

Texas Hill Country

Birding & Nature | Trip Report

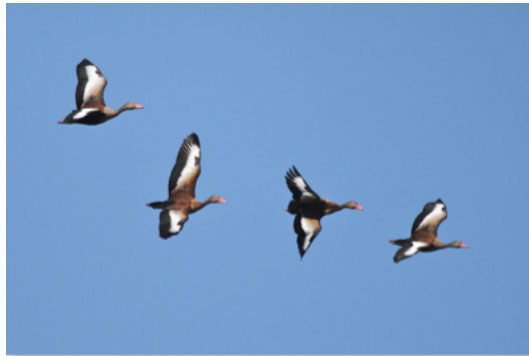
April 15 – 20, 2018 | Written by Bob Behrstock



Participants: Dwayne and Marj, Susan and Terry, Don and Ann, Judy and Karen

Sun., April 15 Arrival in San Antonio / On to the Hill Country & Lodgings at Neal's in Concan

Our group gathered in San Antonio, and by 1:30 p.m., we were headed to the Hill Country. Heading westward from Hondo, we could see the limestone hills of the Edward's Plateau in the distance. During the 1800s, many considered the escarpment we approached to be the



beginning of "Out West." To the East were the deep fertile soils that continued through the Gulf Coast and produced the country's cotton. Westward on the elevated limestone plateau was little more than a thin veneer of soil that supported tough shrubs, tough ranchers, and the cattle, sheep, and goats that were symbols of western expansion.

A stop at a feedlot just west of Sabinal yielded the hoped for Yellow-headed Blackbirds, plus Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, Purple Martins, Common Ground-Doves, Least Sandpipers, and a locally uncommon Lesser Yellowlegs. Along the feedlot's entrance road, I was able to relocate the uncommon Spice Lily or Texas Tuberose (*Manfreda maculosa*), I'd found a year earlier. Disappointingly, this season's blossoms had not yet opened. Just a bit further west, we prospected northward on a county road. There, a farm pond produced nine American Golden-Plovers--very good birds at this location and habitat. Nearby, a Loggerhead Shrike posed nicely for the group, many graceful Scissor-tailed Flycatchers foraged off the fence lines, and Vesper Sparrows and Swainson's Hawks put in an appearance.



Arriving at Neal's, we settled in to our spacious multiple-roomed cabins, then reconvened outside at 5:30. Our walk to dinner was accompanied by the songs of Carolina Wren, Yellow-throated Warbler, Carolina Chickadees, Black-crested Titmice, and the other common residents on the property.

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Mon., April 16 Uvalde / Ft. Inge / Cook's Slough / Fish Hatchery / Neal's

After our 6:30 breakfast, we made a brief stop at Neil's Cattle guard feeding station, that produced just a few birds. We then drove south to Uvalde, dropping to lower elevation amid a mix of desert scrub and agricultural lands.

Our first stop was at the gate to Fort Inge. This historic site contains a few remains of a military outpost active during the mid-1800s. It is closed during the week but I had a feeling we might encounter some birds at the entrance. Among the species here were a lovely male Painted Bunting, a couple of vocal Cactus Wrens, and a singing male Pyrrhuloxia.

We then made the short drive to Cook's Slough, finding a Bronzed Cowbird en route. Cook's Slough is a municipal water treatment project that was developed into a nature park with some 25 acres of ponds and mesquite woodland. At this popular spot for local and out-of-town birders, we saw several species of dabbling ducks, a fly-by Neotropic Cormorant, Blue Grosbeaks, Bell's Vireo, eastern and western forms of Yellow-rumped Warbler (watch for a proposed split of these distinctive birds), and two species more characteristic of the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas: Great Kiskadee and Olive Sparrow. There were also a number of butterflies, dragonflies, and wildflowers, and a nightmare's worth of large Diamondback Water Snakes basking in the sun.

Backtracking to Uvalde, we had lunch at the Tea Room, which included salads, sandwiches, and their signature roasted poblano chile soup. After lunch we drove a short distance west to the federal fish hatchery. Water levels were high on the birding lake, precluding shorebird activity, but there were a number of species of ducks and dragonflies present, and an adjacent fish pond produced several glowing Cinnamon Teal.

Returning to Neal's, we visited their pecan grove, where feeders and the surrounding trees yielded Eastern Bluebird, Cedar Waxwings, (Eastern) Nashville Warbler, and a fine Yellow-throated Vireo. From 3:15 to 4:30, we took a bit of a break, then some of us walked down to the Frio River, where we saw a few birds including Black Phoebe and Northern Parula. Dinner was at 6 p.m., providing us with the daily iteration of chicken.



