



Nature Trip's 2016 "A South Texas Adventure"

Day 1, April 10 - Airport Birds: An early-ish April start allows us to catch late migrant shorebirds. This year, each Corpus Christi International Airport pickup was followed by easily locating Upland Sandpipers along with other "Grass-pipers" such as Pectoral Sandpipers and Yellowlegs on the airport's grasslands.

Mottled Ducks waddled in the creek and Eastern Meadowlarks were singing from the fences with ubiquitous Great-tailed Grackles and a couple of Loggerhead Shrikes.

Early arrivers also visited Packery Channel and picked up 26 additional birds for the day. Breeding birds included Roseate Spoonbills, Inca Dove, Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, Gray Catbird, Cardinals and Pyrrhuloxia. A few migrants were about as well: Eastern Kingbird, Orchard Orioles and Swainson's Thrush plus a solitary Solitary Sandpiper.

Pectoral Sandpipers were strutting through the grasslands on arrival at the CC Airport



Here our merry band of South Texas Adventurers are gathered for an inaugural dinner at Doc's Seafood on the northern tip of Padre Island – the Laguna Madre side. Casual dining, live music inside and Laughing Gulls outside.

Later that night some real thunder and lightning rolled through but by morning the skies were just about birding perfect – high clouds and no rain.



Laughing Gull (*Larus atricilla*)

Day 2, April 11 – Mustang Island:

Crossing the Packery Channel is hardly noticeable with all the wetlands in the area but, once you do, you are then on Mustang Island home of some of the top birding spots along the central coast. We made a quick stop at relatively unknown migrant trap called “the willows” but migrants were scant this early: a late Yellow-rump and Ruby Crowned Kinglet plus great looks at a Couch’s Kingbird – lifer for many aboard. Most of the action was elsewhere and it didn’t take us long to find it.

A few minutes later we were sorting through 15 shorebirds species accompanied by many of the typical waders, ducks, gulls and terns at Port A’s “wetland park” overlook. Great views of Pectoral Sandpipers and nice comparisons of Calidrids, primarily Stilt, Semipalmated and Western Sandpipers. Both Dowitchers were present for studies by both sight and sound. Single of Herring Gull and Common Tern were a bonus while 4 Reddish Egrets (one White Morph) pranced around showing off their peculiar hunting styles. Next up was the ultra-productive Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Center.



Stilt Sandpiper (*Calidris himantopus*)

This well managed 10 acre water treatment area is surrounded by another hundred acres or so of salt, brackish and fresh (treated) water marshes at a multitude of depths that support an astounding diversity of bird life – eBird enthusiasts have reported 322 species in just the accessible area. Today in under two hours we detected 70 species of birds plus many butterflies, a huge 12 footer American Alligator and an assortment of other reptiles too. Beginning in the tidal wetland area we picked out 6 Calidrid sandpipers species and our first American Golden Plover of the trip. Studying the many swallows produced a Bank Swallow that the whole group was able to get on plus more of the usual Barn and Northern Rough-winged.

A surprising quantity of ducks and grebes were seen from the boardwalk for this late in the season and one, then two Least Bittern flew out over the deeper brackish water immediately disappearing upon arrival to tule and typha reeds. The real show however and where we spent most of our visit was along the marsh edge where mangroves meet up with native willow and Huisache trees. A mini-fallout of sorts was occurring. We were treated to good or great looks at nine warbler species best of which were a very cooperative Worm-eating Warbler and a spectacular male Cerulean Warbler.



Worm-eating Warbler (*Helmitheros vermivora*)



Cerulean Warbler (*Dendroica cerulea*)

After lunch at our favorite and very friendly local Texican spot – San Juan – we strolled over to the immediately adjacent and locally famous “Paradise Pond” to see what might have dropped in. Note: anyone who has visited this hotspot before 2016 will be shocked to see that all vegetation north of the pond has been completely removed and a development of housing is entering. Word is a promise to replace the vegetation along the pond with natives. Once you get over that fright and focus on the rest of the site you’ll see that after many years of being almost or completely dry due to the drought the pond is chock full of water. This day 4 species of ducks including a female Redhead were paddling around, a Louisiana Waterthrush was one of 6 warbler species

we noted and most of us had looks at both Red-eyed and White-eyed Vireo.



