



Field Guides Tour Report
South Texas Rarities 2019

Jan 12, 2019 to Jan 18, 2019
Chris Benesh

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The group overlooking the Rio Grande north of San Ygnacio, Texas. All photos by guide Chris Benesh.

South Texas was hosting a cold front during much of our time in the Rio Grande Valley, but despite that, we managed to see a great assortment of birds and even came away with some real treats. Because of the forecast, we mixed things up a bit and headed out to the area framed by the North American Butterfly Center and Bentsen Rio Grande State Park, a threatened area that was hosting recent Hook-billed Kite activity. We were not disappointed either, with great sightings of two birds shortly after arriving on site. At one point, we watched as a Cooper's Hawk swooped after one of the kites. We spent the rest of the day birding at the Frontera Audubon thicket where we saw a handful of interesting birds, including the long-staying Golden-crowned Warbler that put in a brief appearance.

Having the kites and warbler out of the way, we spent some time the following day visiting Estero Llano Grande, always a wonderful spot with a great variety of species. Most memorable among these was no doubt the point blank views of roosting Pauraques, which never cease to amaze. After time looking for blackbirds and whistling-ducks, we headed over to the coast to see a variety of waterbirds, and diversity of shorebirds. A cooperative pair of Aplomado Falcons was a highlight.

Our third morning was spent birding the Edinburg Wetlands where local guide Becky helped us track down some great views of Ringed and Green kingfishers. I was intrigued by the Summer Tanager that had parked itself in the cold weather next to a paper wasp nest and was leisurely picking it apart to dine on the wasps inside. That afternoon it was back to Estero to see Laura's Eastern Screech-Owl that had been awol the day before and to enjoy a few more specialties there. We finished up the day with some Green Parakeets doing their best to dodge raindrops.

We decided to head back to the kite area the following day in hopes of spotting some Groove-billed Anis reported there recently. The kites themselves stayed unseen, perhaps because of a couple of noisy Red-shouldered Hawks hanging out in their favorite tree. But Muriel spotted the anis moving silently in the brush near a small bridge, and they eventually approached us to within a few feet. Quite a remarkable experience! From here, we started heading upriver to lunch in Rio Grande City and then on to our first visit to Salineno and later, the Zapata city park.

Our principle target here was Morelet's Seed eater, formerly part of a larger species White-collared Seed eater. In fact, the birds in south Texas belong to the subspecies Sharpei, so could also be referred to as Sharpe's Seed eater. At any rate, we didn't see any!

We spent the last full day with another visit to Salineno where we failed to see the seedeaters again, but had a great time visiting the feeding station where Michael and Merle were hosting. We headed back to Zapata for lunch and another shot at the seedeater. This time Chip spotted a male for us! Later in the afternoon we visited the roadside rest north of San Ygnacio where we had another male seedeater as well as a pair of Audubon's Orioles, and a great view of a stretch of the Rio Grande.

Our final morning was spent at Falcon State Park, where we enjoyed a nice variety of species including more Orange-crowned Warblers than anyone imagined existed. We also had our first Greater Roadrunner and Northern Bobwhite. Then it was on to Harlingen to say our goodbyes until the next adventure.

Thanks to all of you for coming along and making the tour a great success! It was nice to see familiar faces and make a couple of new friends. -- Chris

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

BIRDS

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

BLACK-BELLIED WHISTLING-DUCK (*Dendrocygna autumnalis*) – Not too evident for us on the trip, we had a huge number of them at the Progreso Lakes.

BLUE-WINGED TEAL (*Spatula discors*)

CINNAMON TEAL (*Spatula cyanoptera*) – We had a couple males mixed in with all of the teal on our second visit to Estero Llano Grande (ELG).

NORTHERN SHOVELER (*Spatula clypeata*)

MOTTLED DUCK (*Anas fulvigula*)

GREEN-WINGED TEAL (AMERICAN) (*Anas crecca carolinensis*)

REDHEAD (*Aythya americana*) – We ran into one huge flock in a shallow bay along Hwy 48.

LESSER SCAUP (*Aythya affinis*)

HOODED MERGANSER (*Lophodytes cucullatus*) – There was one female hanging out at Estero on our first visit there.

RED-BREASTED MERGANSER (*Mergus serrator*) – There was one just off the beach at South Padre Island that we scoped.

Cracidae (Guans, Chachalacas, and Curassows)

PLAIN CHACHALACA (*Oreortyx vetula*) – One of the iconic birds of south Texas; we sure had some good views of it. The northernmost of the tropical family Cracidae.

