



SPRINGTIME IN THE TEXAS HILL COUNTRY

28 April–3 May, 2014

I grew up near Fort Worth. As an adolescent, I had little appreciation for Texas, and I vowed that, other than visiting my parents, I would have no reason to return. I was not a birder back then. In my adult years, when I started enjoying nature, my trips to Texas took on new meaning. Harris's Sparrows in winter and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers in summer inspired me to return again and again. I soon discovered the Texas Hill Country, a region of extraordinary natural beauty and home to two very special endangered species: the Golden-cheeked Warbler and Black-capped Vireo. After many subsequent visits, we are excited to share with you some world-class birding at the peak of nesting season in the most beautiful corner of the Lone Star State. Join us in the Hill Country this spring, and you too will want to return!

Your Host and Guide, Stephen Shunk

TOUR ITINERARY

NOTE: Our 2014 Hill Country tour follows our April 22–27 tour to East Texas. Participants attending both tours will get dinner and an extra night of lodging in between the tours at no extra charge.

Our tour route begins and ends in San Antonio, at the edge of the Edwards Plateau, also known as the Texas Hill Country. We will spend four full days and two half-days birding this diverse region, in search of the two very special endangered species: the Golden-cheeked Warbler and the Black-capped Vireo. Our daily itinerary will usually be driven by our efforts to see both species well, but along the way we will encounter many other southern specialties.



Monday, April 28—San Antonio to Brackettville

Meet at San Antonio International Airport at approximately 2 p.m.

Curbside location(s) and time(s) will be determined closer to trip date, based on individual flight itineraries. After departing San Antonio airport, we will head west along the southern edge of the Edwards Plateau, working our way into Uvalde County. Along the route we will likely encounter Swainson's Hawk, Black Vulture, Crested Caracara, Western Kingbird, and abundant Scissor-tailed Flycatchers.

Our first official birding stop will land us at the Uvalde Fish Hatchery, where we will enjoy a nice juxtaposition of land and water birds. The ponds could produce Little Blue Heron, Solitary Sandpiper, Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, and Blue-winged Teal, while the surrounding uplands may host Black Phoebe, Bell's Vireo, Painted Bunting, and Ladder-backed Woodpecker. Between the hatchery and Uvalde City Park, on the Leona River, we might also find Green Kingfisher, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Great Kiskadee, Black-crested Titmouse, and Clay-colored Sparrow.

We will continue east to Brackettville, where we will spend our first two nights in the lovely, rustic enclave of Fort Clark Springs.

Tuesday, April 29—Western Hill Country

Our first full day will take us near the western edge of the Edwards Plateau. Here we will explore the remote and spectacular Kickapoo Caverns State Park, with one of the highest concentrations of nesting Black-capped Vireos throughout this endangered species' entire range.

This spot will also likely produce an abundance of Bell's Vireo and Yellow-breasted Chat, plus White-eyed and Gray vireos, Orchard and Scott's orioles, Varied and Painted buntings, and as many as 10 sparrow species. We will enjoy our first Cave Swallows here, as well as the ubiquitous Summer Tanager and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. Zone-tailed Hawks occasionally soar with the vultures overhead.

After lunch at Kickapoo, we will escape the afternoon heat with some delightful birding at Fort Clark Springs, where we will bird beneath the riparian canopy along Las Moras Creek. The wetlands and streamside support Yellow-throated Vireo, Green Kingfisher, Black Phoebe, and Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, while the uplands feature Lark Sparrow, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, and many possible migrant songbirds.

Night in Ft. Clark Springs



Wednesday, April 30—Southern Hill Country

A brief morning stop at Chalk Bluff Park along the Nueces (pron. "new-ACE-iz") River should produce Green Kingfisher and Golden-fronted Woodpecker, along with various songbirds of the scrubby fringes of the Hill Country, including possible Pyrrhuloxia and White-tipped Dove. We will then head into the heart of the Hill Country, where we will spend the rest of the morning in and around the town of Concan, along the crystal-clear Frio River. The productive feeding stations at Neal's Lodges can produce a taste of South Texas specialty birds, including Long-billed Thrasher, Brown-crested Flycatcher, and Olive Sparrow, along with Carolina Chickadee, Carolina Wren, Black-crested Titmouse, and Indigo and Painted buntings. Here we will also look for our first Golden-cheeked Warbler and Black-capped Vireo, with Yellow-throated Warbler and Green Kingfisher along the river.

After lunch at Neal's Café, we will spend the afternoon birding at Garner State Park, upstream on the Frio. Here we will bird among the giant bald-cypress galleries for Yellow-throated Warbler, Summer Tanager, and Ringed Kingfisher. The juniper slopes above invite Golden-cheeked Warbler, while Canyon Wrens sing from the cliff faces.

