

# Texas Big Bend: Birding and Wildlife | Trip Report

## July 20 - 27, 2019 | Written by Michael Marsden



With Guide Michael Marsden, and participants Jean, Nancy, Chip, and Lisa





## **Saturday, July 20                      Arrivals in El Paso**

Everyone had arrived in El Paso the previous day (though, in Nancy's case, only just - after a miserable day of flight cancellations and delays she didn't get to her hotel until midnight!), so we were able to make an earlier start than usual on our initial drive to Alpine. After a break for lunch and introduction to the delights of Tex-Mex cuisine at Chuy's Restaurant in Van Horn, we headed south-east, on Highway 90 into a scenic landscape of beautiful rolling grasslands and shrubby desert framed by majestic mountains. There were ominous scattered storms in the distance, thankfully the only ones we were to see during our trip.

Highway 90 is a wonderful wildlife road—on roadside wires above us were Swainson's Hawks, Chihuahuan Ravens, Western Kingbirds, and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, while on the ground we had memorable views of a handsome buck Pronghorn and the first of many Greater Roadrunners. We made several brief stops along the road—at the pop art Marfa Prada, the Marfa settlement ponds, the Marfa Lights Viewing Area, and the Cactus Gardens at Sul Ross State University. Our final destination was at the historic Holland Hotel in Alpine, we enjoyed a delicious dinner at the nearby Reata Restaurant.

## **Sunday, July 21                      Fort Pena Colorado Park | Marathon | Hepatic Tanager**

After an early breakfast at our hotel, we headed out to our first birding destination—Marathon's Fort Pena Colorado Park, better known to birders as the Post, the site of a former military outpost established in 1879 as protection against marauding Apaches. The road into the Post from Marathon was gratifyingly productive, with an array of characteristic species of the area including Scaled Quail, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Cactus Wren, Lark Sparrow, Blue Grosbeak, and Pyrrhuloxia. The pond and cottonwoods at the Post itself held Vermilion Flycatchers, Orchard Orioles, Summer Tanagers, Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, and Black Phoebe. At Marathon's delightful Gage Gardens, we also came across Cassin's Kingbirds, Inca & Common Ground-Doves, and Cave Swallows.

After a pleasant lunch at the V6 restaurant in Marathon, we headed to the grasslands north of the town, the site of an extensive Black-tailed Prairie Dog village and the summer home of several Burrowing Owls. We quickly





found our first owl and then spotted at least three others among the many prairie dogs. Other wildlife included Mexican Ground Squirrel, and Cassin's Sparrow.

We then started the long drive to our lodgings at the Chisos Mountain Lodge in the very heart of Big Bend National Park, with a stop at the Park's spectacular Fossil Discovery Exhibit on the way. It was very hot at this point, and we were astonished to come across three Yellow-headed Blackbirds, miles from the nearest water, using the shelter of the Exhibit as a lookout while hunting for bugs on the desert floor.

After we got back to the Lodge, some of us did a little birding around the grounds, where the highlights were a Scott's Oriole found by Chip and a Black Bear (!) seen by Nancy. Other species included Say's Phoebe, Canyon Towhee, Rufous-crowned Sparrow and House Finch. Most memorable, though, was a Hepatic Tanager nest in a tree by the restaurant's patio, where we gathered each evening to compile the day's sightings log. There were three chicks in the nest, and we were able to watch as they were being fed by the female. We subsequently saw the male, sometimes with the female, persistently attack his reflection in the restaurant's windows. Our waiter told us that they had been acting that way every day since April!



## Monday, July 22      Rio Grande Village

After a filling breakfast, we collected our packed lunches and headed off to Rio Grande Village. We had hoped to find one of the Common Black-Hawks, that had for several years used the cottonwoods as a nesting site. We quickly found the nest, but neither we, nor the other searchers, had any luck with the hawks. Birds we did see included Greater Roadrunner, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Bell's Vireo, and Summer Tanager. We then walked the Village's Nature Trail, which crosses a small wetland with a beaver pond before heading down to the Rio Grande. There was a prehistoric-looking Texas Spiny Softshell Turtle in the pond and singing

Common Yellowthroats in the reeds. The hike to the river, though, was memorable for its many species of cacti, as well as for several deep, perfectly cylindrical mortar holes in the limestone bedrock made by native Indians for grinding mesquite beans and grain. Mexican Ducks were calling from a section of the river we couldn't get down to.



After a picnic lunch under the cottonwoods at Daniel's Ranch, we drove to Boquillas Canyon and, despite the afternoon heat, hiked the trail all the way into the Canyon itself. High above us three Common Ravens were showing off their flight skills and apparently being harassed by an American Kestrel... perhaps they were all just enjoying themselves!