Odontophoridae (New World Quail)

NORTHERN BOBWHITE (*Colinus virginianus*) – Terrific views of this species on our final morning of birding at Falcon State Park.

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

LEAST GREBE (*Tachybaptus dominicus*) – Seemingly kind of scarce this trip; we had all of ours at Estero Llano Grande.

PIED-BILLED GREBE (*Podilymbus podiceps*)

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) [I]

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

INCA DOVE (*Columbina inca*)

COMMON GROUND-DOVE (*Columbina passerina*) – There was a single male hanging out with the Inca Doves at Falcon State Park.

WHITE-TIPPED DOVE (*Leptotila verreauxi*)

WHITE-WINGED DOVE (*Zenaida asiatica*)

MOURNING DOVE (*Zenaida macroura*)

Cuculidae (Cuckoos)

GROOVE-BILLED ANI (*Crotophaga sulcirostris*) – For me, the most magical moment of the tour was watching the troop of anis moving closer and closer to us as we watched silently. Great spotting, Muriel!

GREATER ROADRUNNER (*Geococcyx californianus*) – Speak and you shall receive bird... on our final morning at Falcon State Park.

Caprimulgidae (Nightjars and Allies)

COMMON PAURAQUE (*Nyctidromus albicollis*) – Hard to imagine a bird being more cryptically patterned. Laura Paulson pointed out the first ones to us and then we saw more out at Alligator Lake.

Trochilidae (Hummingbirds)

BLACK-CHINNED HUMMINGBIRD (*Archilochus alexandri*)

BUFF-BELLIED HUMMINGBIRD (*Amazilia yucatanensis*) – We had some good views of this species at Estero, especially at the new blind in the Tropical Zone.

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)

SORA (*Porzana carolina*) – A couple of these were seen at Estero.

COMMON GALLINULE (*Gallinula galeata*)

AMERICAN COOT (*Fulica americana*)

Recurvirostridae (Stilts and Avocets)

BLACK-NECKED STILT (*Himantopus mexicanus*)

AMERICAN AVOCET (*Recurvirostra americana*)

Haematopodidae (Oystercatchers)

AMERICAN OYSTERCATCHER (*Haematopus palliatus*)

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER (*Pluvialis squatarola*)

WILSON'S PLOVER (*Charadrius wilsonia*)

SEMPALMATED PLOVER (*Charadrius semipalmatus*) – An amazing concentration of these (90+) were at the mudflats on South Padre Island.

PIPING PLOVER (*Charadrius melodus*) – A good number of these were on the mudflats too. I counted 25.

KILLDEER (*Charadrius vociferus*)

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

LONG-BILLED CURLEW (*Numenius americanus*)

RUDDY TURNSTONE (*Arenaria interpres*)

SANDERLING (*Calidris alba*)

DUNLIN (*Calidris alpina*)

LEAST SANDPIPER (*Calidris minutilla*)

WESTERN SANDPIPER (*Calidris mauri*)

SHORT-BILLED DOWITCHER (*Limnodromus griseus*)

LONG-BILLED DOWITCHER (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*)

SPOTTED SANDPIPER (*Actitis macularius*)

GREATER YELLOWLEGS (*Tringa melanoleuca*)

WILLET (*Tringa semipalmata*)

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

LAUGHING GULL (*Leucophaeus atricilla*)

RING-BILLED GULL (*Larus delawarensis*)

HERRING GULL (AMERICAN) (*Larus argentatus smithsonianus*)

GULL-BILLED TERN (*Gelochelidon nilotica*)

CASPIAN TERN (*Hydroprogne caspia*) – We saw an amazing flight of nineteen birds at Salineno while we were there. We witnessed a couple of terns tossing fish into the air and catching them again while flying along.

FORSTER'S TERN (*Sterna forsteri*)

ROYAL TERN (*Thalasseus maximus*)

BLACK SKIMMER (*Rynchops niger*) – There was a huge flock of these (150+) roosting on the mudflats on SPI and another 50 or so at the Shrimp Basin Bridge.

Anhingidae (Anhingas)

ANHINGA (*Anhinga anhinga*) – A few were at Alligator Lake at ELG, a favored spot for this species.

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

NEOTROPIC CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax brasilianus*)

DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax auritus*)

Pelecanidae (Pelicans)

AMERICAN WHITE PELICAN (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*)

BROWN PELICAN (*Pelecanus occidentalis*)

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

GREAT BLUE HERON (*Ardea herodias*)

GREAT EGRET (*Ardea alba*)

SNOWY EGRET (*Egretta thula*)

TRICOLORED HERON (*Egretta tricolor*)

REDDISH EGRET (*Egretta rufescens*) – Great to see this species on SPI, including white morph birds.

