

JOPPA FLATS EDUCATION CENTER
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BIG BEND – BROCHURE – 2018. (08/04/17)

TEXAS: BIRDING BIG BEND

NATIONAL PARK AND WEST TEXAS



Santa Elena Canyon, Big Bend

May 1 - May 8, 2018

Leaders

Bill Gette
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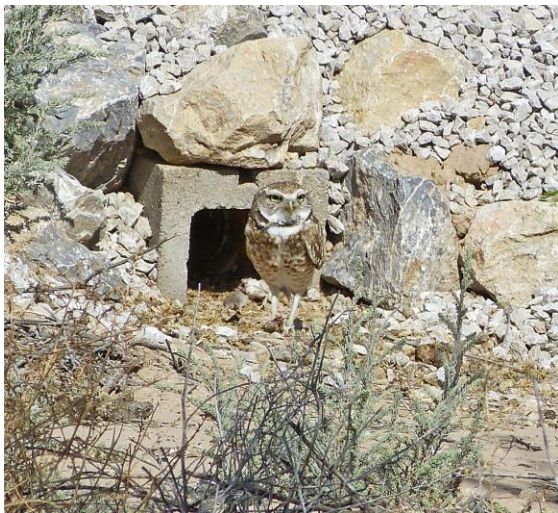
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Vermilion Flycatcher (Male)



Scott's Oriole (Male)



Burrowing Owl



Montezuma Quail (Male)



Say's Phoebes (Fledglings)



Summer Tanager (Male)

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Introduction

Big Bend National Park, located along the Rio Grande River (Rio Bravo del Norte) in southernmost Texas, is an extraordinary place to visit. In fact, the park is really three parks in one. It includes extensive riparian habitats along the Rio Grande River, large expanses of Chihuahu Desert, and the beautiful Chisos Mountains. The significant changes in elevation within the park create varied habitats and awe-inspiring scenery. And talk about big—Big Bend National Park encompasses 1,252 square miles and is bigger than the state of Rhode Island. More than 450 species of birds and 75 species of mammals have been recorded in the park. Adding to the excitement of our visit to Big Bend is the history written in stone, the geological formations evident throughout the area. Upthrusting of rocks due to plate tectonics, millions of years of deposition and erosion, and faulting and bending of the rocks have created a geological wonderland.

As exciting as Big Bend is by itself, the park represents only part of our natural history adventure. Our trip begins in El Paso, Texas, where we will visit some wonderful birding venues along the Rio Grande. Leaving El Paso, we will make a brief visit to the McNary, Texas, area before moving on to the beautiful Davis Mountains and the Davis Mountains State Park. From there, we will visit Balmorhea Lake, an oasis in the desert, before heading south to Big Bend. After three-days exploring Big Bend, we will leave the park through Persimmon Gap, an extraordinary geological feature, and drive back to the Davis Mountains. We will explore some new venues in the Fort Davis area and then work our way slowly back to El Paso, stopping at a number of productive areas en route.

Since we will be visiting so many different habitats, we have a large number of target bird species such as Common Black-Hawk, Montezuma Quail, Band-tailed Pigeon, Greater Roadrunner, Burrowing Owl, Vermilion Flycatcher, Black-chinned Hummingbird, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Black-capped Vireo, Cave Swallow, Verdin, Cactus Wren, Crissal Thrasher, Phainopepla, Colima Warbler, Western Tanager, Lark Sparrow, Pyrrhuloxia, Painted Bunting, Varied Bunting, and Scott's Oriole.

Tuesday, May 1

Our trip begins at El Paso International Airport at approximately noon. From the airport, we will drive the short distance to the Rio Bosque Wetlands Park. This 372-acre reserve is managed by the University of Texas at El Paso and includes an irrigation canal, ponds (water levels vary greatly throughout the year), and walking trails. In recent years, pairs of White-tailed Kites and Harris's Hawks have nested in the park. Other nesting species at Rio Bosque include Cinnamon Teal, Gambel's Quail, Black-necked Stilt, Greater Roadrunner, Burrowing Owl, Black-chinned Hummingbird, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Western Kingbird, Verdin, Crissal Thrasher, Blue Grosbeak, and Painted Bunting.