On the way back to the Lodge we stopped off at Dugout Wells, a little oasis of water and mature trees in an expanse of shrub desert, where the highlights were a covey of ten or so Scaled Quail and close views of a Loggerhead Shrike.

## **Tuesday, July 23                      Hiking the Chisos Mountain**

Today was the day for our long hike into the Chisos Mountain, and we could hardly have picked a better one—cooler than it had been with no threat of rain. The 11 miles of the loop we followed, starts at 5,400 ft in pinyon pine-juniper-oak habitat close to our cabins. It then rises through the high grasslands of Laguna Meadows (once a favorite Apache camping area), following Colima Trail and its stand of rare Douglas Fir to the contrasting moist riparian woodland of Boot Spring and the spectacular vistas of Boot Canyon (including of course its upside-down cowboy-boot shaped volcanic spire). Then, at 7,100 ft, it starts descending through the impressive rock formations of the Pinnacles Trail. It really is one of the iconic hikes of U.S. birding.

A major reason it is so iconic, is the Chisos Mountains happens to be the only place in the U.S. where Colima Warblers nest. Although their breeding season was over, we were still hoping to catch a view of them. Despite spending over two hours in their favored habitat, though, we were out of luck and it was little consolation that no-one else saw them during our stay at Big Bend (but a few at least were undoubtedly still in the area, as later reports confirmed). There were compensations, however, and we had memorable views of Cordilleran Flycatcher, Hutton's Vireo, Spotted Towhee, and Blue-throated Hummingbird. We also got great views of a kaleidoscope of colorful butterflies, Two-tailed Swallowtails, Arizona Sisters, and Golden-banded Skippers graced the trails.

Jean had opted out of the long hike and decided to complete the Chisos Basin Loop and spend more time around the Lodge. And, of course, she had one of the most exciting encounters of the trip—a second Black Bear close to the Lodge's restaurant!





## **Wednesday, July 24      Lower Burro Mesa Pour-off | Terlingua**

Today we headed towards the southwestern corner of Big Bend. Our first stop was at the old Sam Nail Ranch. The habitat here is similar to Dugout Wells, but the birding was much more productive, and we were able to get wonderful views of some of the most handsome birds in the U.S. Pyrrhuloxia, Yellow-breasted Chat, and Varied & Painted Buntings, all in ideal light—even the Verdins looked spectacular!

Next stop was the trail at Lower Burro Mesa Pour-off, and its exhilarating mix of spectacular cliffs and wildlife-rich habitats. Here we had our best sightings of Canyon Wrens and Rufous-crowned Sparrows, but the highlights were two new species for the trip—Black-tailed Gnatcatcher and an overhead Zone-tailed Hawk. With the increasing heat of the day we came across a muster of lizards on the desert floor, including Marbled Whiptails and beautifully colored Side-blotched Lizards.

On our way to the Cottonwood Campground for our picnic lunch (and encounters with Brown-crested Flycatchers and lots of Vermilion Flycatchers), we passed the historic buildings of Castalon. On previous trips, the store (for ice creams!) and museum there had always been one of our favorite stops, but sadly, they had been badly damaged by a wildfire that spread from Mexico earlier in the summer. Fortunately, prompt action by the Park's fire crews saved all the nearby cottonwoods.

After lunch we drove down to the Rio Grande at Santa Elena. The scenery here is awesome with the sheer limestone walls of the canyon towering 1500' above us. There is a trail across Terlingua Creek, past an overlook with breathtaking views and on into the heart of the canyon, but by now it was hot—Chip and Lisa heroically braved the entire walk, while the rest of us opted to stay behind and (ostensibly!) enjoy the peace of the river.

The afternoon heat showed no signs of abating, so we decided (as dinner was to be in Terlingua that night) to drive to the Visitor Center at Big Bend Ranch State Park in Lajitas, with its gardens and impressive historical and



ecological displays at its Interpretive Center. Birds there included Scott's Orioles in the gardens, and a Black Phoebe on the nearby golf course. We then back tracked to the former mining town of Terlingua, now settled by as intriguing a bunch of folks as one could imagine, for a shopping spree at the trading post and wonderful food and live music at the inimitable Starlight Theater.

## **Thursday, July 25      Christmas Mountain Oasis and Carolyn Ohl-Johnson**

One of the greatest pleasures of any birding vacation in Big Bend is the opportunity to visit Christmas Mountain Oasis, the domain of Carolyn Ohl-Johnson, who has, through unimaginably hard work, created a birding paradise and comfortable home in the midst of seemingly unpromising creosote desert. All the feeders were active during our visit, giving us memorable views of several Lucifer Hummingbirds, Carolyn's signature species, as well as Black-chinned Hummingbirds and Carolyn's very first Rufous Hummingbird of the season. Other birds we came across on her land included Scaled Quail, Greater Roadrunner, Bell's Vireo, Black-throated Sparrow, Ash-throated Sparrow, Scott's Oriole, and Blue Grosbeak. Carolyn was even happier, though, to be able to show us the Palmer's Metalmark butterfly and Citrine Forktail damselflies that she had recently found by one of her ponds.