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Tues., April 17 Park Chalk Bluff & Nueces River/Frio Bat Cave

We left Neal's around 7:15, again driving southward to Uvalde. Approaching town, we turned northwest toward Park Chalk Bluff where we would spend the latter part of the morning along the banks of the Nueces River. But first, we continued northwest to some rocky slopes where we hoped to find Gray Vireo. We slowly drove a stretch of road that is home to this nondescript Southwestern species, listening intently for its slow, rough song.



Unsuccessful after our first pass, we made a U-turn to revisit the same stretch of road. It was then that we realized that the Texas Department of Transportation had begun to repave that very stretch of road and, despite my earnest birder's plea, we were unceremoniously escorted away from the site. Good-bye Gray Vireo.

Backtracking to Park Chalk Bluff, we worked the park's entrance road looking for Bell's Vireo, orioles, grosbeaks, sparrows, and other species characteristic of the area's dry scrub. Driving through the park, we dropped to the pecan grove bordering the Nueces River--here broad, shallow, and flowing over gleaming limestone below the park's namesake white bluff. During weekends, this area is choked with tourists but today, we pretty much had the park to ourselves. Besides the expected Vermilion Flycatchers, Carolina Chickadees, Summer Tanagers, and



Yellow-throated Warblers, we had nice looks at a pair of Couch's Kingbirds, saw a half a dozen each of Yellow-breasted Chats and Red-eyed Vireos, and noted several singing Orchard Orioles--the first year males providing a lesson in potentially confusing plumages.

The biggest surprise here was a small flock of rather quiet Green Jays feeding along the hillside on the northern margin of the grove. Green Jays have recently pioneered northward from the lower Rio Grande Valley and are a rather special addition to any Hill Country trip.

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We then drove back toward the park entrance where weekenders' cabins are scattered among a grove of huge, Ball moss-covered Live Oaks. Being a weekday, the often crowded camping area had been reclaimed by Eastern Fox Squirrels, Black-crested Titmice, and Carolina Wrens, so we picked a couple of shady picnic tables for the bag lunches provided by Neal's. A short walk to the river netted us a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker feeding with the more common Ladder-backed and Golden-fronted woodpeckers. After birding the park just a bit more, we stopped for a cold drink near the entrance then returned to Neal's.

Timing of the evening activity dictated an early dinner, as it did for a couple other tour groups sharing the restaurant with us. A short drive brought us to the entrance gate of the Frio Bat cave by 6:00 p.m. There, we were met by interpretive naturalist Bain Walker of Frio Bat Flights who led a procession of vehicles through ranch property to the bat cave. As several dozen Cave Swallows flew in and out of the cave entrance, we listened to Bain discussing the biology of Mexican free-tailed Bats (we were at a nursery cave inhabited almost exclusively by females) and the economic history of the cave.

At one point, a swallow-hunting Peregrine Falcon blasted past us close enough that we could feel the rush of air from its wings. Later, a Merlin and Swainson's Hawks joined in to hunt the emerging bats. At 7:16, a few bats fluttered out of the gaping cave entrance, followed almost immediately by their myriads of sisters. Frio Bat Cave is a summer home to some 10-12 million bats--the second largest aggregation of mammals on Earth. As we sat on blocks of limestone, or stood close to the cave entrance, a continuous ribbon of bats streamed past us just a few feet away, their wings rustling softly as they flew by. All the bats flew southward toward agricultural fields where the moths they feed on are numerous. Within a few minutes, streams of bats resembling wisps of smoke extended for miles and could be followed in binoculars until they disappeared into the growing darkness.



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At one point, Bain took out his phone and showed us how the massive emergence appeared on weather radar, a spreading green and yellow storm of tiny winged creatures. Each of these bats would fill its belly with insects, a large proportion of which were harmful agricultural pests. The millions of moths consumed by the colony not only provided nourishment for the adults and their young, but allowed the farmers to decrease the use of crop chemicals, a huge economic and environmental benefit for the land owners. Tonight's guests included visitors from California, the Southwest, Illinois, and as far away as Australia and Germany. Collectively awestruck, we spent an hour admiring the spectacle--some of us photographing the emergence against a colorful sunset--and then returned to Neal's.

Wed., April 18 Kerr Wildlife Management Area/Mo Ranch/Hunt/Neal's



After a 6:30 breakfast, we departed north then east and crossed into the drainage of the Guadalupe River to visit Kerr Wildlife Management Area. En route, we saw Wild Turkeys, and a few introduced "Texotics" including Blackbuck Antelope, Elk, and an Emu. Kerr is an easy place to be a naturalist: no traffic, one road, places to pull out, and birds, wildflowers and butterflies anywhere you stop.