CATTLE EGRET (*Bubulcus ibis*)

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

YELLOW-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON (*Nyctanassa violacea*) – Alligator Pond is a sure-fire spot for this southern heron. Great looks at this and Black-crowns there.

Threskiornithidae (Ibises and Spoonbills)

WHITE IBIS (*Eudocimus albus*)

ROSEATE SPOONBILL (*Platalea ajaja*) – We had that wonderfully close flyby of one at Estero.

Cathartidae (New World Vultures)

BLACK VULTURE (*Coragyps atratus*)

TURKEY VULTURE (*Cathartes aura*)

Pandionidae (Osprey)

OSPREY (*Pandion haliaetus*) – The Rio Grande Valley is an important wintering area for this species and they seemed to be just about everywhere.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites).

WHITE-TAILED KITE (*Elanus leucurus*)

HOOK-BILLED KITE (HOOK-BILLED) (*Chondrohierax uncinatus uncinatus*) – Hook-billed Kite is typically one of the more challenging valley birds, with only a few individuals present along the entire Rio Grande Valley corridor. We were fortunate that our visit corresponded with a period of local activity. We saw two males at the spot near the Butterfly Center and watched one get chased off by a Cooper's Hawk.

NORTHERN HARRIER (*Circus hudsonius*)

SHARP-SHINNED HAWK (*Accipiter striatus*)

COOPER'S HAWK (*Accipiter cooperii*)

HARRIS'S HAWK (*Parabuteo unicinctus*) – South Texas has the highest density of Harris's Hawks in the country. We sure saw a bunch.

WHITE-TAILED HAWK (*Geranoaetus albicaudatus*) – A few nice views of this attractive species near the coast.

GRAY HAWK (*Buteo plagiatus*) – It was a good trip for this species with several seen. The bulk were juveniles, though we had a pair of adults at Salineno.

RED-SHOULDERED HAWK (*Buteo lineatus*)

RED-TAILED HAWK (*Buteo jamaicensis*)

Strigidae (Owls).

EASTERN SCREECH-OWL (MCCALL'S) (*Megascops asio mccallii*) – After missing Laura's stakeout on our first attempt, our return was rewarded with scope views.

GREAT HORNED OWL (*Bubo virginianus*) – We could hear this one hooting in the woods near the Zapata Library pond but could not spot it. [*]

BURROWING OWL (*Athene cunicularia*) – We managed to spot a resident bird crouching out of the elements at Granjeno.

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers).

RINGED KINGFISHER (*Megaceryle torquata*) – We got our first at the Edinburg Wetlands.

BELTED KINGFISHER (*Megaceryle alcyon*)

GREEN KINGFISHER (*Chloroceryle americana*) – Adding to the kingfisher fest was a nice Green Kingfisher at Edinburg Wetlands. Another male showed briefly at Salineno.

Picidae (Woodpeckers).

YELLOW-BELLIED SAPSUCKER (*Sphyrapicus varius*) – A female was hanging out in the trees in Zapata.

GOLDEN-FRONTED WOODPECKER (*Melanerpes aurifrons*) – Super common in the valley but a treat to see so well.

LADDER-BACKED WOODPECKER (*Dryobates scalaris*)

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras).

CRESTED CARACARA (*Caracara cheriway*) – As with Harris's Hawk, south Texas is the best place in the country to see this species in numbers. A rather odd falcon, this species specializes in foraging on carrion.

AMERICAN KESTREL (*Falco sparverius*)

MERLIN (*Falco columbarius*)

APLOMADO FALCON (*Falco femoralis*) – We had some decent scope views of a pair of birds followed by a bit of an aerial performance as they dive-bombed some unseen nuisance.

Psittacidae (New World and African Parrots).

MONK PARAKEET (*Myiopsitta monachus*) – Nice views of this species near Hidalgo where there is a small colony. [I]

RED-CROWNED PARROT (*Amazona viridigenalis*) – An impressive showing of this species at Oliveira Park in Brownsville. One of the countable parrots.

RED-LORED PARROT (YELLOW-CHEEKED) (*Amazona autumnalis autumnalis*) – There were four of these in the big flock at Oliveira Park.

