

Texas 2004 November

Waders, Warblers & Whooping Cranes

This is a report on an 11-day guided bird-watching tour of Texas with a dba [disabled birders association] group

The tour had 10 participants; Nigel Moorhouse of Sarus Tours leading and driving the larger vehicle and Bo Crombet-Beolens of the dba as second leader driving a saloon car. The other participants were Brian Anderson, Mike & Gill Brown, Maggie Crombet-Beolens, Lawrence and Ann Robinson, Sue Sayers and Andy Senior. Whilst Mike and Gill have been to Texas a number of times this was the first visit for the rest of the participants...

We were joined for the first few days by old friends from Canada Mo & Char Jones who had driven down from Ontario and whose help we all appreciated and whose company we greatly enjoyed.

Whilst this was an 11-day trip to Texas the participants left for Mexico for a 7-day period in the middle so that the entire trip spanned the 6th to the 22nd November 2004 [with an unexpected extra day due to flight cancellations]. In Texas we travelled from Houston down the coast crossing the border at Brownsville and returning later through McAllen eventually flying out from Harlingen/McAllen.

Overview

This trip was conceived as a dba trip with all that implies but, for those who do not know, the majority of participants were able-bodied and were able to bird in a normal way albeit visiting more sites and walking less than most tours. We tend to see about as many birds as an a fully able-bodied group and try to overcome the problems which prevent seeing species which occupy habitat niches which are least accessible. We rely on thorough research and local knowledge for this. Nevertheless, there were some species seen only by those who could get to difficult sites quickly.

At times [with prior or ad hoc arrangements] we were able to take a vehicle into areas from which they are normally excluded.

This trip should be read in conjunction with the Mexico report which took place as a middle section to the overall tour. The trip list is a combined one – as with all trips ID was not always easy nor agreed by all...

Our flight arrived mid-afternoon but the drive to our hotel involved a number of unscheduled detours so that we arrived in the dark but not before some of us were lucky enough to have American Woodcock flying over the road in front of the vehicles.

Day By Day

Day One – 7th November

The group's first birds revealed themselves before and after breakfast in the environs of the hotel. Open grass, neighbouring gardens, "fly-overs" and a small ditch adjacent to the hotel produced several lifers for many on the tour as well as the ubiquitous House Sparrows and common species to be seen throughout the trip such as Mourning Dove, Common Grackle, Starling, Blue-jay, Northern Mocking Bird etc. Notable was a Belted Kingfisher above the ditch, Loggerhead Shrike on power cables in the car park. White-winged Dove in distant trees and a fly by American Crow closely followed by a Fish Crow which enabled size comparison. The inevitable Rock Doves were duly ticked too.

We drove the short distance to our first site – Baytown Nature Centre – the journey gave us our only Ferruginous Hawk of the trip as well as Large-tailed Grackles, and common birds such as Cattle Egret, Eastern Meadowlark etc.

Baytown Nature Centre

This site includes some fresh water pools, inlets and bays and a tidal wetland area. It is used to fish and generally relax with the wildlife area not normally open to vehicles. We were lucky to run into the Park's naturalist, John Mason, who kindly allowed us vehicle access and also told us where the best viewing areas were etc. Close to the entrance is a wooded area and an open freshwater pond which is divided from the sea by the roadway. This area was a baptism of birds for us all producing many lifers for those who were new to North America and even a few for those of us who had made trips before. Pond birds included our first Tri-coloured, Little Blue and Great Blue Herons, Great White and Snowy Egrets, and the surrounding vegetation produced Bronzed Cowbird, Red-winged Blackbird and our only Sedge Wren of the trip which might have remained a Wren Sp. were it not for the local knowledge of the Park Naturalist. On a power pylon we spotted our first Red-shouldered Hawk of the trip.

On the sea side of the road were our first waders, Spotted Sandpiper and Killdeer as well as both Double-crested and Neotropic Cormorants, America White Pelican, Forster's Terns and Osprey all of which we were to see many times at most sites. The woodland held several woodpecker species and we saw our only Red-bellied Woodpecker of the trip as well as Downy Woodpecker and Yellow-bellied Sapsucker.

The party walked, wheeled and drove along the tracks ending up together at the entry to the restricted area where the Park Naturalist let us through the barrier. On route one of the party was lucky to get a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher flying over.

The party moved along the paths toward the "Pavilion" set on a hill affording views across the tidal wetlands and scrub and a distant Peregrine, Northern Rough-winged Swallow and Bank Swallow. En route our first test at identifying sparrows with the only one revealing itself at length being White-crowned Sparrow. From the [accessible] Pavilion, where we lunched on a Pizza, we also saw Solitary Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, Sanderling, White Ibis, Turkey Vulture and Cooper's Hawk which sat out in the open for good scope views.

After lunch we drove to the furthest point of the park seeing a few duck species en route in the wetland – including Blue-winged Teal. On the sea at the point were Least & Pied-billed Grebe, and American Black Duck, Ring-necked Duck, Ruddy Duck and Gadwall as well as Brown Pelican. In the trees around the Toilet Block were a few

passerines including our only Carolina Chickadee of the trip [in fact our only chickadee of any sort] and Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Blue-grey Gnatcatcher and Eastern Phoebe [which must have been the passerine we saw most often throughout the trip]. Further forays didn't produce any new species.

