



EARLY SPRING IN SOUTH TEXAS Lower Rio Grande Valley & South Coast 26–31 March 2013

I grew up near Fort Worth, and as an adolescent, I had little appreciation for Texas. I vowed that, other than to visit my parents, I would have no reason to return. I was not a birder back then. In my adult years, since I started enjoying nature, my trips to Texas have taken on new meaning. Harris's Sparrows in winter and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers in summer made the visits quite enjoyable, and even exciting. I found that I could even tolerate the Texas heat in exchange for some adventurous birding! My first visit to the Lower Rio Grande Valley sealed the deal. My parents could now count on me visiting at least once a year, maybe two or three times! Many life-birds later, we are thrilled to invite you to South Texas to share its world-class birding at the onset of spring migration. Whatever your feelings about Texas, after one look at a Green Jay, you too will want to return.

Your Host and Guide, Stephen Shunk

TOUR SUMMARY

Our tour begins and ends in McAllen, Texas, just north of the Mexican border, where we will meet at the McAllen Airport on the afternoon of Tuesday, March 26. Before checking into our motel in the Harlingen area, we will head straight to the Rio Grande to get our first dose of South Texas specialty birds. After a leisurely afternoon of birding we will get settled in Harlingen, where we will spend the next 5 nights.

Our four full days of birding will take us along the lower Rio Grande Valley to the coastal areas of the Laguna Madre and South Padre Island. We will explore the Sabal Palm Grove Sanctuary, where we could see Plain Chachalaca, Ringed Kingfisher, Least Grebe, Couch's Kingbird, Green Jay, and possible rarities such as Gray-crowned Yellowthroat or Blue Bunting. We will also visit Bentsen-Rio Grande River State Park and Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, either of which can produce Altamira Oriole, Great Kiskadee, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Long-billed Thrasher, and White-tipped Dove.

While we are in the valley, we will keep a close eye on the weather. If a cold front moves through, we will head straight for the migrant traps of South Padre Island, where we could catch the first incoming waves of migrating songbirds. Early arrivals typically include Great-crested Flycatcher, Eastern Kingbird, Yellow-throated Vireo, Gray Catbird, Brown Thrasher, Ovenbird, Painted Bunting, and Dickcissel. We will also visit a few private habitat oases north of the Rio Grande that are famous for Mexican rarities, including possible Clay-colored or White-throated thrushes, or Crimson-collared Grosbeak. An evening drive in coastal habitats might allow us to see Common Parakeet, with a night along the river searching for Elf Owl, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, and possible Chuck-Will's Widow.

Aquatic habitats, especially those at South Padre Island and Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, could produce nearly every species of wading bird in North America, including Least Bittern, Roseate Spoonbill, and Reddish Egret. We will also study up to nine species of terns and as many as seven rails. Dense concentrations of shorebirds may include Wilson's & Piping plovers, Red Knot, and Upland & Buff-breasted sandpipers. Other land birds scattered along our tour route may include Black-crested Titmouse, White-eyed Vireo, Golden-fronted and Ladder-backed woodpeckers, Red-crowned Parrot, Green Parakeet, and Scissor-tailed Flycatcher.

TOUR ITINERARY

Our daily itinerary will be determined by local weather and bird reports, as well as our success at finding certain species. The itinerary below is just a sampling of how the days might look:

Tuesday, March 26 — Afternoon arrivals by 2 p.m. Afternoon birding along the Rio Grande; dinner and night in Harlingen.

Wednesday, March 27 — Morning at Sabal Palm Grove Sanctuary; afternoon and evening at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge; dinner and night in Harlingen.

Thursday, March 28 — All day birding South Padre Island and Laguna Madre region; dinner and night Harlingen.

Friday, March 29 — Morning birding at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge; afternoon and evening at Benson Rio Grande State Park; dinner and night in Harlingen.

Saturday, March 30 — All day birding upstream on the Rio Grande, possibly as far as the desert habitats around Falcon Reservoir; dinner and night in Harlingen.

Sunday, March 31 — Morning birding at local habitat oases in suburban McAllen; return to McAllen airport by noon for 2 p.m. or later departures.

