



*Field Guides Tour Report*

**Texas' Big Bend & Hill Country 2015**

Apr 18, 2015 to Apr 27, 2015

Chris Benesh & Tom Johnson

*For our tour description, itinerary, past triplists, dates, fees, and more, please [VISIT OUR TOUR PAGE](#).*



*Several scenes from the tour including the Pecos River; Casa Grande; the gray skies at Blue Creek Canyon; dawn on the Pinnacles trail; and Boot Canyon. (Photos by guide Chris Benesh)*

It was an exciting time to be in west Texas and the Texas Hill Country, thanks to better than average winter rains that had worked their magic on the native plants, allowing us to enjoy a rather spectacular floral display while out looking for other critters. For the most part, luck favored us in our quest to find those species special to the area.

We met up in San Antonio and quickly headed west towards Del Rio, stopping along the way to look for some vireos north of Brackettville. After some success there, we headed to Del Rio for the night.

Our second day found us birding up a storm in Del Rio. Birds seemed to be everywhere, and Yellow-breasted Chats ruled the day. After lunch, we headed west with a stop at the Pecos River, the water body dividing Texas. We arrived at Big Bend National Park in time for dinner and settled in.

Our first day in the park found us hiking up Blue Creek Canyon, a gentle canyon with some terrific rock formations. Varied Buntings seemed to be everywhere. In the afternoon, we visited Cottonwood Campground in search of migrants.

The next morning we visited Rio Grande Village, where we were treated to some wonderfully active Common Black Hawks and noisy Gray Hawks down the road. A stop at Dugout Wells produced a few migrants as well. The afternoon saw us birding in the Chisos basin where we encountered a nice flock that held a few warblers, Plumbeous Vireo, and Red-breasted Nuthatch.

Then came the hike up the Pinnacles Trail to Boot Spring. We had a pleasantly cool day to do the hike. The Colima Warblers were cooperative and the first good looks were had at about 3 miles along the trail. Those who continued on to Boot Spring were treated to Painted Redstart and a funky hybrid Hepatic X Western Tanager.

Then it came time to leave the park. We headed to the Christmas Mountains to visit the gracious Carolyn Ohl's oasis where we were able to track down a male Lucifer Hummingbird as well as an Elf Owl for some. Then it was on to the Davis Mountains. Though the quail let us down, there were other birds

to keep us occupied.

After a last check for quail, it was time to head east to the Texas Hill Country and Utopia. On our first morning there, we visited Lost Maples and had a great time enjoying a variety of specialties. In the afternoon, we headed to Cook's Slough to track down a Green Kingfisher.

Our final full day of birding started at Chalk Bluff Park where we had some nice birding, though no sign of the Rufous-capped Warbler for the past couple of years. That evening, we headed to the Frio Bat Cave for what is one of the greatest wildlife spectacles anywhere. As the light grew dim, we watched as thousands of Brazilian Free-tailed Bats exited the cave, a river of tiny mammals.

Thanks for coming along and sharing in some great Texas birding!

--Chris & Tom

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#### KEYS FOR THIS LIST

One of the following keys may be shown in brackets for individual species as appropriate: \* = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic, N = nesting, a = austral migrant, b = boreal migrant

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### BIRDS

#### Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

**BLACK-BELLIED WHISTLING-DUCK** (*Dendrocygna autumnalis*) – Our first ones were in Uvalde. Also seen in flight around Del Rio.

**GADWALL** (*Anas strepera*)

**AMERICAN WIGEON** (*Anas americana*)

**BLUE-WINGED TEAL** (*Anas discors*)

**NORTHERN SHOVELER** (*Anas clypeata*)

**CANVASBACK** (*Aythya valisineria*) – Tom spotted a female at Cook's Slough that took off with some scaup.

**REDHEAD** (*Aythya americana*)

**RING-NECKED DUCK** (*Aythya collaris*)

**LESSER SCAUP** (*Aythya affinis*)

**BUFFLEHEAD** (*Bucephala albeola*)

**RUDDY DUCK** (*Oxyura jamaicensis*)

#### Odontophoridae (New World Quail)

**SCALED QUAIL** (*Callipepla squamata*)

**NORTHERN BOBWHITE** (*Colinus virginianus*) – Some flushed alongside the road north of Bracketville.

#### Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

**WILD TURKEY** (*Meleagris gallopavo*)

#### Podicipedidae (Grebes)

**PIED-BILLED GREBE** (*Podilymbus podiceps*)

#### Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

**NEOTROPIC CORMORANT** (*Phalacrocorax brasilianus*) – Nice comparison of this and the next species as they perched together in Del Rio.

**DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANT** (*Phalacrocorax auritus*)

#### Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

**GREAT BLUE HERON** (*Ardea herodias*)

**SNOWY EGRET** (*Egretta thula*)

**CATTLE EGRET** (*Bubulcus ibis*)

**GREEN HERON** (*Butorides virescens*)

**BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON** (*Nycticorax nycticorax*)

#### Cathartidae (New World Vultures)

**BLACK VULTURE** (*Coragyps atratus*)

**TURKEY VULTURE** (*Cathartes aura*)

#### Pandionidae (Osprey)

**OSPREY** (*Pandion haliaetus*)

#### Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

**SHARP-SHINNED HAWK** (*Accipiter striatus*)

**COOPER'S HAWK** (*Accipiter cooperii*)

**COMMON BLACK HAWK** (*Buteogallus anthracinus*) – Wow, what a terrific show of this species at Rio Grande Village. The nesting pair was very active and visible during our visit to the nest area.

**HARRIS'S HAWK** (*Parabuteo unicinctus*)

**RED-SHOULDERED HAWK** (*Buteo lineatus*)

**BROAD-WINGED HAWK** (*Buteo platypterus*) – One seen at Lost Maples was a surprise for so late a date.

**GRAY HAWK** (*Buteo plagiatus*) – We had some great looks at this species flying around at Rio Grande Village.

**SWAINSON'S HAWK** (*Buteo swainsoni*)

**ZONE-TAILED HAWK** (*Buteo albonotatus*) – We finally connected with this species at Lost Maples.

**RED-TAILED HAWK** (*Buteo jamaicensis*)

*Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)*

**AMERICAN COOT** (*Fulica americana*)

*Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)*

**ROCK PIGEON** (*Columba livia*) [I]

**BAND-TAILED PIGEON** (*Patagioenas fasciata*) – Briefly seen up high in the Chisos.

**EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE** (*Streptopelia decaocto*) [I]

**INCA DOVE** (*Columbina inca*)

**COMMON GROUND-DOVE** (*Columbina passerina*)

**WHITE-TIPPED DOVE (WHITE-TIPPED)** (*Leptotila verreauxi angelica*) [\*]

**WHITE-WINGED DOVE** (*Zenaida asiatica*)

**MOURNING DOVE** (*Zenaida macroura*)

*Cuculidae (Cuckoos)*

**YELLOW-BILLED CUCKOO** (*Coccyzus americanus*)

**GREATER ROADRUNNER** (*Geococcyx californianus*)

*Strigidae (Owls)*

**EASTERN SCREECH-OWL** (*Megascops asio*) – All eventually got good looks at a bird near the bat cave.

**GREAT HORNED OWL** (*Bubo virginianus*)

**ELF OWL** (*Micrathene whitneyi*) – Tom's van had great views of one perched on a wire near its nest hole in the Christmas Mountains. The rest of us saw one peering out from a nest hole in the Davis Mountains.

**BARRED OWL** (*Strix varia*) [\*]

*Caprimulgidae (Nightjars and Allies)*

**LESSER NIGHTHAWK** (*Chordeiles acutipennis*) – Seen while we were awaiting the bat exodus.

**COMMON POORWILL** (*Phalaenoptilus nuttallii*) – Good flight views of one in the Davis Mountains.

**CHUCK-WILL'S-WIDOW** (*Antrostomus carolinensis*) – Similarly great flight views of one just after dark near the bat cave.

