This Greater Roadrunner showed off quite well for our group at Rancho Lomitas

Texas
Birding the Rio Grande Valley

Tour Leader: Tyler Ficker
December 2-9, 2022
December 3 - Hugh Ramsey Park, Boca Chica, Oliveria Park

After a later start to the morning following some flight delays due to fog, we were eager to get birding! A quick drive down the road started us at Hugh Ramsey Park. This small patch of habitat adjacent to the airport started the trip strong with many of the iconic valley specialties such as Great Kiskadee, Green Jay, Green Kingfisher, Olive Sparrow, Black-crested Titmouse, and Golden-fronted Woodpecker. Curve-billed and Long-billed Thrashers showed off quite nicely, Buff-bellied Hummingbird visited the nearby feeders, and a group of American White Pelicans flew over.

Following a great Texas BBQ lunch, we made our way down Boca Chica looking for many of the coastal species that can be found along this road. We were met by 10 species of shorebirds highlighted by Long-billed Curlews and American Avocets. A large number of wader species were present including a gorgeous Roseate Spoonbill feeding right on the roadside! We enjoyed White-tailed Kites, Harris’s Hawks, and White-tailed Hawks hunting the roadside and a Peregrine Falcon defending its territory atop SpaceX from a nearby Turkey Vulture. The unanimous bird of the day was a very cooperative Greater Roadrunner that gave us great views along the roadside. We ended the day at Oliveria Park in Brownsville surrounded by over 100 Red-crowned Parrots with some White-fronted and a lone Yellow-headed Parrot mixed in as well! This was a great way to end the first day of what would be an amazing week of birding.
December 4 - University of Texas RGV, South Padre Island, San Benito Wetlands

We started our morning eager to get birding! Our first stop was the University of Texas - Rio Grande Valley Campus. While the Social Flycatcher did not make an appearance for us, the birding was still excellent. A chorus of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks followed us everywhere we went. Several of the valley species from yesterday continued to show well as well. Wilson’s, Yellow-throated, Orange-crowned, and Yellow-rumped Warblers were scattered in mixed flocks. The highlight of the morning was Altamira Oriole. This sighting of an already striking and exciting species was made even more special as it was Steve’s 1000th life bird! On our way out to South Padre Island, we quickly visited a site and added a few more shorebird species to our trip list. We then birded the convention center on South Padre Island where we could drive out onto a bay access point and see many of the shorebirds up close. This location added several more wader species, gulls, and even more shorebirds highlighted by a large group of Piping Plovers!

After a quick lunch, we visited the South Padre Island World Birding Center and walked the boardwalk around the property. This location allowed us to add several marsh species such as point-blank Clapper Rails, Yellow Warblers (Mangrove), American Oystercatchers, and a lone Cedar Waxwing in the parking lot! On our way back towards McAllen, we stopped to search for Aplomado Falcon. After quickly finding it along with Harris’s, White-tailed, and Red-tailed Hawks, a White-tailed Kite displayed very well for us overhead on our way back towards McAllen. A stop in San Benito yielded a very cooperative Burrowing Owl that has taken up residence on a concrete pipe along the roadside. San Benito Wetlands provided a breathtaking look at Scissor-tailed Flycatcher close and in perfect lighting. We then made our way to McAllen where we would stay for the coming days.

Piping Plover

SabrewingNatureTours.com
December 5 - Estero Llano Grande SP, Progresso Sod Farm, National Butterfly Center

Estero Llano was our first stop of the day. We quickly saw why this is often considered one of the favorite birding sites in the valley. The feeders were full of activity at first light with Green Jays, Great Kiskadees, White-tipped Doves, Olive Sparrows, Long-billed Thrashers, Golden-fronted and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers. Nearby, 3 Common Paurques roosted with one individual right in the open, allowing for great views. Ruby-throated, Black-chinned, and Buff-bellied Hummingbirds all visited the feeders at the visitors center. A chorus of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks echoed throughout the park all morning. Snow and Ross's Geese flew over shortly after starting the trail. After seeing many raptor, duck, and wader species, it was time to head to lunch at the famous Nana's Taqueria with an impressive 80 species already at Estero alone!

Following lunch, we cruised roads around Progresso searching for some of the grassland species that call the local sod farms home. Highlights at this location included a Say's Phoebe and several Western Meadowlarks mixed in with the more common Eastern Meadowlark. From here, we continued to the National Butterfly Center. This butterfly haven is a great place for birding as well. The feeders provided many Plain Chachalacas at close range, an immature Hooded Oriole, brief looks at Northern Beardless Tyran-nulet, and a heard-only Golden-crowned Kinglet. Many other people in the park were in constant communication about butterfly sightings in the park when a Spot-celled Sister, a very rare butterfly to the US, was found in the park. We went over to see it along with other beautiful species such as Mexican Bluewing and Malachite. When others learned we were searching for Audubon's Oriole, we had many more sets of eyes helping us. Eventually, someone in the park found us to tell us their friend called them to tell them they found the Oriole and wanted to make sure we knew. Thanks to the great teamwork of everyone there, we enjoyed great looks at this beautiful oriole.
December 6 - Salineño, Dump Road, Starr County Park, H-E-B Parking Lot

