



South Texas in Winter High Lonesome BirdTours 2024 Trip Report

February 17 - 25, 2024



Whooping Crane by Stephan Lorenz

Trip Report and Photos: Stephan Lorenz

The 2024 South Texas in Winter tour was one of the most successful to date. With an unprecedented number of rarities present, many of which we managed to see, and the always spectacular specialties showing in numbers, we enjoyed a fantastic nine days of birding in one of the most productive areas in the US.



Aplomado Falcon Photo Stephan Lorenz

After collecting the entire group at the Corpus Christi airport, we drove downtown to look for the long-staying Cattle Tyrant. We had to drive a few loops through the favored area before we spotted the bird on the sidewalk. We parked and walked up to this rarity as it chased insects unperturbed by our presence. We then continued to Rockport where we checked in before a welcome dinner at a local seafood restaurant.

We enjoyed a leisurely start and made our way to the Rockport Harbor after breakfast. The morning boat trip into Aransas National Wildlife Refuge was exciting and productive, with cool temperatures but clear skies. The highlight of course was a dozen Whooping Cranes and we were able to observe several family groups closely. The trip held an additional 59 species of waterfowl, waders, shorebirds, loons, and more. We left Rockport and took the ferry to Port Aransas and Mustang Island. We enjoyed an hour of birding at the Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Center where we could study good numbers of waterfowl and shorebirds very closely. A King Rail that came into the open was a welcomed sighting and another family of Whooping Cranes was a surprise. We then continued south, scanning the coastal prairie for Aplomado Falcons, and found a pair in their favored spot. The birds showed very well in flight and perched. We continued towards Kingsville with an unplanned stop for a Say's Phoebe spotted by Garrett as we turned onto the highway, a good find for the area. The final bird for the day was a Great Horned Owl that called from the top of the hotel roof.



Gray-collared Becard Photo Stephan Lorenz

We set out early and headed south towards the lower Rio Grande Valley. Along the way, we stopped for Brewer's Blackbirds and a large flock of geese that contained a few Ross's Geese among hundreds of Snow Geese. We made our first stop in the Rio Grande Valley at Hugh Ramsey Park to search for a Golden-crowned Warbler, one of the many rarities from south of the border that graced the Rio Grande Valley during the winter of 2023/24. The bird proved skittish and elusive, but after a few hours of dedicated searching, everyone managed at least a glimpse. We also added other South Texas specialties to our list, including Plain Chachalaca, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Great Kiskadee, Green Jay, Long-billed Thrasher, Clay-colored Thrush, and Olive Sparrow, plus a few wintering warblers. We eventually headed for a lunch break. Our next chase led us to the campus of the university in Brownsville and it was a completely different experience. Within minutes of arriving, we clamped our eyes on the beautiful Fan-tailed Warbler that had been present for a few weeks, the views were outstanding as the bird foraged actively right in front of us. Buoyed by the quick success we carried on to the Resaca de la Palma State Park, where the rare Roadside Hawk proved cooperative and we added a locally scarce Dusky-capped Flycatcher and Tropical Parula. In addition, Altamira Oriole, White-tipped Dove, Harris's Hawk, and Couch's Kingbirds all made it onto the list. After such an eventful day, we gladly headed out to an early dinner, only to be interrupted by a Peregrine Falcon perched near the hotel.

We returned very early to the Resaca de la Palma State Park and our persistence paid off when we had excellent views of the extremely rare Gray-collared Becard alongside dozens of other

happy birders. We also had much better views of Tropical Parulas in the morning light. We spent the rest of the morning at the Frontera Audubon Center enjoying close views of many Rio Grande Valley specialties coming to a variety of feeders and a low-flying Zone-tailed Hawk was a definite highlight here. After lunch, we drove to the nearby Estero Llano Grande State Park, which was very dry, but we did find a roosting Common Pauraque and had a quick look at a Buff-bellied Hummingbird. The Eastern Screech-Owl on a day roost was a welcomed addition. A very quick detour to the Weslaco Wetlands netted us a Tropical Kingbird before we headed into the neighborhood to witness the spectacle of dozens of Red-crowned Parrots coming to roost. These wonderful birds eventually settled into trees right before us for great photo opportunities.



Red-crowned Parrots Photo Stephan Lorenz

We set out east towards South Padre Island and made a quick stop for Least Grebes with no less than five birds seen well. A stop at Laguna Atascosa was interesting but didn't add anything new. The South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center was packed to the brim with birds as usual and we took our time sorting through the waterfowl species, wading birds, and shorebirds. Some of the highlights here included a close American Oystercatcher, Piping Plover, Black Skimmer, White-tailed Hawk, Tropical Kingbirds, and a surprise Seaside Sparrow. We also saw a female of the Mangrove subspecies of Yellow Warbler. Another stop at Frontera Audubon didn't yield the hoped-for Crimson-collared Grosbeak. We finished the day watching hundreds of Green Parakeets coming to roost in McAllen.

On our way to Bentsen State Park, we bumped into our first Ringed Kingfisher and added Black Phoebe and Cave Swallows. Bentsen State Park was dry and relatively quiet but we admired

strutting Wild Turkeys and fine Gray Hawks from the tower. A male Vermillion Flycatcher put on a show and Verdins were vocal and easily seen. A quick stop at Quinta Mazatlan produced much better views of Buff-bellied Hummingbirds.



Green Jay Photo Stephan Lorenz

We left the lower Rio Grande Valley and traveled upriver towards Zapata and the Falcon Dam. We stopped at Salineno by midmorning and added plenty of species to our list, including Mexican Duck, Green Kingfisher, Bewick's Wren, and Audubon's Oriole, and had fantastic views of the localized Morelet's Seedeater. For the afternoon, we visited Flacon State Park where Northern Bobwhite, many Greater Roadrunners, cooperative Cassin's Sparrow, Black-throated Sparrow, Green-tailed Towhee, and Pyrrhuloxia were all great additions. Near Zapata, we quickly found some Cactus Wren before calling it a day in preparation for the long day ahead.

We spent the entire day on the Santa Margarita Ranch with an enthusiastic set of fellow birders. The morning session proved incredibly productive with nearly 100 species seen. Undoubted highlights were Red-billed Pigeon, Limpkin, Bare-throated Tiger-Heron, Rose-throated Becard, Hammond's and Dusky-capped Flycatchers, the family group of Brown Jays, locally uncommon Winter Wren, Audubon's Oriole, and another Morelet's Seedeater. After a late lunch in Zapata, we returned in the evening for an owling outing on the ranch and after much patience, we saw the very rare Mottled Owl in flight.

For the final morning of the tour, we traveled to Laredo with a quick stop at the Zapata County Landfill. Here dozens of Chihuahuan Ravens were present and we added Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Clay-colored Sparrow, and Lark Bunting to the list. The drive to Laredo went well once we were able to leave the landfill and the tour concluded at the airport.

Trip List (202 species):

<https://ebird.org/tripreport/204543>



Audubon's Oriole Photo Stephan Lorenz