Not far from the headquarters buildings, we pulled off the road to check out the birds singing nearby. Karen soon had everyone admiring the lush Antelope horns Milkweed and found a vine of the very different-looking Pearl milkweed. At several stands of low juniper/oak woodland, we had looks at Black-capped Vireos. This tiny and attractive songbird has been an Endangered Species for some 30 years but was recently delisted in light of successful management (and a

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decrease in goat production that has permitted the bird's habitat to heal). At one stop, a couple of Golden-cheeked Warblers (a priority species for the trip) were singing and everyone got good looks at those birds--especially fortuitous, as they were largely invisible where we expected them later in the tour. Other species we encountered included Eastern Phoebe, Field Sparrow, Wild Turkey, Hutton's Vireo, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Canyon Wren, and Ash-throated Flycatcher.



Leaving Kerr, we drove a short distance to Mo Ranch, a huge religious retreat that invites birders. There were no particular ornithological goals but the previous year I'd seen lots of flowers at a stream crossing so we visited that spot. I was thinking especially about Scarlet leather flower, a richly colored bell-like Clematis that is endemic to just a few counties in the Hill Country. Continuing through verdant ranch land, we reached the town of Hunt where we had lunch at a restaurant with a nice selection of entrees and several wicked desserts. From Hunt, we drove westward along a scenic road that follows the South Fork of the Guadalupe River. Before dinner, several of us took a walk on Neal's grounds, which netted us a Verdin and excellent views of White-eyed Vireo.



Thurs., April 19 Lost Maples State Natural Area/Utopia/Neal's

We left Neal's around 7:15, driving East on 1050 past Garner State Park to Utopia. We stopped first at the Utopia City Park where feeders often produce Ruby-throated Hummingbirds. Learning that the feeders weren't being maintained, we spent a while birding the pretty Live Oak grove in the park. Everyone was pleased to see a pair of Barred Owls that posed for photos, as well as several Blue Jays, both of which are Eastern species whose ranges extend westward into the Hill Country.



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Continuing northward, we followed the Sabinal River until, a bit north of Vanderpool, we arrived at Lost Maples State Natural Area. The park's name refers to a disjunct population of Bigtooth Maples (a familiar plant where I live in SE Arizona) that shade the canyon bottom on both sides of the scenic Maples Trail. We began on the Maples Trail, at first shaded by the trees that line the narrow canyon bottom, then walking in the sun after the canyon widened. The Maples Trail has always been my go-to place for Golden-cheeked Warblers that construct their nests with the bark of Ashe Junipers growing among the Bigtooth Maples.

During the walk, we saw a number of birds, some new butterflies for the trip, and several interesting plants including the yellow morph of Red buckeye, but we only had one brief look at a Golden-cheeked Warbler, highlighting the value of yesterday's unplanned sightings at Kerr WMA.

Once back at the van, we found a couple shady picnic tables to enjoy a picnic lunch I'd assembled. After that short break, we drove uphill to a blind and feeding station. There, we had good looks at Rufous-crowned and Lincoln's sparrows, Scott's Oriole, and a couple of White-tipped Doves--another South Texas bird that has spread northward into the Hill Country. Returning to Neal's, we broke our usual routine as we'd been told in advance the restaurant would be closed this evening. Instead, we drove the River Road to Hippy Chic's River Shack, a popular outdoor eatery with vintage music, an eclectic menu featuring many dishes named after rock stars, and some of the best salsa any of us had tasted.



Fri., April 20 Departures

We began with the usual 6:30 breakfast. Afterward, we jumped into the van and drove across the Frio River to one of Neal's more distant cabins. There, we checked out a water drip where

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Dwayne, Marj, and Judy had encountered a few different birds while away from the group. We hung around long enough to see a Spotted Towhee then drove back to Neal's main property to check out the cattle guard feeders. After seeing a few of the common birds, we returned to the cabins to pack.

As it turned out, Karen was the only one who actually had a flight. Dwayne, Marj, and Judy departed by car for adventures in East Texas. Terry and Susan, Don and Ann, Karen and I drove to San Antonio with a stop at the locally famous Haby's Alsatian Bakery, where we fortified ourselves for the last forty minutes' drive to the airport.

After dropping the couples off at an airport hotel and Karen at her terminal, I swapped the rental van for my car and returned to Neal's for a couple extra days with private clients.



Photo credits: Black-bellied Whistling ducks, Barry Ulman; Spice lily Texas Tuberose, Robert Behrstock (ROBE); Cactus Wren, Peg Abbott (PEAB); Pyrrhuloxia, Terry Peterson (TEPE); Rio Frio Neals Lodges, ROBE; Northern Parula, PEAB; Vermilion Flycatcher, Steve Wolfe; Green Jays, ROBE; Gulf Fritillary, TEPE; Swainson's Hawk, Greg Smith; Frio Bat Cave, Naturalist Journeys Stock (NJS); Bluebonnets, ROBE; Black Capped Vireo, Tom Dove; Wild Turkeys, (NJS); Verdin, Sandy Sorkin; Barred Owl, TEPE; Arizona Sister, TEPE; Scott's Oriole, TEPE; and Spotted Towhee, Barry Ramdass (BARA).