Black-bellied Whistling Duck (*Dendrocygna autumnalis*)

The weather continued pleasant as we drifted over to Charlie’s Pasture which is basically the Northern side of the same wetland system we visited in the morning which has an extensive 2 mile boardwalk with multiple gazebo style shade stations. Plovers is what we were after and Plovers is what we got with lovely looks at 6 species: Black-bellied, American Golden, Snowy, Wilson’s, Semipalmated and Killdeer. We’ve had Piping here recently but today they were absent or hiding from our scopes or perhaps the hungry Gull-billed Terns, Harrier & Peregrine that were hunting the area encouraged them to hide.

After a brief siesta back at the lodge we rode into town for a visit to another favorite seafood restaurant the Waterfront but not before stopping at local Corpus Christi birders favorite hotspots: Blucher Park.

This tiny 4 acre gem has produced over 250 species of birds and is a much loved migrant trap. On one side are several fabulous Victorian Gulf style mansions that have been restored in this otherwise low income portion of CC; one of them owned by the Nature Conservancy who welcomes birders into their yard has a water feature out back. It didn’t take us too long to get on the first of several Chuck-will’s-widow – this one flew about and landed on the ground for a moment for great looks. We also saw Kentucky, Yellow-throated, Yellow-rumped Warbler and Northern Parula. Chimney Swifts were very active in the dusky skies where two Peregrine Falcons were tail chasing.

A 120 species day - that worked up an appetite!



Chuck-will's-widow (*Antrostomus carolinensis*)

Day 3, April 12 – Hazel Bazemore and southbound to SPI:

Before we climbed into the van we studied Sedge Wrens singing their off-rhythm song in the marsh next to the lodge. After checking out a couple of American Oystercatchers in the channel and a perched White-tailed Hawk a trip to JB's German Bakery on North Padre always sweetens up the day – best strudel ever! – Better coffee than we'd had in a couple of days too. Loaded up a picnic lunch and buzzed over to Hazel Bazemore County Park on the west side of sprawling Corpus. Hazel is known as one of the America's premiere fall hawk migration spots but even in April it can still be loaded with surprises.



Greater Kiskadee (*Pitangus sulphuratus*)



Painted Bunting (*Passerina ciris*)



Indigo Bunting (*Passerina cyanea*)

This morning we continued “living the lifers” from the Hawk Watch platform with excellent looks at a bright male Painted Bunting, Indigo Bunting, Blue Grosbeak, Green Jay, Summer Tanager and Northern Cardinal – an avian kaleidoscope of colors. Other first of trip birds included Black-crested Titmouse, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Great Kiskadee, Purple Martins, Long-billed Thrasher, Bronzed Cowbird and Olive Sparrow. Dropping down to the freshwater marsh we added another Calidris Sandpiper: an early migrant White-rumped Sandpiper in transitional plumage. Belted Kingfishers belted out a rattle a couple of times while Scissor-tailed Flycatchers cut through the air above us. Oh yeah, there were Broad-winged and Red-tailed Hawk too. Great light and some very good birds. Didn’t get to check out the river side of the park but the clock pushed on and we had to as well.

Long-billed Thrasher (*Toxostoma longirostre*) Can you dig it? They can dig it.



Birding at 70 mph is not ideal but it can give you a “sense of place” and when you are in great company and spotting Scissor-tailed Flycatchers every few miles the time goes by quickly. Raptor is quite good along Highway 77 and the “Falfurrias Hawk Alley” we took today had the hoped for species in good numbers: Crested Caracara, American Kestrel, migrant Swainson’s and Broad-winged Hawks and a couple of Harris’s Hawks. We birded the Falfurrias Rest stop after our picnic – not too birdy this day but we had great looks at a couple of Summer Tanagers and added Hooded Orioles that nest in the fan palms. A “write-up” bird was an alternate plumaged male “Audubon’s” Warbler – not typical here. An America Robin was also unusual this late in the season and our only one of the trip. A flooded field in Willacy County on the way back to Highway 77 was just loaded with White-faced Ibis and we counted at least 6 Golden Plovers. There were more birds than we could see from the van but the truck traffic was a bit much to scope from the road at this spot.

On to SPI: the cloud cover stayed high and wind light so when we pulled into the Cameron County “Highway 100 Aplomado Viewing Area” as eBird calls it. The looking was real good and we had real good looks at first one then two Aplomado Falcons perched on power towers. Two Chihuahuan Ravens were flying about and one flew to a prickly pear cactus power pole nest and hunkered down. Looked ouchy but these birds are tough out here in the thorn Scrub. About 5 minutes later one of the two Aplomados flew to another power pole cactus nest and climbed in - very cool!



