

Texas: Rio Grande Valley with Greg Miller

November 16-23, 2014

Day 1 – Nov 16, 2014

Arrival Day in Harlingen, TX / boat trip with Scarlet Colley into the Port Isabel Bay & Channel

73 species (69-seen, 1-heard only, 2-leader only, 1-participant only)

Arrivals were with minor travel incidents (like baggage not arriving with passenger) and everyone had arrived by early afternoon. Gabriel Lugo and I had stopped in a parking lot on each return trip from the airport to show everyone in our group a Tropical Kingbird. By the time we were done, we had several kingbirds. On a good note, everyone got to see the kingbirds. On a bad note, the snap broke on Gabriel's shoulder strap and his camera and lens both hit the pavement hard. The camera was unusable and the lens was physically broken. Not just cracked, but broken into pieces. It is a heart-crushing way to start a trip to one of the best birding areas in the U.S.

It was pleasant, but windy today. Unfortunately, the forecasters were predicting a strong cold front to blow in overnight. The next couple days would be far colder than normal for the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Scarlet Colley called us and suggested that if possible, we should get out on the boat trip today rather than wait for poor boating conditions and very cold weather the next day. Everyone in the group agreed and we loaded up the van and headed east toward Port Isabel.

We searched the open fields on our drive toward Port Isabel for Aplomado Falcon, but without success. It is a great raptor road and we saw our first bevy of birds of prey including many Ospreys, a beautiful White-tailed Kite, Northern Harrier, Cooper's Hawk, Harris's Hawk, and White-tailed Hawk. It is hard not to look at everything but we only had a few hours until dusk and we still needed to get out into the bay with Scarlet.

Known by many people as the Dolphin Whisperer, Scarlet has a bigger-than-life personality. Her love for dolphins and nature in general is woven into everything

she does. She knows and loves her birds, too. Taking her boat tour is a wonderful experience. Her passion and enthusiasm for the water is contagious. We all boarded her comfortable, six-passenger boat and motored out into the channel.



Scarlet Colley departs from the dock

We did not have to go very far before seeing our first birds. This osprey gave me the kind of look that invited a photograph. So I obliged it.



Osprey with a fish and a great expression.

Some of the birds here in the Lower Rio Grande Valley are not specialty birds just for this area, but may be difficult to find in other areas of the Country.



American Oystercatcher preening

We had only been out for a few minutes when we came across a good bird—a Reddish Egret in its rarer form, the white morph.



Reddish Egret in its unusual white morph.

Although they are certainly not considered rare, I find sightings of Black Skimmers to be vastly entertaining.



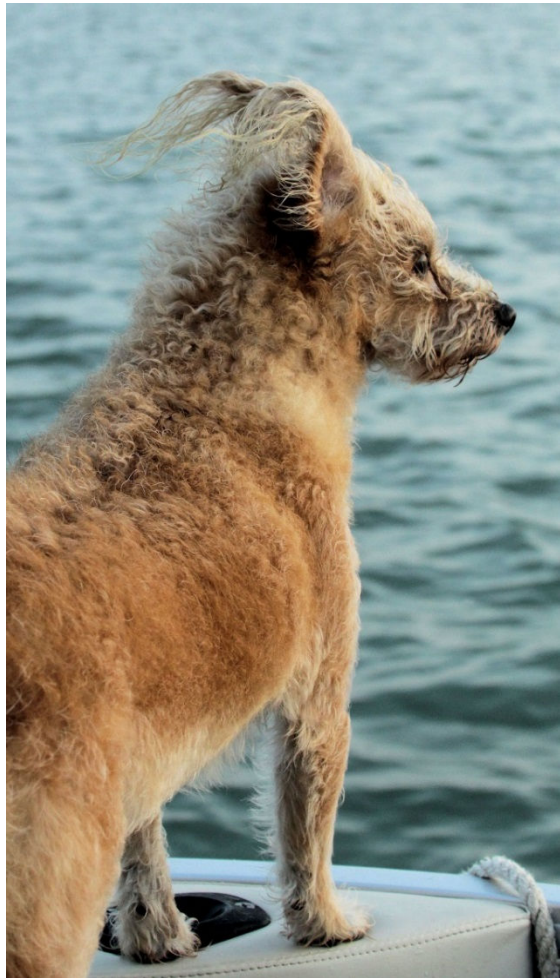
Black Skimmers with gulls, terns, and pelicans on the beach

Too bad we did not see the spoonbills any closer. But still, in evening light the color of the Roseate Spoonbills is impressive.