*Apodidae (Swifts)*

**CHIMNEY SWIFT** (*Chaetura pelagica*)

**WHITE-THROATED SWIFT** (*Aeronautes saxatalis*)

*Trochilidae (Hummingbirds)*

**BLUE-THROATED HUMMINGBIRD** (*Lampornis clemenciae*)

**LUCIFER HUMMINGBIRD** (*Calothorax lucifer*) – It took some work, but we did eventually connect with this species at Carolyn's place in the Christmas Mountains.

**RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRD** (*Archilochus colubris*)

**BLACK-CHINNED HUMMINGBIRD** (*Archilochus alexandri*)

*Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)*

**RINGED KINGFISHER** (*Megaceryle torquata*) – It was a good year for this species. We had a cooperative one in Del Rio, and another pair were flying back and forth along the Nueces River at Chalk Bluff.

**GREEN KINGFISHER** (*Chloroceryle americana*) – After quite a few false starts, we managed to find a perched bird at Cook's Slough that we could scope.

*Picidae (Woodpeckers)*

**ACORN WOODPECKER** (*Melanerpes formicivorus*)

**GOLDEN-FRONTED WOODPECKER** (*Melanerpes aurifrons*)

**LADDER-BACKED WOODPECKER** (*Picoides scalaris*)

**NORTHERN FLICKER** (*Colaptes auratus*)

*Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)*

**CRESTED CARACARA** (*Caracara cheriway*) – Rather widespread on the Edwards Plateau these days.

**AMERICAN KESTREL** (*Falco sparverius*)

*Tyrannidae (Tyrant Flycatchers)*

**WESTERN WOOD-PEWEE** (*Contopus sordidulus*)

**EASTERN WOOD-PEWEE** (*Contopus virens*) – Great looks at a singing bird at Lost Maples.

**ACADIAN FLYCATCHER** (*Empidonax virens*) – We connected with this large empidonax on our way back to the vans at Lost Maples.

**DUSKY FLYCATCHER** (*Empidonax oberholseri*) – Briefly encountered on the hike up the Pinnacles Trail.

**CORDILLERAN FLYCATCHER** (*Empidonax occidentalis*) – Well seen right at Boot Springs. This species likes shady, moist canyons.

**BLACK PHOEBE** (*Sayornis nigricans*) – A couple of these were in Del Rio.

**EASTERN PHOEBE** (*Sayornis phoebe*)

**SAY'S PHOEBE** (*Sayornis saya*)

**VERMILION FLYCATCHER** (*Pyrocephalus rubinus*) – Barb sent along this quote that sums this species up beautifully. "The sight of a vermilion

flycatcher leaves us breathless every time - he's not just a bird, he's a punctuation mark on the air, printed in red ink, read out loud as a gasp." Barbara Kingsolver (Small Wonder)

**ASH-THROATED FLYCATCHER** (*Myiarchus cinerascens*)

**BROWN-CRESTED FLYCATCHER** (*Myiarchus tyrannulus*)

**GREAT KISKADEE** (*Pitangus sulphuratus*)

**TROPICAL KINGBIRD** (*Tyrannus melancholicus*) – Two found near the restrooms at Chalk Bluff were a notable range extension for this species.

**COUCH'S KINGBIRD** (*Tyrannus couchii*) – Well seen in Del Rio and again at Chalk Bluff.

**CASSIN'S KINGBIRD** (*Tyrannus vociferans*)

**WESTERN KINGBIRD** (*Tyrannus verticalis*)

**SCISSOR-TAILED FLYCATCHER** (*Tyrannus forficatus*) – What an amazing looking bird!

*Laniidae (Shrikes)*

**LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE** (*Lanius ludovicianus*)

*Vireonidae (Vireos, Shrike-Babblers, and Erpornis)*

**WHITE-EYED VIREO** (*Vireo griseus*)

**BELL'S VIREO** (*Vireo bellii*)

**BLACK-CAPPED VIREO** (*Vireo atricapilla*) – Great looks at this species on our first afternoon birding north of Brackettville.

