing waiting for birds to show up. A folding stool can be useful for relieving the strain of standing. Also, hot days can be physically taxing. If you are uncertain about whether this tour is a good match for your abilities, please don't hesitate to contact our office; if they cannot directly answer your queries, they will put you in touch with the guide.

About the Birding Areas



Semi-arid Brushlands—Between the coastal savannas and the subtropical woodlands along the lower Rio Grande lies a broad, level to gently rolling plain covered—in its original state—with low, dense thorny brushlands. The bird life of these brushlands is similar to that of much of the arid Southwest, with such species as Greater Roadrunner, Scaled Quail (here occurring with Northern Bobwhite), Harris’s Hawk, Chihuahuan Raven, Bewick’s and Cactus wrens, Curve-billed Thrasher, Verdin, Pyrrhuloxia, and Black-throated and Cassin’s sparrows. Other species of interest that live in or migrate through this habitat include Cave Swallow, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, wintering Green-tailed Towhee, and Hooded Oriole.

Rio Grande Riparian Woodlands—Along the lower Rio Grande from near its mouth upstream almost to Laredo (about 250 air miles) are taller, lush woodlands composed of a mixture of subtropical and temperate trees. These woodlands have mostly been cleared for a variety of irrigated crops (sugar cane, citrus fruits, cotton, winter vegetables, and small grains) upstream to about Roma, where the flood plain narrows to a mere strip along the immediate river bank.

Relatively small but important fragments of this unique habitat are preserved in Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park, and other, locally run reserves. These areas are famous among birders for the wealth of Neotropical species that are resident or have straggled up from Mexico from time to time. A complete list would run to fifty or so species, but the regulars include Least Grebe, Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, Neotropic Cormorant, Plain Chachalaca, White-tipped Dove, Common Pauraque, Gray Hawk, Hook-billed Kite (increasingly rare), White-tailed Kite, Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, Great Kiskadee, Couch’s and Tropical kingbirds, Green Jay, Long-billed Thrasher, Clay-colored Thrush, Olive Sparrow, and the gorgeous Altamira and Audubon’s orioles.

Border Wall Update—For those concerned about the recent news from South Texas, the Border Wall has been in the news almost daily over the past year or more, with quite a bit of information circulating through social media and in the press. We suspect that a lot of you are wondering just how a border wall might affect birding in south Texas. The potential loss of habitat and access to birding sites has caused a great deal of concern among naturalists and conservationists working and living in the area. Field Guides has been offering tours to Big Bend and the lower Rio Grande Valley for almost thirty-five years and knows these areas exceptionally well.

Without question, some specific areas would be impacted, but even with a border wall under construction, the overall birding experience should be only minimally impacted. Why is that? As it turns out, many of the most productive birding sites are north of the proposed wall. It is possible to observe most of the specialty birds of the region without setting eyes on the Rio Grande. Mind you, it would be a shame not to take in the river view as part of the south Texas birding experience, and it will likely remain a feature of our tours to the region.

Itinerary for South Texas Rarities

Day 1, Sat, 11 Jan. Arrival in Harlingen. Please plan to arrive in Harlingen in time to meet at our hotel for a 6:30 dinner. Night in Harlingen.

Day 2, Sun, 12 Jan. Harlingen, Brownsville, and the coastal plain. Our focus today will depend on any rarities that may be present in this area and will likely include searches for Aplomado Falcon, Groove-billed Ani, and various waterbirds, in addition to visiting a large evening parrot roost in Brownsville. Night in Harlingen.

Days 3-4, Mon-Tue, 13-14 Jan. Lower Rio Grande Valley. Our schedule over the next couple of days is somewhat flexible. South Texas now hosts a great variety of tiny and not so tiny refuges that hold a number of South Texas specialties. We’ll adopt a wait and see attitude to decide which sites allow us to maximize our birding returns and provide us with the potential of seeing the greatest assortment of valley specialties as well as any real rarities that might be overwintering here. From our base in Mission, we are located close to a number of exciting areas. Nights in Mission.

Day 5, Wed, 15 Jan. Falcon Dam area. We'll head off directly this morning for the area of the Rio Grande below Falcon Dam, about an hour's drive upriver, where we will spend most of the day seeking species that do not normally range down along the lower Rio Grande, such as Audubon's Oriole. Planned birding stops over the next couple of days will include a search for the diminutive Morelet's Seedeater along the Rio Grande in Zapata or further upstream. Night in Zapata.

Day 6, Thu, 16 Jan. Falcon Dam area. We'll have another day to explore the Falcon area, focusing on those species that are still eluding us. In addition to the birds already mentioned, this area is quite good for western deserts species like Cactus Wren, Verdin, Scaled Quail, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, and Ash-throated Flycatcher among others. Night in Zapata.

Day 7, Fri, 17 Jan. Flights home from Harlingen. We will depart early this morning, with our destination determined by whatever species we are still lacking. Later in the morning we will proceed to Harlingen, where we will plan to arrive at the airport by 1:00 p.m. **Please schedule homebound flights no earlier than 2:00 p.m.**



We'll search for the colorful Audubon's Oriole in the Falcon Dam area. Photograph by guide Doug Gochfeld.