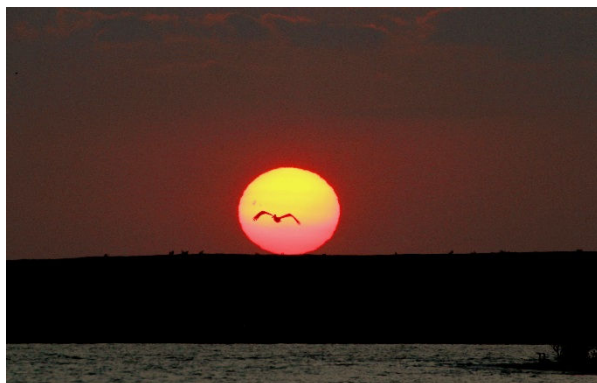
Roseate Spoonbills flying in evening light

Part of what adds to the character of the trip is a nonhuman. It's Rozzi. Rozzi the Dolphin Dog!



Rozzi the Dolphin Dog always likes a command position

Sunsets over the water are always special and today was no different. In fact, I captured a photo of a Brown Pelican crossing the sun. It was a nice way to end the day.



A Brown Pelican crosses the setting sun

Day 2 – Nov 17, 2015

Rt. 100 East of San Benito / Sabal Palm Sanctuary

80 species (78-seen, 1-heard only, 1-leader only)

It was blustery, wet, and cold this morning with temperatures dipping into the 30s in the early hours--more than 20 degrees below average. We decided to bird from the van spending our time with the heater on and looking for the often-elusive Aplomado Falcon rather than birding outdoors in the cold on South Padre Island. It meant we would see fewer species for our trip total, especially wintering waterfowl and shorebirds. But the allure of the falcon and searching from the heated van outweighed the larger list.

Our efforts were rewarded within the first hour of searching with an Aplomado Falcon flying on the left side of the van. The views were fleeting as the bird cruised over a row of trees and then reappeared more than a quarter of a mile away fighting the wind. It was the only look we would get all morning. The raptors were good again in the open areas of field and scrub along Rt. 100 with highlights including White-tailed Hawk, Harris's Hawk, and White-tailed Kite.

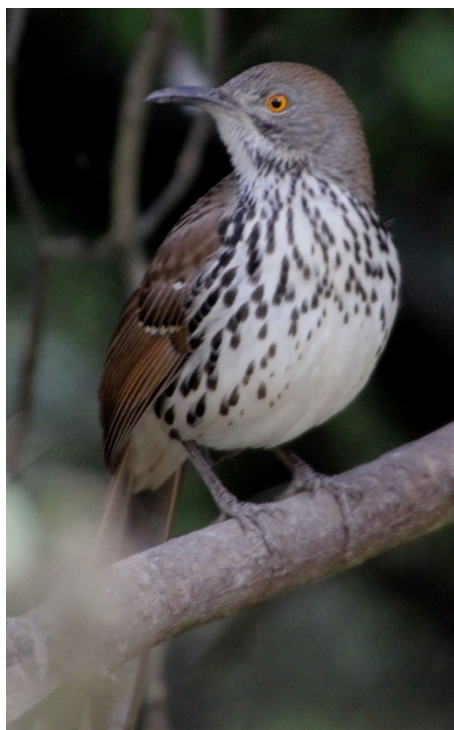
We birded our way back west on Rt. 48. A number of wet areas afforded us views of shorebirds like American Avocet and Black-necked Stilt as well as tern species including Sandwich Tern and Royal Tern.

We stopped at a Subway and got lunches to go. We headed south toward the border. Our next destination was Sabal Palm Sanctuary. We got to go *beyond* the border fence to reach the refuge. The old mansion on the right is now the new headquarters. There are still picnic tables close to the old headquarters building and the feeders are still maintained there. And this is where we sat down with our picnic lunches and watched lifers come to the feeders. Admittedly, it was a chilly lunch. It was still pretty windy and the temperatures never made it out of the 50s. I think the lifers here made it feel just a bit warmer.