Lodging in El Paso

Wednesday, May 2

We will have a 7 a.m. departure and drive the short distance south along I-10 to Fabens. We will then follow Route 20 south and stop to view several irrigation ponds. During previous trips, we have seen a good variety of ducks, Eared and Clark's grebes, White-faced Ibises, and White Pelicans in the ponds and irrigation canals.

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At McNary, we will explore the surrounding thornbush habitat where creosote bush, mesquite, and cacti are the dominant plants. This habitat is excellent for Pyrrhuloxia, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, White-winged Dove, Say's Phoebe, Green-tailed Towhee, and Cactus Wren. We should also be on the lookout for Collared Peccaries (Javelinas).

From McNary, we will continue east on I-10 to Kent, where we will begin our ascent into the Davis Mountains. The drive into the mountains passes through scenic areas with extensive grasslands and scattered stands of Gray and Emory oaks, Pinyon Pine, and Alligator Juniper. Birds of special interest we will be looking for along the way include Swainson's Hawk, Cassin's Kingbird, Acorn Woodpecker, Bushtit, Western Bluebird, Phainopepla, Western Scrub-Jay, Hepatic Tanager, Western Tanager, Canyon Towhee, Lark Sparrow, Cassin's Sparrow, and Black-headed Grosbeak. In the lower elevation grasslands, we will look for Pronghorns. At the highest elevations along our route, we hope to see some Band-tailed Pigeons.

As we approach the small town of Fort Davis, we will enter the Davis Mountains State Park. The elevation in this area is approximately 5,000 above sea level, so conditions will be relatively mild. One of the first birds we will look for within the park is the secretive Montezuma Quail. During our previous trips, we have seen this beautiful quail in the campground and near Indian Lodge.

After dark, we will drive through the Davis Mountains State Park and listen for Western Screech-Owl and Common Poorwill.

Lodging at Indian Lodge

Thursday, May 3

We will have a pre-dawn departure from Indian Lodge and drive approximately 35 miles north to Balmorhea Lake. En route, we will look for Collared Peccaries; they frequently feed on the shoulders of the highway at night. (We saw 20 peccaries in this area during a previous trip.) At Balmorhea Lake, which covers 573 acres, we will look for water birds. In the past, we have seen four species of grebes (Western, Clark's, Eared, and Pied-billed) and a good variety of ducks (including Cinnamon Teal). We will search the mudflats and shoreline for shorebirds. We expect to see Wilson's Phalarope and Black-necked Stilt. With luck, we could find a Snowy Plover. In the scrub habitats around the lake, we will search for Ash-throated Flycatcher, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Phainopepla, Vermilion Flycatcher, Yellow-breasted Chat, Brewer's Sparrow, and Rufous-crowned Sparrow.

En route back to Indian Lodge, we will drive along Limpia Creek. We will be on the lookout for the Common Black-Hawks that have nested in the cottonwoods along the creek in recent years.

By mid-morning, we will leave the Fort Davis area and drive south to Big Bend National Park. We plan to make a number of stops en route (e.g., Elephant Mountain). We will enter the park at the Study (rhymes with "moody") Butte entrance. We will bird along the park road until we reach The Basin, a picturesque location in the heart of the Chisos Mountains.

Lodging at Chisos Mountains Lodge

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Friday, May 4

We will leave the lodge by 4:00 a.m. and hike along the Laguna Meadow Trail into the Chisos Mountains. (Our early departure is planned to avoid the intense heat later in the day. The trail is well marked and a small flashlight is sufficient to light the way.) The trail is moderately difficult, and the distance to our destination, Laguna Meadow, is about 3.5 miles. We plan to set an easy pace with frequent stops to bird and rest.

