



South Texas in Winter: Whooping Cranes and The Lower Rio Grande (9 days)



Whooping Crane Photo Stephan Lorenz

South Texas is a subtropical birder's paradise at any time of the year, including late winter when resident birds are joined by an abundance of wintering shorebirds and waterfowl. This eight-night tour begins and ends in Corpus Christi after a leisurely swing south along the Texas

coast and up through the Lower Rio Grande Valley, where we will plan to explore many of the region’s best birding locations. It is an ideal late winter birding getaway!

In addition to the endangered Whooping Crane, we will hope to see many South Texas specialties such as Plain Chachalaca, Least Grebe, White-tipped Dove, Common Pauraque, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, White-tailed and Gray Hawks, Ringed and Green Kingfishers, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Red-crowned Parrot, Green Parakeet, Great Kiskadee, Tropical and Couch’s Kingbirds, Green Jay, Black-crested Titmouse, Cave Swallow, Long-billed Thrasher, Clay-colored Thrush, Olive Sparrow, and Altamira and Audubon’s Orioles. Other regional specialties that can be more challenging, but are still quite possible, include Red-billed Pigeon, Hook-billed Kite, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, Aplomado Falcon, Tropical Parula, and Morrelet’s Seedeater. And in addition to this long list of regular South Texas birds, one or more rarities from “south of the border” are typically present most winters. Examples from recent years include Bat Falcon, Social Flycatcher, Fork-tailed Flycatcher, Rose-throated Becard, Golden-crowned Warbler, Crimson-collared Grosbeak, and Blue Bunting.

Note: *The exact itinerary may change depending on rare or unusual species present in the Rio Grande Valley during the time of the tour, but we will visit all the main birding sites mentioned.*

Tour at a Glance

Day 1	Pick up at Corpus Christi Airport at 4:00 p.m. transfer to Rockport Night: Rockport
Day 2	Aransas National Wildlife Refuge transfer to Kingsville Night: Kingsville
Day 3	Full day King Ranch birding tour. Night: Harlingen
Day 4	South Padre Island and nearby locations. Night: Harlingen
Day 5	Estero Llano Grande State Park and other hotspots Night: McAllen
Day 6	Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge and other hotspots Night: McAllen
Day 7	Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park and transfer to Zapata Night: Zapata
Day 8	Zapata and Salineno birding. Night: Laredo
Day 9	Morning in Laredo and transfer to Laredo International Airport for flights home

Day 1: Arrival in Corpus Christi and then transfer to Rockport. We’ll meet at the Corpus Christi Airport at 4:00 p.m. to load up for the drive to Rockport. You’ll want to have your binoculars accessible, as we’ll be making a stop along the coast for a few minutes of easy coastal birding. The combination of mudflats, marshes, and open water makes this an ideal birding location and we should see a variety of shorebirds, waders, and waterbirds, including Black-bellied and

Piping Plovers, Long-billed Curlew, Marbled Godwit, Common Loon, and Clapper Rail. Later, we'll continue to Rockport to get checked into our hotel and enjoy our first dinner together at a local seafood restaurant.

Day 2: We start the first morning of the tour with one of the most memorable birding experiences in North America, a winter visit to the world-famous Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. The vast coastal marshes and bayous here are home to the last remaining wild population of Whooping Cranes. Extraordinary conservation measures saved the species from extinction and from a low of 16 birds in 1941 the flock has grown to more than 500. We will explore the refuge by boat and have excellent chances to observe stately Whooping Crane families as they forage for blue crabs and walk through their winter territories. The coastal and intercoastal waterways are filled to the brim with birdlife and we will also see wintering Common Loons, Common Goldeneyes, Red-breasted Mergansers, a dozen species of herons and ibis, colorful Roseate Spoonbills, a wide variety of shorebirds, including American Oystercatcher, plus plenty of gulls and terns. The wetland vegetation and islands of trees attract numerous raptors, including Northern Harrier, Peregrine Falcon, and Crested Caracara, while Marsh Wrens, Common Yellowthroats, and Seaside Sparrows skulk in the marshes. Photographic opportunities from the boat are excellent. After our exciting morning, we head south towards Kingsville via Mustang Island where we will search for the scarce Aplomado Falcon.