Green Jay shucking seeds at a feeder

When I get a chance to see Green Jays I call it Green Jay Therapy. For some reason I just cannot feel disappointed or unhappy when I encounter a Green Jay. It's my happy bird.



Long-billed Thrasher near the feeder area

Long-billed Thrashers were present near the feeder area, too. But they were less prominent than the in-your-face Green Jays. Other birds coming to the feeders included Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, Ladder-backed Woodpeckers, White-tipped Doves, Black-crested Titmouse, and an Olive Sparrow.

The wooded areas at mostly dense sabal palms. Birds can be completely hidden in these trees. A couple resacas—oxbows—often harbor some good birds.



An adult Least Grebe swims close to the blind

Day 3 – Nov 18, 2014

Resaca de la Palma State Park / Estero Llano Grande State Park

90 species (89-seen; 1-leader only)

We woke up to a very chilly 40 degrees and still breezy although not as windy as the previous day. Today we headed to the large State Park, Resaca de la Palma. They often have a good feeder system and the habitat is varied offering the birder a diversity of species. The local Rare Bird Alert indicated that a Cassin's Finch had been coming to the feeders and that a Black-throated Gray Warbler was near the Visitor Center.

Thankfully, the feeders were full and had activity.



Green Jays at the feeders at Resaca de la Palma

We got glimpses of the Black-throated Gray Warbler from the main parking area, but missed the Cassin's Finch. We did get a bonus bird—a male Townsend's Warbler—while we were watching the feeders.



A Great Kiskadee came close to check us out



An Altamira Oriole near the feeding stations

Our first Altamira Oriole of the trip showed up near the feeders. Olive Sparrows and Black-crested Titmice were also there as well White-tipped Doves and Inca Doves. A Carolina Wren was singing its heart out. Orange-crowned and Nashville Warblers flitted about above our heads with the one good look we had of the rare Townsend's Warbler.

After a good morning of birds despite the cold weather we headed west toward Estero Llano Grande State Park. It is currently one of the Valley's hottest birding spots.

Before we went birding there we stopped for lunch at one of my favorite BBQ spots—Fat Daddy's. It's a great place with excellent BBQ. But one should save room for

dessert. Like Peach Cobbler, for instance. Heated. With ice cream. Pure. Decadence. Photo? No. I ate this dessert before even *thinking* about a photo. A note of caution: after consuming said dessert one may feel inclined to take a nap. But don't! Some of the best birding in the Valley is less than 2 miles away!

Estero Llano Grande is one of the newer parks but it already has an established reputation as one of the top spots in the Lower Rio Grande Valley.



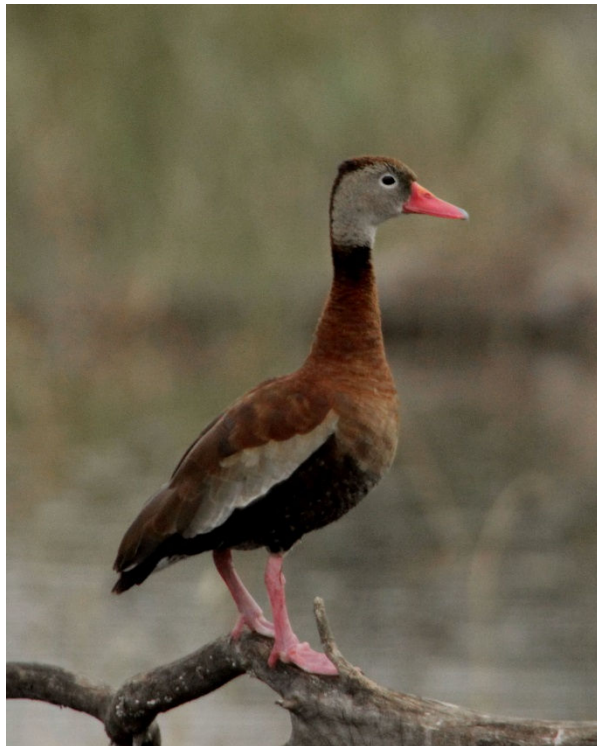
A Buff-bellied Hummingbird rests near the Visitor Center at Estero Llano Grande State Park

This park is, in my opinion, one of the easiest places to find the hummingbird specialty of the LRGV, the Buff-bellied Hummingbird. For you birders in Eastern North America, this hummer is larger than the Ruby-throated Hummingbird and its bright, neon orange beak really does stand out like in the picture.

