WEST TEXAS NEW MEXICO

March 8 - 16, 2019

Thursday night while in Albuquerque Brandon and I heard wind howling outside our hotel window, however, Friday dawned cool and calm and scouting proceeded just fine the following day. Later during the tour we had two afternoons with high winds and on the morning of our departure home we had rain and cold temperatures. Aside from those inconveniences we had pretty good weather and some fine birds, along with great scenery.

After a slow start at Embudito Canyon Trail things picked up and we started spotting desert birds like Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Gambel’s Quail, Curve-billed Thrasher, Black-throated Sparrow, and Lesser Goldfinch. The staked out Fox Sparrow made a brief appearance as it scratched for seeds in the underbrush.

We then made the trek across town and up the mountain to Sandia Crest House on Sandia Crest where we were treated to close up looks at Brown-capped, Gray-crowned, and Black Rosy-Finches. Blacks far outnumbered the other two species. Also coming into the seed were Steller’s Jay, Mountain Chickadee, Red-breasted Nuthatch, and a few hardy Dark-eyed Juncos. This year we were able to watch the birds from the comfort of the gift shop where we enjoyed hot chocolate and cold candy bars while viewing the birds. On the way down as we picnicked, we saw a Willimson’s sapsucker and a small flock of Evening Grosbeaks. Later in the day we had close up looks at numerous species of ducks at Rio Grande State Park and Tingley Beach Park, and as the day was winding down we had great looks at the staked out Western Screech-Owl in a tree at Columbus Park.

The next day we worked other areas in and around Albuquerque and found numerous Sagebrush Sparrows and a few cooperative Crissal Thrashers at Petroglyphs National Monument. Los Poblanos Open Space provided a refreshing walk and a few calling Western Meadowlarks, perched kestrels, and a few Eastern and Western Bluebirds. We eventually ended up in the small town of Socorro that serves as the gateway to Bosque del Apache NWR.

We spent the following day on the refuge, driving the north loop before our picnic lunch at Park Headquarters, and the south loop after lunch. The north loop is where we watched the recently arrived Trumpeter Swan and had nice looks at a female Phainopepla, the male would be seen later on the tour, while both loops provided great looks at numerous species of ducks including Cinnamon Teal, Bufflehead, and small flock of Common Mergansers. At Park Headquarters we scoped the many White-crowned Sparrows and eventually located the immature Golden-crowned Sparrow and Harris’s Sparrow with both species offering extended looks at the two out of range *Zonotrichia* sparrows. The refuge is a wonderful place to spend an entire day leisurely birding. A brief, but pleasant stop at Turtle Bay Park in Socorro produced some easy birding, many American Wigeon and an out of range juvenile Yellow-bellied Sapsucker.

After two nights in Socorro we worked our way south to El Paso with the threat of rain, though none materialized, where we would spend the last four nights. En route we stopped at Percha Dam State Park and watched a pair of Peregrine Falcons interacting, several Kestrels, another Crissal Thrasher, and we located a nicely colored Cassin’s Vireo and soon after a nicely bespectacled Plumbeous Vireo. A stop at Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park in Las Cruces allowed nice looks at a White-tailed Kite desperate to cling to a branch in the powerful winds that sent our potato chips flying and us toward the Ford Expedition for our next stop, El Paso where we spent our remaining four nights. Our first day in El Paso found us starting at Crossroads Ponds with more ducks, then a nice easy walk around the El Paso Country area for Acorn Woodpecker, Phainopepla, both Myrtle and Audubon’s Yellow-rumped Warbler, and scope views of four Lilac-crowned Parrots. A brief stop at nearby Keystone Heritage Park gave us yet again more ducks and Black-necked Stilts and American Avocets, along with Northern Rough-winged, Tree, Cave, Cliff, and Barn Swallows, and even some Yellow-headed Blackbirds. At Ascarate Lake Park we had looks at Neotropic Cormorants, more ducks, Brewer’s Blackbirds, and looks at two Monk Parakeets. Our last stop for the day was Rio Bosque Wetlands where we scared up more ducks, including Blue-winged Teal, Gadwall, and Shoveler. Eventually we located a pair of handsome Harris’s Hawks perched, then flying in the desert scrub around the wetlands.

The following morning was spent relaxing and just birding the desert scrub around the hotel. McKelligon Canyon in the Franklin Mountains was our first stop of the day where we had our sack lunch and we watched Black-throated Sparrow, Sage Thrasher, Crissal Thrasher, Rock Wren, Chipping Sparrow and Brewer’s Sparrows in a nearby arroyo. Other stops produced more typical desert scrub birds and finally it was time for some delicious State Line barbeque and baked potatoes.

Since I added an extra day to the tour, we had a day of “play”, so it was off to Dell City and the Guadalupe Mountains. The Dell City Loop is an under birded loop that goes from I10 up to the small agricultural town of Dell City and then back to I10 via a different road. On the loop we saw many of the same birds as previously on the trip though we did encounter Ferruginous Hawks and large flock of over 400 Long-billed Curlews right alongside the road. Once back on I10 we made a stop for pictures of Guadalupe Peak that rises to 8,751 feet above sea level. Once an underwater coral reef when much of Texas was a shallow inland sea, the reef has resisted erosion and now juts prominently into the clear blue West Texas sky forming the tallest peak in Texas. The sheer face of El Capitan makes for dramatic scenery and excellent photo opportunities, a group picture was indeed taken. We birded the park headquarters, Frijole Ranch, and lastly, the first portion of the McKittrick Canyon Trail enjoying fine looks at a Townsend Solitaire and others species of the park.