DAILY ACTIVITIES

Birding in the Rio Grande Valley is an experience in contrast. Land birding in the region will include stops at isolated oases—either small areas of protected native habitats along the river, or private preserves surrounded by suburban and agricultural sprawl. Birding in the coastal regions will take us into some surprisingly expansive undeveloped habitats, but Padre Island is dominated by an unavoidable tourist infrastructure. We will do our best to stay out of the urban chaos in the developed areas, but it will be unavoidable at times. One of the advantages of “oasis birding” is that the birds tend to be concentrated heavily in these areas, so we can encounter some delightfully overwhelming birding scenarios, such as tiny patches of shrubs filled with songbirds or small beaches carpeted with terns and sandpipers. Some of the preserves along the river will be loaded with South Texas specialty birds.

Extensive birding experience is not required for this tour, and it is an excellent trip for beginning birders. As with any birding outing, those with more advanced skills will be able to find and identify more of the anticipated species, and those with less experience will delight in the abundance of “life-birds” throughout the week. Your guide, Steve Shunk, is a patient, professional educator, with many years of birding experience, and he will work diligently to help each participant learn bird sounds and visual identification, as well as general natural and cultural history of the region.

Every day will involve considerable walking, with some limited birding from the vehicle. Most individual walks will be short, flat, and at a “birdwatcher’s pace,” but a handful of routes may take us over rough terrain. To take advantage of moderate morning temperatures and the height of bird activity, we will start birding early each morning, often taking extended lunch breaks in the heat of the day and then birding into sunset.

The group will travel in a large, comfortable passenger van, with ample room for two people per bench and up to 7 birders plus your guide. We will repeatedly enter and exit the van from an entrance that is high off the ground, although a step stool will be provided. This tour is for moderately active people in good health. Your guide is a certified first-aid provider, but we may occasionally be two hours from any medical facilities. This is a non-smoking tour. We will stay in non-smoking motel rooms and eat in non-smoking areas of restaurants when they are available.

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 bring along any camera you can tolerate carrying, and you might at least want to carry a small camera to capture images of the region's unique habitats.

CLOTHING & EQUIPMENT

Warm to hot temperatures and high humidity predominate in South Texas, but the daily weather can be quite changeable. We may experience thunderstorms, light rain, and extended periods of sun, and it may be quite windy along the coast. You should be prepared to be outside, away from the vehicle or other shelter, for up to two 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 outdoor conditions.

Biting insects may occur in some areas along our route, and we recommend that you take the proper precautions. Depending on recent rain activity, a few of our stops could host enough mosquitoes to hinder the birding experience, so you will need repellent or bug resistant clothing in order to enjoy the birds. You also should be prepared to protect yourself from the sun, as we will spend many hours outside on most days.

We recommend that you bring your own binoculars, spotting scope, and favorite field guide. We will carry extra binoculars and at least one scope, along with an extensive birding and natural history library for reference and learning.

LODGING, MEALS & REFRESHMENTS

We will spend each night in comfortable motels. If you are traveling with a birding partner and wish to share a room, we should be able to accommodate you at the *double-occupancy* rate. 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-occupancy* tour rate.

Your tour fee includes all meals from dinner on Tuesday, March 26, through lunch on Sunday, March 31. 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 in local grocery stores. To prepare for these contingencies you may wish to bring foods that will meet your dietary preferences.

Most breakfasts will be held early to allow us an early start in the coolest part of the day. Some will be continental-style while others will be complete meals. Regardless of the breakfast meal served, we will ensure that coffee and tea are available for the earliest risers. Restaurant lunches may be followed by a break at our motel or driving between birding sites, and they may be our largest meal of the day. Dinners will be held at casual local eateries. They will often be held at dusk, which may be later than you are used to eating.

In addition to restaurant meals, we will provide food and beverages for snacks in the field. We will also provide plenty of water during the trip. On some occasions, we may snack through lunch, reserving our largest meal for dinner. 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.

TOUR FEE

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

We are pleased to accept checks or credit cards (VISA or Mastercard only). A \$95 *non-refundable* deposit is required to hold your space, with the balance due 60 days prior to departure. We always recommend that you purchase travel insurance.

FEE PER PERSON:	Single/Double..... \$1,770/1,580
DEPOSIT PER PERSON: <u>\$95</u>
BALANCE DUE January 26:	Single/Double..... \$1,675/1,485

NOTE: Our tour fees are structured to allow the best possible client-to-guide ratio for an optimal birding experience, with a minimum of 4 and 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 we cancel the tour due for any reason, you will receive a full refund.

You may send your non-refundable \$95 deposit to the address below to hold your spot, with the balance due 60 days prior to trip date. For more information, please call 541-408-1753 or e-mail steve@paradisebirding.com. *We look forward to seeing you in South Texas this spring!*

PARADISE BIRDING CONTACT INFORMATION

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