Plain Chachalacas were rummaging around in the bushes on the entrance path while making their little growl-like alarm calls. A Long-billed Thrasher was calling from the bushes here, too. And a Golden-fronted Woodpecker flew across the path in front of us. Inca Doves were at the feeder next to the Visitor

Center. Now we are ready to go inside and pay the entrance fee and start birding. Yes. This is birding, Estero Llano Grande style.

Next to the Visitor Center is a large covered viewing area overlooking a large shallow pond. It often has waterfowl and occasionally shorebirds. Marsh birds are here, too. Today there were 11 species of waterfowl. Of interest to the out-of-state birder was the presence of several Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks and some Mottled Ducks.



A Black-bellied Whistling-Duck perches on a log



A Sora forages in the nearby marshy area

Over a more distant pond is a gorgeous White-tailed Kite hovering effortlessly. These elegant masters of flight are a joy to watch. And a tiny little Green Kingfisher lands on a distant snag. Exhale. Birding in the LRGV is a rich experience!

In the last few years, it has been possible to find Common Pauragues snoozing on the ground during the day.



A Common Pauraque shows off its camouflage

Time flies by quickly when one is having this much fun. We were starting to lose daylight and the time to exit the park was drawing near. At the last pond we stopped at we were graced with the presence of the most regal of all the kingfishers in North America—the Ringed Kingfisher. This bird approaches the size of a crow and has a monstrous beak and brightly-colored plumage. What a way to end the day!



A Ringed Kingfisher perched in fading light

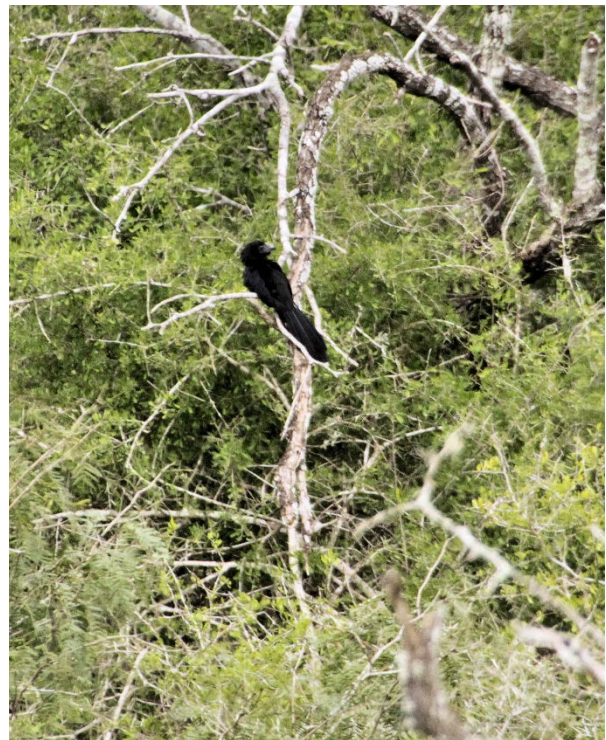
Day 4 – Nov 19, 2014

Estero Llano Grande State Park / Santa Ana NWR

85 species (84-seen; 1-heard only)

