WEST TEXAS AND NEW MEXICO AND JUST TWO ROSY FINCHES

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On the last day of the tour we were to go up Sandia Crest, however, that morning I had to explain to the group the road to the top, and finch feeders, was closed. The group appeared to be understanding, but I suspect disappointed just like myself. After all, this was a finch tour of sorts. Can’t argue with Mother Nature and safety.

Seven days earlier on the first morning of the tour we visited Memorial Park in the very heart of El Paso. We set off to find the long staying Williamson’s Sapsucker which took a while, but as we searched, we found Juniper Titmouse, a species that was staging a massive invasion into El Paso and southern New Mexico this year, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Verdin, Say’s Phoebe, a hard to get on Plumbeous Vireo, Lesser Goldfinch, and a variety of Dark-eyed Junco subspecies. Another species that seemed to be more common in El Paso this year was Red Crossbill, and we had wonderful looks at several bright red males in pines at the park.

After Memorial Park it was off to Arroyo Park for some desert type species. Things started of a bit slow, but picked up as we slowly walked down an arroyo within Arroyo Park. A crowd favorite was the Crissal Thrasher singing in plain sight and perfect sunlight, what a wonderful and complex song it has. We found our first of many Northern Flickers, Cactus Wren, Curve-billed Thrasher, Spotted Towhee, and a lovely Pyrrhuloxia. A quick stop at a friend’s house produced our only Anna’s Hummingbird, a stunning male, and an Inca Dove hiding from a hunting Cooper’s Hawk. McDonalds provided a stop of a different kind, though well deserved. At McKelligon Park we had our first of many sack lunches and then walked down another arroyo having great looks at Rock and Cactus Wren. Our first Black-throated and White-crowned Sparrows were spotted along with a few Canyon Towhee. We never could track down the elusive Black-chinned Sparrow. A few high flying White-throated Swifts proved difficult to initially get on, but as they came closer, we all had nice looks. As we were looking at the White-throated Swifts we also had to spend time looking at, and admiring, the dainty and subtlety marked Brewer’s Sparrow. We ended our day in the El Paso Country area with a productive stop at Crossroads Pond where we encountered a calling Sora, Cinnamon Teal, American Wigeon, and some real Mallards. While walking through the exclusive neighborhood we heard, then found another species making an invasion El Paso County this year, the sleek looking Townsend’s Solitaire, and the more expected Say’s Phoebe. Doniphan Marsh, which is now the well maintained Keystone Heritage Park, allowed a close study of gulls, and more gulls, and more gulls. After spending time searching through hundreds of Ring-billed Guls we spotted Black-legged Kittiwake, Lesser Black-backed Gull, and several Herring Gulls. The kittiwake had been seen in New Mexico this winter, but our sighting was the first for Texas. On a return visit to Keystone Heritage Park, we would track down the long staying male Northern Cardinal, Crissal and Long-billed Thrashers, numerous Gambel’s Quail, Yellow-headed Blackbirds, and Pyrrhuloxia.

Today we met a local birder to seek out the long staying and rather reclusive Pacific Wren in the Sunset neighborhood of the El Paso Country Club area. After an unsuccessful search for the wren, we proceeded to a small pond with Canvasback, Mexican Duck, Bufflehead, Common Merganser, and one of many Black Phoebes we would see throughout the trip. In the same Sunset neighborhood, we encountered another Townsend’s Solitaire, one of many we would see throughout the trip, a cooperative Plumbeous Vireo, Red Crossbill and the rare for El Paso County, Common Grackle. From one country club area to the next. At the Coronado Country Club, we had stunning looks at two stunning birds, Lewis’s and Acorn Woodpeckers. What a treat it was to see two Lewis’s and one Acorn Woodpecker interacting in dead snags along side the well groomed golf course. All this before lunch. Our lunch at Ascarate Park proved difficult because of the wind and as time went by the wind only increased making birding a challenge. We did see the colorful Wood Duck, rare to El Paso Greater Scaup, Ring-necked Duck, Neotropic Cormorant, and had a study of Brewer’s Blackbird. We left with a strong tail wind. Last minute intel had us heading to a locale we had birded many years ago, but not recently, the outskirts of the small town of Horizon. As we pulled up to said location, and before exiting the vehicle, we tallied two Sage Thrashers. Once out of the vehicle we tallied two more. A short walk into the desert scrub revealed two close at hand Sagebrush Sparrows and a glance upward showed just how close by the wind fueled dust storm was.

