

Birder's Reunion in Lower Rio Grande Valley 2014

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Day -1 – March 23 – Mission, Texas

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Day minus 1. March 23, 2014 – Mission, Texas

(Bert) Of the places we visit and the people that travel with us, each trip is unique. And certainly, this next one will be no exception.

It is a Birder's Reunion, a gathering of those that have traveled with us on some of the 31 tours Shari and I have led since our first in 2000 to West Mexico. And, we will have a few new travelers joining us now and coming along on our later tours this year through Texas, Quebec, and Labrador-Newfoundland.

An overwhelming response for our reunion, we expect to see about 60 people meeting us here in Mission, Texas. Today the first have arrived.

Shari and I are anxious to see them, so we bicycle from our house, through the back gate, and into the adjoining RV park. Just as we get to the park entrance we see Richard and Georgia pulling in with their truck pulling the 5th-wheel. Georgia jumps out to give us hugs and quickly returns to follow the lead vehicle to their assigned site. Then we see Bill and Ginny, followed by Don and Barbara – more hugs all around. Checking in at the campground office we hear others have arrived and before long we meet newcomers Jeff and Barbara and find Sid and Beryl, veterans of our 2000 and 2001 Mexico tours, and finally Bill and Marlene from our 2008 tour to Alaska.

Our visits are short for now. The real activities and birding start two days from now.

Day 0. March 24 – Mission

(Bert) More are arriving at the RV park, but I am working on last minute arrangements. At 3 PM the ukulele players arrive at our home for a practice session. On our Alaska 2006 tour it was Richard and Bill that got the music started. Bill had already been inventing new songs during our Manitoba caravan. By the time we joined them on the

2011 Mississippi River tour more ukulele players had joined and now six players are gathered in our living room, including the newest player, Shari. Richard has selected songs related to birds and they will include two of Bill's birding caravan songs. They play pretty good and I'd call them the "Not ready for primetime group." Well, more on that later.



Day 1. March 25 – Mission Rendezvous

(Bert) Jim and Donna help Shari and me get everything set up at the clubhouse and by 1 PM people start arriving for registration and materials. As a warm-up to get people acquainted with one another, Shari has prepared a 20-question quiz. Those that have traveled with us before will recognize some of the situations that happened during their tour, but for the other answers they will have to ask around.

I use a PowerPoint presentation to outline our plans for today and the next nine days. During the break and before the BBQ, Jim C. tells me about an Eastern Screech-Owl roost several have found and watched last night. He leads me to the dead palm tree with three holes excavated along its trunk. The owl pops out and I am surprised how small it is and its shape looks more rounded than I expected, but I am not carrying my binoculars and really cannot see other features.

After the catered BBQ I have another PowerPoint presentation listing our group members by the number of times they have been on tours with us in the past. We have first timers (2 couples), first timers but will be with us on more caravans this year (3 couples), second tour (9), third (5), fourth (6), fifth (1), sixth (2), seventh (1), eighth plus three more tours this year (1). I guess you could call that loyalty.

In the early evening we have team completion on “Name That Bird,” including which is the fastest team to identify a bird depicted from one of my photos – most of which are easy – followed by a harder competition where each photo is displayed for 20 sec. Eight teams competed and two teams tie with the most points, the one led by Brenda and the one led by Chris. In the run-off, I display a photo I took this winter of a Hook-billed Kite. Neither team recognizes it, so I display a second photo. Brenda’s team correctly identifies it as Rainbow Lorikeet.

While we are cleaning up, Chris asks about the owl. He too questioned the identity of the owl in palm tree outside the clubhouse. He goes out to check it again and this time it is calling vigorously. It’s an Elf Owl! A great find and one we will have to tell others about tomorrow.







Rainbow Lorikeet – tie breaker identification on quiz

Day 2. March 26 – Bentsen Rio Grande Valley State Park and National Butterfly Center

(Bert) About a dozen of us meet at 6:30 AM to enter Bentsen Rio Grande Valley State Park. It's very quiet as we walk silently on the blacktop road and Lee H. and I occasionally shine our flashlights in search of the reflecting eye shine. At 6:50 we hear our first bird, the distinctive call of a distant Pauraque. Reaching the corner that leads into the old RV park loop we hear another close by. Cautiously and silently, we gather near the calling bird, turn on our flashlights and see two glowing orange eyes only a couple inches above the road. In seconds it takes flight like a disturbed moth and flutters away into darkness. This sequence repeats with another Pauraque sighting and at one stop we can hear four or five calling from different directions. Those in the group who have not previously visited The Valley check off Common Pauraque as a Life Bird.

