



Trip Itinerary: Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas Hill Country, and Big Bend Birding

Day 1: Arrival in McAllen; Afternoon Birding Rio Grande Valley

On the first day, the group will meet Jesse Huth, the tour leader and lead bird guide, at the Alamo Inn (in the small town of Alamo, just outside of McAllen, Texas).

Upon arrival, Jesse will provide a brief orientation for the afternoon, and the group can get right to birding.

This afternoon and after the group gets together at the Alamo Inn, we will head first to Estero Llano Grande State Park. This 230-acre park is part of the World Birding Center network. It has an extensive trail system around the ponds and forests. Cinnamon Teal can usually be seen from the visitor center, as can Great Kiskadee, Plain Chachalaca, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Vermilion Flycatcher, Couch's Kingbird and several species of waterfowl. We will take a short walk around the ponds to look for Ringed Kingfisher, Belted Kingfisher and Green Kingfisher, and we will carefully search a short stretch of trail for the Common Pauraque that often sleep within a few feet of the path. As we walk around the ponds, we may encounter Olive Sparrow. When we enter the more forested "tropical zone" of the park we may find Clay-colored Thrush, Green Jay, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Gray Hawk, Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet and Tropical Parula. A drip and feeding station may bring in White-tipped Dove, Wilson's Warbler, Orange-crowned Warbler and Nashville Warbler.

We will spend the night at the Alamo Inn.



Day 2: Full Day Birding Rio Grande Valley: South Padre Island and Brownsville

We will likely need to leave the inn by 6:30 AM to get to an Aplomado Falcon site close to sunrise. We will have an early breakfast at the Alamo Inn (possibly take-out style tasty breakfast tacos) before leaving.

After we leave the falcon site, we will drive to South Padre Island. On the island we will first visit the SPI Birding and Nature Center, which is one of several units of the World Birding Center found in the Valley. The center features almost a mile of boardwalk over an excellent wetland. Here we will enjoy viewing shorebirds, rails, terns, Neotropic Cormorant, Reddish Egret, Roseate Spoonbill, Black Skimmer and other wildlife such as the American Alligator. Many visits here allow good looks at Least Bittern and/or American Bittern, along with the local “Mangrove” subspecies of Yellow Warbler. During low tide, the mudflats can be covered with many different kinds of shorebirds, including American Oystercatcher, Long-billed Curlew, Marbled Godwit, Ruddy Turnstone and Dunlin. Gull-billed Terns and Sandwich Terns sometimes put in an appearance.

We will likely stop at a beach on our way off the island for opportunities to add more seabirds to our list. Northern Gannet is a possibility, as are typical coastal shorebirds like Black-bellied Plover, Willet, Ruddy Turnstone and Sanderling. Along the drive out to the beach, we should find Harris’s Hawk, White-tailed Hawk and Chihuahuan Raven.

Depending on reports and group willingness we may visit the Brownsville Landfill. Chihuahuan Raven and several gull species are frequently seen here, but the main

draw is the Tamaulipas Crow which is beginning to make sporadic visits after a nearly seven-year hiatus from the site.

At the end of the day, we will have an early dinner in Brownsville then head to Oliveira Park just before sunset. A large flock of Red-crowned Parrots gathers to roost here every night after spending the day out foraging. Small numbers of Green Parakeets may be seen as well, along with a few species of escaped parrots that are becoming established in the area (especially White fronted, Red-lored, Yellow-headed and Lilac-crowned Parrots).

After the parrot show we will drive back to our lodging and review plans for the next day. It may make sense to pick up some Mexican food on the way back to the hotel.

We again spend the night at the Alamo Inn.





Day 3: Full Day Birding: Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park, Anzalduas Park and Other Key Area Sites in the Rio Grande Valley

We start the day with a 30-minute drive to Bentsen State Park, likely leaving the inn around 7:00 AM.

Some consider Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park among the best places for spring birding in the Lower Valley region. Possibilities include Plain Chachalaca, Hook-billed Kite (rare), White-tipped Dove, Great Kiskadee, Green Jay, Clay-colored Thrush, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Tropical Parula, Hooded Oriole and Altamira Oriole.

Curve-billed Thrashers and Long-billed Thrashers can usually be located in the dense undergrowth, and Greater Roadrunners hang out at the park entrance. There's a good chance we'll see Javelinas as well.

We will leave Bentsen after lunch, and drive along some dirt roads and levees, scanning for Mottled Ducks, herons, raptors and kingfishers.

Next, we will head to Anzalduas Park, a good location for wintering warblers, sparrows, and sometimes Sprague's Pipits. Because of a bend in the Rio Grande, much of this park is actually south of a portion of Mexico. The open areas and riverfront here offer a good opportunity for Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, Neotropic Cormorant, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Black Phoebe, Couch's Kingbird, a few shorebirds, herons, and terns. Gray Hawks and Zone-tailed Hawks are sometimes seen flying up and down the river.

Once we are finished birding here, and if we still have time, we will move on to another of the nearby birding hotspots.

We spend another night at the Alamo Inn.