Aplomado Falcon (*Falco femoralis*) photo from our 2011 Nature Trip

Day 4, April 13 – SPI and Laguna Atascosa

As an eBird hotspot the compact Convention Center and World Birding Center on South Padre Island has an astounding 349 species of birds listed today. With water features and drips and bird friendly habitat provided by locals it is a real bird magnet year around but especially during spring migration.

We often start our day here and this day was another very good one. In just over 2 ½ hours we detected 75 bird species. Highlights: 8 warbler species including a male Blackpoll Warbler, our first Wood Thrush of the trip, a Brown-crested Flycatcher, a Lesser Nighthawk flying about us, and from the marsh overlook and boardwalks a boat load of shorebirds, a Fulvous Whistling Duck and a busy pair of Least Bitterns who were nesting in the reeds. Clapper Rails were clapping, Ruby-throated Hummingbirds were humming, Catbirds were meowing and 10 more wader species were wading.



Blackpoll Warbler (*Dendroica striata*)

Before lunch we also stopped at one of the Valley Land Fund lots and picked up a few more warblers including American Redstart and Nashville Warblers. A couple of male Blue Grosbeaks mixed in with Indigo Buntings for color palette checks while large flocks of pink bellied Franklin's Gulls migrated overhead. An odd parrot with violet blue body and off-white head that flew into a palm certainly caught our attention. Later we figured it out to be a Fischer's Lovebird (*Agapornis fischeri*) – an island first.



Laguna Atascosa: Our afternoon was spent at some of the accessible portions of the huge Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. The Wildlife Loop road was under redevelopment for this trip to make it safer for wildlife and is scheduled to reopen in part in late 2016.

Not only does this refuge have the highest bird species list of any NWR it is perhaps one of the best refuges to see the iconic birds of south Texas. Having seen the Aplomado Falcons yesterday in another portion of the refuge we focused on other specialties: Plain Chachalacas, Northern Bob-whites, White-tailed Hawks, Roadrunners, White-tipped Doves, Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, Couch's Kingbirds, Green Jays, Long-billed Thrashers Olive Sparrows, the wonderfully bright orange Altamira Orioles plus about 30 other species were seen, most at close range. The Visitor's Center has several water features and feeders around it plus a nice photo blind. When the loop opens again and other improvements are complete this reserve will once again be A++! Today it was just A+ ☺

The rough entrance road discourages non-refuge travel and encourages a go slow approach which provides many opportunities to see not only birds along the fence lines and scrub but also mammals such as coyotes, the neat looking Mexican Ground Squirrel and perhaps a Collared Peccary AKA Javelina. We had 6 species of sparrow along the roadway today including the shy Cassin's Sparrow.

**Baltimore Orioles (rt.) are orange but
Altamira Orioles (below) are Oranger!**



Keep looking up: a brief break on the bumpy road got us on soaring White-tailed Hawks and we looked up a flotilla of 14 American White Pelicans soared on a thermal north bound, then Buntings, then White-eyed Vireo, oh there's a Cooper's Hawk and a White-tailed Kite hunting the ag fields where Willet's, Horned Larks and Lark Sparrows foraged. A bit further one pair of eagle eyes in our group picked out a Merlin in the thick scrub which obliged by staying put when we backed up for a better look. Raptorng was excellent!

Day 5, April 14 – SPI, Sable Palm Preserve and more SPI

Not quite a cold front but a cool front came in overnight and anticipation for fresh birds was high. Before we boarded the van at the lodge streams of Franklin's Gulls were flowing low and slow in the northerly breeze. The pulse at the Convention Center had kicked up a couple of notches too with birds and birders with the same hopes we had. We decided to focus on seeing birds in the wood lot and skipped the boardwalk. Warbling Vireos were now joined by a Philadelphia Vireo; a Yellow-billed Cuckoo was glimpsed, an Acadian Flycatcher fly caught; warblers numbers were up - we added a gorgeous male Blackburnian, a Kentucky and another "write-up" bird: Canada Warbler. Clay-colored, Lincoln and Savannah Sparrows were feeding with Dickcissels. Most all were visiting the water feature for some quick bathing.