**GRAY VIREO** (*Vireo vicinior*) – We also had super views of a singing bird north of Brackettville too. Thank goodness, as they were pretty quiet in Big Bend.

**YELLOW-THROATED VIREO** (*Vireo flavifrons*)

**PLUMBEOUS VIREO** (*Vireo plumbeus*) – We lucked into one on our afternoon hike around the basin in Big Bend.

**HUTTON'S VIREO** (*Vireo huttoni*) – Seen in the Chisos and at Lost Maples (where they have only recently colonized).

**RED-EYED VIREO** (*Vireo olivaceus*)

*Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)*

**WESTERN SCRUB-JAY** (*Aphelocoma californica*) – Well seen at the feeding station in the Davis Mountains, more were seen in the Hill Country.

**MEXICAN JAY** (*Aphelocoma wollweberi*) – Seen in the Chiso Mountains. This population differs from those in Arizona in being brighter blue, lacking the extensive cooperative breeding strategy and delayed plumage and soft part development, as well as being vocally distinct.

**CHIHUAHUAN RAVEN** (*Corvus cryptoleucus*)

**COMMON RAVEN** (*Corvus corax*)

*Hirundinidae (Swallows)*

**NORTHERN ROUGH-WINGED SWALLOW** (*Stelgidopteryx serripennis*)

**PURPLE MARTIN** (*Progne subis*)

**BANK SWALLOW** (*Riparia riparia*)

**BARN SWALLOW** (*Hirundo rustica*)

**CLIFF SWALLOW** (*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*)

**CAVE SWALLOW** (*Petrochelidon fulva*)

*Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)*

**CAROLINA CHICKADEE** (*Poecile carolinensis*)

**BLACK-CRESTED TITMOUSE** (*Baeolophus atricristatus*)

*Remizidae (Penduline-Tits)*

**VERDIN** (*Auriparus flaviceps*)

*Aegithalidae (Long-tailed Tits)*

**BUSHTIT** (*Psaltriparus minimus*)

*Sittidae (Nuthatches)*

**RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH** (*Sitta canadensis*) – It was quite a year for this species in west Texas.

**WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH** (*Sitta carolinensis*)

*Troglodytidae (Wrens)*

**ROCK WREN** (*Salpinctes obsoletus*)

**CANYON WREN** (*Catherpes mexicanus*)

**HOUSE WREN** (*Troglodytes aedon*)

**CAROLINA WREN** (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*)

**BEWICK'S WREN** (*Thryomanes bewickii*)

**CACTUS WREN** (*Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus*)

*Poliophtilidae (Gnatcatchers)*

**BLUE-GRAY GNATCATCHER** (*Poliophtila caerulea*)

**BLACK-TAILED GNATCATCHER** (*Poliophtila melanura*)

*Regulidae (Kinglets)*

**RUBY-CROWNED KINGLET** (*Regulus calendula*)

*Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)*

**EASTERN BLUEBIRD** (*Sialia sialis*)  
**WESTERN BLUEBIRD** (*Sialia mexicana*)  
**TOWNSEND'S SOLITAIRE** (*Myadestes townsendi*)

Mimidae (Mockingbirds and Thrashers)

**CURVE-BILLED THRASHER** (*Toxostoma curvirostre*)  
**BROWN THRASHER** (*Toxostoma rufum*) – One in Del Rio was a bit of a surprise.  
**LONG-BILLED THRASHER** (*Toxostoma longirostre*) – We eventually tracked down this species in Del Rio.  
**NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRD** (*Mimus polyglottos*)

Sturnidae (Starlings)

**EUROPEAN STARLING** (*Sturnus vulgaris*) [I]

Bombycillidae (Waxwings)

**CEDAR WAXWING** (*Bombycilla cedrorum*)

Ptilionotidae (Silky-flycatchers)

**PHAINOPEPLA** (*Phainopepla nitens*)

Parulidae (New World Warblers)

