RIO GRANDE VALLEY

February 3-8, 2024

Well, where to start? Let’s start well before the beginning. In November it became apparent that this was going to be a good year for rare birds in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. Roadside Hawk showed up and was hanging out at a resaca, while the Gray-collared Becard favored the visitor center area and tram road, the Crimson-collared Grosbeak could be found at sign D, the Golden-crowned Warbler was at the bend in the trail behind a small tree by the pond, the Fan-tailed Warbler was skulking near a culvert. But all this was going down well before the start of the tour, and I knew these incredible rarities would not be hanging around nearly three months later when the tour started in early February. However, thankfully, I was wrong. They all remained, and all put on a show for us, though one show was rather frustrating.

Now to just before the beginning, Bob, Brandon, and I left Houston at 4 o’clock on the morning of the tour to go straight to Resaca de la Palma SP under the guise of scouting, we all needed the Fan-tailed Warbler for a life bird. A few days earlier I truly scouted the state park with a fellow birder from Houston and did not see the warbler, but I got the lay-of-the-land. This time we did find the Fan-tailed Warbler but realized it would be highly unlikely to get all in our group on the bird, if we could even find the bird again the next day. The viewing area was small, the number of viewers large, and the bird was extremely secretive. But we would try tomorrow with all our tour members.

We met the three Pennsylvanians at the Harlingen Airport at the appointed time and zoomed off to nearby Harlingen City Lake for a bit of birding before sunset. Here we found Black-bellied Whistling Duck galore, Ring-necked Duck, Forster’s Tern, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Black-crested Titmouse, and Orange-crowned and Yellow-throated Warbler. It is nice when participants are getting life birds in the fading light on day one. And as the light faded even more on our way to the hotel, we spotted twelve Green Parakeets on the powerline right in front of us while at a stop sign. This of course, dictated that I pull over allowing participants to hop out of the vehicle for their lifer looks at the cooperative parakeets.

On our first full day of birding, we decided to go straight to Resaca de la Palma State Park to chase rarities while enjoying the many resident birds of the Valley. The Roadside Hawk that had been seen every day since November was not seen all day today, how could that be? I thought this bird was a guarantee, show up at the resaca (as I did in November) and the hawk is there within thirty minutes. Darn, we moved on to the Gray-collared Becard which we saw near the visitor center. While looking for, and seeing the becard, we enjoyed Plain Chachalaca, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Great Kiskadee, Long-billed Thrasher, and the striking Alamira Oriole.

After viewing the Gray-collared Becard, we headed off to the UT Rio Grande Valley Campus in search of more Valley specialties and hopes of seeing the Fan-tailed Warbler. It was a life bird for me two weeks prior to this tour. After seeing how many people were looking for the warbler two weeks ago and just yesterday, I had little hope the group would be able to get on the bird. However, as we walked up to the appointed spot, miraculously there was not a birder in sight. Brandon and I had a look into the area where we had seen the bird previously, and there it was, skulking in the brush alongside the resaca. The other members of the group came over and everyone had looks at this mega rarity. Along with the warbler we had Least Grebe, Solitary Sandpiper, Black Phoebe, Tropical Kingbird, Blue-headed Vireo, Clay-colored Thrush, Hooded Oriole, and another Yellow-throated Warbler. After all this “work” we had a lovely picnic lunch on campus watching Black-bellied Whistling Duck and White Pelican along with other birds.

From here we decided to press our luck with another hard-to-find warbler, the Golden-crowned Warbler at Hugh Ramsey Park. Here we had Plain Chachalaca, Great Kiskadee, Green Jay, Gray Catbird, Clay-colored Thrush, and the very hard to see Golden-crowned Warbler. What a day of birding.

