



*A Common Pauraque at Estero Llano Grande State Park*

# Texas

## *Birding the Rio Grande Valley*

Tour Leader: Eric Ripma

December 2-9, 2023

## *Decmeber 2 – Oliveira Park*

After everyone in our group arrived in Harlingen, we made the short drive south to Brownsville, checked into our hotel, and made a short drive to Oliveira Park. This park is a roosting area for the local parrots and within a couple minutes we had our first parrots arriving. Before the parrots started arriving, we had good looks at Merlin, American Kestrel, Loggerhead Shrike, and the ever present Great-tailed Grackles. As soon as the parrots started arriving, they stole the show. We ended up seeing four species: Red-crowned, Lilac-crowned, Red-lored, and White-fronted! A couple Tropical Kingbirds perched nearby as we watched the parrots swirl around the park!

## *December 3 – Resaca de la Palma State Park, Old Port Isabel Road, Shrimp Basin Bridge, Bahia Grande*

We started this morning at Resaca de la Palma to look for a few continuing rarities including Gray-collared and Rose-throated Becards, and Roadside Hawk. Just a few minutes after arriving we had heard both becards and over the next 15 minutes we all had great views! After enjoying the becards, we headed down the trail to look for the hawk. As soon as we arrived, we spotted the hawk perched up in the open, allowing for great scope views. As we were looking for these rarities, we also saw many of the valley

*Rose-throated Becard*





*Roadside Hawk*



*Gray-collared Becard*

specialties including Plain Chachalaca, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Green Jay, Long-billed Thrasher, Clay-colored Thrush, Olive Sparrow, and Altamira Oriole. It was a great start to our trip! After lunch, we birded several coastal locations. We started at Old Port Isabel Road where we saw our first Long-billed Curlews, Gull-billed Terns, Harris's and White-tailed Hawks, Lark Sparrow, and both Eastern and Western Meadowlarks. Afterwards, we stopped at a couple locations to look for shorebirds where we added many species. While looking at shorebirds, we also saw a Yellow Warbler (Mangrove), our first for the trip. We also stopped at an Aplomado Falcon viewing area, but none were to be seen. Unfortunately, this became a theme for our trip. We made one last stop on our way back to Brownsville for the night where we all enjoyed great looks at a Burrowing Owl!

### *December 4 – South Padre Island, Hugh Ramsey Park*

We spent this whole morning birding on South Padre Island. We started at the Birding and Nature Center where we recorded about 70 species. There were many highlights including a cooperative Clapper Rail, an uncooperative American Oystercatcher, Reddish Egret, a couple Vermilion Flycatchers, and an adult male Yellow Warbler (Mangrove). Afterwards we spent some time birding some flats for

for shorebirds. We had many firsts for the trip including Piping and Snowy Plovers, Royal Terns, and another Reddish Egret, this time a white morph. A brief stop at the convention center provided more Redheads (there were hundreds out in the bay), a Lark Sparrow, and our only Indigo Bunting of the tour. We left the island in the early afternoon and made a stop at Hugh Ramsey Park on our way to McAllen. A Golden-crowned Warbler has been spending the winter here and before long we had great looks at the



*Clapper Rail*

bird (thanks to a couple of other birders who had already found it). During our time at the park, we also enjoyed nice views of a Green Kingfisher, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, and several Clay-colored Thrushes. Afterwards, we headed to our next hotel in McAllen and enjoyed a great Mexican dinner.

### ***December 5 – Estero Llano Grande State Park, Frontera Audubon Center, Donna Reservoir, McAllen Parakeet Roost***

We started our morning at Estero Llano Grande, one of the most diverse parks in the valley. We birded here throughout the morning and tallied 84 species! While birding in the tropical zone we came across a large flock of passerines! Many Ruby-crowned Kinglets and Orange-crowned Warblers made up the bulk of the flock, but we also saw a Cassin's Vireo, Black-and-white and Nashville Warblers, Black-crested Titmice, and a few hummingbirds! As we started looking for Common Pauriques, a park volunteer came up and showed us two roosting pauriques

and an Eastern Screech-Owl! We spent the rest of the morning birding other areas of the park and added many species including our only Mallard and Stilt Sandpipers of the trip. We also had great looks at another Common Pauraque and a Green Kingfisher, as well as many other valley specialties such as Green Jay. After a great lunch at Nana's Taqueria (a well-known restaurant in the valley), we headed over to Frontera Audubon Thicket



*Green Jay*

to look for a previously reported, Crimson-collared Grosbeak. There were a couple groups of birders all looking for it around the feeders without luck, so we decided to walk some of the trails around the park. After a little while, we came upon a small feeding flock, and it wasn't long before Scott spotted an interesting bird; it was the grosbeak! A little more birding around the park yielded our only Black-throated Green Warbler of the trip and a heard only Golden-crowned Warbler. On our way back to the hotel, we stopped at Donna Reservoir and saw our first Ring-necked and Ruddy Ducks, as well as hundreds of Lesser Scaup. Before dinner, we stopped at a Green Parakeet and Great-tailed Grackle roost in McAllen. We quickly saw hundreds of Green Parakeets, thousands of Great-tailed Grackles, and many Bronzed Cowbirds. The number of birds that roost here is a sight to behold!