WHITE-FRONTED PARROT (*Amazona albifrons*) – There were impressive numbers of these coming in to Oliveira Park. This evening's estimate was forty.

GREEN PARAKEET (*Psittacara holochlorus*) – Despite the weather, we found the flock of parakeets in McAllen using the eaves of a building to keep out of the rain.

MITRED PARAKEET (*Psittacara mitratus*) – One was in the Green Parakeet flock.

Tyrannidae (Tyrant Flycatchers).

NORTHERN BEARDLESS-TYRANULET (*Camptostoma imberbe*) – We had one put in a brief appearance at Estero on our visit there.

LEAST FLYCATCHER (*Empidonax minimus*) – A couple of these were along the river at Salineno.

BLACK PHOEBE (*Sayornis nigricans*) – This species has really increased in the valley in recent years. We recorded it at several locations.

EASTERN PHOEBE (*Sayornis phoebe*)

VERMILION FLYCATCHER (*Pyrocephalus rubinus*) – Always a treat to see; we got our first at Estero.

GREAT KISKADEE (*Pitangus sulphuratus*) – Another iconic bird of the Rio Grande, a most impressive flycatcher!

TROPICAL KINGBIRD (*Tyrannus melancholicus*) – This and the following species are best told by voice. Fortunately, we encountered calling birds of both species.

COUCH'S KINGBIRD (*Tyrannus couchii*)

Laniidae (Shrikes).

LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE (*Lanius ludovicianus*) – Quite a few shrikes winter in the valley, giving the false impression that the species is doing well. Its numbers are down throughout its range.

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

WHITE-EYED VIREO (*Vireo griseus*)

BLUE-HEADED VIREO (*Vireo solitarius*)

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies).

GREEN JAY (*Cyanocorax yncas*) – We all fell in love with this most colorful of jays. Another iconic valley species.

Hirundinidae (Swallows).

NORTHERN ROUGH-WINGED SWALLOW (*Stelgidopteryx serripennis*)

TREE SWALLOW (*Tachycineta bicolor*)

Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice).

BLACK-CRESTED TITMOUSE (*Baeolophus atricristatus*)

Remizidae (Penduline-Tits).

VERDIN (*Auriparus flaviceps*)

Troglodytidae (Wrens).

HOUSE WREN (*Troglodytes aedon*)

MARSH WREN (*Cistothorus palustris*) – We had one singing at the Hook-billed Kite site that was singing a western dialect. Some biologists believe that there are two species. [✱]

CAROLINA WREN (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*)

BEWICK'S WREN (*Thryomanes bewickii*)

CACTUS WREN (*Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus*) [✱]

Poliophtidae (Gnatcatchers).

BLUE-GRAY GNATCATCHER (*Poliophtila caerulea*)

BLACK-TAILED GNATCATCHER (*Poliophtila melanura*) – Great looks at one north of San Ygnacio.

Regulidae (Kinglets).

RUBY-CROWNED KINGLET (*Regulus calendula*)

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies).

EASTERN BLUEBIRD (*Sialia sialis*) – A few of these were hanging out at Anzalduas Park.

CLAY-COLORED THRUSH (*Turdus grayi*) – We saw four of these hanging together at Estero Llano Grande. Also seen at the Edinburg Wetlands and at Salineno.

Mimidae (Mockingbirds and Thrashers).

GRAY CATBIRD (*Dumetella carolinensis*) [✱]

CURVE-BILLED THRASHER (*Toxostoma curvirostre*) – We saw a few of the paler, eastern forms.

LONG-BILLED THRASHER (*Toxostoma longirostre*) – Often furtive at this time of year; our best views were at the Salineno feeders.

SAGE THRASHER (*Oreoscoptes montanus*) – A nice bonus for our roadside stop along Hwy 83.

NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRD (*Mimus polyglottos*) – The state bird of Texas was evident most places we visited.

Sturnidae (Starlings).

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*) [II]

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies).

HOUSE FINCH (*Haemorhous mexicanus*) – Locally rare in the valley; we had quite a few of these at Anzalduas Park.

AMERICAN GOLDFINCH (*Spinus tristis*) – It was a particularly good year for this species in the Rio Grande Valley as it is absent some years.

Passerellidae (New World Sparrows).

CASSIN'S SPARROW (*Peucaea cassinii*) – We had one pop up for a bit at the bunting stop along Hwy 83.

GRASSHOPPER SPARROW (*Ammodramus savannarum*) – One sat up on the fence with other sparrows near Falcon Heights.

