

TEXAS: RIO GRANDE VALLEY RARITIES

MARCH 7-15, 2020

Leader: Mark Korducki

The lower Rio Grande Valley in Texas is a biogeographical extension of northeastern Mexico, and its unique flora and fauna is found nowhere else in the United States. For U.S. birders, this means a trip to “The Valley” is a must if they wish to maximize the number of birds on their life list. Mid to late winter trips to South Texas are always likely to produce an excellent mix of wintering waterfowl and shorebirds, the area’s unique resident species as well as unexpected Mexican vagrants that turn up every year in the region. In 2019, some of the rarities The Valley has hosted include Crimson-collared Grosbeak, Golden-crowned Warbler, Hook-billed Kite and Tropical Parula. However winter in the valley is different and one can never know what might turn up in a given year. Past years have brought sightings of Masked Duck, Masked Tityra, Northern Jacana, Blue Mockingbird, Stygian Owl, Collared Forest-Falcon, Blue Bunting, Roadside Hawk and on and on. Many species new to the ABA area have been recorded in south Texas, so the possibilities of finding something special make this an enticing winter birding destination.

In addition to the possible vagrants and rarities available, the list of South Texas specialty birds is impressive and includes resident species such as Least Grebe, Neotropic Cormorant, White-tailed Kite, White-tailed and Harris's hawks, Crested Caracara, Plain Chachalaca, Ringed and Green kingfishers, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Green Parakeet, Red-crowned Parrot, Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, Green Jay, Clay-colored Thrush, Long-billed Thrasher, Tropical Parula, Olive Sparrow, Morelet’s Seedeater, and Altamira and Audubon's orioles.

In terms of pace and difficulty, this is a relatively easy tour as we base for 5 nights at a single hotel in Harlingen and make day forays to some of the surrounding bird-rich areas. Most of the destinations are within an hour of the hotel. On one day we will drive north about 2 hours to the famous King Ranch, where we will have access to a part of the ranch that hosts resident Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl and Tropical Parula. We will also spend two nights in Zapata, about 2 hours to the west of Harlingen to access habitats for Morelet’s Seedeater and areas near Falcon Dam.

Saturday March 7, Day 1: Our tour begins with arrival in the valley town of Harlingen (airport code HRL). Participants should plan to arrive in Harlingen by 2:00 PM. Our first official group activity will be dinner near the hotel at 6:30 PM. Night in Harlingen.

Sunday-Tuesday March 8-10, Day 2-4: We will have three full days to explore the many bird rich venues near Harlingen. Some of these will include:

Laguna Atascosa NWR, a raptor rich expanse of coastal prairies where where Aplomado Falcon, White-tailed Hawk and White-tailed Kite are seen with some degree of

regularity. The visitor center feeding station attracts Green Jay, Plain Chachalaca, Long-billed Thrasher, Olive Sparrow, White-tipped Dove and Altamira Oriole, in addition to more widespread species.

South Padre Island: A must venue for visiting birders where the coastal marshes and mudflats are home to a large number of shorebirds, gulls and terns. Some of the specialties here include Clapper Rail, Piping Plover, Gull-billed Tern and American Oystercatcher.

Santa Ana NWR: One of the jewels of South Texas with an extensive network of roads and trails allowing birders to access areas of excellent and diverse habitat. Birds commonly seen here include Least Grebe, Plain Chachalaca, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Great Kiskadee, Green Kingfisher, Couch's Kingbird and Olive Sparrow.

Estero Llano Grande SP & Frontera Audubon: Estero Llano has been designated a World Birding Center site and is home to an excellent mix of wintering and resident birds. Habitats include a series of impoundments that generally host impressive numbers of wetland species including Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, Green Kingfisher, Anhinga, Neotropic Cormorant, Roseate Spoonbill and large numbers of herons and ibises. Frontera Audubon preserves a small tract of thorn scrub, a habitat unique to northern Mexico where an amazing number of rarities have appeared in recent years including White-throated Thrush, Golden-crowned Warbler and Crimson-collared Grosbeak.

Sabal Palm Sanctuary: This 172 acre sanctuary protects an island of tropical forest where many south Texas specialties can be found including Long-billed Thrasher, White-tipped Dove and Altamira Oriole.