Goose Creek

A short stop at Goose Creek on the way back to the hotel did not produce new species but afforded excellent views of another Yellow-bellied Sapsucker.

Day Two – 8th November

Our second full day was one of mixed fortunes. We drove out to High Island, Anahuac and Bolivar flats but found that migrants were pretty scarce whilst waders were profuse.

Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge

The trip to the Refuge was rewarded with a Pileated Woodpecker when we took a stop just before the turn off to get gas and en route our first American Kestrels and Red-tailed Hawk – the two being the commonest raptors throughout our tour. One person spotted our first Common Black Hawk. Just outside the centre entrance we had some fly-over White-fronted Geese along with some Snow Geese as well as both Black Vulture and Turkey Vulture and an excellent view of our first Crested Caracara.

Once in the refuge we were immediately entranced by an area of wetland smothered in waders and wildfowl as well as our first view of the superb White-tailed Kite and passing Tree Swallow and Violet Green Swallow neither of which were seen during the rest of the trip. In the background a number of Northern Harriers glided across the flatlands. Glossy Ibis jostled with Roseate Spoonbills vying for our attention with ducks being represented by Northern Pintail, American Widgeon, Gadwall, Northern Shoveler and Mallard as well as both Moorhen and American Coot. Waders abounded with Long-billed Curlew, Black-necked Stilt, Wilson's Snipe, both Short-billed and Long-billed Dowitcher, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, and Least, Semi-palmated and Baird's Sandpipers. The supporting cast included pelicans, cormorants and various herons and egrets.

Eventually we tore ourselves away and started to drive along the tracks where we had a brief view of our first alligator and some pond turtles. The "willows" area was unproductive with only Eastern Phoebes viewed by those who walked or wheeled around, but continuing along the track brought our only American Bittern of the trip as well as the only Arcadian Flycatcher. A pair of Fulvous Whistling Ducks were also seen and a number of sparrows many proving difficult to identify for sure apart from Swamp and Savannah Sparrows – the latter being seen at many locations during the tour. Before moving on a rush along the tracks to pick up one of the party resulted in a view for some of Yellow-crowned Night Heron.

High Island

High Island was a terrific disappointment... this Spring migrant trap was as quiet as it had ever been and the viewing stands seemed stark and unnecessary, just to prove that in birding as in life, timing is all. What is more a dog had clearly been bitten by something as it chased around the site yelping and disturbing those few birds with the temerity to stop by. Sharp eyes did manage to pick up on a few passerines with the

highlights being Bell's Vireo and Black-throated Green Warbler – the latter being the warbler we saw most often during the trip. We did not stay long but found a nearby gas station to find some lunch and saw Collared Doves in some nearby palms.

Bolivar Flats Shorebirds Sanctuary

The short journey to Bolivar Flats produced the first Boat-tailed Grackles so far. We then pulled into a small carpark much used by fishermen to be confronted with gulls, terns, cormorants, pelicans, kingfishers and waders galore all seemingly quite unconcerned by people fishing amongst them. New for the trip were Royal Terns, and Ring-billed Gulls amongst the Laughing Gulls and Forster's Terns and some fine-looking Black Skimmers going about their business of clipping the water's surface with drooping lower mandibles. New waders included Marbled Godwit, Ruddy Turnstone, Black-bellied, Semi-Palmated, American Golden and Snowy Plovers, American Avocet, American Oystercatcher, Willet and Dunlin. Virtually all the egrets and herons were on view including our first Reddish Egrets.

Day Three – 9th November

A travelling day – we took the long drive down from Baytown to Corpus Christi trying to identify the birds on the way – without much success apart from our first White-tailed Hawks. We did stop to take a look at a huge flock of mixed grackles and blackbirds feeding in fields where we also had our first sighting of Sandhill Cranes with attendant snow and white-fronted geese. We also took a look at the scrub around a lagoon near Indianola where we were lucky enough to see our first Pyrrhuloxia as well as our first Long-billed and Curve-billed Thrashers. The lagoon held a few egrets and herons and what appeared to be a good number of both Yellow-crowned and Black-crowned Night-herons. We ate our lunch of cold pizza [left from the night before] overlooking the sea at Port O'Connor amidst the gulls [including the only Laughing Gull we saw still in full breeding plumage] and pelicans and were briefly graced by the appearance of a dolphin off shore.

Aransas National Wildlife Refuge

Rather than go straight to our hotel we decided to go on to Aransas instead so drove on to reserve with an hour or so of daylight left and headed straight for the viewing ramp. There was no sign of any Whooping Cranes but there were good numbers of ducks and waders as well as lots of vultures swooping below as well as above us. It was here we saw what we thought, at the time, were Glossy Ibis but which we later re-assessed as White-faced Ibis. We also saw our first Red-head and Lesser Scaup of the trip as well as our only Red-breasted Merganser. On leaving we also picked up Turkey which may well have been feral rather than from a wild population and our first Armadillo which posed for photos.