About Your Guide

Chris Benesh grew up studying natural history in California, where he was inspired by his father to take up birding as a teenager. After earning a degree in zoology from UC Santa Barbara in 1987, Chris moved to Austin to join the Field Guides staff. Since then, his life has undergone a wonderful transformation. The intervening years at Field Guides have taken him to many corners of the world and across both the Arctic and Antarctic circles! Chris takes an interest in nearly anything that flies, and you might catch him sneaking a peak at a passing aircraft, or stopping to examine a butterfly or odonate. You might also notice him getting especially excited at the sighting of a rare or wonderful mammal (heck, he can get excited about a squirrel).

Chris's passion for education has led to his serving on the Arizona Bird Committee, leading the occasional workshop, presenting at birding conventions, and—we must add—thoroughly explaining in admirable detail the nuances of flycatchers to tour participants and colleagues alike. These days, a lot of his “down time” is spent at home in Tucson watching his two wonderful kids, Sean and Linnea, grow.

Visit <https://fieldguides.com/guides> for Chris's complete tour schedule; just click on his photo.

*“I would travel with **Chris Benesh** anywhere, any time. He is calm, pleasant, and good-humored. He is not only brilliant at finding and spotting birds, but equally brilliant at ensuring that every member of the group gets a great look at the bird...”*
B.M., Arizona's Second Spring

Financial Information

FEE: \$2275 from Harlingen

DEPOSIT: \$250 per person

FINAL PAYMENT DUE: September 13, 2019

SINGLE SUPPLEMENT (Optional): \$450

LIMIT: 7

Other Things You Need to Know

TOUR MANAGER: The manager for this tour is Karen Turner. Karen will be happy to assist you in preparing for the tour. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to call her!

AIR ARRANGEMENTS: On Day 1, please plan to arrive in Harlingen in time for a 6:30 p.m. dinner; on Day 7, please plan to depart from Harlingen after 2:00 p.m.

Field Guides is a full service travel agency and your tour manager will be happy to assist you with flights to join this tour. Field Guides does not charge a service fee for these services to clients booking a tour. However, we understand that tech-savvy clients often prefer to shop online or that you may wish to use mileage to purchase tickets. Regardless of which method you choose, your tour manager will be happy to provide assistance regarding ticket prices and schedules, along with rental cars and extra hotel nights as needed.

Please be sure to check with your tour manager prior to purchasing your ticket to make sure the flights you have chosen will work well with the tour itinerary and that the tour is sufficiently subscribed to operate. Once purchased, most airline tickets are non-refundable and carry a penalty to change. Field Guides cannot be responsible for these fees. **Also, it is imperative that we receive a copy of your comprehensive flight itinerary—including any and all flights not covered in the tour fee—so that we may track you in the event of missed connections, delays, or other mishaps.**

LUGGAGE: Please be aware that many airlines have recently modified their luggage policies and are charging additional fees for checked bags. Updates could easily occur before your departure, so you may wish to contact your airline to verify the policy. Additional charges for bags on any flights, whether these are covered by the tour fee or not, will be the client's responsibility.

TOUR INCLUSIONS/EXCLUSIONS: The **tour fee** is \$2275 for one person in double occupancy from Harlingen. It includes all lodging from Day 1 through Day 6, all meals from dinner on Day 1 through breakfast on Day 7, all ground transportation, entrance fees, and the guide services of the tour leader(s). Tipping at group meals and for drivers, porters, and local guides is included in your tour fee and will be handled for the group by your Field Guides leader(s). However, if you would like to recognize your Field Guides leader(s) or any local guide(s) for exceptional service, it is entirely appropriate to tip. We emphasize that such tips are optional and not expected.

The above fee does not include your airfare to and from Harlingen, airport taxes, any checked or carry-on baggage charges imposed by the airlines, any alcoholic beverages, optional tips to local drivers, phone calls, laundry, or other items of a personal nature.

The **single supplement** for the tour is \$450. If you do not have a roommate but wish to share, we will try to pair you with a roommate from the tour; but if none is available, you will be billed for the single supplement. Our tour fees are based on double occupancy; one-half the cost of a double room is priced into the tour fee. The single supplement is calculated by taking the actual cost of a single room and subtracting one-half the cost of a double room (plus any applicable taxes).

TOUR REGISTRATION: To register for this tour, complete the Registration/Release and Indemnity form and return it with a **deposit of \$250** per person. If registering by phone, a deposit must be received within fourteen days, or the space will be released. **Full payment** of the tour fee is due 70 days prior to departure, or **by September 13, 2019. We will bill you for the final payment at either 70 days or when the tour has reached sufficient subscription to operate, whichever date comes later.** Since the cost of your trip insurance and airline tickets is generally non-refundable, please do not finalize these purchases until you have received final billing for the tour or have been advised that the tour is sufficiently subscribed to operate by your tour manager.

TOUR LIMITS: Our limits are firm and we don't exceed the limit by one to accommodate a couple when only one space remains open. However, on occasion, we will send along a guide in training on a tour. In these cases, one seat in the van or bus will be taken by the guide in training. Our guides will have a rotation system within the vehicle so that clients share the inconvenience equally. We hope this minor inconvenience will be more than offset by the advantages of having another guide along.