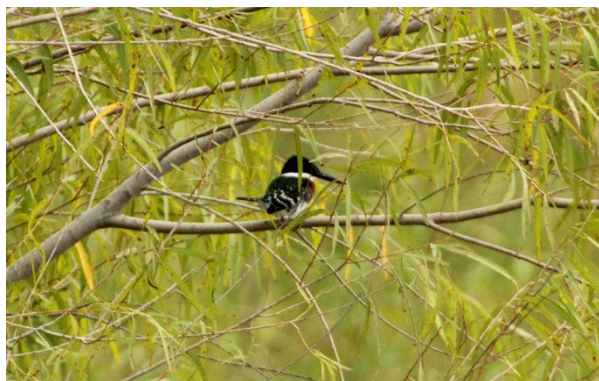
We returned to Estero Llano Grande to look for birds we missed the day before or better looks desired. Groove-billed Anis are far more reliable in late summer than in winter. But there were reports from Estero from several days ago and no recent reports. We

birded our way to the approximate location—an area of the park that is not birded that often. It did not take long. I saw a bush off to the right and down from the dike that had about 5 birds in it. All black birds with long tails. They were in a fairly tight group. I got excited when I saw the hunched look of birds and then their thick beaks. “Anis! Groove-billed Anis!” I declared excitedly as I set up my scope. Soon we all got looks through the telescope. I walked hurriedly back to another group of birders to alert them of the sighting. But when I turned around to lead them back to our location I saw a bird on the other side of the dike that made me stop. Was this another ani? Why, yes! Yes, it was!



Groove-billed Ani—a nice surprise this time of year

On our way back we stopped at a small pond and got better views of a Green Kingfisher.



A little Green Kingfisher perched in a tree



A lovely pair of White-tailed Kites



A Black-crested Titmouse comes to get seeds from a handrail

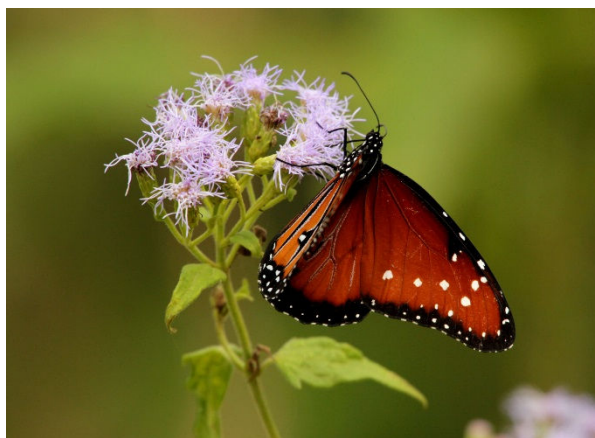
In the afternoon our group headed over to Santa Ana NWR. It is one of my very favorite Wildlife Refuges in the U.S. The tree-lined paths are fun to hike and the birding has the potential to be very good. There is a lot of history here and a number of North American rarities

have been found here. Many of the paths look like they did more than 30 years ago when I first visited here.



Paths at Santa Ana NWR are lined with trees gracefully draped in Spanish Moss

Birding was slower in the afternoon. There were very few birds at Willow Lakes. I did manage to find a Common Pauraque on the ground, but it took off soon after I found it even though I didn't approach it. Maybe it just wanted to prove it was alive unlike the bird we had seen earlier at Estero Llano Grande.



A gorgeous Queen Butterfly

The butterflies in the LRGV can be fantastic and Santa Ana NWR is a great place to find them. The timing was right for Queen Butterflies. They were everywhere.

Day 5 – Nov 20, 2014

Quinta Mazatlan / Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park

54 species (53-seen; 1-leader only)

Quinta Mazatlan is a small property in McAllen, Texas with many trails and neatly manicured landscapes with bronze sculptures and interesting plants. It is beautiful to behold. They have many fine educational programs here and it's so pretty that many people get married here as well. But to the birder, well, there are birds here.



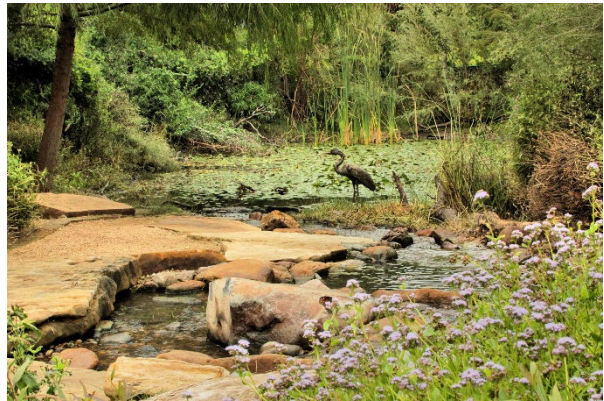
This Curve-billed Thrasher was our friendly greeter in the parking area of Quinta Mazatlan

This year as many as a dozen Clay-colored Thrushes were visiting. I think we *only* saw 7 of those 12.