Day 3: We will spend most of today birding the enormous King Ranch with one of their excellent birding guides. Potential highlights here could include Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, Northern Bobwhite White-tailed Hawk, Sprague's Pipit, and Audubon's Oriole. We may also enjoy our first views of South Texas specialties we'll hopefully see almost daily for the remainder of the tour, such as Great Kiskadee, Long-billed Thrasher, Green Jay, and Black-crested Titmouse. The coastal prairie and oak woodlands of the ranch also support a variety of wintering sparrows. Later we'll continue south to the Lower Rio Grande Valley for the night.

Day 4: South Padre Island and Brownsville area birding. (Our schedule for the next several days will be flexible based on recent reports and species we would still like to find. While we plan to visit all locations noted in this itinerary, the exact order may differ.) Our plan for this morning is to enjoy additional coastal birding on South Padre Island. By checking a few favored mudflats and walking a boardwalk trail we should find a variety of waders, shorebirds, and waterbirds. Along the way to and from South Padre Island, we'll watch for raptors such as White-tailed Kite, White-tailed Hawk, and Aplomado Falcon. Later, we'll check one or more of the many good birding locations in and near Brownsville. Woodlands and "resacas" (ox-bow lakes) at these locations harbor a nice variety of waterbirds and South Texas specialties.

Day 5: Estero Llano Grande State Park and "Mid" Valley birding locations. Estero Llano Grande offers a variety of birding opportunities. We'll start in the tall oaks of the old trailer park where we search for White-tipped Dove, Great Kiskadee, Couch's Kingbird, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Green Jay, Altamira Oriole, and others. Next, we'll scan the small lake from the

visitor center deck where a variety of waterfowl, waders, and shorebirds are typically visible. From here we will take the easy walk to Alligator Lake, stopping to watch for Least Grebe, and with luck, we may find a day roosting Common Pauraque on the ground next to the trail. The remainder of the day will be spent visiting nearby birding sites in search of South Texas birds we have yet to see – and at least one of our evenings in McAllen will include an outing in search of Red-crowned Parrots and Green Parakeets coming to favored roost sites for the night.

Day 6: Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge and nearby sites. At Santa Ana, we'll start by watching the visitor center feeders for White-tipped Dove, Clay-colored Thrush, Altamira Oriole, and others. Later we'll follow trails to several small resacas where we'll hope for Least Grebe, Sora, and a variety of waterfowl, waders, and shorebirds. Though rare, Santa Ana is host to Hook-billed Kites, so we'll want to keep checking overhead while we're walking the trails or scanning from the observation tower. We will check along the edges of the wetlands for Green and Ringed Kingfishers. Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge has hosted many rare species in past years and exploring the beautiful, native habitat here is always exciting.

Day 7: Bentsen State Park, Salineño, and west to Zapata. We'll start the day at Bentsen State Park, another of the Lower Rio Grande Valley's famous birding locations. Here we'll check the feeders and walk some of the roads and trails. It's another good location to find the regular species of the region and Bentsen has also hosted many rarities over the years. Later, we'll start traveling to the west. A definite stop will be at Salineño, where volunteers maintain feeders during the winter. It's a great location to see many of the region's regular species up close, as well as less common species like Clay-colored Thrush and Audubon's Oriole. Access to the edge of the Rio Grande is still currently possible here, so we'll spend some time here as well. It's fun to watch birds moving up and down the river and it's a location where Red-billed Pigeons can be seen at times but have become very rare.

Day 8: Our final full day together should be a fun one birding around Zapata. If we still need Morrelet's Seedeater, we'll check favored areas in Zapata or nearby and hope for good luck and good views. A stop at Falcon State Park could yield Cactus Wren, Pyrrhuloxia, Black-throated and Cassin's Sparrows, and other arid country species, including a wide selection of wintering species. We then transfer to Laredo for the final night and will enjoy dinner and a checklist session together.

Day 9: We will bird in the Laredo area for the morning, particularly searching for Red-billed Pigeon and Morrelet's Seedeater, and then transfer to the Laredo International Airport.