At 7:10 we hear our first of many Northern Cardinals and Green Jays. The wake-up call for Plain Chachalacas and a Gray Hawk is 7:15. At first light, 7:20, the first of a dozen Olive Sparrows calls its distinctive "bouncing ball bearing" song. By now we have walked to the resaca, near the boat ramp and hear the rattle of a Belted Kingfisher but the morning light is still too dim to make out much else.

Briefly we hear a Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, yet, as usual, we cannot find this tiny treetop lurker unless it repeats its subtle call. I leave Lee H. with the group and head back to the park entrance to meet the rest of our group. On the way back I photograph a juvenile hawk, perhaps one of the Gray Hawks that has been calling for the past hour.

The late risers of our group are gathered near the feeders at the park entrance, an easy spot to see many LRGV specialties: White-tipped Dove, Inca Dove, Green Jay, Altamira Oriole, Long-billed Thrasher, Clay-colored Thrush and, of course, lots of chachalacas chasing like spooked chickens.

We are appreciative of the Bentsen staff for adding a couple additional trams this morning to shuttle our large group through the park and eventually to the Hawk Tower. It's quiet on the tower as the north headwinds deter hawk migration. The hawk counter informs us that the hawks are probably huddled town in Mexico waiting for their opportunity. We see a circling Gray Hawk, a juvenile Broad-winged Hawk that seems to have taken up residency the past couple of days, and a few distant Mottled Ducks in the wetlands that are mostly now dry.

Surprisingly close to my tentative schedule, we arrive at the National Butterfly Center at 11 AM. Our expectations for butterflies are low, as our guides Audrey and John tell us the cold front keeps the butterflies hidden. Nonetheless, as the day warms they are able to identify for us a Question Mark, Checkered White, American Snout, Brown Longtail, Funereal Duskywing, Clouded Skipper, Dusky Blue Hairstreak, Tawny Emperor, White checkered Skipper and I'm sure a few more I didn't record in my notebook. The bird feeders are also quite productive and good photographic opportunity for Olive Sparrow, Long-billed Thrasher and dozen others.

In late afternoon, the group gathers at our house. I've moved out our two cars and the RV to a neighbor's lot so that we have the sheltered RV port area for our wine and lemonade party. The owner of the RV park, the unsold portions of our gated community, as well as over 2000 surrounding acres of undeveloped land, gives us a brief history from the time Bentsen Rio Grande Valley State Park was closed to camping to the conversion of the former onion fields to the World Birding Center and his properties. Then it is off to Mambo's Seafood for dinner and non-stop conversations among enthusiastic caravaners.





National Butterfly Center



Black-crested Titmouse



Ladder-backed Woodpecker



Hispid Cotton Rat



Question Mark



Long-billed Thrasher



Brown Longtail



Olive Sparrow



Tawny Emperor

Day 3. March 27 – Salineño, Chapeño and Falcon Dam

(Bert) An early morning start has us driving in the dark, heading west toward Starr County. At first light, a coyote streaks across the highway, narrowly missing my vehicle and the oncoming car. We park our cars near the Salineño bird feeding station—now closed for the season with the gate locked—and walk to the Rio Grande. A strange sight I doubt many of us have witnessed before, a Collared Peccary is swimming, then wading, across the river and lumbers out onto the U.S. shore. I wonder if this immigrant is carrying a valid passport!

A pair of Ospreys—one upstream, the other downstream—perches on trees overhanging the river and occasionally one takes flight to survey for fish. Rigid V-formation flying flocks of Double-crested Cormorants follow the river west, as sloppy strings of up to 40 Great Egrets head east. A couple dozen other species start to fill our day-list before the real highlight of the morning: a Red-billed Pigeon winging quickly just above the tree tops. Later Lee's group sees others farther away from the river.

