

By Luke Tiller

Monday, November 9th 2015

Meeting at our hotel in Harlingen, TX the obvious and planned first stop for our tour was out east towards the coastal plain that held one of our key target species: Aplomado Falcon. Counting against heading towards the proposed Aplomado site was the fact that multiple birders had found their cars recently stranded in the once dirt, now Battle of the Somme-esque mud, road that had been created by Hurricane Patricia as she'd passed through. There was also the allure of a Hook-billed Kite sighting a few days previously to our west in McAllen. I had warned participants that they key to a successful trip would be a little flexibility and the morning therefore started with plans thrown out the window and the group racing towards Anzalduas Park.

Right on the border, the park provides both a great view of the river and thanks to the dam road levy a great site to look for raptors. As we arrived at the park we were soon stumbling upon the first specialties of the region with Cackling Great Kiskadees and garrulous Green Jays. As we approached the levy I noticed a new bunch of signage warning people not to go up on it. Assuming they just meant cars I breezed past only to get stopped by the passing border patrol. Apparently the new rules meant no foot traffic either. I asked the officer if we stayed off the road itself whether we could stand right at the very top of the entrance ramp to the levy. Thankfully the officer said yes as our new view was affording us some nice looks at some highly prized species including stunning Summer Tanagers and Altamira Orioles. Not long after our run in with border patrol, out towards Mexico we spotted what must be the Holy Grail for raptor fans in Southern Texas: the oddly paddle-winged, long-tailed shape and strangely acrobatic flight of a brilliant Hook-billed Kite! This was the bird we had come for. Found all the way south to Northern Argentina, the range of the species barely touches the tip of this little tropical part of Texas and is even here rarely seen. It is possible to come here for many years and not see one, so this was an incredible start to the trip!

After all enjoying scope views of the flying kite we decided to see whether we could see the bird from closer to the river and scout out what else was in the park. Beyond the kites there was much else here to enjoy including a couple of locally rare birds that seemed to have been swept in by Hurricane Patricia: Greater Pewee and Dusky-capped Flycatcher. Both species are also pretty limited in their US range to Arizona and New Mexico so were not birds we had anticipated on the tour. After these exciting out-of-place finds we stumbled on another couple of unlikely birds: first up were two Audubon's Orioles. Though they are a specialty of the area, Audubon's Oriole are rarely found this far east and were in fact were just the second sighting of this species at this famous and incredibly heavily birded park. The second rarity was something more prosaic: a little flock of four American Robins. There are a number of species that though common almost everywhere else on the continent that do not often reach this little tip of the USA and American Robin is one of them (ditto House Finch, Mallard, Common Grackle, American Crow....). While not that exciting to most birders, the robins were rare enough to trip the eBird filters locally. We were able to share the sightings with a couple of other birders too, which is part of the fun and community that is birding in the Rio Grande Valley.

After an incredible start to the trip we switched back to our itinerary. First was a stop at a secondary site that I had seen Aplomado Falcon at a few times before, but unfortunately this time we had no luck. From there we headed on to South Padre Island. Unfortunately the most interesting bird there (a Swainson's Warbler) had perished at the hands (or hooked bill) of a Loggerhead Shrike the day before,

but a couple of quick stops had soon brought us nice looks at some local beauties including Scissor-tailed Flycatchers galore. Our main quarry though was a few shoreline dwelling species and we were not to be disappointed as we picked up a bevy of stunning herons and egrets including Least Bittern, Roseate Spoonbill and Reddish Egret.

Other highlights included a couple of passing Merlins and a rather nice stop for lunch at a somewhat upscale burger bar! Our day ended with us stopping to check for Aplomados on the way back to our hotel, but again we had no luck, leaving us with both an amazing day but a change of plans required for the following morning.

Tuesday November 10th 2015

With Aplomado Falcon distinctly not on our trip list thus far we again switched up our itinerary and started our morning at a site that had earlier in the week been devouring birders cars: Old Port Isabel Rd. Little more than a dirt track, this site is renowned for Aplomado Falcon but also for a wealth of great sparrows, shorebirds and other things. We were met on site by a drier than expected road and a beautiful sunny sunrise: stunning. Almost immediately we had another much desired species under our belt: the terrifyingly ancient looking Wood Stork – all bald head and scimitar like bill. As we worked away along the road we were almost always entertained: a flock of feeding Long-billed Curlews, a drab but prized Cassin's Sparrow and an oddly out of place Pine Warbler. We also had a wealth of raptors to accompany us including beautiful White-tailed Hawks (a local specialty), coursing harriers and of course an abundance of Osprey. After much searching and scanning of every fencepost we finally had our quarry: Aplomado Falcon. Though it was great to see them they were somewhat distant and though we were happy to see them we could have been happier with the views.