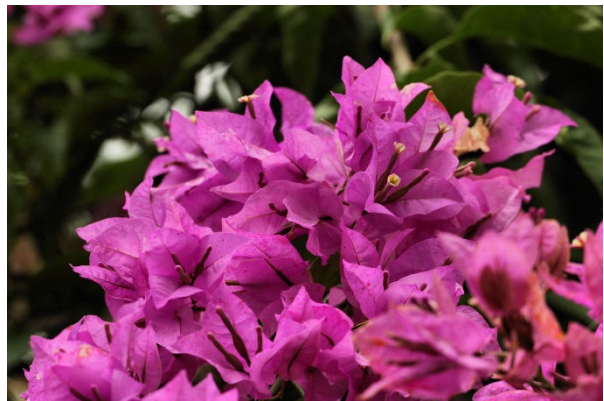


One of the seven Clay-colored Thrushes our group found

The landscaping here is fabulous.



Decorative pond (there are 100+ Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks on a golf course pond to the right—can you hear them?)



Bouganvillea to brighten a late November day

If you miss Great Kiskadee at Quinta Mazatlan you may want to consider a different hobby. The kiskadees here are truly hard to miss.



Head shot of a Great Kiskadee at Quinta Mazatlan

And here is another shot of the Great Kiskadee. No. I am still not tired of these birds. They are one of the quintessential species associated with the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas.



Great Kiskadee—one of the quintessential species of the LRGV

And there were butterflies here, too. Here is another neat Texas butterfly common in the LRGV, the White Peacock.



White Peacock butterfly at Quinta Mazatlan

And what is a visit to South Texas without seeing this species?



A Plain Chachalaca approaches us

Yes. The very entertaining and kind of funny looking Plain Chachalaca is especially common here at Quinta Mazatlan.

We said our good-byes to Quinta Mazatlan and headed south again to another park along the Rio Grande River, Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park. This is a large park right on the Rio Grande River with plenty of riparian habitat. Awesome rarities have showed up here. I got my Blue Bunting here in 1998 during my Big Year. It is a place you walk into with great anticipation. There is always the possibility of a potential mega-rarity from south of the border.

Today was not one of those days. Birding in the afternoon was again slower. We did get a much better view of a Gray Hawk here. And seeing an owl is always fun, no matter what kind it is.



Gray morph Eastern Screech-Owl poking its head out of a box

The real highlight for me was to see a Javelina (collared peccary) with its young run across the road in front of our tram. I snapped a couple shots through the windshield.



Javelina (collared peccary) with baby

Day 6 – Nov 21, 2014

Salineño / Falcon Dam State Park / Seedeater Sanctuary

64 species (61-seen; 2-heard only; 1-participant only)

We headed west this morning along the Rio Grande River to the tiny little border town of Salineño. The boat launch area at the Rio Grande River affords some decent views up and down the river. It is often a good place to find both Ringed and Green Kingfishers,

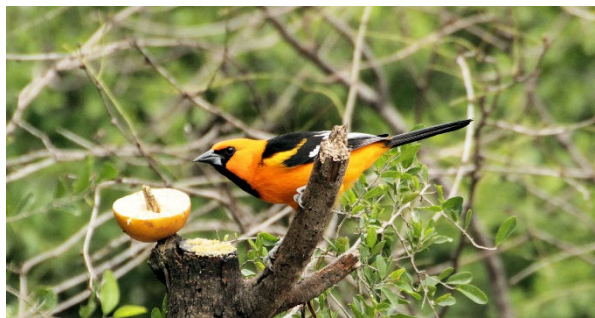
Audubon's Oriole, and sometimes a place where one can find the rare Red-billed Pigeon. Brown Jays used to visit the feeders here. Then there was a break of several years when feeding stopped. And the Brown Jays disappeared. Feeding is now maintained again there. Hopefully we will see Brown Jays return.