Dickcissel (*Spiza americana*)



Kentucky Warbler (*Geothlypis formosa*)



Blackburnian Warbler (*Setophaga fusca*)



A quick trip to the beach turned up the usual shorebirds and waders plus our only Baird's Sandpipers (3) of the trip who seemed a little out of place on the wide beach and moved on before everyone got scope views. A single Snowy Plover was much more cooperative and tern numbers were well up from before.

Sandwich Terns
(*Thalasseus sandvicensis*) have a
pow-wow

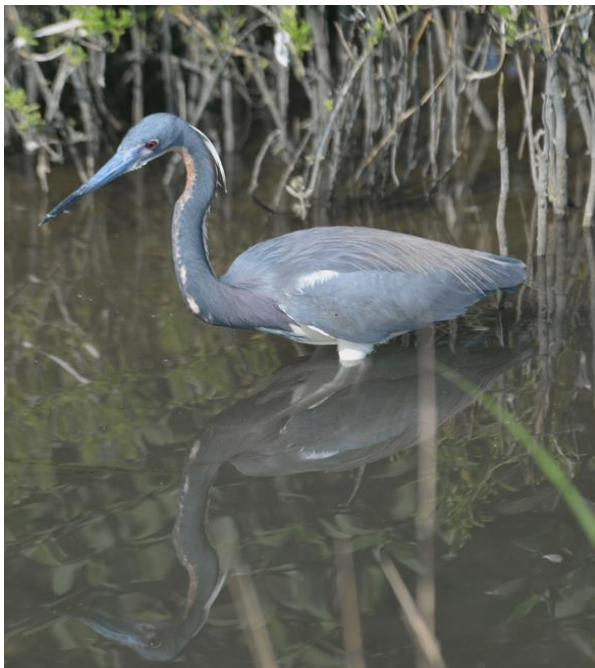


Post lunch we headed more south, past the Bahia Grande where numerous ducks, waders, shorebirds and raptors were seen; further yet, beyond the now iconic and always sobering border wall to another of our favorite preserves, Audubon's Sabal Palm Sanctuary. The visitor's center, a restored Queen Anne style Rabb Plantation house built in 1892 and restored in 2014, aids in the time travel element of this site and a hike in one of the finest surviving mature riparian forest in the Rio Grande Valley completes the illusion. The Sabal Palm tree (Sabal palmetto) historically covered much of the delta and upriver for at least 40 miles.

Mid-day is generally not the best time to bird the preserve in April but the cool front kept many of the birds active this day. A fast flyover Buteo was guessed to be a young Gray Hawk, then we had definitive looks at what was probably the same bird followed by an adult. Later in the hike we heard one calling repeatedly from a perch (or maybe a nest) but couldn't see it through the dense foliage. The feeder and water feeder always produce good looks at the south Texas specialties and today the Buff-bellied Hummingbirds were particularly active, Green Jays and Black-crested Titmice were constantly about, Olive Sparrows and Hooded Oriole were showing occasionally. Perhaps the most exciting sighting for the group at this stop was watching a gorgeous and huge Texas Indigo snake slither down to the water feature for a drink. The Resaca, nearly full from the recent rainfall was lined with beautifully blooming Retama trees which added a delicious odor throughout our stroll along the Resaca Loop trail. The deeper portions of the pond held Least Grebes, a few ducks and shorebirds including two Solitary Sandpipers. The typical flycatchers were feeding and affording improved looks while White-eyed Vireos and Carolina Wrens called incessantly in the forest. Some of us had a quick look at a fast moving Clay-colored Thrush.

Day 6, April 15 – Upriver and into the RGV

But first, who couldn't resist one last stop at the World Birding Center? It turned out better than good too! The improvements made to the habitat here last year paid off in migrants aplenty. Immediate dividends in Eastern Wood-Pewee, Great Crested Flycatcher, a male American Redstart and much better looks at numerous Baltimore Orioles. The mudflat produced our only Long-billed Curlew for the trip and a spotted Spotted Sandpiper was spotted working the outgoing tide near a very stoic Yellow-crowned Night-Heron. We watched a preening and stretching Clapper Rail for as long as we wanted and marsh birds included Least Bitterns, many Common Yellowthroat, Marsh and Sedge Wrens. The annual Motorcycle Convention was revving up so it was time to bid the island a fond adieu.