As darkness fell we headed back across farmland towards Rockport and some of the party saw both Whip-poor-will and Common Nighthawk and we all saw an owl which we believe was probably a Great Horned Owl as it was big, had "horns" and we can offer no more.

Day Four – 10th November

Over our dinner at the "Back 40" at Rockport on day 4 we had discussed the arrangements for the following day. Mo & Char we due to head back to Canada but

were booked on a boat trip around the islands and inlets in search of Whooping Cranes. After a lively discussion most elected to take the boat trip whilst 4 decided to go back to Aransas and hope for views from the tower. As it turned out no one dipped on the cranes but those who elected to take the boat had a brilliant morning and probably saw the entire over-wintering Whooping Crane population [c.31]. What is more they got very close to the birds and even saw one dealing with a Water Moccasin to educate its offspring before eating it!

Those who elected to go to the tower timed it to a T as they saw three cranes within a couple of minutes of getting into position and they flew away never to be seen again! The boaters also had good views of Hooded Merganser as well as many ducks, waders and heron species and the only Common Loon seen. One of the party also had Gull-billed & Caspian Terns. Those who took the car saw many snakes [of at least 6 species] but very few passerines amongst the bushes. However, they did have a fine view of vultures and up to 12 Caracara on a carcass beside the entry road and the first Black-bellied Whistling Duck of the trip. The group came together at lunch time and headed off to Goose island.

Goose Island

Goose Island was a disappointment. Inland there are many trails around what is, essentially, a caravan and camping location with bays for visiting vehicles. We drove around looking for passerines and other migrants with little luck excepting one vehicle managing the only Olive-sided Flycatcher seen during our trip, whilst the only excitement elsewhere was initial misidentifying of immature woodpeckers. We drove on to the sea – and watched waders on a rather smelly beach – nothing new for the trip but lots of variety and good close views. On the thin strip of land were a few passerines such as Meadowlarks etc.

Day Five – 11th November

Day five was spent driving from Corpus Christi to Brownsville birding all the way stopping at a golf course, a ranch, a marsh and eventually another reserve. At some time during the day we saw our first Lark Sparrow and our first Grey Kawk but I don't recall where?

L E Ramay Park

This is, in fact, a golf course near a military base and the open viewing coupled with a pond and some sprinklers made this a great place to break the journey for 3/4 hour. We had our first view of Say's Phoebe, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, [which proved to be the woodpecker we saw most over during the whole trip] Eastern Bluebirds and Brewer's Blackbirds here as well as several species of woodpecker and some doves hard to ID at first as they were soggy from the sprinklers! More surprisingly we had our only Whimbrels of the trip here too.

Santa Gertrudis Creek

Our next stop was at a viewing site on the edge of a small marsh at Santa Gertrudis Creek. This was another site which produced new birds we did not see elsewhere, notable Sora and Virginia Rails which we heard long before we managed to get glimpses. Whilst searching we saw our first Greenjay of the trip and Nigel told us we

would soon be used to seeing these superbly colourful birds; and the doubters were soon proved wrong as most of the following days saw good views, the very same could have been said of our first Great Kiskadee too! Golden-fronted Woodpeckers seemed to be everywhere and our first Ladder-backed Woodpecker could easily have been overlooked when it took the place of a Golden-fronted on a dead tree we were watching. On the other side of the road in another dead tree we had good scope views of our first Harris's Hawk.

BBarB Ranch

Our next stop was a slight diversion to the dead-end road that runs up to BBarB Ranch. We saw plenty of birds along the road with the first Northern Cardinal exciting us all with its brilliant colour. However, undoubted bird of the day awaited us and eventually posed on a fence place allowing good scope views – a bird many of us had wanted to see since cartoons first impinged upon our youth – a fine Roadrunner! This will be a never forgotten moment and the subsequent half a dozen Roadrunners seen during the trip were all a reinforcement of a wish fulfilled.

Laguna Atacosa National Wildlife Refuge

Our final stop of the day was Laguna Atacosa NWR. We had little light left but looking at the roads we assumed that the area might well be good for night birds although most of us “dipped” and no new night birds were seen. However, we did have very close views of our first Merlin on a power pole.

Day Six – 12th November

Day six was spent in the Brownsville area visiting Sambal Palm Sanctuary and Boca Chica Island. One of the highlights was our only Coyote loping across the road at Boca Chica – delighting those of us who are still juvenile enough to want the full set of ‘toon characters! This was one of the best days of our Texas trip with some of the “top wants” of the party as well as many new birds for the trip and lifers for almost all the party.

Sambal Palm Sanctuary

We started the day early at Sambal Palm Sanctuary and ticked a new species on stepping down from the vehicles – Plain Chachalaca and added to this with a short walk through wooded areas to the large lakes, which was rewarded with several passerines including warblers and our first party of Tufted Titmouse [Black-crested is a sub species which has been split and lumped so may yet be elevated] along with lots of Greenjays, Blue-grey Gnatcatchers, White-eyed Vireo, Common Ground Dove and etc.- later we watched many of all these species at the bird feeders although the hummer feeders were empty as there had been a problem with bees disturbing visitors. At the lake we had our first Anhingas whilst Andy managed at long last to catch up Least Grebe! The top bird of the visit was, to my mind, the stunning and huge Ringed Kingfishers which fished whilst we watched in awe. High overhead our first Sharp-shinned Hawk circled putting us all in mind of Saprrowhawk. On walking out of the hide we also got our first White-tipped Dove. We made around to a walkway across a wetland area and did managed to see more warblers, woodpeckers, wrens and the like. In fact, this area produced some terrific birds with no less than three wrens showing themselves to the party for the first [and in two cases last] times; House Wren,

Carolina Wren and the familiar Winter Wren as well as Wilson's Warbler, Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Lincoln's Sparrow.