OLIVE SPARROW (*Arremonops rufivirgatus*) – Texas is the only state in the country where this species occurs. We had a few good studies.

CHIPPING SPARROW (*Spizella passerina*)

CLAY-COLORED SPARROW (*Spizella pallida*) – Some nice views of this species this year with some at the bunting spot and Falcon State Park.

BLACK-THROATED SPARROW (*Amphispiza bilineata*) – There were three of these gorgeous sparrows at the roadside stop on Hwy 83.

LARK SPARROW (*Chondestes grammacus*)

LARK BUNTING (*Calamospiza melanocorys*) – A couple of nice flocks encountered on the last couple of days of the trip.

WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*) – We had one along the Dump Road near Salineno. This species is scarce in the valley most winters.

VESPER SPARROW (*Pooecetes gramineus*)

SAVANNAH SPARROW (*Passerculus sandwichensis*)

LINCOLN'S SPARROW (*Melospiza lincolni*) – This species was locally abundant this year.

Icteridae (Troupials and Allies).

YELLOW-HEADED BLACKBIRD (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*) – We managed to see a small number of these mixed in with the blackbird flocks near Progreso.

WESTERN MEADOWLARK (*Sturnella neglecta*) – We identified a few of these.

EASTERN MEADOWLARK (*Sturnella magna*) – We could hear this species singing near the coast.

HOODED ORIOLE (*Icterus cucullatus*) – There was gorgeous male hanging out at Estero Llano Grande in the tropical zone. One was briefly at the Salineno feeders.

ALTAMIRA ORIOLE (*Icterus gularis*) – The big orange boys; we had a few good sightings, building up to the mind-blowing show in Salineno.

AUDUBON'S ORIOLE (*Icterus graduacauda*) – Nice looks at one at the Salineno feeders and another pair at the rest area north of San Ygnacio.

RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD (*Agelaius phoeniceus*)

BRONZED COWBIRD (*Molothrus aeneus*)

BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD (*Molothrus ater*)

GREAT-TAILED GRACKLE (*Quiscalus mexicanus*) – Staggering numbers of these were roosting on wires near our motel in Mission.

Parulidae (New World Warblers)

BLACK-AND-WHITE WARBLER (*Mniotilta varia*)

ORANGE-CROWNED WARBLER (*Oreothlypis celata*) – A abundant wintering bird in the valley.

NASHVILLE WARBLER (*Oreothlypis ruficapilla*)

COMMON YELLOWTHROAT (*Geothlypis trichas*)

YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER (MYRTLE) (*Setophaga coronata coronata*)

YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER (AUDUBON'S) (*Setophaga coronata auduboni*) – While most Yellow-rumps seen are Myrtle, we did have a couple of these in Zapata and they were not associating with the Myrtle's there.

YELLOW-THROATED WARBLER (*Setophaga dominica*) – Nice views at Anzalduas.

BLACK-THROATED GREEN WARBLER (*Setophaga virens*) – We managed to see a couple of these along our route.

GOLDEN-CROWNED WARBLER (*Basileuterus culicivorus*) – Well, this was an awesome one for Muriel. We encountered the stakeout bird at Frontera, but it came in so quick and close that it was tough to get on to before returning to its usual stealthy self.

WILSON'S WARBLER (*Cardellina pusilla*) – A few of these were wintering at the Edinburg Wetlands.

Cardinalidae (Cardinals and Allies)

SUMMER TANAGER (*Piranga rubra*) – One of the more interesting behaviors of the tour was the female tanager that had parked herself next to a wasp nest to dine in the cold weather.

NORTHERN CARDINAL (*Cardinalis cardinalis*)

PYRRHULOXIA (*Cardinalis sinuatus*)

Thraupidae (Tanagers and Allies)

MORELET'S SEEDEATER (*Sporophila moreletii*) – It took quite a bit of searching, but we eventually connected with a male in Zapata. Later we found another male north of San Ygnacio.

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

HOUSE SPARROW (*Passer domesticus*) [I]

MAMMALS

EASTERN COTTONTAIL (*Sylvilagus floridanus*) – Great looks at this species at Falcon State Park.

FOX SQUIRREL (*Sciurus niger*)

HISPID COTTON RAT (*Sigmodon hispidus*) – One was munching on seed at Falcon State Park.

COYOTE (*Canis latrans*) [*]

COLLARED PECCARY (*Tayassu tajacu*) – We saw a couple of these on the tour, with the first at the Hook-billed Kite spot and again at Falcon State Park.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 174 bird taxa and 5 mammal taxa