Our group has already moved on to the Salineño Cut-off where we park our cars along the edge of the dirt road and walk beside the chaparral of cactus and mesquite. Our target bird is Cassin's Sparrow and we listen keenly for its special song. Brenda, who has some of the sharpest ears attuned to bird song that I know, hears a Brewer's Sparrow. I haven't seen this sparrow here before and we check the maps to verify we are standing at the eastern edge of its range. I use my iPhone to dial up Brewer's Sparrow and confirm the song we are hearing matches the species. Just as my iPhone sings, up pops a sparrow and I swing my binoculars and then camera toward the Brewer's Sparrow. Cassin's Sparrows

are singing too, although none are displaying. Instead they are singing vigorously from atop eye-level bushes.

We continue to Chapeño. Fortuitously, I miss the turn and we continue on a country road to our advantage, since we find soaring Swainson's Hawks migrating north. Backtracking to the Rio Grande, our first good bird is Gadwall, a pair, with Blue-winged Teal and Mottled Ducks. A thermal produces a spiraling tower of Turkey Vultures, a Black Vulture and a Chihuahuan Raven, a shape contrast in black.

Near the entrance to Falcon State Park I stop the car to watch a soaring hawk very high above us. It is suspended, nearly motionless, with outstretched paddle-shaped wings pinched in near the base of the tail, just where a fluff of white feathers is obvious from top and bottom. Others stop too and we speculate on its identity. By wing shape I lean toward Hook-billed Kite, but the white feathers are puzzling as is the behavior and habitat. I resort to taking lots of photos. [It isn't until a day later upon analyzing the photos that we decide it is a Harris's Hawk].

Falcon State Park is where we find a number of other special birds, including Northern Bobwhite (good views), Scaled Quail (quick mediocre views), Black-throated Sparrow (nice!) and Bell's Vireo (singing). The species that gets the most thrills though is the Greater Roadrunner. They are everywhere! Most entertaining is one that hops atop a short post and poses for cameras. Its burnt orange and mascara blue ear patch is stunning.

Early in the evening when it is dark, we stop to check the campground Elf Owl, now noted to be a pair. Its head protrudes from the nest hole and he calls continuously. Bruce gets an excellent photo and I am surprised when I find I got a good photo also.



Descending to the Rio Grande from Salineño at dawn



Javelina crossing the Rio Grande



Mystery hawk/kite



Greater Roadrunner



Bruce's photo of Elf Owl



Bert's photo of Elf Owl

Day 4. March 28 – Rio Grande

(Bert) If you visit the Lower Rio Grande Valley, sooner or later you see portions of the river, though what many think is the river are really resacas carved out by former channels, now isolated as oxbow lakes. The Rio Grande is often hidden by impenetrable thorn forest or, now, the border fence. So it is a unique experience this morning to board a river boat for a two-hour cruise up and down the Rio Grande.

In my notebook I make two columns, one for birds seen on the U.S. side and the other for the Mexico side of the river. In time, the U.S. column grows longer than the Mexico column, probably because of the extensive development of eye-catching Mexican parks extending right up to concrete and stone facades bordering the river shore. Pretty, but attractive only to Great-tailed Grackles. It is in the cane and palms growing on the U.S. side and short breaks in the Mexico side that we find the birds.

Excited voices and eagerly extended arms announce each sighting. On a crowd decibel scale the birds that rate the highest are Ringed Kingfishers and Green Kingfishers, of which we see many. The Ringed is hard to miss by virtue of its large size and Gatling gun rattle. The Green is quiet and shy, yet when it takes flight low over the water and alights on a branch extending a few feet above the river, we can all zero in on its perch. Flying birds are hard to miss and we tally Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, Osprey, Laughing Gull, Forster's Tern and Caspian Tern. Harder to recognize are the high flying Northern Rough-winged Swallows, but one conveniently perches on a dead snag and is easily photographed as the quiet boat slowly passes. Common Yellowthroats are commonly heard, although I don't see a single one of those well-hidden birds.

Two more crowd-pleasing species are the Altamira Orioles and, best of all, a bright male Vermilion Flycatcher. Final species tally is U.S. side 38, Mexico side 20, total 41.

At the boat dock restaurant our boat ride is followed by lunch, conveniently preordered from a menu list each of us reviewed two days ago. The dinners are quickly delivered and delicious.