Some of the party returned to this site and also had good warblers, thrashers and orioles and Altimira Oriole, Common Yellowthroat, Blue-headed Vireo, and Northern Parula and the only Tennessee Warbler, Summer Tanager and Northern Waterthrush of the trip. Meanwhile others [some of who had unexpectedly close views of a Speckle Gray Snake en route] went to the feeders and then the butterfly gardens and saw other species such as Warbling Vireo and Yellow-rumped Warblers coming to drink at an artificial stream. Both parties had their first Black & White Warblers too. All of the party had their only Olive Sparrows of the tour.

Boca Chica Island

Our reason for going to Boca Chica was in search of the Seaside Sparrow. We spent some time looking for this scarce sparrow including enlisting the help of the local Border Patrol! Whilst going to the furthest point on the road we stopped to watch waders including many Snowy Plovers and our first and only Piping Plover and the only Pectoral Sandpiper of the trip, a lifer for most of the group. At one point the two vehicles took different directions with one going down to the sea to watch waders and passing seabirds. It was at this point that the other vehicle came upon a Horned Lark and called the other vehicle. As they had left their walkie-talkie in the vehicle they were not alerted and one of the party staked out the lark whilst the rest went to collect the others. They were in time to see the lark but missed the Coyote.

However, having come back together we shortly saw a number of Seaside Sparrows conveniently at the side of the road.

Day Seven – 13th November

This was a travel day as we left Brownsville en route for Mexico [See the Mexico report on this website] but we did manage to get out early to check a site in Brownsville where both Red-fronted Parrot and Green Parakeet roost. We did not find the roost which had clearly moved from the position reported in the guide but it was sufficiently close for us to get some fly-bys of both birds as well as some good close views of Merlin and Sharp-shinned Hawk.

Day Thirteen- 19th November

We travelled back to the US arriving in Brownsville with no time for birding.

Day Fourteen – 20th November

This was a day spent around McAllen trying to locate a few of the species we missed such as Burrowing Owl – some of which we never found. Time was divided between the World Birding Centre – Bentsen Rio-Grande, Residential Birding in McAllen, Santa Ana and some fields near Santa Ana.

World Birding Center

It is worth noting the guffaws of any non-US birder when confronted with a site calling itself the world birding centre – a peculiarly Texan ego-centrism perhaps? Whilst this is a growing resource and quite a nicely laid out centre with a "road train" that takes people around the site it is not the biggest, best, birdiest site, or any other superlative

in birding terms. One is put in mind of the “World Series” which is, of course, only open to US teams!

There was a terrific hatch of Queen butterflies everywhere which are very attractive but the feeders at the centre were more or less devoid of birdlife with the exception of one brief hummer visit which defied ID. The party took the accessible “train” and stopped by the Boat ramp as our guide for the day, a dba-usa member Ron Smith. He showed us around the area which was uncharacteristically quiet with just a few warblers, woodpeckers and jays etc. The lake held grebes, ducks, anhinga and cormorant etc.

We decided to return to the vehicles and hitched a ride on the next “train”... a good move as the driver stopped opposite a hollow tree to point out its resident Eastern Screech Owl with its cryptic plumage perfectly matching the tree bark.

Backyard Birding

Ron led us on to a local resident’s garden which is the winter home to some visiting Green-breasted Mangos such a rarity that we found his patio held a number of twitchers from as far afield as New York! We were delighted to see our first hummers of the US trip with Buff-breasted Hummingbird regularly visiting a feeder which we were watching for the rarity. However, the Green-breasted Mango did eventually show itself at the feeder and in an adjacent tree giving us all good views. On leaving the garden two of the party were lucky enough to also see a Rufous Hummingbird in a large flowering tree. Ron took his leave of us here and we thank him for his help.

Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge

Santa Ana NWR was a big disappointment to our group – we arrived to find that the trail is only open to vehicles two days a week and closes quite early in the afternoon. We arrived just 30 minutes before it was due to close. We took the opportunity to go to a place where Clay-coloured Robins had been seen that day but had no luck – the best sighting was by Mike & Gill of a very large black snake disappearing from view in a muddy ditch into lush grass. We left the reserve with no birds added even to the day’s tally.

Farmland Roads

We spent the rest of the day driving around farmland roads looking for anything we could find. A new bird for the trip were groups of American Pipits on ploughed fields and we also saw a great many raptors including excellent close views of Peregrine, Gray Hawk, Osprey etc. Some of the party also picked up Clay-coloured Sparrow and Grasshopper Sparrow and we also saw a number of Western Meadowlarks and Brown Cowbird. Much searching and even more hoping still failed to produce any Burrowing Owls.