We were particularly privileged then to be invited to tour Carolyn's remarkable home, and to be told something of its history and the problems she overcame in building it. In her garden pond were Rio Grande Leopard Frogs and what, from our brief view, looked like a Black-necked Garter Snake.

After lunch in Alpine's Guzzi-Up, we decided to drive through Fort Davis and head for Balmorhea. The State Park there and its spring-fed swimming pool were thronged with people, so we visited instead nearby Lake Balmorhea, an isolated reservoir that has attracted an astonishing number of rare birds over the years. It was too early in the season for wildfowl, but there were dozens of Clark's and Western Grebes on the water, with the former seemingly the more numerous. More unexpectedly were a couple of elegant American Avocets resting on a small muddy island, and a solitary Lark Bunting sharing lakeside pasture with some very contented-looking cattle.

That left us just enough time to drive back to the Hotel Limpia in Fort Davis, where we were to spend the next two nights, and enjoy an outstanding dinner at the adjoining Blue Mountain Bistro.

## **Friday, July 26      Davis Mountains!**

Our last full day, which we spent entirely in the Davis Mountains. The uplands here attract more rain than Big Bend, haven't been quite so badly degraded by overgrazing, and tend to be greener and less austere. And the birds are often surprisingly different—no Blue-throated or Lucifer Hummingbirds, no Mexican Jays, but, unlike Big





Bend, there are nesting Woodhouse Scrub-Jays, Western Wood-Pewees, Gray Flycatchers, and Lark & Chipping Sparrows (all of which we saw).

After an early breakfast at Stone Village Market, we briefly visited the feeders at Davis Mountains State Park, where we watched Acorn Woodpeckers, Lesser Goldfinches, Canyon Towhees, and Bewick's Wrens. We then drove to the Lawrence Wood Picnic Grounds and walked the 2.4 miles of the Nature Conservancy's Madera Canyon Trail. This traverses a rich mix of grassland and pinyon/juniper habitats and skirts a productive pond (sadly bereft of wildlife during our visit). Birds we came across included Black-crested Titmouse, Gray Flycatcher, Cassin's & Western Kingbirds, Bushtit, Black-chinned Sparrows, and, a little more surprisingly, Northern Flicker.

We could hardly pass the renowned McDonald Observatory without stopping off at the Visitors Center. It was well worthwhile - as well as learning something about the Observatory itself, we also did a little birding at the Center's feeders, where, as well as several Black-chinned Hummingbirds, we saw our second Rufous of the trip and a wonderful, adult male Broad-tailed Hummingbird.

We had time for another quick visit to Davis Mountains State Park (adding Bushtit and Black-headed Grosbeak to our growing Park list) and an even briefer one to the Fort Davis Historic Site (a particularly well maintained example of a U.S. military post from the 1850s), before an early dinner at the Blue Mountain Bistro. We had arranged to dine particularly early to give us time to return to the State Park in the evening in the hopes of seeing Elf Owls. From recent negative reports, our chances of success didn't seem high, but we managed to be in the right place at exactly the right time, and were rewarded with brief views of two owls as they flew out from their daytime roost in a woodpecker hole in a wooden utility post—a very satisfying end to the day!

## **Saturday, July 27      Departures**

We had to get back to El Paso by noon, so we decided to have a leisurely breakfast at Stone Village Market and have a bit of time to stop should we see anything of particular interest on the drive back. As it happened there was little new, but we did get last views of Chihuahuan Ravens and Swainson's Hawks, as well as Black-tailed Jackrabbit, another lone buck Pronghorn, and of course Greater Roadrunner (at least our 30th of the trip!). We bid goodbye to Chip and Lisa at the Paisano Hotel in Marfa, where they were going to spend an artistic weekend, and then drove to the airport to conclude an enjoyable and productive visit to West Texas.

## **Photo Credits:**

Lower Burro Mesa Pour-off with group, Michael Marsden (MM); Greater Roadrunner, Jean Reger (JR); Clark's Grebe, JR; Pronghorn, JR; Say's Pheobe, JR; Lucifer's Hummingbird, Nancy Braun (NB); Scissor-tailed Flycatcher,

Terry Peterson (TP); Hepatic Tanager, NB; Rufous-crowned Sparrow, TP; Spotted Towhee, JR; Cordilleran Flycatcher, Sandy Sorkin (SS); Zone-tailed Hawk, Hugh Simmons (HS); Brown-crested Flycatcher, HS; Scaled Quail, TP; Blue Grosbeak, TP; Northern Flicker, Barry Ramdass (BR).