Tricolored Heron (*Egretta tricolor*)



Eastern Wood-Pewee (*Contopus virens*)

Estero Llano Grande near Weslaco has hosted many rarities over the years and is worth a visit any time of year. This afternoon we focused on the wetland ducks, shorebirds and rails. From the deck two male Cinnamon Teal (common in the western U.S. but almost absent from the east) plus two Fulvous Whistling Ducks and a lingering Gadwall in very worn plumage plus the usual Blue-winged Teal and now familiar BB Whistlers. Along with Black-necked Stilts there were Avocets. Both species were bonding and some nesting. A kettle of 25 Swainson's Hawks were lazily catching thermals, a White-tailed Kite kited in the busy sky and two fast moving Peregrine Falcons were tail chasing.

On a warm but not too warm walk to the Dowitcher Pond we found many Long-billed for sure and a couple dozen we couldn't prove were not Short-billed. As we approached the boardwalk a Virginia Rail strutted across an open mudflat. Many Stilt Sandpipers, maybe 20 Least Sandpipers and a couple of Least Grebes for at least measure. We drifted over to Alligator Pond where Green Heron were nesting at the far end. A Green Kingfisher was darting and plunging – eventually giving long scope views. A Veery was spotted by Eddie in the undergrowth but wouldn't stay put until the group arrived.



Green Kingfisher (*Chloroceryle americana*)

Running out of time, we backtracked to the entrance of the "Tropical section" to look for Clay-colored Thrush that had been spotted during a pre-field – no Clay-colored but four Curve-billed Thrashers were amusing and we had fair looks at Altamira Orioles and flycatchers. Arturo's fine Mexican food was calling and we still had to check into our lodge for the next two nights so further we went, but not so far. Yum!

After our long day and tasty Mexican dinner as we were readying for a much need nocturnal siesta an Eastern Screech Owl began tooting a sonorous lullaby – lovely end to very nice day!

Day 7, April 16 – Santa Ana and Frontera Audubon

Second only to Laguna Atascosa on number of avian species sighted at a National Wildlife Refuge, Santa Ana is another “must visit” location for South Texas birders. On this day the weather remained relatively comfortable with temperatures only reaching the mid 80’ which was a good thing because the shady trails we usually take along the Willow Lakes route were closed due to vegetation management. First we climbed the Hawk Towers and Broad-winged Hawks were certainly the flavor of the day with a continuous stream of them easily totaling over 250 birds. Not a lot of raptor diversity but we spotted both Sharp-shinned and Cooper’s Hawks and Harris’s Hawks perched up and seen easily. In fact one of our team found a Harris Hawk on a nest and when we put a scope on it we could see it was feeding two chicks – how cool is that?!

Good numbers of Swallows including our first Cave Swallows of the trip, and abundant southern flycatchers. We hiked out to the Pintail Lakes, very nice wildflowers and many butterfly species all along the way. The lakes themselves held typical ducks, Least and Pied-billed Grebes but water was too high for shorebirds. Another Green Kingfisher was cool. Then we heard some chirping coming from two Kingbirds nearby and realized they were speaking Tropical Kingbird – very nice!

Lunch was expected at the lodge soon so we trekked back to the Visitor’s Center, spent a bit of time at their water features and feed stations and made the short hop to Casa Santa Ana.



Least Grebe (*Tachybaptus dominicus*)

He we are on the bank of the once mighty Rio Grande.

We were styling all right! Pant leggings tucked into socks, “all the rage” in the upper valley. Too bad it didn’t keep all the chiggers out but we sure did look good!

Oh well, the swelling goes down and bite marks disappear after a few weeks and they don’t really eat much.

After a short siesta back at the lodge we went up to Frontera Audubon’s fine reserve in Weslaco. Warm and sultry but still nice in the shade we wandered their grounds in hopes of getting a glimpse of one of the rarities that had been reported in the last few



weeks. No big rarities but we did add a surprising number of species given the time of day. They have a well-designed water feature with benches and this day a Louisiana Waterthrush was bobbing around. Ovenbird and Yellow-breasted Chats were nearby on the ground and scrub while a Blue-headed Vireo called from the canopy.

The trails produced a fair amount of the more common passerines especially around the resacas and noisy Red-crowned Parrots flew overhead but blocked from view by the mature tree crowns. Suddenly from the back of the group Noreen motioned us back and was on a shy acting Groove-billed Ani that eventually gave great looks for the whole group.