Night in Leakey

Thursday, May 1—Central Hill Country

After an early breakfast in town, we will head for Lost Maples Natural Area, one of the true gems of the Hill Country. Here, we will be surrounded by Golden-cheeked Warblers, although the habitat diversity at Lost Maples can produce an amazing array of birds, and the distractions will be many. Just a few of the possible songbirds may include Red-eyed Vireo, Acadian Flycatcher, Louisiana Waterthrush, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Western Scrub-Jay, Indigo Bunting, and Scott's Oriole. A hike to the trim of the canyon may produce Black-capped Vireo or resident Zone-tailed Hawk, with Black-chinned and Ruby-throated Hummingbirds at the campground feeders.

We will enjoy an early dinner in the quaint town of Utopia, followed by some birding in town and along the Sabinal River. Here we can hope to see the town's resident Blue Jays, along with Couch's Kingbird, Blue Grosbeak and swarms of chattering Chimney Swifts.

Night in Leakey



Friday, May 2—Northern Hill Country

Our final full day will take us into another stronghold of the Black-capped Vireo, the Kerr Wildlife Management Area. In some years, hundreds of these skulking little songsters breed on the preserve. On our vireo quest we will also enjoy more nesting species of the Hill Country, including Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Warbling, Hutton's, and Bell's vireos, Golden-cheeked and Black-and-white warblers, and Yellow-breasted Chat.

After a mid-day break and early dinner in Leakey, we will head south to a private ranch downstream on the Frio River, where we will witness one of the greatest nature spectacles in the world: the evening fly-out of 10 million Mexican Free-tailed Bats from the Frio Bat Cave! Before the great bat exodus, we will enjoy swarms of Cave Swallows entering their lair for the evening, as well as a chorus of Rock, Bewick's, and Cactus wrens, Canyon Towhee, Painted Bunting, Scott's Oriole, and Black-throated Sparrow. On our drive out after dusk we will listen for Chuck-Wills-Widow, Common Poorwill, and Eastern Screech-Owl.

Night in Leakey



Saturday, May 3—Return to San Antonio

Our last day will take us east across the Edwards Plateau toward San Antonio, with a couple leisurely birding stops along the way. In addition to many of the birds above, we will enjoy more of the common species we have seen repeatedly on the trip, including White-eyed Vireo, Eastern Bluebird, Northern Cardinal, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, and the always captivating Scissor-tailed Flycatcher.

We will return to San Antonio airport by noon, in time for 2 p.m. or later departures.

DAILY ACTIVITIES

Most of our Hill Country birding will be conducted from the trails of local parks, although we may stop on our travel routes to observe raptors or other specialty birds (including the abundance of Scissor-tailed Flycatchers!) from the vehicle. Every day will involve considerable walking, and we may hike a total of three miles per day. Some of our individual hikes will involve short but relatively steep climbs, but all routes are well-maintained. Regardless of the route difficulty, we will always move at a “birdwatcher’s pace,” and there may be the option to stay behind for some more casual birding while others in the group opt for the steeper travel. Birding in the Hill Country is mostly about finding and observing songbirds, which can be challenging for new birders. Those of you with more advanced skills will be able to find and identify more of the anticipated species, while those with less experience will still delight in the abundance of “life-birds” throughout the tour.



This tour may even be fine for some beginners, but you should be prepared for the abundance of new information and the occasional frustration of searching for elusive songbirds in the canopy and thickets. Your guide, Steve Shunk, is a patient, professional educator, and he will work diligently to help each participant learn bird sounds and visual identification, as well as general natural history of the region.

This tour is for moderately active people in good health. Our guides are certified first aid providers, but we will often be several hours from any medical facilities. We will do our best to cater each day's activities to the diverse ability levels among the group. To take advantage of cooler temperatures and the height of bird activity, we will start birding early each morning, with breaks or meals in the heat of the day, and birding until sunset.

Depending on group size, we will either travel in a 15-passenger van or a minivan. In either case, we will leave ample room for each guest to have his or her own window in the van. If we use a large van, we will use a step stool for ease of entry. This is a non-smoking tour. Whenever possible we stay in non-smoking rooms and eat in non-smoking areas, but we cannot avoid exposure to cigarette smoke in all circumstances.

CLOTHING & EQUIPMENT

Warm to hot temperatures and high humidity predominate in spring in central Texas, but the daily weather can be quite changeable. We may experience thunderstorms, light rain, fog, and extended periods of sun, all in one day. You should be prepared to be outside, away from the vehicle or other shelter, for a couple hours at a time. Please pack conservatively to allow room for all our gear, but do not compromise your ability to be comfortable in a wide variety of conditions out-of-doors.