We birded right down on the river. The Rio Grande is not very wide here and it is easy to see across. We had a few flyby Neotropic Cormorants and up to 3 Ringed Kingfishers at the same time. But no Green Kingfishers today.



Birding on the Rio Grande at Salineño

We walked up the small hill to the feeding stations that are now being actively maintained. We took seats on lawn chairs and watched the many birds. There were many Green Jays, Altamira Orioles, and a few Long-billed Thrashers, Olive Sparrows, and Ladder-backed and Golden-fronted Woodpeckers. Inca Doves, Common Ground-Doves and White-winged Doves were regular, too. An Orange-crowned Warbler came in to an orange a couple times.



An Altamira Oriole visits the feeding area



Green Jays. Can one ever tire of seeing these birds? I think not



A female Ladder-backed Woodpecker visits the feeder area



White-winged Doves occasionally dominated this feeder

Probably the best bird there was a female Hooded Oriole. Sadly, no Audubon's Oriole showed its face while we were there (although it had been seen earlier in the day).



This smaller oriole, a female Hooded Oriole visited one of the hummingbird feeders

Falcon Dam State Park was our next destination. By the time one travels this far west the coastal scrub and subtropical habitat give way to arid land with prickly pear cactus and mesquite. Falcon Dam had a couple good birds including Pyrrhuloxia, Cactus Wren, Western Meadowlark, Vesper Sparrow, and a flock of Bronzed Cowbirds.



A not-so-shy Javelina rustles through the leaves nearby

Our third destination was the Seedeater Sanctuary at the end of Washington Street in San Ygnacio, Texas. In years past, this was one of the go-to spots to find seedeaters. They still occasionally show up here, but have become sporadic.

On this day our efforts turned up no seedeaters. None. Zero. Zip. Nada. Seedeaters are almost always difficult. But in winter when they are not singing they are *even harder* to find.

We got back to Zapata in the evening with a little daylight left. We drove to Bravo Park near the Zapata Library. We were delighted to see a brilliant male Vermilion Flycatcher make its last few attempts at flycatching from a high perch before it disappeared in a tree to roost for the night. What a great way to end the day!

Day 7 – Nov 22, 2014

La Laja Ranch / Laguna Atascosa NWR

65 species (62-seen; 2-heard only; 1-leader only)

We got an early start this morning out of Zapata and headed even further west beyond San Ygnacio, Texas to La Laja, a private ranch. This is currently the most reliable spot I know of to find the rare and often elusive White-collared Seedeater.

Those of you who have visited with an unsuccessful outcome are probably wary of my use of the word reliable.

"You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means." –Inigo Montoya in the movie, The Princess Bride

Well. Ok. Seedeaters in Texas are *never reliable*. This is just your best shot currently.

We met our local contact at the gate and he let us in. We drove back to an area closer to the river and then hiked the rest of the way.



One of several White-collared Seedeaters along the Rio Grande at La Laja

And yes, we found seedeaters. To many birders this species is something on the order of a Unicorn—it is some mythological creature that does not exist. Although I did use the word reliable, I am *always relieved* to when I finally get to see one...on purpose.

Sadly, our trip was drawing to a close quickly. We left the arid western habitat near Zapata and headed back east to Harlingen. The following day our group would be boarding planes and departing for home and the real world. No more Magic Kingdom birding for a while. Birding in the LRGV is like that—an amusement park full

of fantastic birds that one only dreams about on a cold winter's night.

We ended up at Harlingen early enough to spend the last couple hours of daylight birding in Cameron County. We made it all the way to the entrance road of Laguna Atascosa NWR before we lost enough light to keep birding.

Several Scissor-tailed Flycatchers delighted us along the way.



One of several Scissor-tailed Flycatchers along Rt. 100 east of Harlingen

We also got a pretty good view of one of the most dapper hawks in the U.S.—the Harris's Hawk.



A stunning Harris's Hawk along Rt. 100 east of Harlingen

And the trip comes to a close. It was another wonderful adventure with lots of good food, so much laughing that my sides hurt, fabulous birds, and a really nice

group of birders. Everyone got lifers. Well. Except for me. But then, I get almost as happy nowadays showing other people lifers. I've been there. I know how good that feels. And I get to live it all over again.