



Green Jay

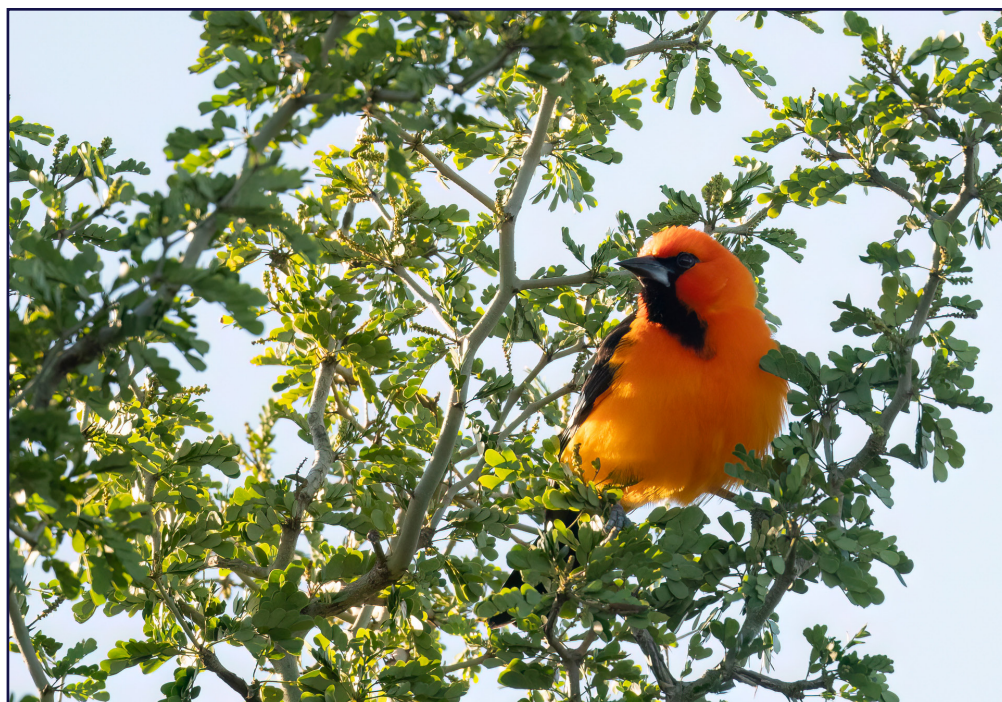
Texas
Birding the Rio Grande Valley

Tour Leader: Eric Ripma

December 10-17, 2024

December 10 – Hugh Ramsey Nature Park, Oliveira Park

We were almost all ready to take off from the airport and start birding, until our last arriving participant, Jim, got unlucky and his plane was rerouted to Houston. Luckily, he was rescheduled to arrive later in the afternoon, so the rest of us started heading towards Brownsville. We made a quick stop at Hugh Ramsey Nature Park (right after a quick stop for Dairy Queen ice cream!) in Harlingen and picked up a few of the specialties of the area such as Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Great Kiskadee, and Green Jay. After checking in and dropping everyone off at the hotel, I went back and picked Jim up from the airport and tried to make it back in time to visit a parrot roost. We were very close on timing, but we arrived as it was getting dark and were able to see Red-crowned Parrots. We would have to come back the next evening to see the whole show!



Altamira Oriole

December 11 – Resaca de la Palma State Park, Fred Stone County Park, Laguna Atascosa NWR, Oliveira Park

We started our morning at Resaca de la Palma State Park where we picked up many of the specialties of the region. As we walked around the park looking for a mixed flock, we picked up Yellow-rumped and Orange-crowned Warblers, heard a couple of American Goldfinches, and saw several Ruby-crowned Kinglets and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers. The area around the feeders produced many of the targets including the glowing Altamira Orioles, White-tipped Doves, Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, Green Jays, and Long-billed Thrasher. After spending a couple of hours, it was time to make a drive north to look for a continuing Sabine's Gull in Port Mansfield.

We picked up a number of species on our way north including White-tailed Hawk, Couch's Kingbirds, and Least Grebe. As soon as we arrived, we could see the Sabine's Gull feeding at the end of the fishing pier where it has been spending the winter. Over the next half hour, we had great views of the gull as it fed mere feet away from us at times. We also saw many other coastal species including Roseate Spoonbills, Long-billed Curlews, and a Reddish Egret.