Day Fifteen – 21st November

We decided to spend our last day trying to find more sparrows and set off along roads around El Joya and later roads and ponds near Edinburg.

El Joya

Our searches were not in vain and this turned out to be a good area for passerines with good views of Cardinals, Pyrrhuloxia, Crissal Thrasher as well as Curve-billed, buntings, blackbirds and some warblers as well as a number of sparrows; the best being Baird's, Cassin's, Vesper and Black-throated Sparrows, as well as other species such as lark and Savannah Sparrows previously seen many times and our last Roadrunner of the trip. We also had a look at a small lake and wetland and added Common Yellowthroat as well as seeing more Spoonbills, Ibis, waders, and waterfowl etc.

Both vehicles at different times managed to get good views of Bobwhite too and more Sandhill Cranes and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers to boot. We lunched on Subways. Further along we went on to an un-metalled road alongside farm land which did not produce new birds on the way up. However, on the way back we did manage to get one of the "top wants" when the saloon car party were lagging behind to see a Verdin spotted by the lead vehicle they lucked upon a Cactus Wren which the lead vehicle returned for and the birds were eventually seen by the whole party [this involved Andy running like a Roadrunner himself and the saloon having to be backed and forwarded to get good views for Brian].

Edinburg

We spent the afternoon trying the dusty roads near Edinburg after first visiting a wetland which turned up plenty of waterfowl and herons yet did not produce the desired species but did turn up our only Marsh Wren and Bonaparte's Gull of the trip and our last Muscovy Duck.

Another stop produced our only Zone-tailed Hawk of the trip and many of the more common raptors and another few roads little until a dyke turned up our only Mottled Duck of the trip and both Ringed Kingfisher and Belted Kingfishers.

Conclusion

We spent a further two days in Texas almost all of it in the confines of airports and hotel rooms – one more day than intended as weather stopped our connecting flight from going into Houston. The roadhouse we had lunched in, on our way to Corpus Christie, had experienced no less than 15 inches of rain overnight from the electrical storms that circled the city. Alas these days produced no more birds just numb behinds.

Below are some notes on accessibility and hotels and transport. There will also be a gallery of pictures taken during the trip when time permits. Around 200 different species were seen in Texas and, as with all dba trips, the priority was for as many of the group as possible to see each and every species which was, for the most part, achieved.

This was one of the most successful dba trips and the group jelled due to Mike's ever willing help to all, Brian's entertaining flights of fantasy, Gill's cheeky looks, Ann's big heart, Lawrence's priceless asides, Maggie's spotting eye, Andy and Sue's strong pushing arms, and Nigel's planning and ID skills [and of course my own small contributions of wicked wit and unobtrusive management skills].

Never were these collective skills more tested and more successful than in the adversity of delayed flights and total lack of help or support from Continental Airlines. The “team” swiftly organised hotel rooms, vehicular transport, meals and re-arranged flights as if born to the task. We also greatly enjoyed sharing the first two days of the trip with Mo & Char whose enthusiasm for all things birdy is infectious. I think I will not be contradicted when I say a great time was had by all!

bo beolens – aka The fat Birder

Background

This bit can safely be skipped by anyone who is just interested in the birds and their locations. It contains details of transport, accommodation and so forth and dwells on the need for accessible facilities for our group.

Transport

Transport for our group proved difficult to arrange. Had we just had disabilities, or had we just wanted to cross the Mexican border we would have had plenty of choices but wanting accessibility and taking the vehicles to Mexico meant we could only find one company that could accommodate us – Advantage Rent-a-Car.

Given that we not only had luggage for 10 people but two wheelchairs and an electric buggy, and that one of the wheelchair users could neither walk nor stand, meant that we decided that a 15-seater bus and a saloon car were needed – hence the need for two drivers. We arranged to pick up both vehicles in Houston but could only drop off the saloon in Harlingen near the border and the bus had to be driven back to Houston. We were also given dire warnings before the trip and when we picked up the vehicles that a certificate was needed for both in Mexico and that this had to be displayed throughout and returned to the Mexican authorities on departure.

Despite careful planning and long explanations of our needs we arrived at the pick up point for Advantage Rent-a-Car in Houston to be told we were to be given two 7-seater buses “at no extra charge” as the 15-seater was not available. When we were outraged they changed this to a 12-seater and saloon. When the 12-seater turned out not to have a spare tyre [well spotted by one of our party] and our firm assertiveness eventually resolved the situation a 15-seater bus miraculously appeared and a just returned saloon duly made ready. [We, of course, had to unpack the 12-seater and pack the 15-seater ourselves].

The latter was a low-slung boy-racer machine low enough for Brian to get into from his wheelchair whereas most of the saloons we were offered were too high – this was a real problem when on rough roads as its clearance was insufficient to cope, as well as being a problem for the driver’s back getting in and out! The most important effect was that this vehicle stopped us from going as far as we wanted along a road near Gomez Farias for fear of ripping off suspension, gearbox etc. The 15-seater was fine with the two rear seats removed to make room for luggage and wheelchairs... although Houston Advantage refused to keep the seats and they were left at the Harlingen Depot instead [the guys there were very helpful].

