Remote West Texas Tour 2024 NO

Rio Grande Valley Rarities Tour 2024 YES

February 23 – March 1, 2024

In early November rarities from the south began to invade the Rio Grande Valley like Roadside Hawk, Bare-throated Tiger Heron, Crimson-collared Grosbeak, and Golden-crowned Warbler. Then on January 5 a Fan-tailed Warbler was found on the UT Rio Grande Valley Campus. And remarkably all these birds remained for our scheduled Valley tour in early February. Here is a link to that trip list.

https://ebird.org/tripreport/196868

After Brandon and I finished the tour mentioned above we turned our attention to the upcoming Remote West Texas tour, it’s always nice to be birding in West Texas. We had a nice itinerary with the routine West Texas birds scoped out, all was in place, flights, hotel reservations, and van rental. Then, a participant sent me an email jokingly, though maybe not, indicating it was too bad we weren’t going to the rarity filled Valley instead of remote West Texas with the routine birds of West Texas present. I then, jokingly, though maybe not, emailed back indicating I’d go back to the Valley if everyone on the tour agreed. Well, everyone readily agreed. From there it was just a matter of changing reservations and arranging for a departure time from Houston. We were driving to the Valley, not flying to El Paso.

On the appointed day five birders loaded up in the rental vehicle and worked our way south. The sixth participant, soon to become a grandmother, decided to drive her own vehicle and met us in Rio Grande City where we would spend the next three nights.

We made the requisite stop for the Cattle Tyrant in Corpus Christi and after a bit of looking we received a tip from a parking lot attendant that the bird was recently seen in the Best Western Hotel flower bed area. Though we never found a flower bed area, we found a very confiding Cattle Tyrant. After an hour or so of not finding the Bar-tailed Godwit in Corpus Christi we headed southwest to Rio Grande City. We were scheduled to go on to the Santa Margarita Ranch to nail the Bare-throated Tiger Heron in two days, meaning we had all day tomorrow to bird the local area.

For our first full day of birding in the Valley as a group of six we started at Salineno right along the river and then moved on to the feeders at Salineno. Here we found Plain Chachalaca, Least Grebe, Red-billed Pigeon, White-tipped Dove, Gray Hawk, Ringed Kingfisher, Great Kiskadee, Green Jay, Long-billed Thrasher, the flashy Altamira Oriole, and after a bit of a wait at the feeders we had nice looks at Audubon’s Oriole. A quick trip around Falcon State Park, resulting in a near vehicular collision, produced Common Ground-Dove, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Vesper Sparrow, Green-tailed Towhee, and Pyrrhuloxia. A quick stop at Roma Bluffs turned up nothing new and it was time for an early dinner so we would be well rested for our trek onto the Santa Margarita Ranch for the sure thing Bare-throated Tiger.

Our first two hours on the ranch were spent on the bluffs overlooking the Rio Grande River and seeing birds on both sides of the river. From the bluffs we had plenty of ducks including Wood and Canvasback, flyby Red-billed Pigeon, Limpkin feeding in the river, Wilson’s Snipe, Gray and Swainson’s and Zone-tailed Hawk, Ringed and Green Kingfisher, Couch’s Kingbird, and Morelet’s Seedeater. After the bluffs we ventured to another part of the ranch to view a feeding station and walk to the river to look for the tiger-heron. At the feeding station and along the walk we had nice looks at Brown Jay up close and personal, Blue-headed Vireo, Green Jay, Bewick’s Wren, Clay-colored Thrush, Olive Sparrow, and Altamira Oriole. After two hours of walking the river and looking for the Bare-throated Tiger-Heron, we realized we were not going to see this bird. This was a mega disappointment.

The following day we left early and drove straight to Resaca de la Palma State Park to attempt to find the Gray-collared Becard and Roadside Hawk. The Roadside Hawk proved to be rather cooperative, affording nice looks as it perched in a tree right next to our boardwalk. The pesky becard was not seen today, maybe the high winds had something to do with the lack of sightings. But we did see Peregrine Falcon, Great Kiskadee, Green Jay, Black-crested Titmouse, Black-and-white and Nashville Warbler. Since the winds were high and the becard is seldom seen after 9:30am we headed to the UT Rio Grande Valley Campus for an opportunity to sit and wait for the Fan-tailed Warbler. Here we sat and waited and waited and waited and waited a bit more, but no warbler. We enjoyed a nice picnic lunch on campus with Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Red-crowned Parrot, Green Parakeet, Black Phoebe, Clay-colored Thrush, and Wilson’s Warbler.