SMOKING: Almost all of our clients prefer a smoke-free environment. If you smoke, please be sensitive to the group and refrain from smoking at meals, in vehicles, and in proximity to the group on trails and elsewhere.

CANCELLATION POLICY: Refund of deposit and payment, less \$100 handling fee, will be made if cancellation is received up to 120 days before departure. If cancellation occurs 70 days or less before the departure date all deposits and payments are not refundable.

This policy only applies to payments made to Field Guides for tour fees (and any services included in those fees). Airline tickets not included in the tour fee and purchased separately often carry penalties for cancellation or change, or are

sometimes totally non-refundable. Additionally, if you take out trip insurance the cost of the insurance is not refundable so it is best to purchase the policy just prior to making full payment for the tour or at the time you purchase airline tickets, depending upon the airlines restrictions.

The right is reserved to cancel any tour prior to departure, in which case full refund will constitute full settlement to the passenger. The right is reserved to substitute in case of emergency another guide for the original one.

TRIP CANCELLATION & MEDICAL EMERGENCY INSURANCE: We strongly recommend you consider purchasing trip cancellation (including medical emergency) insurance to cover your investment in case of injury or illness to you or your family prior to or during a trip. Because we must remit early (and substantial) tour deposits to our suppliers, we cannot offer any refund when cancellation occurs within 70 days of departure (see CANCELLATION POLICY). In addition, the Department of State strongly urges Americans to consult with their medical insurance company prior to traveling abroad to confirm whether their policy applies overseas and if it will cover emergency expenses such as a medical evacuation. US medical insurance plans seldom cover health costs incurred outside the United States unless supplemental coverage is purchased. Furthermore, US Medicare and Medicaid programs do not provide payment for medical services outside the United States.

When making a decision regarding health insurance, Americans should consider that many foreign doctors and hospitals require payment in cash prior to providing service and that a medical evacuation to the United States may cost well in excess of \$50,000. Uninsured travelers who require medical care overseas often face extreme difficulties. When consulting with your insurer prior to your trip, please ascertain whether payment will be made to the overseas healthcare provider or whether you will be reimbursed later for expenses that you incur.

US citizens will receive from us a brochure regarding optional tour cancellation/emergency medical insurance. Our agent, CSA, will insure for trip cancellation and interruption, medical coverage, travel delay, baggage loss and delay, and emergency medical transportation. **Currently we are unable to offer CSA insurance policies to residents of New York and Hawaii.** We have had clients provide positive feedback after acquiring insurance with InsureMyTrip (www.insuremytrip.com) in the past, and would suggest that company as an alternative. Please let us know if you have any questions about this. If you purchase the insurance within 24 hours of making final payment for the tour, and cover all non-refundable parts of the trip (including any non-refundable flights), pre-existing conditions are covered. The CSA brochure includes a contact number; you may also purchase your CSA policy on-line by visiting our website at <https://fieldguides.com/travelinsurance.html> and clicking the link to CSA. Please note, once the insurance is purchased it is non-refundable, so please check with your tour manager prior to making the purchase to assure the tour will operate as scheduled. Citizens of other countries are urged to consult their insurance broker.

RESPONSIBILITY: For and in consideration of the opportunity to participate in the tour, each tour participant and each parent or legal guardian of a tour participant who is under 18 agrees to release, indemnify, and hold harmless Field Guides Incorporated, its agents, servants, employees, shareholders, officers, directors, attorneys, and contractors as more fully set forth in the Release and Indemnity Agreement on the reverse side of the registration form. Field Guides Incorporated acts only as an agent for the passenger in regard to travel, whether by railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, airplane, or other means, and assumes no liability for injury, damage, loss, accident, delay, or irregularity caused by defect in such vehicles or for any reason whatsoever, including the acts, defaults, or bankruptcies of any company or person engaged in conveying the passenger or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. Field Guides Incorporated accepts no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in air or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, or other causes. The tour participant shall bear all such losses and expenses. Field Guides Incorporated reserves the right to substitute hotels of similar category for those indicated and to make any changes in the itinerary where deemed necessary or caused by changes in air schedules. Field Guides Incorporated reserves the right to decline to accept or to retain any person as a member of any tour. Baggage is at owner's risk entirely.

Participants should be in good health and should consult a physician before undertaking a tour. If you have questions about the physical requirements of a tour, please contact our office for further information. Participants should prepare for the tour by reading the detailed itinerary, the information bulletin, and other pertinent matter provided by Field Guides. Each participant is responsible for bringing appropriate clothing and equipment as recommended in our bulletins.

THE RECEIPT OF YOUR TOUR DEPOSIT SHALL BE DEEMED TO BE CONSENT TO THE ABOVE CONDITIONS. EACH TOUR PARTICIPANT AND EACH PARENT OR LEGAL GUARDIAN OF A TOUR PARTICIPANT WHO IS UNDER 18 SHALL SIGN AND DELIVER THE RELEASE AND INDEMNITY AGREEMENT AT THE TIME OF REGISTRATION.

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