As we were leaving the site I spotted a stunning (and close) adult White-tailed Hawk and pulled over so that the group could get photographs. It sat accommodatingly for a minute or so before it dropped off of its telephone pylon perch and dive bombed a passing Aplomado Falcon! The falcon buzzed past us and headed away before circling a few times to put on something of a show! A brilliant end to the visit to this magnificent spot. Like the Hook-billed Kite, the falcon can be found all the way down to the pampas of Argentina, but again it ranges just into the tip of the US mainly in this Texas stronghold. Extirpated from the US in the early 1950's the reintroduction of the bird has been successful in this part of Texas and the American Birding Association recently changed their rules so that you can now officially count these birds on your North American list.

Our next stop of the day was at Estero Llano. Usually a reliable spot for a number of interesting species, we caught it at hot high noon. We managed however to dig up what was probably our main target species here a roosting Common Pauraque. A member of the nightjar family this cryptically colored but beautifully patterned bird is a real prize. Other highlights included a mixed roaming flock of warblers and an absolute abundance of vivacious Vermilion Flycatchers.

After a nice taqueria lunch stop we were on to our afternoon adventures. This involved taking in a few of the little parks around Weslaco and McAllen as we worked our way west. Here we were greeted by more warbler flocks as well as a number of other local specialties including cheerful Black-crested Titmouse, skulky thrashers of both Curve-billed and Long-billed flavors as well as our first Clay-colored Thrushes and Plain Chachalacas. Chachalacas are a large and somewhat comical chicken-like bird related

to guans and curassows and their raucous calls are an integral part of the sounds of the Rio Grande Valley.

We ended our evening with a few celebratory margaritas just a stone's throw from the hotel in McAllen.

Wednesday, November 11th 2015

We started our morning at the famed Santa Ana NWR. Here we were looking for raptors as well as a couple of wetland specialties. Overhead we soon had the usual throngs of Turkey Vultures, but they were rapidly joined by a couple White-tailed Hawks including one of those neat second year birds which allowed us the ability to study it intently. There were also a couple of Crested Caracaras around as well and a bunch of dueling Harris's hawks.

On the pond we soon had a couple more target species, including Least Grebe and a trifecta of regularly occurring North American kingfishers with both Ringed and Green Kingfisher putting on a fine show. These two stunning species are real crowd pleasers and are a highlights of any visit. We also picked up a rather accommodating Olive Sparrow or two on our way back to the vehicle. Great birds at one of the Rio Grande Valley's real gems.

We continued our day with a lunch stop at Anzalduas Park. This time it wasn't quite as productive though we did find three highly prized Sprague's Pipits. Unfortunately we didn't find a Zone-tailed Hawk and to rub salt into the wound about one million Texas Mosquitoes found us (everything is bigger in Texas!).

With the day becoming almost unbearably hot and humid I suggested a trip to the National Butterfly Center. Though by no means an expert on Texas butterflies, the grounds of the National Butterfly center are beautiful and worth a trip any time you are in the valley. As we pulled up to the center, I wondered aloud to participants whether the strong southerly winds we were experiencing that day might have brought something interesting up from Mexico. Sure enough we arrived to butterfly insanity as at least two genuine rarities had been found on site: a subtly beautiful Yellow-tipped Flasher and a preposterously flashy Red Rim. There were plenty of other good butterflies being turned up by the enthusiastic hordes including a White Scrub-hairstreak and Lantana Scrub-hairstreak. Other beautiful species included Silver-banded Hairstreak and the stunning Malachite. There was even a few nice birds around, including a mixed warbler flock that contained a Tropical Parula! Hot and exhausted we called it a day early and headed back for a welcome shower and some air conditioning before heading out for Green Parakeets, some dinner and a craft beer or two in McAllen.

Thursday, November 12th 2015

Our day started pretty early as we searched for somewhere to pick up an early morning coffee and then headed northwest to a wonderful feeder setup along the river: Salineno. Among the now usual feeder suspects Green Jay, White-tipped Dove and Golden-fronted Woodpecker we enjoyed stellar views of a number of great birds including Long-billed Thrasher (which performed it's thrashing behavior perfectly), Altamira and (had it not been for an amazing find earlier in the trip) our target bird Audubon's Oriole. We also checked along the river here which proved productive for a mixed flock or two that produced cheeky little Verdin as well as Clay-colored Thrush in their natural environment. Also along the river we garnered beautiful views of elegant Gray Hawks as well as a soaring adult Peregrine Falcon – which spooked the abundant White-winged Doves.

Next stop was a little spot I'd discovered during me couple of days scouting the area. Though it wasn't quite as productive as it had been during scouting (of course) it did allow us to pick up Neotropical Cormorant, Cactus Wren and perhaps North America's most stunning sparrow: Black-throated Sparrow.