The following day found us back at Resaca de la Palma State Park with the same result, visible Roadside Hawk and no becard. Darn. We did get nice looks at both Tropical and Northern Parula as well as other Valley birds. Round two on campus netted a few chiggers and nary a Fan-tailed Warbler. We made a quick run over to Frontera Audubon and did not find the Crimson-collared Grosbeak or Golden-crowned Warbler. In the evening the Weslaco Parrot Roost was a bust, but Olive Garden proved a nice dinner location.

The following morning the winds had died down considerably and finally on our third visit to Resaca de la Palma State Park we had great looks at the Gray-collared Becard. At one point it was on a branch just above our heads. This was a big score. More hours were spent looking for the Fan-tailed Warbler with the same result, no warbler. After three attempts we had had enough. Tomorrow would be a day of just birding the Valley, no rarity chasing. This evening we had dinner in Brownsville and afterwards went to Oliveira Park and had nice looks at Red-crowned, Red-lored, and White-fronted Parrot. This was a nice way to end the day.

Since we decided to bail on the Fan-tailed Warbler that had not been seen in three days, we just went birding. At Estero Llano Grande State Park we found Cinnamon Teal, other ducks, a rather cryptic Common Pauraque, Black-necked Stilt, American Avocet, Stilt and Spotted Sandpiper, Harris’s Hawk, Eastern Screech-Owl, Crested Caracara, and Orange-crowned Warbler. About the time we were admiring the owl we received a report the Fan-tailed Warbler was putting on quite the show at the very spot we had been sitting for the past three days when on campus, this was depressing. It was worse than depressing, but we carried on. From here it was back to Frontera Audubon where we had fantastic views of the Crimson-collared Grosbeak feeding on an orange slice. With the grosbeak checked off we decided to see if we could get the Golden-crowned Warbler at Hugh Ramsey Park in Harlingen, and we did. We nailed it, right next to the walking path putting on a show for all present.

On the last day of the tour the itinerary indicated the day was to be devoted to the long drive back to Houston with an occasional birding stop, HOWEVER, it didn’t seem right to not try for the Fan-tailed Warbler one more time. So, we did. Once the vehicle was loaded with luggage and humans, we headed straight to the UT Rio Grande Valley Campus and sat ourselves down and then got ourselves right back up because the warbler had finally appeared, and boy was it cooperative. This made for a much easier and more pleasant drive back to Houston.

When the trip was changed from West Texas to the Rio Grande Valley, we all decided it would be a “rarities chase tour”, not the usual bird tour. Our goal was to track down the rarities present and not really spend time on the common Valley birds. Everyone on the tour had been to the Valley many times and wanted the rarities.

At the start of the tour Brandon and I came up with a list of rarities we would chase, **Cattle Tyrant**-present since November 12, 2023, **Bar-tailed Godwit**-present for a second winter, **Bare-throated Tiger-Heron**-present since November 12, 2023, **Red-billed Pigeon**-year round, **Brown Jay**-year round, **Morelet’s Seedeater**-year round, **Roadside Hawk**-present since November 7, 2023, **Gray-collared Becard**-present since November 25, 2023, **Crimson-collared Grosbeak**-present since at least December 2, 2023, **Golden-crowned Warbler**-present since early November in two locations, **Fan-tailed Warbler**-present since January 5, 2024. Not all the black bold birds are super rare like Red-billed Pigeon, Brown Jay, and Morelet’s Seedeater, but we included them on our list since they have restricted ranges and limited access to some of their range. This was the first time a Gray-collared Becard was recorded in Texas and only the second time a Fan-tailed Warbler was recorded in Texas. These are indeed special birds.

Unfortunately, the day we were escorted on the Santa Margarita Ranch the Bare-throated Tiger-Heron was not seen. We went out on February 25. Since then the bird has been missed more than it has been seen, maybe it has found another stretch of river it prefers.

It was a great idea to skip West Texas and chase rarities in the Valley. Next year we will return with our usual Rio Grande Valley tour designed to look for birds of the Rio Grande Valley, not just chase rarities. Of course, if some rarities are present we will make an effort to see them, but that will not be the emphasis of the tour.