***December 6 – Salineno, Dump Road, Bravo Park, Falcon State Park***

We had an early start to our day to make an hour and a half drive to Salineno

*Ringed Kingfisher*



Wildlife Preserve. As soon as we got out of the vehicle, a couple Mexican Ducks flew by, our first of the trip. Soon after, our first Ringed Kingfishers flew by as well. We spent the next couple hours birding along the trail. Raptors put on a good show, and we had good looks at Gray and Zone-tailed Hawks. A couple Hooded Mergansers and a Wood Duck, both somewhat uncommon species in the area, joined all the regular waterfowl in the Rio Grande. As we were walking back, we came across a flock of five Red-billed Pigeons! Afterwards we spent some time birding the desert along Dump Road. A Black-throated Sparrow perched up for the whole group to see, a couple Verdins gave brief views, a couple Pyrrhuloxia only allowed for brief views, and a Green-tailed Towhee perched up for a few moments. Since we hadn't seen any seedeaters at Salineno, we stopped by Bravo Park in Zapata after lunch. After a loop around the pond, we finally saw one seedeater, but it wouldn't cooperate for more than brief views. Later in the afternoon we visited Falcon State Park. Several Greater Roadrunners and a small flock of Common Ground Doves were seen as we drove the roads around the park. Once we started birding around the campground, many birds were seen including Northern Bobwhites coming to feeders. Our main target in this area were sparrows and once we were almost back to the car we came upon a nice flock! Clay-colored Sparrows were most numerous, but we also picked out a continuing Brewer's Sparrow, and Cassin's, Black-throated, White-crowned, and Lincoln's Sparrows. It was a great day of birding, but it was time to head back to McAllen for the night.

*Brewer's Sparrow*



***December 7 – Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park, National Butterfly Center, McCook Area***

We started at Bentsen this morning with a walk down to the hawk deck. We enjoyed views of many of the valley specialties on our way. Altamira Orioles provided views for the first time since our first day and we added a Golden-crowned Kinglet to our trip list. When we arrived at the hawk deck, a border patrol helicopter was patrolling close by, making for difficult birding until it finally left. Several raptors were seen including a Gray Hawk and a very distant Hook-billed Kite. We waited for a reappearance from the kite, but it was not to be on this morning. A flyover Cedar Waxwing was our only one for the trip. After birding at Bentsen, we were heading for lunch when we saw our first Scissor-tailed Flycatcher for the trip. This was number 500 for Scott; it made for a great bird for 500! After lunch we spent some time at the National Butterfly Center. Our main target was an Audubon's Oriole that has been at this park for several years. Unfortunately, it only provided a brief flyby view during our time here. However, we did enjoy great views at Olive and Lincoln's Sparrows, Curve-billed and Long-billed Thrashers, and a roosting Eastern Screech-Owl! Later in the afternoon we visited some agricultural fields around McCook. We observed several new species for the trip including a small flock of Vesper Sparrows, a large flock of Lark Sparrows, and a little way down the road a flock of Lark Buntings and some Brewer's Blackbirds. It was a productive trip into the fields!



*Eastern Screech-Owl*

*December 8 – Corpus Christi, Sunset Lake, Goose Island State Park, Mustang Island*

Due to the long-staying, first U.S. record Cattle Tyrant, we spent our last full day birding travelling to Corpus Christi. After a couple hour drive, we pulled up to the “Cattle Tyrant” intersection and several birders were all looking in the same direction. We knew they must have the tyrant and we were soon enjoying views of the tyrant with everyone else present. After enjoying the tyrant, we drove north to Sunset Lake to look for a Bar-tailed Godwit that has been wintering in the area. Unfortunately, no Bar-tailed was present, but we did enjoy views of an American Oystercatcher, Snowy and Piping Plovers, Marbled Godwits, and Long-billed Curlews! After lunch, we drove north to Goose Island to look for wintering Whooping Cranes. We quickly saw a couple flying across the bay and eventually had great views of others on the ground with Sandhills and in flight. While we were looking, we also had great views of Wilson’s Snipe, many Roseate Spoonbills, and our only Common Loons of the trip. We then headed south to Mustang Island to look for a couple species, but as we were running out of time, we needed the birds to be cooperative. Unfortunately, neither an Aplomado Falcon or a staked out Iceland Gull were present on our quick stops.





*Whooping Crane*

We headed back to Harlingen for our farewell dinner and departures the following day. It had been a great trip with many highlights and we broke our record for number of species on this tour! By the end of the trip, we had recorded 207 species including quite a few rarities from Mexico!



*Cattle Tyrant (from before the tour)*