The habitat dries as you head west out of the valley and so the birds there change with it: Greater Roadrunner, Pyrrhuloxia and Verdin. Our destination for the afternoon was the Max A Mandel Golf Course. Here we added to our mode of birding transport for the trip: Golf cart. Whizzing around the course in Laredo was almost as much fun as the birding itself. We worked hard for White-collared Seedeater and were rewarded for our tenacity. A covey of well seen Northern Bobwhite were new for the trip, as was a Say's Phoebe. Highlights though were of an owl kind when, one of our participants, Steve spotted a likely looking crevice and eventually found two Barn Owls inside. We ended our day being serenaded by two Great Horned Owls as they duetted on the Mexican side of the river. They even appeared for photographs - simply magical.

Friday November 13th 2015

Our next stop was Falcon State Park. Here we searched the scrub for sparrows and whatever else we might discover. Though Scaled Quail vocalized they never showed and the one that got away was a large falcon which was distant in poor lighting but gave more of a Prairie feel than a Peregrine one. Down on the deck there were plenty of nice sparrows to sort through including a bunch of Vesper Sparrows, one Grasshopper Sparrow and even better an uncommon Lark Bunting.

This was essentially our last day birding in the valley, so we were keen to make the most of it. We briefly stopped just to look at Roma Bluffs but were keen to get on the road to Bentsen and other sites just to see what we could dig up. Bentsen proved somewhat productive as we turned up roving flocks of warblers that included a nice Black-throated Gray and a Parula which was sadly Northern rather than Tropical. After doing a fair amount of walking we also got to ride their rather comfortable tram back to the center.

Our day ended back at the place the tour had started Anzalduas Park, where we picked up our first Eastern Bluebirds and had another visit with the continuing Greater Pewee. More importantly as the light began to fade I picked up the up slurred call of a Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet. With a little fussing the group were finally on the bird. This was the perfect way to end our Rio Grande Valley portion of the trip with a specialist bird of the region.

Saturday November 14th 2015

The final full day of our trip saw us winging our way north to Rockport, Texas and a trip out on a boat with Rockport Birding and Kayak Adventures. Whooping Cranes are one of the rarest birds in North America (even though they have bounced back to about 600 individuals from an all-time low of about 20 in the 1940's!!!!) and one of the most compelling too. Standing at about five feet and with a wingspan of seven feet they are impressive birds. Though sometimes visible on land the most intimate way to see them is on a boat out on Aransas NWR.

The boat also provides the opportunity to see a bunch of other cool birds including a couple of Sandwich Terns that paralleled the boat as we headed out to Aransas. Our first stop included a sheltered shorebird

spot that the Army Core of Engineers created with dredge spoils and we had soon picked up a few nice ones including Marbled Godwit and American Oystercatcher. As well as the Sandwich Terns there were a few other gull and tern species loafing on the islands including Forster's Terns and the odd but splendid looking Black Skimmers.

As we got out to Aransas the neat sightings came thick and fast: our first distant cranes, a rather healthy looking coyote and a White-tailed Hawk that was eating lunch on the wing! Eventually we tracked down a close family group of spectacular Whooping Cranes. A moment that made the whole drive north worth it. Even better we got shots of the group being photobombed by one of the islands wintering harriers: very cool!

As we worked our way back we picked up a few more birds for our ever growing trip list before heading for lunch. With just a few hours of the tour left we decided that there could be no more perfect way to end a HMANA Tour than to head over to the Hazel Bazemore Hawkwatch. We were met by the friendly faces of Kevin, Erik and Dane and happily whiled away the next couple of hours in their company talking about hawks and hawkwatching across the county. A fine end to a fun trip and not without a few more avian rewards. First our smallest bird of the trip, a Rufous Hummingbird and our nineteenth and final raptor of the tour a late Broad-winged Hawk. A nice relaxing end to a good trip spent in fine company including the cute little Javelina family that came to hang out at the hawkwatch feeders.

That evening we headed out for our final meal at the area's best BBQ joint. We reflected on a fun and action packed week and reminisced about cool birds and exciting sightings. In all we had managed an impressive 187 bird species over the week that included the two rarest raptors in the United States: Hook-billed Kite and Aplomado Falcon. We had also birded by boat, by car, by tram and by golf cart: next time we need to jump on a train just to round out the experience.

You can see the report with pictures on the HMANA Blog: <http://hmana.blogspot.com/2015/12/hmana-raptors-of-rio-grande-valley-tour.html>

I have stuck a few of my better bird shots from the week on my flickr page here: <https://flic.kr/s/aHskmPCTV7>