The border crossing into Mexico was made at least 1.5 hours longer by needing to get the certificates for the vehicles [and paying \$30 tax for the privilege]. On our return we could not find where to hand over the displayed permit and had to re-cross the border to find it. We then spent 30 minutes being given a certificate to prove that we no longer had a certificate!

We drove over 3000 miles in total and had no other vehicle problems apart from the saloon trying to keep pace with the van in mad traffic and being pulled over by police in Mexico – they decided to just let us proceed once it was clear we were non Spanish speaking Brits. Gas consumption was pretty good too. All of the US gas stations had accessible toilets and most of the larger Mexican ones, on main roads, did too.

Flights

We booked our flights separately although most travelled BA to and from Houston and had a short flight booked from Harlingen to Houston with Continental. I thoroughly recommend that anyone buys their tickets direct through ONE airline – asking them to sort out connections and onward flights. The reason for this is that they will then sort problems and you will not need to go through several agents or companies.

We had a problem! Our flight to Houston from Harlingen got to the runway ready for take-off then sat on the tarmac for two hours. We were offloaded and sat in Harlingen airport for 5 hours whilst the flights continued to be put back because of very heavy weather in Houston [bad enough to give 15 inches of rain in one town we had driven through]. At 7.00pm the flight, with all others to Houston, was cancelled. After 1.5 hours queuing at the Continental desk our flights home were re-booked and we were told that the only connecting flight we could get would be at 8.15am out of McAllen [the town we had stopped at the night before].

NO HELP WAS OFFERED AT ALL! We were shocked that they did not offer to transport us, put us up in a hotel or feed us. What is more when asked if they could at least help us make arrangements we were told this was not Continental policy when the problem had been caused by poor weather!

The best they could do was point us toward a stall holder who had a telephone directory. The fact that we were visitors to their country and that the party had a number of disabled participants no one bothered to help in any way. [This is, of course, now the subject of a claim]. The team rallied round and we had soon found suitable transport [Thanks Dough and the guys from Airport Shuttle], hotel rooms and so forth. We ended up spending all day at Houston International – the most part the ground side of any facilities! Worse was to come for the one person who flew Air France when he was evacuated from Paris Airport [whilst trying to get his flight to Manchester] whilst they exploded someone's suitcase!

Accommodation

Accommodation in Texas was not a problem to arrange as almost all US chains have "handicapped" rooms or have standard rooms which are accessible. This is not to say that they all proved perfect, but none were so bad as to be unusable and most afforded the basics for a wheelchair user so that they could wash and sleep without too much

hassle. Unfortunately, US hotels rarely have grounds other than hard standing for cars so little, if any, birding can be done before breakfast. The exception was at Baytown but this was a House Sparrow roost in the grounds and an adjacent stream and vacant lot.

Baytown Quality Inn

In terms of accommodation and public areas the Baytown Quality Inn was probably the least well-appointed hotel we stayed at. We ate in on the first night but found that they did not serve food on a Sunday or a Monday night so had to have a take-away sent in from a local Chinese Restaurant in one case and a Pizza on the other although they did allow us to use their dining room. The adjacent bar served a good variety of beer with soft drinks free. Breakfast was the usual Texan affair of too many over large pancakes and syrup with eggs, bacon and so forth.

The terrific waitress did initiate us into some traditional fare bringing us all “hominy grits” to try... these turned out to be not unlike semolina and rather bland. The waitress then made us all laugh by bringing out a certificate she had made to the one member of our party who ate all his up! Brian kept us amused at breakfast carving a reasonable facsimile of Texas from his last pancake. We spent three nights here as it was convenient for a number of reserves.

Corpus Christie Clarion

The Clarion at Corpus Christie is another standard hotel with its main disadvantage being the close proximity of parking to ground floor rooms. The internal standards are fine with a refrigerator provided but only a small amount of hanging space with the usual iron, hairdryer etc. Breakfast was served from 6.00pm and was of the usual kind albeit with fresh waffles cooked to order and the biggest TV I have ever seen. However, there was no dining room for evening meals and we had to eat out or en route [On one occasion at Back 40 in Rockport and on the other a Mexican restaurant there]. The setting was, as with most US hotel chains – nothing to write home about – a semi industrial area next door to a filling station. We spent just two nights here as it was handy for Aransas.

Brownsville Four Points Sheraton

The standard of the Sheraton chain is a notch above the others although still not luxurious. The [Four Points Sheraton](#) in Brownsville was centrally located and had its own restaurant and proved comfortable. We spent two nights here. Breakfast was a la carte one day and self-service another... the evening meal was quick and good one night very slow and poor standard another and it was clear that most of the staff were new and not all were doing their regular jobs. The guy who brought room service and later pillows wasn't working for the kitchen or housekeeping but was a driver. It seemed to us as if there had been some industrial dispute resulting in wholesale clear out of staff!

We also stayed in the [Four Points Sheraton in McAllen](#) – much of the above applies except that the restaurant service here was even worse – we had to ask for meals to be served in the restaurant and the waiter service was very variable.

