BIG BEND NATIONAL PARK

April 27 – May 4, 2023

Bradford/Percival

Brandon and I last led a tour to Big Bend in the winter of 2011 and before that in the spring of 2003 and 2005 and it was wonderful to be back. However, the near eleven mile hike into the high Chisos Mountains was not so wonderful physically but was wonderful bird wise. Our hike went from about 5,000 feet in elevation in the Basin to about 7,000 feet in elevation in the Chisos Mountains offering us looks at the Colima Warbler, our target bird. We first heard the warbler at a rather low elevation, but never had a look. After another mile of uphill hiking, we had our first glimpse of this warbler that has a very restricted range in the US. A little later we came on another Colima that offered better looks, though not excellent looks. Seeing our target bird sure made the hike down more bearable, though not pleasant.

Our tour started in the West Texas town of El Paso where we visited numerous parks and neighborhoods. We start in Memorial Park in the heart of El Paso finding many breeding plumaged Yellow-rumped Warblers in nearly full breeding plumage, what I sight to watch five birds feeding on the ground at once. At the park we had a Swainson’s and Cooper’s Hawk flyby, a single Anna’s Hummingbird, nice looks at Lark Sparrow, numerous breeding plumaged Yellow-rumped Warblers and few Wilson’s Warblers and lone Virginia’s made a brief appearance. A quick stop at Arroyo Park produced Woodhouse’s Scrub-Jay, the first of many verdin, Crissal Thrasher showing well, and out first Brewer’s Sparrows. Our first picnic lunch was at McKelligon Canyon SP where we encountered a confiding Rock Wren, Cactus Wren, Green-tailed Towhee, and a nice-looking Ash-throated Flycatcher. A quick stop at the Border Patrol Museum netted another Crissal Thrasher, a few Black-throated Sparrows and our first glimpse of Gambel’s Quail, a bird that finally showed well at Horizon City Ponds the following day. Keystone Heritage Park produced a few ducks, and Black-necked Stilt, American Avocet, Long-billed Dowitcher, Snowy Egret and a few White-faced Ibis. And this was only day one.

The following morning was our long drive to Big Bend National Park where we would spend four lovely nights in the Casa Grande Lodge rooms, and when time allowed, we sat out on our balconies enjoying the sights of the park. On our way to the park, we made a strategic stop at Limpia Crossing finding the sixty bird flock of Pinyon Jays that had been visiting the area most of the winter and all of the spring along with a lingering Cassin’s Finch. We arrived in time for dinner at Big Bend allowing us to refuel and rest up for our first full day of birding in the park.

This morning we enjoyed the scenic drive along the Ross Maxwell Highway leading to Cottonwood Campground. At the campground we worked hard to get a look at Lucy’s Warbler, along with Greater Roadrunner, a wonderful Gray Hawk, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, numerous Vermilion Flycatchers, a lone Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, and Yellow and Wilson’s Warblers. After a quick stop in the town of Castolon for some goodies, we ate our picnic lunch in the birdy campground in the shade of massive cottonwood trees. A quick stop at Santa Elena Canyon showed some of the beauty of Big Bend NP, what a sight. After a brief break in the afternoon, we began our owling trip to Dugout Wells for Western Screech and Elf Owls, both owls we would see well and hear calling. Great fun. However, on our way to the owls we stopped at Green Gulch and scored big with singing Varied Bunting and singing Black-capped Vireo. The Rufous-crowned Sparrow was rather handsome as well.

The following morning found us first in line for the continental breakfast provided by the lodge, then we were off to the Daniel’s Ranch area and Rio Grande Village where we finally had stunning looks at the nesting Common Black Hawk. After sitting on the nest for most of the morning it finally lifted off showing the large white band on its wide black tail. In and around the area we spotted Verdin, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Canyon Wren drinking from a nearby pond, Nashville, Wilson’s, and Yellow-rumped Warblers, along with Blue Grosbeak and Painted Bunting. A Common Ground Dove and Long-billed Curlew were good finds. We ended the day early allowing us to rest up for our early morning start for the near eleven mile hike up into the high Chisos Mountains for Colima Warbler.

We gathered in the parking lot at 5:30am with our backpacks, flashlights, and high hopes of finding the Colima Warbler. Starting the hike an hour before sunup allowed us to hike in darkness or the shade up until about 11:30am, very nice. We encountered a singing Colima rather early on our hike, however, we had to go another mile up until we finally spotted one. Then another. Along with Colima we had Nashville, Yellow-rumped, Townsend’s, and Wilson’s Warbler. No Hermit Warbler, but Painted Redstart was nice as were the Western Tanagers, Black-headed Grosbeaks, Mexican Jays, Hutton and Plumbeous Vireos, and Acorn Woodpeckers. Watching an eye level Zone-tailed Hawk soar in morning thermals was a treat. We went up the steep Pinnacles Trail, cut across on the Colima Trail, and came down the less steep Laguna Meadows Trail that seemed to go on and on as we descended toward the lodge. We received a quick wake up call when we rounded a sharp turn and came upon a black bear munching on leaves on the side of the trail just thirty or so feet in front of us. With some patience, silent cursing, and noise making the bear moved on and we proceeded to stumble toward the lodge. Turns out the hike was 10.5 miles and took about 11 hours to complete, a job well done.

The following morning, we woke to stiff joints and sore muscles, nothing a little time and Advil couldn’t cure. On our way back to El Paso we stopped at Gage Gardens in Marathon for Black-chinned Hummingbird, Western Kingbird, Cave Swallow, Lesser Goldfinch, Lincoln’s Sparrow, Orchard Oriole, more Townsend’s Warblers, Rose-breasted and Black-headed Grosbeaks. At nearby Post Park we had Curve-billed Thrasher, about thirty Blue Grosbeaks on bushes, fences, and the ground, along with a lone Indigo Bunting. As we continued to El Paso we stopped at Lake Balmorhea and ticked a few ducks, Baird’s Sandpiper, Black Phoebe and Say’s Phoebe, Clay-colored Sparrow, Chihuahuan Meadowlark, and a few Clark’s Grebes. Eventually we arrived in El Paso in time for a nice dinner at Famous Dave’s Barbeque, a mile from our hotel.

For a detailed list of locations and birds use this link.

https://ebird.org/tripreport/122731

Brandon and I plan on returning to Big Bend in the fall of 2024. Please consider joining us.