After three nights, two full days of birding, and 103 species in El Paso County we were off to New Mexico and the promise of rosy finches and other high elevation birds. However, we decided to make one more attempt for the Pacific Wren. After spotting Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Woodhouse’s Scrub Jay, Gray Catbird, Phainopepla, and Lincoln’s Sparrow, Brandon heard the wren. It was very close to the side of the trail and eventually put on quite the show for us. We obtained nice photos and a nice voice recording of this long stay, but hard to see Texas rarity. We had to finally leave this Texas rarity and head to a New Mexico rarity, the Broad-billed Hummingbird at Sagecrest Park. After hiking a very short distance we found the feeder and after a few more minutes so did the hummer. In the same park there were also Juniper Titmouse, Verdin, and Phainopepla.

One of our favorite stops in New Mexico is Percha Dam SP and that is where we ate lunch in a low area out of the wind. Slow and easy walking through the park produced Gadwall, Belted Kingfisher, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Vermilion Flycatcher, great looks at the colorful Western Bluebird, Spotted Towhee and both Myrtle and Audubon subspecies of Yellow-rumped Warbler. A quick stop at Elephant Butte Lake produced the desired large grebes, Clarke’s and Western and the not so desired high winds. The good news is this would be the last day of the wind.

We spent our next two nights in the out of the way town of Socorro, New Mexico, the gateway to Bosque del Apache NWR. On our full day at the bosque, we birded the entrance road where we found three out of range Dunlin, the Visitor Center which is now open post Covid, and the two auto tour loops. For lunch we decided to forgo the usual picnic style lunch and savor the burgers at the Owl Café and Bar just outside the park boundary. Along the loops we encountered numerous species of ducks, a large flock of Snow Geese, many Sandhill Cranes, a few White-faced Ibis, a flock of Wild Turkey, Greater Scaup, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, and a surprise find, a Golden-crowned Sparrow among the many white-crowneds. What a great day it was at Bosque del Apache NWR. A quick stop at Turtle Bay Park, a small park right in town adjacent to a golf course, yielded ducks up close, another Juniper Titmouse, Phainopepla, Red Crossbill, and Pine Siskin.

Once in Albuquerque we made our first stop at Los Poblanos Open Space to get our steps in for the day and life looks for some of a Western Screech Owl peering out at us from the protection of its nest box. Rio Grande Valley SP offered up more ducks up close, Cackling Goose, Hairy and Downy Woodpecker, Black-capped Chickadee, a small flock of Bushtits coming to a feeder, Townsend’s Solitaire, Song Sparrow, and Spotted Towhee. A stop at the famous Balloon Park allowed us to watch a little soccer up close and a Brant up close. What a great bird in a beautiful park.

On our last day of the tour, we were to be heading up Sandia Crest, but instead I was explaining to the group that according to the NM State Transportation website the road is closed, and we cannot try for the finches. The storm that dumped large amounts of snow in the Rockies a few days earlier closed the road a few days and that also explained why there had not been any recent reports from Sandia Crest, no one could get up the mountain. However, I decided we should see how far up the mountain we could go and then try for some mountain birds on foot past the road closed signs. Well, mile after mile on our ascent I kept looking for the road closure signs and massive amounts of snow. They never appeared. So off to the top we went. Within a few minutes a single adult male Black Rosy-Finch perched up for photos and visuals and about an hour later an adult male Brown-capped Rosy-Finch showed up to feed, preen, and display itself. Though I had wished for a swirling flock of 20 or 30 birds, people enjoyed their lifer looks at two of the three finches. We also had nice looks at the feeder of Steller’s Jay, Mountain Chickadee, Cassin’s Finch, and Hairy Woodpecker. After all the excitement we had our last sack lunch at the Tijeras Ranger Station with another Townsend’s Solitaire. A little down the road it was Pygmy Nuthatch and another solitaire. On our way back to the hotel for an early evening to wrap up the trip and pack, I decided we should stop one more time at the Tijeras Ranger Station to try for Pinyon Jay. After a pleasant enough walk to the museum, we found the flock of jays, or did they find us. What a great way to end an exceptional tour.