On the way home we checked out agricultural fields that held at least 15 Upland Sandpipers as well as Horned Larks, Savannah and Vesper Sparrow. Then out to a McAllen restaurant with a nice feature: Green Parakeet roost just outside. Between courses we had 90 Green and 2 Mitred Parakeets.



Totally groovy! Groove-billed Ani (*Crotophaga sulcirostris*)

Day 8, April 17 – Bentsen State Park and a Pauraque search



Our warmest day yet, temperatures would reach the low 90's, just about average for this area in mid-April. After a look around the visitor's center we climbed in one of the parks vans (their open air tram was unfortunately unavailable) directly to the Hawk Tower where Hawk Watcher extraordinaire John was preaching to the choir (which in this case was us) the fine details of raptor identification. Most of the raptors were well up in the partly cloudy sky which added some challenge to the finding fun. Mostly all Broad-winged Hawks with an occasional Swainson's or accipiter. Both vultures were around in low numbers and a single White-tailed Kite came about, a lone Crested Caracara the only falcon.

Meanwhile Chachalacas, Kiskadee, Kingbirds, flycatchers, vireos, thrashers, warblers, Olive sparrows, Verdin, titmice, Grackles, Cowbirds and Blackbirds and Orioles were firing off all through the forests and after about 45 minutes we were pulled in their general direction. No tram in site we began hoofing it in the warm, muggy air. A Gray Hawk was calling consistently but never in sight. Then we heard the dee-dee-dee of a Northern Beardless Tyrannulet the flycatcher with a name bigger than it is. The tram came around the bend but we were almost at the trailhead now so most of us walked. The Tyrannulet was not cooperating at all, calling a bunch but just giving glimpses and shadows.

The next mile was relatively quiet but pleasant enough: butterfly and reptile sightings were well up with great looks at Six-lined Racerunners, Rose-bellied, Texas Spiny and Reticulated Collared Lizards sunning on brick picnic shelters. Reaching the large Resaca, we scoped for Kingfishers but only came up with a rather large Diamond-backed Water Snake swimming quickly across. On to Mission for lunch at Casa Del Taco, tastier than it sounds.



Verdin (*Auriparus flaviceps*)

Nature Trip



We almost never returned to a same location in the mid-valley on these tours but there was some unfinished business involving a nightjar and well, we'd seen or at least heard much of what we could see birdwise so, back to Estero Llano Grande we went. Now we're looking for target birds and there were two that just felt like the group deserved to see if at all possible so after a very brief look from the veranda we quick footed it out to Alligator Pond. Weren't there a minute and Susan walked up and said "I got it!" and sure enough there it was and preening in the middle of the day too: Common



Common Paraque (*Nyctidromus albicollis*)

Pauraque! What a wonderfully strange creature it is too: ultra-cryptic feathering that blends perfectly with leaf litter a huge head with a massive mouth for its size and rictal bristles that look like a teenager boy's trying to grow a first mustache. From the front they can have a sort of a Yoda-like countenance. Can you make out the two chicks in the photo below?



Another 10 minutes and we were back at the Visitor's Center so we decided to push our luck over at the Tropical Area. We paused after a few minutes to savor the scene and wouldn't you know the Clay-colored Thrush appeared on the ground and right out in the open for all to see. Sweet!

Super early rise in our future, we headed for a good ol' time at the Texas Roadhouse before going to our staging area for the King Ranch tour in the morning.



Clay Colored Thrush (*Turdus grayi*)

Day 9, April 19 – King Ranch and a Texas sized thunderstorm

The forecast was looking iffy as we went to bed but by morning the radar showed storms to the west, south and north of us - the tour was on! We've gotten to know our guide Jim well over the years and the lanky former Oklahoman, now all Texan was in fine form today. With Rio Grande Valley form of Wild Turkey practically under foot Jim announced as we had asked that this was a tour to find the specialty birds and with that strode off at a brisk pace to try for the first one: Ferruginous Pygmy Owl. We scanned the places the little owls have been getting seen: first place nothing, second place nothing again and nothing at the third place at first...then, just as Jim decided to use a call and before he did one of them flew into a live Oak and it didn't take us too long to get great scope views. Nice! Pressure off, we climbed into two vans and headed to the ranch house area. Along the way the second van saw a perched bird that looked a little off and on backing up found a second Pygmy owl – turned out that was a new territory or the year too.