Psittacid Roosts: Both McAllen and Brownsville host impressive numbers of Green Parakeets and Red-crowned Parrots and the early evening congregation of birds returning to evening roosts is always a spectacle.

These are just some of the possible venues available to us during the tour, but as always our daily schedule will be flexible and dictated by current information on what and where the best birds are. Nights in Harlingen.

Wednesday March 11, Day 5: Today we will drive about 90 minutes north from Harlingen to the famous King Ranch, where we will have a private tour that will take us to the Norias division of the ranch where two of the rarest birds in the U.S. are resident: Tropical Parula and Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl. Though these will be our two primary targets there are many other exciting species on the ranch including White-tailed Hawk, Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, Botteri's Sparrow and Vermillion Flycatcher. We

will spend most of the day at the ranch with plans to return to Harlingen by early evening. Night in Harlingen.

Thursday-Friday March 12-13, Days 6-7: The town of Zapata will be our base for the next two nights. Located about 2.5 hours west of Harlingen in a drier and more sparsely populated region of the valley, it provides us with access to areas around Falcon Dam and San Ignacio where a number of species not readily available in the “lower valley” can be seen. In the community of Salineno, a several well-stocked feeding stations attract Audubon’s Oriole in addition to other more common valley specialties like White-tipped Dove, Green Jay and Olive Sparrow. If we are lucky we may also find Red-billed Pigeon, an uncommon U.S. bird that generally moves south into Mexico during the winter. In the town of Zapata and in nearby San Ignacio we will spend time searching for the very rare Morelet’s Seedeater. A small population of these tiny brush-dwelling birds are resident here. They are not always easy to locate, but with several hours at our disposal we should be able to locate one. We will also visit some of the drier upland areas near Falcon State Park where species like Scaled Quail, Black-throated Sparrow, Greater Roadrunner, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Curve-billed Thrasher and sometimes Sage Thrasher occur. Along the river near Falcon Dam we should find Ringed and Green kingfishers and possibly Gray Hawk and Muscovy Duck. Nights in Zapata.

Saturday March 14, Day 8: After breakfast we will begin driving back to Harlingen stopping along the way for any species we might have missed. We will plan to arrive at the hotel by late afternoon where we will prepare for our departure and have a final group dinner. Night in Harlingen

Sunday March 15, Day 9: Participants can schedule their flights home at anytime this morning.

3150

COST

The price for this tour \$2495 and includes 8 nights lodging (March 7-14), ground transportation, guide service, all park entrance fees, private full day access to and tour of the Norias division at the King Ranch, all meals beginning with dinner on Day 1 through breakfast on Day 9. The price does not include round trip airfare between Harlingen and your originating city, alcoholic beverages, phone calls, laundry, gratuities or items of a personal nature. A single supplement of \$400 will be charged if you choose to room alone.

DEPOSIT & REGISTRATION

A deposit of \$500 and a completed registration form will be required to secure a place on this tour. Checks should be made payable to Otus asio Tours and mailed to Jan Hansen at 900 Hillsborough Road in Chapel Hill NC 27516

MINIMUM/MAXIMUM

A minimum of four persons will be required to operate the tour and it will be limited to seven people.

LEADER

The tour will be led by Mark Korducki who has birded in Texas extensively through the years and has led many previous tours to Texas for Otus asio.

PACE

In general this is not a physically demanding tour. Most walks will be on flat trails or roadways, will be no more than 1-2 miles and will be at a slow, leisurely pace, the usual birding pace. We will do a fair amount of birding while standing (wetland scoping) and feeder watching. Anyone in reasonable physical condition should have no problems participating in all of the activities of this tour. There will probably be a couple of evening excursions to look for Eastern Screech-Owl and Pauraque, so some dinners may be as late as 7:30 PM. Mornings starts will be around 6:30-7:00 AM.

SMOKING

Smoking is not allowed in tour vehicles. Anyone wishing a smoking room should specify so on their registration form.

CLIMATE

Winter weather in Texas is generally comfortable with lows in the 50's and 60's and daytime high highs ranging from the mid-70's to the mid-80's. Rain is unlikely at this season.

INFORMATION

For more information contact Mark Korducki at 414-640-0864 or korducki@earthlink.net