After finishing up at the park, we had lunch in town before heading back south towards Brownsville. We made a stop along Laguna Atascosa NWR where we were looking for Aplomado Falcon but didn't come across one. We did see many Ospreys, a couple of White-tailed Hawks, and several other species. Since it was the late afternoon, it was time to head to Oliveira Park to watch the parrots come in for roosting. We weren't disappointed! We saw many Red-crowned and White-fronted Amazons and a couple of Red-lored Amazons.



Sabine's Gull

December 12 – Laguna Atascosa NWR, South Padre Island, Laguna Vista Nature Trail, South Texas Ecotourism Center

Since we had missed the Aplomado Falcons the previous afternoon, we started our morning in search of this special species. We came up empty at our first stop, but I thought I could see one perched close to our next spot. We quickly moved to the next spot and had good looks at one! As we were walking back to the van, we spotted another that had prey. It was great to watch this falcon enjoy its breakfast!

Next, we headed onto South Padre Island where our first stop was at the South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center. It was a great stop, and we enjoyed great looks at many species! After stepping

out of the van, we had great views of a Peregrine Falcon and an Osprey feeding on a fish. The tide was exceptionally low during our visit, so there was a lot of mudflat habitat exposed that isn't normally. We added many species of shorebirds and ducks and had great looks at Roseate Spoonbills and Reddish Egrets. One of our targets, the Purple Gallinule, made us wait, but eventually gave our whole group great looks! A little further on, we had great views of a Tropical Kingbird and after a little work, we were treated to a Groove-billed Ani. After we were done, we drove just north to some mudflats that are usually great for plovers, but due to the low tide, shorebirds were in short supply. However, we made a short walk on the boardwalk at the convention center and came across our only Clapper Rail.



Tropical Kingbird

After lunch on the island, we made a visit to the Laguna Vista Nature Trail where we picked up quite a few new species. Ruby-throated and Buff-bellied Hummingbirds visited the feeders while White-eyed Vireo, Long-billed Thrasher, Olive and Lincoln's Sparrows, and Orange-crowned, Nashville, Yellow-rumped, and Wilson's Warblers visited the water features. Eventually we ran out of time and had to make our drive to McAllen where we would be staying for the next four nights.

December 13 – Estero Llano Grande State Park, Edinburg Scenic Wetland, Brushline Road

We spent the first half of our day enjoying the birding at Estero Llano Grande State Park. We started off in the "tropical" zone where we quickly found the Eastern Screech-Owl (McCall's) roosting in its normal spot and 4 Common Paurasques! The feeders weren't filled yet, but we did enjoy watching many White-tipped Doves feeding on the ground below. We decided to take our walk around the

park and then return to the feeders once we were done. When we arrived at the visitor center, we noticed a dilute plumaged Bronzed Cowbird that was cold, sandy-brown colored overall. It's always interesting to see these weird plumages in birds! We added many species of ducks, several shore-birds including Wilson's Snipe, and White-faced Ibis at the first marsh unit. A little further on, we were happy to watch a Least Grebe at close range. And, afterwards, we found two more Common Paurasques, both of which were much more in the open. Eventually we made our way back to the feeders, but not before seeing our first Indigo Snake on the way. We enjoyed some great photo ops at the feeders and our best looks yet at Clay-colored Thrush and Black-crested Titmouse. On our way out of the park, we came across a Winter Wren, which is rather uncommon in south Texas.



Least Grebe

After a great morning, we were ready for a delicious lunch at Nana's Taqueria. The food and atmosphere at this restaurant are both excellent! Next up, we stopped at Edinburg Scenic Wetlands. After a short walk to one of the main ponds, we picked up several new ducks including Ring-necked and Lesser Scaup. After a few minutes, a Green Kingfisher flew by, and we were able to relocate it for good views. The other highlight of our visit was when Sharon found a Yellow-throated Warbler - our only sighting of this species on our trip.

We still had some time left for birding, so we drove a short distance to Brushline Road. On the way, we saw our only Scissor-tailed Flycatcher of the trip. As soon as we turned onto the road, we had great views of a Merlin! A short way down the road produced many good birds and we saw many Northern Bobwhites, Lark Buntings, Lark Sparrows, and Pyrrhuloxias. Several Vesper Sparrows and a Say's Phoebe rounded out a great afternoon of birding.