The ranch house area is on a rise so we scoped all about and turned up Eastern Bluebirds and a pair of beautiful Vermillion Flycatchers, the King Ranch's icon bird. Tyrannulet were calling in the distance and many flycatchers were active as well. We checked out a field for sparrows and came up with quite a few Savannah Sparrows, a single Cassin's, a Lark Sparrow and a couple of Dickcissels. Upland Sandpipers were close as well.

The next search took us deeper into the ranch than we've been before through about 8 miles of pristine live oak forests. Many White-tailed Deer were around as well as some imports: Impala, Nilgai and a huge pack of Wild Boar crossed the road in front of us. At one stop we had a nice selection birds who were on territory with great looks at Tyrannulet, Summer Tanager, Hooded Orioles and came across a group of about 8 Brown-crested Flycatchers who were exhibiting some rather bizarre group bonding behavior posing and flying at each other and chirping loudly.

Driving slowly with the windows down we listened for and heard Parula singing on territory so we stopped and after about ten minutes coaxed out a Parula – no eye arcs so Tropical Parula - cousin of the Northerners we've seen.

Time for a picnic at Caldero Camp and by now we had worked up a real hunger. During lunch Jim was regaling us with stories of past trips and how once after looking for hours and not finding they came here for lunch and found the owl. Keen eyed Noreen listened, looked up and said "there's one right now" and so it was – pictured at right.



Ferruginous Pygmy Owl (*Glaucidium gnoma*)

After lunch we perused the farmed roads seeing Roadrunner, wrens and thrashers, then fields again picking up Grasshopper Sparrow and Horned Lark and an assortment of raptors: Osprey, Harris's, Swainson's, Red-tailed and White-tailed Hawks. Too soon our time was up and we bid Jim a fond adieu at the gate and headed to the Sarita Rest Stop for a short, shady rest and reliable addition to our list: Brewer's Blackbird (of all things!)

As if the skies had been holding back for us all morning, on the way back to Corpus, they unleashed a sizeable torrent as our phones buzzed with severe thunderstorm warnings. Nothing too heavy, but impressive rain drops for sure and the flashing highway signs warned "turn around, don't drown"... possibly as a memorial to the half dozen folks that didn't turn around and did drown in much heavier storms in Houston earlier that day.



Safely back in Corpus skirting low level flooding we headed over to Landry's seafood for dinner - appropriately enough on a boat. The storm surge was pushing over the sea walls when we arrived but hey, what could go wrong? Crackle, snap the lightning roared, spurt, pop, the lighting's out...a few seconds, then on for a few more, then way off with a second of silence before the patron's groan. Wasn't too long however (OK, ten looong minutes maybe) and the backup power was flowing and then the drinks followed by a blast of sunshine from the west and much deliciousness from the briny deep.



Tropical Parula (*Parula pitaiyumi*)



Wine Cup (Poppy Mallow)



Day 10, April 20 – Corpus Christi preserves and moving on

Some of our group had to move on early while the rest of us headed back to the migrant trap-ish Blucher Park to see what the storm may have dropped in. Leaden skies didn't help the looking up part but the birding was certainly looking up and we detected 50 species in only a one hour and 20 minute visit. Mostly species we had seen but 10 warbler species including our only Yellow Warbler of the trip some much better looks at Rose-breasted Grosbeak, buntings and vireos.

Our last visit to Pollywog Ponds was even more rewarding in terms of activity and new birds. A group of Cave Swallows were gathering mud for nests near the entrance. Flycatchers, Buntings and Orioles were abundant; a flock of at least 80 Cedar Waxwings were singing from the tree tops. Red-shouldered, Broad-winged and Swainson's Hawks were flying about. Short on time but we made it to the two larger impounds which were busy with PB and Least Grebes, Redhead and Blue-winged Teal plus many coots and gallinules. We had a Yellow-billed Cuckoo calling in the dense stream side vegetation when another cuckoo flew across the trail and perched out – Black-billed Cuckoo! Returning on the same trail we ran into a small warbler swarm: Parula, Tennessee, Nashville, Black-and-White when Susan exclaimed "get on this one" and, as luck would have it, a male Golden-winged Warbler was bouncing around in the branches. 60 species in 1 hour and 9 minutes says eBird.

A lovely end the 2016 GGAS "South Texas Adventure". Thanks to all of you for making it happen...we're so happy you all joined us!



Until we meet again,

Happy Trails to you!

Eddie and Noreen