**LOUISIANA WATERTHRUSH** (*Parkesia motacilla*) – Great to see this species singing on territory at Lost Maples.  
**BLACK-AND-WHITE WARBLER** (*Mniotilta varia*)  
**ORANGE-CROWNED WARBLER** (*Oreothlypis celata*)  
**COLIMA WARBLER** (*Oreothlypis crissalis*) – A trip highlight for many, it was a good year from them thanks to above average winter rains.  
**NASHVILLE WARBLER** (*Oreothlypis ruficapilla*)  
**COMMON YELLOWTHROAT** (*Geothlypis trichas*) [\*]  
**NORTHERN PARULA** (*Setophaga americana*)  
**TROPICAL PARULA (NORTHEAST MEXICO)** (*Setophaga pitiayumi nigrilora*) [\*]  
**YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER (MYRTLE)** (*Setophaga coronata coronata*)  
**YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER (AUDUBON'S)** (*Setophaga coronata auduboni*)  
**YELLOW-THROATED WARBLER** (*Setophaga dominica*) – A gorgeous species that was wonderful to see and hear to well in the Hill Country.  
**BLACK-THROATED GRAY WARBLER** (*Setophaga nigrescens*)  
**TOWNSEND'S WARBLER** (*Setophaga townsendi*) – A couple of these were seen in the Chisos.  
**GOLDEN-CHEEKED WARBLER** (*Setophaga chrysoparia*) – Are main target at Lost Maples, we were not disappointed with several great looks there.  
**WILSON'S WARBLER** (*Cardellina pusilla*) – The most common migrant warbler in Blue Creek Canyon.  
**PAINTED REDSTART** (*Myioborus pictus*) – A couple that appeared to be nesting right near Boot Springs.  
**YELLOW-BREASTED CHAT** (*Icteria virens*) – Who can forget the amazing sight of so many singing in Del Rio!

Thraupidae (Tanagers and Allies)

**WHITE-COLLARED SEEDEATER (WHITE-COLLARED)** (*Sporophila torqueola sharpei*) – It wasn't the most handsome individual, but we did connect with this scarce species in Del Rio where it was only relatively recently discovered.

Emberizidae (Buntings and New World Sparrows)

**OLIVE SPARROW** (*Arremonops rufivirgatus*) – Nice scope views of this south Texas specialty in Del Rio.  
**GREEN-TAILED TOWHEE** (*Pipilo chlorurus*) [\*]  
**SPOTTED TOWHEE** (*Pipilo maculatus*)  
**RUFIOUS-CROWNED SPARROW** (*Aimophila ruficeps*)  
**CANYON TOWHEE** (*Melospiza fusca*)  
**CASSIN'S SPARROW** (*Peucaea cassinii*)  
**CHIPPING SPARROW** (*Spizella passerina*)  
**CLAY-COLORED SPARROW** (*Spizella pallida*)  
**BREWER'S SPARROW** (*Spizella breweri*)  
**FIELD SPARROW** (*Spizella pusilla*)  
**BLACK-CHINNED SPARROW** (*Spizella atrogularis*) – We had a pair chasing one another above the lodge in the Chiso Mountains.  
**VESPER SPARROW** (*Pooecetes gramineus*)  
**LARK SPARROW** (*Chondestes grammacus*)  
**BLACK-THROATED SPARROW** (*Amphispiza bilineata*)  
**LARK BUNTING** (*Calamospiza melanocorys*)  
**SAVANNAH SPARROW** (*Passerculus sandwichensis*)  
**GRASSHOPPER SPARROW** (*Ammodramus savannarum*)  
**WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW** (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*)  
**DARK-EYED JUNCO (GRAY-HEADED)** (*Junco hyemalis caniceps*) – A few birds lingering from the winter.

Cardinalidae (Cardinals and Allies)

**HEPATIC TANAGER** (*Piranga flava*) – A few folks saw this on the hike coming back down from Boot Springs. Most also saw the hybrid Hepatic X Western that turned up in Boot Spring again this year having been first discovered on last year's tour. It is the first time this hybrid pairing has been observed.