Day 4: Morning Birding in Rio Grande Valley to Salineño and then Birding to Junction

Today we will pack up our gear, check out, and try to have an early morning departure (close to 6:00 AM or a bit before), allowing us to arrive at Salineño right at sunrise. This is the best time to look for Muscovy Ducks flying down the river and Red-billed Pigeons leaving their roosts. We may also have a Ringed Kingfisher zip by or a flyover by a Zone-tailed Hawk. Our main target as the morning progresses will be Morelet's Seedeater, recently split from White-collared Seedeater. The excellent feeders here usually bring in Audubon's Oriole, Altamira Oriole, Green Jay, Great Kiskadee, Long-billed Thrasher, Curve-billed Thrasher and more.

After a morning at Salineño we will bird the nearby "dump road" to look for Cactus Wren, Cassin's Sparrow, Pyrrhuloxia and Black-tailed Gnatcatcher. From here we will move on to Starr County Park for more chances at scrubland birds.

Later in the afternoon we will begin our five-hour drive to Junction along back roads, through a very scenic portion of the Texas Hill Country. On the drive we will keep an eye out for Northern Bobwhite in the grass along the side of the road and make stops along the way as needed. We should see many sparrows including Clay-colored Sparrow, Grasshopper Sparrow, Lark Sparrow and Vesper Sparrow.

Overnight in Junction.





Day 5: Morning Birding at South Llano River State Park, then PM Drive to Big Bend.

In the morning, we will need another early start to sort out breakfast and get to our birding location close to sunrise. (If we got in late the night before, we may be able to sleep in a little bit today, if desired).

We will start the birding day at nearby South Llano River State Park. This park is one of the best places in the state to get a look at the Black-capped Vireo. These birds can be difficult to see, but there are several areas in the park where they will sit in treetops singing. There is also a good chance to locate the Golden-cheeked Warbler, as they frequent several areas in the park as well. Other birds of interest here include Vermilion Flycatcher, Painted Bunting, Scott's Oriole, Bewick's Wren, Bell's Vireo, Cassin's Sparrow, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Black-throated Sparrow and Lark Sparrow.

Once we are satisfied with our looks at the vireo and warbler, we will begin the drive to Big Bend. Without stops, this would take about six hours.



Day 6: Morning Hike for Colima Warbler and More; Afternoon Focus on Other Big Bend and South Texas Specialties

We need to make a very early start this morning. The goal will be to be packed and ready to depart at 5:30 AM for the long hike.

We should be on the trail no later than 6:30 AM, which is about an hour before sunrise. Good hiking shoes, plenty of water (ideally in a camelback type pack), a flashlight, and trail food of your choice will be needed today. Depending on the group's preference, we can ascend high enough to see the Colima Warbler and return to the lodge in time for lunch or pack a lunch for the trail to give us more time to search out other rarities like Painted Redstart, Dusky-capped Flycatcher, Band-tailed Pigeon, Violet-green Swallow, Western Tanager and any rarities that may be in the area at the time.

The hike up Pinnacles Trail will take as much time as it takes. It is just under three miles with a ~1,500-foot elevation change. The highest point is right around 7,000 feet. Don't be afraid to ask for breaks if needed - the birds live up there and aren't going to leave though they are easier earlier in the morning. We will of course stop for interesting birds along the way, especially if we can track down a pre-dawn Mexican Whip-poor-will. If we turn around at the first Colima Warbler we see, we will likely have a six-mile round trip. If we choose to continue further, we may opt to complete the loop down the Laguna Meadows trail, which will make an eight-and-a-half-mile round trip, but with a bit less steep of a descent that is easier to walk.

During whatever is left of the afternoon we will search for any needed birds we did not see along the trail. Possibilities include Blue-throated Hummingbird in Chisos Basin,

Crissal Thrasher at Dugout Wells, Lucifer Hummingbird, Varied Bunting, Cassin's Sparrow, Black-chinned Sparrow and more.



Day 7: Morning Big Bend Birding and visit Christmas Mountain Oasis on way to Davis Mountains State Park

Today we will have a chance to bird around Big Bend as needed to find any remaining birds. This is also a backup day to hike in case weather or other event prevented us from finding the Colima Warbler the previous day.

After we have finished here, we will have an early lunch and move on to our next birding spot.

The Christmas Mountain Oasis is private property that is being managed as a bird sanctuary. The owner allows birders to visit and enjoy the feeders, so we will plan to spend an hour or two here as long as the roads are passable at the time of the trip. The bumpy road is worth it, however, as this is the best location in the state to find Lucifer Hummingbird. Varied Buntings frequent the feeders, Gray Flycatchers and Dusky Flycatchers can be found around the tree thickets, and Black-tailed Gnatcatchers nest out in the scrub.

In the late afternoon we will head towards Davis Mountains State Park to check in to our accommodation and do a little evening birding. Montezuma Quail get active around dusk, and Phainopepla can usually be found.



Day 8: Morning Birding at Davis Mountains; PM Flights out of Midland, Texas

For our final morning, we will begin birding at the state park bird blind, which often hosts many resident species along with western migrants like Townsend's Warbler, Hermit Warbler, MacGillivray's Warbler, Scott's Oriole, Black-headed Grosbeak, Lazuli Bunting and more.

We will next begin our drive to Midland with enough time for a few birding stops along the way to pick up birds of interest. A likely stop is Balmorhea Lake, which attracts a number of waterbirds and is known to regularly have unusual sightings. We may also opt to drive to any other rare birds that may be reported in the area.

At some point we will stop for lunch, then drive the rest of the way to the Midland airport, likely arriving by about 2:30 PM.