McAllen Four Points Sheraton

This became quite familiar to us as we had an unexpected extra night due to delays. The Hotel is a reasonable standard although when we booked late the rooms did not all have the toiletries, standards of cleanliness etc. one should expect. Meals were served to us in the dining room but are usually taken in the bar [we insisted as some of the party could not eat at low tables.] The service was poor although the food itself was not bad, albeit often not quite as advertised or ordered. It was clear that the waiter was enjoying himself but did not listen nor bother to ensure we were served quickly. This was a real let down.

Birds Seen

1. Least Grebe *Tachybaptus dominicus*
2. Pied-billed Grebe *Podilymbus podiceps*
3. American White Pelican *Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*
4. Brown Pelican *Pelecanus occidentalis*
5. Double-crested Cormorant *Phalacrocorax auritus*
6. Neotropic Cormorant *Phalacrocorax brasilianus*
7. Anhinga *Anhinga anhinga*
8. American Bittern *Botaurus lentiginosus*
9. Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias*
10. Great Egret *Ardea alba*
11. Snowy Egret *Egretta thula*
12. Little Blue Heron *Egretta caerulea*
13. Tricolored Heron *Egretta tricolor*
14. Reddish Egret *Egretta rufescens*
15. Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*
16. Black-crowned Night-Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*
17. Yellow-crowned Night-Heron *Nyctanassa violacea*
18. Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*
19. White-faced Ibis *Plegadis chihi*
20. Roseate Spoonbill *Ajaia ajaja*
21. Black Vulture *Coragyps atratus*
22. Turkey Vulture *Cathartes aura*
23. Black-bellied Whistling-Duck *Dendrocygna autumnalis*
24. Fulvous Whistling-Duck *Dendrocygna bicolor*
25. Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons*
26. Snow Goose *Chen caerulescens*
27. Muscovy Duck *Cairina moschata*
28. Gadwall *Anas strepera*
29. American Wigeon *Anas americana*
30. American Black Duck *Anas rubripes*
31. Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*
32. Mottled Duck *Anas fulvigula*
33. Blue-winged Teal *Anas discors*
34. Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata*
35. Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*
36. Redhead *Aythya americana*
37. Ring-necked Duck *Aythya collaris*
38. Lesser Scaup *Aythya affinis*
39. Common Merganser *Mergus merganser*
40. Ruddy Duck *Oxyura jamaicensis*

41. Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*
42. White-tailed Kite *Elanus leucurus*
43. Bald Eagle *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*
44. Northern Harrier *Circus cyaneus*
45. Sharp-shinned Hawk *Accipiter striatus*
46. Cooper's Hawk *Accipiter cooperii*
47. Gray Hawk *Asturina nitida*
48. Harris's Hawk *Parabuteo unicinctus*
49. Roadside Hawk *Buteo magnirostris*
50. Red-shouldered Hawk *Buteo lineatus*
51. Swainson's Hawk *Buteo swainsoni*
52. White-tailed Hawk *Buteo albicaudatus*
53. Zone-tailed Hawk *Buteo albonotatus*
54. Red-tailed Hawk *Buteo jamaicensis*
55. Ferruginous Hawk *Buteo regalis*
56. Crested Caracara *Caracara plancus*
57. American Kestrel *Falco sparverius*
58. Merlin *Falco columbarius*
59. Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*
60. Plain Chachalaca *Ortalis vetula*
61. Wild Turkey *Meleagris gallopavo*
62. Northern Bobwhite *Colinus virginianus*
63. Sora *Porzana carolina*
64. Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*
65. American Coot *Fulica americana*
66. Sandhill Crane *Grus canadensis*
67. Whooping Crane *Grus americana*
68. Black-bellied Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*
69. American Golden-Plover *Pluvialis dominica*
70. Snowy Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*
71. Semipalmated Plover *Charadrius semipalmatus*
72. Piping Plover *Charadrius melodus*
73. Killdeer *Charadrius vociferus*
74. American Oystercatcher *Haematopus palliatus*
75. Black-necked Stilt *Himantopus mexicanus*
76. American Avocet *Recurvirostra americana*
77. Greater Yellowlegs *Tringa melanoleuca*
78. Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes*
79. Solitary Sandpiper *Tringa solitaria*
80. Willet *Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*
81. Spotted Sandpiper *Actitis macularia*
82. Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*
83. Long-billed Curlew *Numenius americanus*
84. Marbled Godwit *Limosa fedoa*
85. Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*
86. Sanderling *Calidris alba*
87. Semipalmated Sandpiper *Calidris pusilla*
88. Least Sandpiper *Calidris minutilla*
89. White-rumped Sandpiper *Calidris fuscicollis*
90. Baird's Sandpiper *Calidris bairdii*

91. Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos*
92. Dunlin *Calidris alpina*
93. Short-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus griseus*
94. Long-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus scolopaceus*
95. Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*
96. American Woodcock *Scolopax minor*
97. Laughing Gull *Larus atricilla*
98. Bonaparte's Gull *Larus philadelphia*
99. Ring-billed Gull *Larus delawarensis*
100. Royal Tern *Sterna maxima*
101. Forster's Tern *Sterna forsteri*
102. Black Skimmer *Rynchops niger*
103. Rock Dove *Columba livia*
104. White-winged Dove *Zenaida asiatica*
105. Mourning Dove *Zenaida macroura*
106. Inca Dove *Columbina inca*
107. Common Ground-Dove *Columbina passerina*
108. White-tipped Dove *Leptotila verreauxi*
109. Green Parakeet
110. Red-crowned Parrot *Amazona viridigenalis*
111. Greater Roadrunner *Geococcyx californianus*
112. Eastern Screech-Owl *Otus asio*
113. Green-breasted Mango *Anthracothorax prevostii*
114. Buff-bellied Hummingbird *Amazilia yucatanensis*
115. Rufous Hummingbird *Selasphorus rufus*
116. Ringed Kingfisher *Ceryle torquata*
117. Belted Kingfisher *Ceryle alcyon*
118. Acorn Woodpecker *Melanerpes formicivorus*
119. Golden-fronted Woodpecker *Melanerpes aurifrons*
120. Red-bellied Woodpecker *Melanerpes carolinus*
121. Yellow-bellied Sapsucker *Sphyrapicus varius*
122. Ladder-backed Woodpecker *Picoides scalaris*
123. Downy Woodpecker *Picoides pubescens*
124. Pileated Woodpecker *Dryocopus pileatus*
125. Acadian Flycatcher *Empidonax virescens*
126. Alder Flycatcher *Empidonax alnorum*
127. Eastern Phoebe *Sayornis phoebe*
128. Say's Phoebe *Sayornis saya*
129. Ash-throated Flycatcher *Myiarchus cinerascens*
130. Great Kiskadee *Pitangus sulphuratus*
131. Couch's Kingbird *Tyrannus couchii*
132. Scissor-tailed Flycatcher *Tyrannus forficatus*
133. Loggerhead Shrike *Lanius ludovicianus*
134. Bell's Vireo *Vireo bellii*
135. Blue-headed Vireo *Vireo solitarius*
136. Warbling Vireo *Vireo gilvus*
137. Blue Jay *Cyanocitta cristata*
138. Green Jay *Cyanocorax yncas*
139. American Crow *Corvus brachyrhynchos*
140. Fish Crow *Corvus ossifragus*

141. Horned Lark *Eremophila alpestris*
142. Tree Swallow *Tachycineta bicolor*
143. Violet-green Swallow *Tachycineta thalassina*
144. Northern Rough-winged Swallow *Stelgidopteryx serripennis*
145. Bank Swallow *Riparia riparia*
146. Carolina Chickadee *Poecile carolinensis*
147. Tufted Titmouse *Baeolophus bicolor*
148. Verdin *Auriparus flaviceps*
149. Cactus Wren *Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus*
150. House Wren *Troglodytes aedon*
151. Winter Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*
152. Sedge Wren *Cistothorus platensis*
153. Blue-gray Gnatcatcher *Poliophtila caerulea*
154. Ruby-crowned Kinglet *Regulus calendula*
155. Eastern Bluebird *Sialia sialis*
156. Northern Mockingbird *Mimus polyglottos*
157. Long-billed Thrasher *Toxostoma longirostre*
158. Curve-billed Thrasher *Toxostoma curvirostre*
159. Crissal Thrasher *Toxostoma crissale*
160. European Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*
161. American Pipit *Anthus rubescens*
162. Tennessee Warbler *Vermivora peregrina*
163. Orange-crowned Warbler *Vermivora celata*
164. Yellow-rumped Warbler *Dendroica coronata*
165. Black-throated Green Warbler *Dendroica virens*
166. Common Yellowthroat *Geothlypis trichas*
167. Olive Sparrow *Arremonops rufivirgatus*
168. Cassin's Sparrow *Aimophila cassinii*
169. Field Sparrow *Spizella pusilla*
170. Vesper Sparrow *Pooecetes gramineus*
171. Lark Sparrow *Chondestes grammacus*
172. Black-throated Sparrow *Amphispiza bilineata*
173. Savannah Sparrow *Passerculus sandwichensis*
174. Baird's Sparrow *Ammodramus bairdii*
175. Seaside Sparrow *Ammodramus maritimus*
176. Northern Cardinal *Cardinalis cardinalis*
177. Pyrrhuloxia *Cardinalis sinuatus*
178. Rose-breasted Grosbeak *Pheucticus ludovicianus*
179. Red-winged Blackbird *Agelaius phoeniceus*
180. Eastern Meadowlark *Sturnella magna*
181. Western Meadowlark *Sturnella neglecta*
182. Brewer's Blackbird *Euphagus cyanocephalus*
183. Common Grackle *Quiscalus quiscula*
184. Boat-tailed Grackle *Quiscalus major*
185. Great-tailed Grackle *Quiscalus mexicanus*
186. Bronzed Cowbird *Molothrus aeneus*
187. Brown-headed Cowbird *Molothrus ater*
188. House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Other Taxa

Coyote
Desert Jack Rabbit
Grey Squirrel
White-tailed Deer
Armadillo

Red-cheeked Slider
Alligator

Gulf Coast Ribbon Snake
Eastern Yellow-bellied Racer
Rough Green Snake
Speckled Grey Snake
Water Moccasin

Gulf Fritillary
Queen
Great Southern White
Cabbage
Monarch
Cloudless Sulphur