**SUMMER TANAGER** (*Piranga rubra*)  
**NORTHERN CARDINAL** (*Cardinalis cardinalis*)  
**PYRRHULOXIA** (*Cardinalis sinuatus*)  
**BLACK-HEADED GROSBEAK** (*Pheucticus melanocephalus*)  
**BLUE GROSBEAK** (*Passerina caerulea*)  
**LAZULI BUNTING** (*Passerina amoena*)  
**INDIGO BUNTING** (*Passerina cyanea*)  
**VARIED BUNTING** (*Passerina versicolor*) – It was a great year for this species in Big Bend thanks to all of the winter rains. We easily managed to see at least six in Blue Creek Canyon.  
**PAINTED BUNTING** (*Passerina ciris*) – Another stunner that we connected with a few times.  
**DICKCISSEL** (*Spiza americana*) – This species was all over the Hill Country in open grassy areas. We had a fun time observing them south of Utopia.

*Icteridae (Troupials and Allies)*

**RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD** (*Agelaius phoeniceus*)  
**EASTERN MEADOWLARK** (*Sturnella magna*)  
**YELLOW-HEADED BLACKBIRD** (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*) – One was in with some other blackbirds in Brackettville.  
**BREWER'S BLACKBIRD** (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*)  
**GREAT-TAILED GRACKLE** (*Quiscalus mexicanus*)  
**BRONZED COWBIRD** (*Molothrus aeneus*)  
**BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD** (*Molothrus ater*)  
**ORCHARD ORIOLE** (*Icterus spurius*)  
**HOODED ORIOLE** (*Icterus cucullatus*)  
**BULLOCK'S ORIOLE** (*Icterus bullockii*)  
**SCOTT'S ORIOLE** (*Icterus parisorum*) – Wonderful to hear this species singing first thing in the morning in the quiet air of Big Bend.

*Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)*

**HOUSE FINCH** (*Haemorhous mexicanus*)  
**CASSIN'S FINCH** (*Haemorhous cassinii*) – Several of these were lingering at the feeding station in the Davis Mountains. This species is a sporadic winter visitor to west Texas.  
**LESSER GOLDFINCH** (*Spinus psaltria*)

*Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)*

**HOUSE SPARROW** (*Passer domesticus*) [I]

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## MAMMALS

**BRAZILIAN FREE-TAILED BAT** (*Tadarida brasiliensis*) – Surely one of the most amazing natural history phenomena to witness in person, seeing hundreds of thousands of bats spilling out of the cave.  
**EASTERN COTTONTAIL** (*Sylvilagus floridanus*)  
**DESERT COTTONTAIL** (*Sylvilagus audubonii*)  
**BLACK-TAILED JACKRABBIT** (*Lepus californicus*)  
**TEXAS ANTELOPE SQUIRREL** (*Ammospermophilus interpres*)  
**MEXICAN GROUND SQUIRREL** (*Spermophilus mexicanus*)  
**ROCK SQUIRREL** (*Spermophilus variegatus*)  
**FOX SQUIRREL** (*Sciurus niger*)  
**NUTRIA** (*Myocastor coypus*) – Cook's Slough. [I]  
**RED FOX** (*Vulpes vulpes*) – One scampered off in front of us at Chalk Bluff. This species is not native to Texas having been introduced for sport there in 1895. [I]  
**GRAY FOX** (*Urocyon cinereoargenteus*) – One was seen briefly in the Davis Mountains.  
**COYOTE** (*Canis latrans*)  
**NORTHERN RACCOON** (*Procyon lotor*)  
**STRIPED SKUNK** (*Mephitis mephitis*)  
**COLLARED PECCARY** (*Tayassu tajacu*)  
**SPOTTED DEER** (*Axis axis*) [I]  
**MULE DEER** (*Odocoileus hemionus*)  
**WHITE-TAILED DEER** (*Odocoileus virginianus*)  
**BLACKBUCK** (*Antelope cervicapra*) [I]  
**BARBARY SHEEP** (*Ammotragus lervia*) – Seen in the Davis Mountains and again at Chalk Bluff, this species has been introduced to various parts of Texas beginning in the 1950s. [I]

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## ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

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**Totals for the tour: 191 bird taxa and 20 mammal taxa**