With high winds predicted for the next day we decided to head to the coast and look for large birds on the water, not small birds getting blown around in the wind. We found the birds while the wind found us. But before reaching the coast we stopped at the Aplomado Falcon Viewing Area for scope looks at this magnificent raptor. Along the boardwalks at South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center and the South Padre Island Convention Center we spotted numerous ducks including close to a thousand Redhead, Common Gallinule, Black-necked Stilt, Black-bellied Plover, Willet, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, both night-herons, Caspian Tern, Tricolored and Green Heron, a remarkable look at Green Kingfisher, more Great Kiskadees and more Tropical Kingbirds. With the wind still blowing we decided to work our way toward the Laguna Vista Nature Trail to look for hummingbirds and other birds. Here we had Buff-bellied Hummingbird, White-tipped Dove, Osprey, Crested Caracara, Long-billed Thrasher, and Olive Sparrow. On our way back to Hugh Ramsey Park we detoured to the Burrowing Owl spot and had nice looks at the owl as it looked at us. We decided to have another go at the Golden-crowned Warbler, resulting in even less satisfactory looks than yesterday. After looking for a small hard to see bird, we decided to go look for big, loud, easy to see birds. In Weslaco we found them, 150 Red-crowned Parrots coming to feed and roost in a fruiting tree alongside a neighborhood road, what a sight and what sounds. We also found the two Yellow-headed Parrots mixed in the flock and a low flying Zone-tailed Hawk.

With little wind predicted for today we headed straight to Frontera Audubon Center to look for the Crimson-collared Grosbeak. At the numerous feeding stations and along the many meandering trails we spotted Plain Chachalaca, Inca and White-tipped Dove, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, White-eyed Vireo, Long-billed Thrasher, Nashville and Wilson’s Warbler. After a lot of patience, the Crimson-collared Grosbeak popped up for all the see, and then was immediately flushed by a Northern Mockingbird, allowing only decent to no looks of this super rarity. Ugh. After the long search we decided to make a beeline for Anzalduas Park. Here we had a wonderful picnic style lunch while observing Neotropic Cormorant, Spotted Sandpiper, White Ibis, Gray Hawk, Ringed Kingfisher, Black and Eastern Phoebe, American Pipit, Nashville and Yellow-rumped Warbler, and Northern Parula. From here it was a quick trip to the National Butterfly Center to sit for a feeder watch. Here we had Buff-bellied Hummingbird flashing its green gorget, Green Jays all over, Curve-billed Thrasher, Olive Sparrow, Altamira Oriole, and some had looks at the Audubon’s Oriole that refused to come to the feeders. We arrived at Bentsen Rio Grande Valley SP with about an hour and a half of daylight left and at the feeders and Visitor Center Trail we encountered Black-chinned Hummingbird, Green Jay, Great Kiskadee, Black-crested Titmouse, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Long-billed Thrasher, Clay-colored Thrush, Altamira Oriole, Bronzed Cowbird, Black-and-white Warbler, Orange-crowned Warbler and Common Yellowthroat.

On our last day of birding, it was decided we would try again for the Roadside Hawk and maybe see the Rose-throated Becard we missed while seeing the Gray-collared Becard two days earlier. As planned, we arrived early at Resaca de la Palma SP, walked to the boardwalk and saw no Roadside Hawk. That’s when a fellow birder informed us, “you just missed the hawk, it was out in the open”. Geez, but with a little waiting the hawk did return and perch out in the open for us. With the rare Roadside Hawk “in the bag”, we began to work the parking lot for the feeding flocks and here we found the Gray-collared Becard again, Rose-throated Becard, Olive Sparrow, Nashville and Pine Warbler, a stunning Tropical Parula, and finally the Western Tanager. What a morning of birding this was, in fact what a tour this was. But wait, there’s more. It was back to Frontera Audubon Center to try again for the Crimson-collared Grosbeak, and after a lot of waiting, cursing, sitting, walking, and resting the bird was found low to the ground and then sat out in the open for all to see. Another picnic style lunch was had today, this time at Estero Llano Grande SP where after a lot of looking we found the cryptic Common Pauraque among the leaf litter. In the marshy area we found American Avocet, Black-necked Stilt, Long-billed Dowitcher, Stilt Sandpiper, Yellow-crowned and Black-crowned Night-Herons, Roseate Spoonbill, and Tree Swallow.