Boarding the river boat



All hands on deck



Green Kingfisher



Great Egret



Northern Rough-winged Swallow



Mexico side of Rio Grande



American Coot

Day 5. March 29 – Estero Llano Grande, Frontera Audubon & Valley Nature Center

(Bert) We have lots of help this morning with additional birding guides Dave, Rick and May. Estero Llano Grande State Park is one of the best birding sites in The Valley and today is no exception. From the covered viewing area we tally 17 species even before we begin our walk. I'd count the Cinnamon Teal as the highlight. Along our walking route we see a flock of Long-billed Dowitchers at the first pond and Northern Rough-winged Swallows and Tree Swallows gyrating in smooth arcs overhead. At the second lagoon are both Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons lurking in the overhanging trees. In a brambled thicket, on the leaf-littered ground, a well-hidden Common Pauraque rests atop her chicks.

A Northern Harrier hunts for prey along the highly banked sides of the levee. Its wings maintain a sharp dihedral while teetering left and right and flying low to the ground, a feat I doubt the Blue Angels could accomplish. In the lagoon just beyond the levee are flocks of American Avocets, Black-necked Stilts, Stilt Sandpipers and more dowitchers. Some of the avocets have transitioned into their cinnamon heads and necks, while others are still dressed in drab gray.

Ahead, on the boardwalk bridge across Ibis Pond, I see the rest of our group, all facing toward the sun, all intently searching through binoculars and camera lens, shifting their position up and down, left and right, for viewing advantage. While they focus on the Sora in the cattails, I focus my camera on the intense birders.

We've completed the loop past the ponds and marshes, so now we move on to the former campground roads through tall woods, in search of newly arrived migrants. The bright red color of a Summer Tanager is the first eye-catcher. Then it is the hummingbirds that attract attention, accompanied with an ongoing debate of whether one or another is a Black-chinned or Ruby-throated Hummingbird. Without the telltale color of a gorget, we resort to the finer subtleties of tail feather shapes, bill lengths and tail flipping behavior, eventually deciding that among the hummingbirds we have a few of each species. Not hard to identify, though, is the Buff-bellied Hummingbird, a real crowd-pleaser and a lifer for many.

Fascinating to all is a roosting Eastern Screech-Owl that takes a significant amount of finger pointing and directional details to zero in on its hidden perch at the bend in a tree trunk. Finally, we also encounter migrant warblers, including Yellow-throated, Nashville and Black-throated Green, as well as the winter-resident Yellow-rumped.

It is lunch time and Shari meets us near the parking lot. She leads two carloads to Mexico for dinner and street side shopping. The rest of us take our packed lunches to the pavilion where we can watch the birds while we eat.

Then it is off to Frontera Audubon. The woods here are very dense and it is single file along its pathways. I'm near the front of the line when I'm called back to see a close White-eyed Vireo and I get a great photo of the bird that usually eludes my camera.

Randi draws my attention to a singing Northern Parula, so we follow the trails in the direction of the song. We cannot find the source, but are soon diverted by the melodious cackle of a pair of chachalacas. It is not their familiar grating ruckus, but rather a more pleasant song and by their actions it appears to be a mating behavior. The actions attract others in the flock and soon we witness raised crests, cocked wings, flipping tails, culminated with a rough-and-tumble fight between two chachalacas: bodies rolling with loss of balance, beaked heads attacking, appendages flapping. I'm told chachalaca gets its Spanish name for the bird's call and a noisy speaker is called a chachalaca. These today certainly are noisy.

Our third stop is Valley Nature Center where we divide into three groups, each led by a local guide. Ours is managed by Keith, who is on the board of directors and gives an thorough explanation of the plant life and its adaptations to the variable wet-dry conditions of The Valley. After passing under the treetop nests occupied by Yellow-crowned Night-Herons, I discover a nesting White-tipped Dove, something I have not seen before. The nest is a loosely interwoven cluster of sticks secured within the leafless branches about 8 ft. up a 20-ft tree. Were I not 9 ft. from the nest, I would not have seen the dove quietly resting. My presence may have gotten the curious chicks to stick out their heads from beneath the dove's breast. Two downy chicks are already well grown and it won't be long before they will venture onto the branches to test life away from the safety of mother.



Intent on seeing a Sora



Well-hidden Eastern Screech-Owl



At what are they looking?



White-eyed Vireo



White-tipped Dove and chicks on nest

Day 6. March 30 – Santa Ana NWR and Hidalgo

(Bert) Perhaps it is the shorebirds and long-legged waders at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge that garner the most attention. From the observation deck I swing my spotting scope from one bird to the next: Wilson's Snipe, Killdeer, Black-necked Stilt, Lesser Yellowlegs, Solitary Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, Long-billed Dowitcher, Least Sandpiper, Greater Yellowlegs. We do not need the scope to admire that half dozen White-faced Ibises just a stone's throw in front of us.