Black-crested Titmouse

December 14 – Santa Margarita Ranch

After an early departure and a stop at Starbucks for coffee and breakfast, we met the Santa Margarita Ranch guides (Simon and Zach) just before sunrise. After meeting outside the border wall, we walked through the wall to the bluffs along the Rio Grande where we would be spending the morning. Watching and hearing the world wake up around us was a great way to spend the morning. Many birds used the river as a corridor, and we picked up many species as we watched. Most importantly, a flock of 9, wild Muscovy Ducks flew downriver; this is the largest flock I have ever seen in the United States. A, rare for the area, Roseate Spoonbill also made an appearance. Throughout the morning, we enjoyed great views of Gray Hawks, many American White Pelicans, and a couple of Ringed Kingfishers.

After our morning watch, we headed to the other side of the ranch to bird around the feeders and along the river. As soon as we walked up to the feeder area the only Brown Jays currently known in the U.S. greeted us. It's always exciting to see this species in the country! The feeders were busy with many other species as well including an Anna's Hummingbird, Plain Chachalacas, Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, many Green Jays, Long-billed Thrasher, and Hooded and Altamira Orioles.

It was time for our hike along the river, but Randy and Chris decided to stay at the feeders and were treated to great views of an Audubon's Oriole as well! Our hike produced our main target, a pair of Rose-throated Becards! We also had brief looks at a pair of Audubon's Orioles on our hike. A roosting Eastern Screech-Owl was also a nice addition. After a few more minutes watching the feeders, it was time to take off and head to town for a late lunch. After lunch, we headed back to McAllen to

get some rest for the next early morning and day of birding. For dinner, we ordered some pizza take out and enjoyed a low-key dinner in the hotel lobby.



Brown Jay

December 15 – Salineño Wildlife Preserve, Falcon State Park, Starr County Park, Jara Chinas Road, McAllen Parakeet Roost

After another early departure, we stopped at Starbucks again for coffee and breakfast. We arrived at our main birding spot for the day, Salineño, a little while after sunrise. As we got out of the van, we heard an Audubon's Oriole nearby but couldn't locate it. However, anyone who went to the port-a-pot by the feeders got a good look at the oriole! We spent some time watching the river and enjoyed the many Osprey, Ringed and Green Kingfishers, and a rare (for the area) Golden-crowned Kinglet. A walk down the river to another viewpoint provided us with great looks at a Vermilion Flycatcher, many species of ducks flying along the river, and our only Zone-tailed Hawk of the tour! Afterwards, we headed to the feeders. On the way, we enjoyed one more Common Pauraque. The feeders were busy, and after a long wait, one Audubon's Oriole made a visit.

Eventually it was time for lunch and due to some recommendations from locals, we stopped by a new (and the only) restaurant in Salineño and picked up lunch. We enjoyed our lunch at Falcon State Park, but the birding was rather slow in the heat and wind. After lunch, we made a stop at the nearby Starr County Park where we picked up a couple of White-tailed Hawks, Black-throated Sparrow, and our only White-crowned Sparrow of the tour. On the way back to McAllen we made a detour to Jara Chinas Road where we picked up TONS of Loggerhead Shrikes, many raptors, and a good handful of sparrows, before making the rest of our drive to a parakeet roost in McAllen. As al-

ways, the parakeet roost didn't disappoint, the amount of noise that comes from hundreds of Green Parakeets, thousands of Great-tailed Grackles, and hundreds of Bronzed Cowbirds is always impressive! It was a great way to end our day.



Loggerhead Shrike

December 16 – Lamar Beach Road, Goose Island State Park, Sunset Lake, Robstown

Since we had done well with all of our reasonable targets in the area, we headed north for our last day of birding. Three hours north, north of Corpus Christi, is where you can see quite a few wintering Whooping Cranes. It only took a few minutes once we arrived and there they were! We enjoyed watching 14 of these beautiful birds over the next half hour. We also added our first Common Loons and our only Eared Grebe of the trip. Next, we stopped at Goose Island State Park, where we saw the continuing flock of Black Scoters, and our first Buffleheads, Common Goldeneyes, and American Oystercatchers.

After a delicious BBQ lunch, we drove south to Sunset Lake and Indian Point since we had missed some of our hoped-for shorebirds earlier in the trip. Sunset Lake provided better looks at American Oystercatcher, but it wasn't until we arrived at Indian Point that we picked up a lot of species! Another couple of American Oystercatchers, our only Piping and Snowy Plovers, Marbled Godwits, and many other shorebirds were present. We had time for one more stop, so we continued south to the Robstown area to look for Sprague's Pipit. It didn't take long before a Sprague's Pipit flushed up and we were all able to get out of the van and get good looks at this hard-to-find species. It was a great way to end our tour, and we spent some time out of the van enjoying the warm weather before heading back to Harlingen.

December 9 – Departure from Halingen



Whooping Cranes



Green Jay