

ITINERARY
South Texas Rarities
January 13-19, 2024



*The Rio Grande Valley of South Texas is well-known in birding circles as a place where rarities may show at any time. One of the most recent was this Social Flycatcher, a bird common in much of South and Central America, but only seen in the US on rare occasions. Our 2021 tour was able to see this exceptional rarity very well!
Photograph by participant Kathy Brown.*

We include here information for those interested in the 2024 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 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.



The Green Jay just reaches the US in South Texas. Photograph by participant Kathy Brown.

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. 2021's tour included Bat Falcon and Social Flycatcher.

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 have sighted a few in recent years, so it's not totally out of the question.

We want to be sure you are on the right tour! Below is a description of the physical requirements of the tour. If you are concerned about the difficulty, please contact us about this and be sure to fully explain your concerns. We want to make sure you have a wonderful time with us, so if you are uncomfortable with the requirements, just let us know and we can help you find a better fitting tour! Field Guides will not charge you a change or cancellation fee if you opt out within 10 days of depositing.

Physical requirements of this tour

- **TRAILS & WALKING:** Moderate amounts of walking on flat ground (up to 2-3 miles per day), some of it on paved roads, some on gravel or dirt roads, and some on trails with no significant obstacles.
- **POTENTIAL CHALLENGES:** We will likely stand for long periods to observe birds. We cover some ground on this tour, and some days will feature fairly long (1-2-hour) periods of time in the vans. There will be some roadside birding, with much getting in and out of vans.
- **PACE:** Early mornings (6:00-6:30 a.m.); both morning and afternoon birding sessions, with occasional afternoon breaks or travel time.
- **WEATHER:** South Texas winter weather is normally pleasant, with temperatures ranging from the low 50s to the high 60s degrees F. Rain showers and windy conditions are possible, and the rare “blue norther” cold front could bring nighttime temperatures into the 40s or lower.
- **VEHICLE SEATING:** So that each participant has equal opportunity during our travel, we employ a seat rotation system on all tours. Participants will need to be flexible enough to maneuver to the back of the vehicle on occasion. Those who experience motion sickness will need to bring adequate medication for the duration of the tour, as we are not able to reserve forward seats for medical conditions.
- **BATHROOM BREAKS:** Bathroom stops at indoor restrooms will be made regularly; comfort stops in nature are also possible, should the need arise.
- **OPTING OUT:** Where we are staying multiple days in the same lodging, participants can easily opt to sit out a day or sometimes a half-day. This will not be possible on days when we are changing locations.

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 frequently, 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 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.



Evidence of the tropical nature of South Texas is the presence of a large roost of Red-Crowned Parrots in Brownsville. Photograph by guide Chris Benesh.

Itinerary for South Texas Rarities

Day 1, Sat, 13 Jan. Arrival in Harlingen. Please plan to arrive in Harlingen in time to meet at our hotel at 6:30 p.m. for dinner. Night in Harlingen.

Day 2, Sun, 14 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, 15-16 Jan. Lower Rio Grande Valley. Our schedule over the next couple of days is 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, 17 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, 18 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 desert species like Cactus Wren, Verdin, Scaled Quail, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, and Ash-throated Flycatcher among others. Night in Zapata.

Day 7, Fri, 19 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.**

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.

*“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*

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

Financial Information

FEE: \$2575 from Harlingen

DEPOSIT: \$250 per person

FINAL PAYMENT DUE: July 17, 2023

SINGLE SUPPLEMENT (Optional): \$450

LIMIT: 7

All participants will be required to confirm they will have completed a full COVID vaccination course at least two weeks prior to the tour (which includes a booster for those eligible to have one). Note too, that many travel destinations may still require proof of vaccination for entry to bypass testing delays or quarantine, and that entry requirements for a destination can change at any time. Proof of a booster shot, too, may be a requirement for some travel destinations.

Other Things You Need to Know

TOUR MANAGER: The manager for this tour is Sharon Mackie. Sharon 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. meeting/ dinner; on Day 7, please plan to depart from Harlingen 2:00 p.m. or later.

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 **\$2,575** 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, please contact us at fieldguides.com/contact-us/. Our office will be in touch with you by email by the next business day (Mon-Fri) with instructions on how to complete our new electronic registration form and medical questionnaire. (We are no longer accepting the paper version.)

Please mail your **deposit of \$250** per person, or see <https://fieldguides.com/payment-options/> for our Payment Options. **Full payment** of the tour fee is due 180 days prior to departure, or **by July 17, 2023**. **We will bill you for the final payment at either 180 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 180 days before departure. If cancellation occurs between 179 and 90 days before the departure date, 50% of the tour fee is refundable. Thereafter, all deposits and payments are not refundable and non-transferable.

Our cancellation policy only applies to payments made to Field Guides for tour (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 that 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 airline's restrictions.

The right is reserved to cancel any tour prior to departure. In most such cases, full refund will constitute full settlement to the passenger. Note this exception, however: If you have been advised pre-tour that there is a non-refundable portion of your tour fee no matter the reason for Field Guides cancellation of the tour, that portion will not be refunded. 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, you acknowledge and agree that we will not issue a refund when cancellation occurs outside of our cancellation policy as published in the itinerary (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 information from us 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. If you purchase the insurance prior to, or within 24 hours of making final payment for the tour, and cover all non-refundable parts of the trip (including any non-refundable flights and in some cases, other arrangements), pre-existing conditions are covered. You may purchase your CSA policy on-line by visiting our website at <https://fieldguides.com/trip-cancellation-insurance/> and clicking the link to CSA. The CSA webpage also includes a contact number.

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 thru InsureMyTrip (<https://www.insuremytrip.com/>) in the past, and would suggest that company as an alternative. When purchasing insurance with a company other than CSA, you will want to understand whether the timing of your purchase will affect coverage before paying your first deposit. Insurance purchase requirements can vary from company to company, and such requirements could limit your options if you do not look into this until making your final payment for your tour. Please let us know if you have any questions about this.

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 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. You acknowledge and agree that Field Guides Incorporated is not responsible 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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