A waterthrush comes to rest on a tree limb only to be knocked off its perch by a chasing waterthrush. They land in well-separated parts of the marsh but close enough to study both with binoculars and scope. So the debate ensues: are these Northern or Louisiana? We collect field notes and come to the unexpected conclusion: one of each.

A colorful snake crosses the footpath in front of us. By the time I reach the spot the snake has slithered into the dense tall grass, but we can see enough of it to get the red-against-yellow sequence of a Coral Snake. I hop onto a log to get a photo and the fallen tree trunk teeters enough to add the excitement of having a poisonous snake where I would land, should I fall. No matter, I take my photo and retreat.

Leaving Santa Ana, we drive to an old residential section of Hidalgo and park along the street near an electrical transformer on a pole. A 6-ft. haystack of interwoven dry grass stalks encompasses the transformer and strings of black electrical cables trisect the mass at its widest diameter. In a junction of twisted cables two Monk Parakeets perch. A neighbor invites us into his backyard to see another nest built by the parakeets. He tells us the first one was built six years ago, another five years ago, and then one three years

ago, each occupied by multiple parakeets. Now there are five nests, the last started in construction one month ago. The oldest nest became so large and heavy it caused an electrical short and the power company came to remove part of the nest. The birds rebuilt it, part was again removed, and the parrots built it for the third time.

We continue to the Old Hidalgo Pumphouse, an historical site where steam-driven irrigation pumps moved water from the Rio Grande into the agricultural fields of The Valley starting in 1909, thus transforming dense river bottomlands of impenetrable thornforest into thousands of acres of farmlands and orchards. Now it is a pretty park attracting birds that today include both American Goldfinch and Lesser Goldfinch.

Tonight we share in a bounty of hors de 'oeuvres, enough to constitute dinner. This is followed by the ukulele sing-along. The six players are in good form as we sing ten songs, most of which have to do with birds or birding, such as Yellow Bird, Red Red Robin and Bye Bye Blackbird. My favorite is the one Bill wrote—Birder's Lament—with sad words recalling the bird we cannot find, wishing we could find that one last bird. The last stanza is a turnaround, recognizing the joy of birding.

*Now what can that bird be that eluded us so long?
You know what, it's different for everyone.
So we keep on searching just to find that special one,
And we hope we never find it, 'cause that will end the fun!*



Identifying waterthrushes



Coral Snake



Lee leading one group at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge



Monk Parakeets at nest surrounding transformer



Ukulele Sing-along

Day 7. March 31 – Anzalduas County Park

(Bert) Our first stop is a rock pile where I found Burrowing Owl this winter. I suspect it has already migrated north, but I thought it worth checking. No show on the owl, though a Border Patrol officer pulls up to our huge group and tells Georgia that he thinks he has found the biggest catch of the day.

As it turns out, it wouldn't have been the largest capture of the day. I was awake at 4:30 AM and while I was making a pot of tea I could hear the Border Patrol helicopter overhead. I looked outside, through the windows, but could not see anything happened. Later I learned the helicopter was hovering between our house and our neighbor's and was beaming a high-intensity searchlight at the heavily wooded drainage ditch one block south of us (we live about a mile from the Mexico border). Through the Facebook grapevine we learned the Border Patrol brought a bus into our gated community and hauled off 90-100 undocumented immigrants. That is about four times the usual high count of detained immigrants passing through our park.

At Anzalduas County Park most of the bird action is above and below the dam. Northern Rough-winged Swallows are the most common swallows circling high above us. Coen says he sees Cave Swallows and following his directions I spot them flying low through the support pillars of the dam. There also are Cliff Swallows flying into nests and, with a scope, we can see their white foreheads. Below the dam are dozens of Great and Snowy Egrets. One Great Egret struggles to swallow a large fish, throwing it on to the ground a few times until it is positioned for a smooth slide down a long neck.

We finally get a few species that have been scarce this week. We hear and see a pair of Tropical Kingbirds and then find another three or four farther along the road bordering the wildlife refuge. I put my scope on a distant Bronzed Cowbird, surprised that I haven't seen this species several times already this week.