An early morning had us standing on the edge of the Rio Grande River in Starr County’s Salieño Preserve. This wonderful location is a great place to watch many species leaving night roost and flying up and down the river. A large raft of ducks on the river added Mexican Duck and Canvas-back along with many of the species we had already seen. Large groups of Neotropic Cormorants, White Ibis, and Great-tailed Grackles flew overhead all morning. Our biggest highlight of the morning was a very cooperative young Morelet’s Seedeater that showed off for us. Other notable birds were our first Bewick’s Wren, White-faced Ibis, Ringed Kingfishers, Vermillion Flycatchers, and Black-throated Sparrows. There was no shortage of birds everywhere, making for a wonderful morning that flew by! Down the road, we birded Dump Road, an access road with scrubby habitat that yielded new species such as Verdin, Cactus Wren, Cassin’s Sparrow, and Pyrrhuloxia. Our final stop before lunch was Starr County Park where we were quickly met with a large flock of Lark Sparrows right at the entrance with one Grasshopper Sparrow mixed in! On our way to lunch, we found a Greater Roadrunner vocalizing from the top of one of the nearby trees and enjoyed prolonged looks at this species again. We made it to a late lunch with over 100 species for the day!

After a break in the early afternoon, we visited the local Green Parakeet roost. Upon arriving, we watched one of the greatest spectacles of the entire trip. At one intersection in McAllen, 250 Green Parakeets lined the telephone wires mixed throughout an incredible Great-tailed Grackle flock consisting of at least 25,000 individuals! The density of birds in this location was incredible to witness and left us in awe. As we went back to the car, we found ourselves in the middle of a flock of nearly 150 Bronzed Cowbirds in the parking lot! It was an amazing way to end the day.

Morelet’s Seedeater

Black-throated Sparrow

SabrewingNatureTours.com
December 7 - Bentsen-Rio Grande SP, Quinta Mazatlan

Our next morning at Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park started with two heard-only new additions to the trip as the continuing Winter Wren vocalized for us and in the distance, an Eastern Screech-Owl called a few times. We wanted to reach the observation tower on the far side of the park as early as we could in search of one of the most difficult specialties of the valley, Hook-billed Kite. However, in the recent week, the kites were reportedly perching close to the road. We carefully checked all of the bare trees as we walked across the park. As we rounded the corner, one dark-morph male took off in the distance and was seen quickly enough for identification and that was about it. Seconds later, we turned around to a light-morph male perched in the wide open at a close distance! We were thrilled and enjoyed incredible scope looks at this very difficult-to-find species! Once we watched it for a while, we looked over to see the female sitting in the next tree over. A total of 3 Hook-billed Kites at close range created an excitement that is difficult to put into words. This encounter made everyone's “Top 3 Birds of the Trip” list at the end! On the observation tower, we watched a few Gray Hawks calling to one another from their favorite perches, Altamira Orioles chasing each other around, and heard a Northern Flicker in the distance. On our way back to the car, what was going to be a quick stop to the recently-filled feeders turned into a rush of excitement as we watched very close Plain Chachalacas, Altamira Orioles, Hooded Orioles, and a male Rose-throated Becard made an appearance! Having seen the Hook-billed Kites and Rose-throated Becard, we were all thrilled with the morning!
December 7 - Continued

Following lunch, we visited Quinta Mazatlan. This small park allowed us to enjoy many of the same species we had seen earlier while checking out the information throughout the park on the habitats, conservation, and species of the Rio Grande Valley and looking for many of the native wildlife statues built around the park.

December 8 - Rancho Lomitas, Delta Lake, Willacy County Roads

We met up with the other Sabrewing tour group to visit Rancho Lomitas, a native plant nursery that is allowing birders to come visit. This location has become known to birders because of some of the species that are known to visit the feeders. Upon arriving we were met with an incredibly tame Greater Roadrunner that came and ate right at our feet! Shortly after, we were very excited to see 17 Scaled Quail make an appearance at the feeders! These striking quails put on quite the show for us as we enjoyed them at close range. A short walk around the property allowed for even better views of some of the desert species we had seen near Salineño such as Verdin, Pyrrhuloxia, and Black-throated Sparrow. When we returned to the feeders, a Cactus Wren even made an appearance for a minute.
December 8 - Continued

Following lunch with the other group, it was time to make our way back to Harlingen with a few stops along the way to add some last-minute birds. A small roadside park allowed us to watch Sandhill Cranes flying in and out of a cow pasture. Our next stop was nothing short of mind-blowing. We arrived at Delta Lake to see nearly 10,000 ducks on the lake with 5 species of ducks having over 1000 individuals! Hundreds of shorebirds lined the edge of the lake. New species at this location were Stilt Sandpiper and Long-billed Dowitcher. A small inland beach on another nearby pond added Snowy Plover, Lesser Yellowlegs, and a flyover Sprague’s Pipit! Our final stop that day provided better looks at more Sprague’s Pipits flying over low.

December 9 - Hugh Ramsey Park, Harlingen City Lake, and Departure

Since our flights were later in the morning, we decided to bird Hugh Ramsey again that morning to enjoy many of the common valley species one final time before departing. The highlight of the morning was getting to see 3 Javelinas up close! A very cool mammal to end the trip!

We ended the trip with an outstanding 194 species! We had a wonderful time and enjoyed the best that the Rio Grande Valley has to offer!