Biting insects do occur in some areas along our route, and we recommend that you take the proper precautions. The chance we will encounter enough mosquitoes to hinder the birding experience is small, but if we do, you may need chemical repellent or bug resistant clothing. You also should be prepared to protect yourself from the sun, as we will spend many hours outdoors on most days.

We recommend that you bring your own binoculars and favorite field guide. You also may bring a spotting scope, although the woodland birding is not terribly conducive to scope viewing. Nonetheless, we will carry a spotting scope for the group to share. We also carry an extensive birding library for reference and learning.

We encourage you to take photos as souvenirs, but this is not a photography tour. If you wish to focus on photographic opportunities, we ask that you remain sensitive to the group's needs and the tour schedule. Ensuring that everyone in the group gets their binoculars or scope on a bird will take precedence over shooting photos, and it may not be practical to stop just for photos. That said, you are welcome to haul along any camera gear you can tolerate carrying, and you may at least want a small camera to remember the wildflowers and scenic vistas.

LODGING, MEALS & REFRESHMENTS

We will spend each night in comfortable motels in Ft. Clark Springs and Leakey. If you are traveling with a birding partner or are willing to share a room with another birder, we will do our best to place you in a double room. Early registrants will be the first ones placed with available roommates. If we are not able to match you with a roommate due to the gender mix of the participants, you will be responsible for the single tour rate.

Your tour fee includes all meals from dinner on April 28 through lunch on May 3. We will eat in restaurants that appeal to a wide variety of food preferences, but it may be difficult to accommodate the most restrictive diets.

If you maintain such a diet, remember that appropriate foods may not be available at restaurants or rural community stores. To prepare for these contingencies you may wish to bring foods that will meet your needs.

Most breakfasts will be held early to allow an early start to our birding day. Some will be continental-style and others will be complete meals. We will eat some lunches in restaurants and some in the field. We may also snack through lunch in anticipation of an early dinner.

In addition to restaurant meals, we will provide food and beverages, with plenty of water, in the field. One of our goals is to keep you pleasantly fueled and hydrated to help you get the most of the long birding days. The survey included in your registration materials asks your dietary restrictions and preferences. While we cannot honor every food and drink request, the more detailed your response, the better we can serve you on the road.



TRAVEL LOGISTICS & TOUR FEE

We will meet all participants at the San Antonio airport at approximately 2 p.m., Monday, April 28. Specific pickup time and location will depend on individual itineraries. We will return to San Antonio no later than 2 p.m. on Saturday, May 3, to allow plenty of time for 4 p.m. or later departures.

If you are also joining us in East Texas before the Hill Country tour, you will travel with us from Houston to San Antonio on Sunday, April 27, and we will spend that night in San Antonio. If you need help with travel planning, or if you have difficulty meeting this schedule, please get in touch.

Your tour fee includes all meals, snacks and non-alcoholic beverages; five nights lodging; transportation from San Antonio; fees, licenses and permits; service-related gratuities; and the instruction and leadership of your guide(s). The fee does not include guides' gratuities, which are never expected but always appreciated based on your satisfaction with our service.

We are pleased to accept checks or credit cards (VISA or Mastercard). A non-refundable \$95 deposit is required to hold your space, with the balance due 60 days prior to departure. If you register after February 28, the entire tour fee is due with your registration materials. We always recommend that you purchase travel insurance.

PER PERSON	Single/Double occupancy:	\$1,870/\$1,630
DEPOSIT		\$95
BALANCE DUE	February 22	\$1,775 /\$1,535

NOTE: Our tour fees are structured to allow the best possible client-to-guide ratio for an optimal birding experience, with a maximum of 7 participants on this tour.

REFUND POLICY: Your deposit is non-refundable. If you cancel your reservation more than 60 days prior to the tour, you will be refunded any payments above your deposit. If you cancel between 60 and 30 days prior to the tour, you will receive a 50% refund of fees paid over the deposit. If you cancel less than 30 days prior, you forfeit your entire tour fee, unless you can fill your space with another birder. If you cancel at any time, your deposit is transferrable to any Paradise Birding tour at any time in the future. If Paradise Birding cancels the tour for any reason, you will be refunded all payments, including your deposit.

To pre-register for the tour, please complete the registration forms printable from our web site at <http://www.paradisebirding.com/2014regforms.pdf> and return them with your non-refundable \$95 deposit. If you are registering less than 60 days prior to the tour date, please submit the entire balance.

We look forward to seeing you in Texas this spring!

PARADISE BIRDING CONTACT INFORMATION

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Flyout at the Frio Bat Cave



Long-billed Thrasher



Flat Bark Beetles on Rose Vervain



Carpet of Rose Vervain



Scissor-tailed Flycatcher