I hear the call of a Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet. We get quick looks as it moves from one tree to the next and then disappears. I hear another and it flies into the tree above us. By its calls, we know approximately where it is, but dozens of eyes cannot detect its position in the tall and leafy tree. It too escapes without a view of it perched. For me, its call is pleasure enough, but I am sure a few others for whom it is a lifer would have liked prolonged views.

Broad-winged Hawks and Swainson's Hawks are again moving north. One columnar tower includes 30 circling Broad-wingeds. We move to the dock and the widened pool of the Rio Grande created by the dam. A pair of Black Phoebes repeatedly flies between the dock and a small island. A House Sparrow, largely underrated, rests in good light on the wooden railing and I take the opportunity to photograph it. I suspect the unappreciated sparrow is ignored by most nature photographers. Sitting in the shade, with a cool breeze coming off the river, makes for pleasant relaxing and we are hesitant to leave. Our delay is fortuitous as we are treated to the sight of five Roseate Spoonbills winging over the small island and along the river, and then returning for a repeat performance.

We quit birding by noon. We have a full schedule of social activities later today. It starts with a scrumptious pot-luck dinner, eating outside on patio of our resort clubhouse. Then we go inside for my slideshow of the birds and scenery, as well as caravaners, on our tours of Alaska, Yukon Territory, Manitoba, and Atlantic Maritime provinces of Canada. On previous nights, I showed photos from our Mexico, Belize, Central America,

Australia and New Zealand tours. The shows are great memories for many of us and enticing for those that have not visited and birded those places.

More is yet to come. I show a PowerPoint presentation of the coincidences between my birding experiences and those of The Big Year author Mark Obmaschik—we birded together 12 May 2012—and main character Sandy Komito—we met at the T.O.S. meeting in January, probably saw the same Blue Bunting at Bentsen Rio Grande Valley State Park and, amazingly, viewed the exact same Terek Sandpiper in Anchorage, 10 July 1998. We follow with a showing of the movie The Big Year. It’s fun to view a birding movie with a birding group. Our laughs, groans, and sighs of recognition coincide.



Below the dam at Anzalduas



Even House Sparrows can be attractive!





Terek Sandpiper seen 10 July 1998 in Anchorage by Sandy Komito and Bert

Day 8. April 1 – Quinta Mazatlan and Williams Wildlife Sanctuary

(Bert) We've divided into four groups this morning for our tour of Quinta Mazatlan with John and Jane as additional leaders. We find a few more migrant warblers than previous days, although the numbers are still small as we are early in the season. Today it is a Black-and-white Warbler, three Nashville Warblers and a Black-throated Green Warbler. I am surprised by the number (5-6) of Curve-billed Thrashers we see. Leader John points

out a ground-roosting Common Pauraque and the knowledge is passed to our other groups as its location is nearly impossible to find on one's own. Those following longtime resident Jane are treated to hearing the fascinating history of Quinta Mazatlan while they walk the pathways through the beautifully maintained preserve and view the many outdoor sculptures of native animals.

Our next stop is an elementary school under construction in Pharr. Allen Williams told me about this place, as he is the architect of the Nature Park between the construction site and a drainage canal. Allen is here to greet us and he tells us this and other nature parks are designed for educating students toward a greater appreciation of the environment: the birds, animals and plant life of South Texas. Allen has cut trails through the brushland and has supplemented the existing trees with new plantings of a greater variety of native plants. Later he will add water features. We are the first birding group to visit the site. The nature parks will be off limits during school hours, but open to the public after hours and on weekends. At the moment the most noticeable feature is the thousands of tall Prickly Poppies appearing in white, yellow and rose varieties.

We leave the property and go to Allen Williams's well-known backyard, named Williams Wildlife Sanctuary & Educational Gardens. A Clay-colored Thrush is building a nest in a large tree. In his backyard Allen points out a nightjar roosting on an obscured tree branch about 10 ft. above the ground. The word spreads that it is a Chuck-will's-widow and Coen and Brenda take particular notice. They have a long life list, rarely adding to it in the U.S., and Chuck-will's-widow is a heard-only bird that they have not seen. Coen is a very thorough observer and will not add the bird unless he is convinced the identification is accurate. Our binoculars study features and Brenda's and my cameras record plumage details as best we can through the interfering branches and dark surroundings. We reduce the possibilities to Chuck-will's-widow and Eastern Whip-poor-will with me advocating the former and Coen leaning toward the latter. Eventually, the evidence stacks up on the side of Chuck-will's-widow.

After a L.E.O. (Let's Eat Out) gathering at China Sea Buffet, we string a line of cars to several sites I know where parrots and parakeets stage at dusk. The first is one where earlier in winter I watched 50-60 Red-crowned Parrots. Tonight we see only a handful and I suspect the parrots have paired up and are visiting isolated nesting sites. So, off we go to a Green Parakeet site where Kate saw a flock last night. After 15 min. I spot one flock of 50-60 flying distantly in a northwesterly direction. A bit later we see a few pairs of parakeets fly overhead. It is not much of a show although apparently enough for most of the group as they soon head back to camp. A few of us want more, so I lead Russell and Stephen, Doug and Kay, Jeff and Barbara (plus Shari and Ron in my car) toward 10th and Violet, northwest of our current position. I have my car windows down, so I can hear a couple of parakeets once I reach Violet St. We park and see a couple more birds, but no gathering. So we head north to Trenton Rd. and there at H.E.B. we find the gathering.

Silhouetted against a purple night sky, perched on three parallel power lines, are the black outlines of over 500 boisterous Green Parakeets. Turning on the flash attachment to my

camera, the black shadows transform to brilliantly yellow-green parakeets set against a featureless navy blue sky. Among myriad Green Parakeets is one Mitred Parakeet.

The sight of so many chattering parakeets is awe-inspiring and we watch them from 7:45 to 8 PM, and then reluctantly head home. Barbara stays briefly to shop at H.E.B. When she comes out of the store at 8:10 PM, all of the parakeets have disappeared.



Plain Chachalaca at Quinta Mazatlan



Yellow Prickly Poppy



Chuck-will's-widow



Chuck-will's-widow



Strings of Green Parakeets



Green Parakeet



Mitred Parakeet among Green Parakeets

Day 9. April 2 – Edinburg World Birding Center

(Bert) It is good that we are starting out early again this morning, as it doesn't take long for the day to warm up. I am surprised at the number of White-eyed Vireos and House Wrens at Edinburg World Birding Center; they seem to be singing from every bush. Otherwise, birding is a bit slow, although walking the maze of trails along the lagoons

and through the butterfly gardens is a pleasant pastime. As interesting as the birds are the turtles basking on the lagoon banks. I photograph Red-eared Turtles (Pond Sliders) and Spiny Softshell. One softshell is much larger than two others, so it must be a female which grows to 18 in., twice the size of a male.

We add another species to the list, a male Ruddy Duck sporting a bright turquoise blue bill. Lee's group discovers another Chuck-will's-widow and, to no avail, Coen spends 30+ min. trying to relocate its perch when it takes flight.

With binoculars in hand, Bud dutifully has been accompanying Randi to almost all the birding sites, even though he would normally not call himself a birder. I thought maybe he has converted, but today he relapses to his favorite sport: golfing. Appropriately for a birding caravan, Bud gets a birdie at Palm Golf Course.

Tonight is our farewell Mexican fiesta. Shari has procured a margarita machine that makes six gallons of frosty drinks in one batch. The pourer spout gets lots of action. When I quiet down the happy group, we begin the bird count off. I had seen over 140 species myself but as I progress through the list, many more species are added. We finish with a total of 171 species seen in 10 days from Edinburg to Falcon Lake.



Edinburg World Birding Center



Inca Dove



Shari, mixing margaritas with her unique recipe



Margarita machine



Original caravaners from 2000 West Mexico and 2001 Yucatan Peninsula

Day 10. April 3 – Mission

(Bert) Shari has trays of little breakfast cupcakes and fresh assorted fruit set out on tables on our patio. I am squeezing fresh grapefruit juice from fruit I picked off the tree two days ago. And the coffee is ready when the first of our caravaners arrives at 7 AM. Our friends come and go, saying farewells, until 10:15.

Overhead we are treated to a constant parade of migrating hawks. I count one flock of over 200 Broad-winged Hawks and another of 75 Swainson's Hawks. With flock after flock the numbers must reach into the thousands, all drifting in strong winds pushing them north. The overhead show stops at the same time the last guest departs.

Then it is time for Shari and me to start packing the RV and closing up the house for the summer. On Sunday we start another caravan at South Padre Island.



Hawk watching



Farewell