The Laguna Meadow Trail offers an excellent opportunity to see one of the park's specialties—Colima Warbler. This warbler's North American breeding range is limited to the Chisos Mountains. During the hike, we will also have a good chance of seeing Townsend's Warbler, Black-throated Gray Warbler, White-throated Swift, Zone-tailed Hawk, and Mexican Jay. In the predawn darkness, we have heard Western Screech-Owls and Mexican Whip-poor-wills.

We will return to the Chisos Mountains Lodge for a midday rest period.

Note: For those participants who feel that the hike into the Chisos Mountains is too strenuous, we will provide information about other birding opportunities in The Basin. For example, the Window Trail provides excellent birding and magnificent scenery.

By mid-afternoon, we will drive the short distance east to Rio Grande Village. The area around the village has small ponds, cottonwood groves, and floodplain vegetation. This is a good place for spring migrants, raptors, Black-capped Vireo, Bronzed Cowbird, Painted Bunting, Western Tanager, and Yellow-headed Blackbird.

As we approach Rio Grande Village, we will cross Tornillo Creek. This river, which

is typically dry, is a good place to look for fossils.

Lodging at Chisos Mountains Lodge

Saturday, May 5

In the early morning, we will have a leisurely hike along the Window Trail located just below the Chisos Mountains Lodge. We hope to see Lucifer Hummingbird, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Varied Bunting, and Rufous-crowned Sparrow.

After breakfast, we will drive west to a stunningly beautiful section of the park, Santa Elena Canyon. Over millions of years, the Rio Grande has eroded the rocks to form a steep-walled canyon. We will bird along a short portion of a nature trail looking for White-throated Swift, Bell's Vireo, and Black-tailed Gnatcatcher. We will scan the sky for raptors (e.g., Gray Hawk, Zone-tailed Hawk, and Golden Eagle) that are using the thermals and updrafts. We will also listen for the songs of Canyon Wrens echoing through the canyon.

Just east of Santa Elena Canyon is the Cottonwood Campground. During our 2014 and 2016 trips, we had extraordinary experiences here. Both times, the park staff was watering the picnic area in the campground and the moist grass attracted a wonderful assortment of birds. We were thrilled to see many Painted Buntings, at least a dozen Vermilion Flycatchers, Summer and Western tanagers, Blue Grosbeaks, Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, and many species of wood-warblers. While the water made our 2014 and 2016 stops memorable, we have always found Cottonwood Campground to be a very productive venue.

We will also stop at the Sam Nail Ranch on the Ross Maxwell Scenic Drive to look

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for birds of the dry scrublands. A small wet area at the deserted ranch attracts a number of exciting species such as Pyrrhuloxia, Varied Bunting, Greater Roadrunner, Black-throated Sparrow, and Scott's Oriole.

Prior to returning to The Basin, we will stop at the park visitor center at Panther Junction. The center has excellent interpretive displays and educational materials and a very good nature shop. We will then return to our lodge for a midday rest period.

This afternoon, participants will have the opportunity to take an extended rest period, go on a leisurely self-guided walk along one of the trails in The Basin, or make a return trip to Rio Grande Village.

Lodging at Chisos Mountains Lodge

Sunday, May 6

After a leisurely breakfast, we will leave The Basin and drive north from Panther Junction toward the park entrance at Persimmon Gap. En route, we will stop at a number of sites, including the fossil bone exhibit and the Dagger Flat Auto Road. As we drive through these desert-like areas of the park, we will look for Mule Deer, Coyote, and Desert Cottontail.

At Persimmon Gap, we will stop to see the layers of rock that over millions of years have been heated and twisted into s-shaped formations. These very visible formations clearly demonstrate the tremendous power of the geological processes that have shaped Big Bend.

From Big Bend, we will drive north toward Marathon for lunch. During previous trips, we have seen our first Scissor-tailed Flycatchers in Marathon.

After lunch, we will return to Fort Davis and bird a scenic stretch of highway that flanks the western side of the Davis Mountains. We hope to find bird species

that we may have missed during our earlier visit to the area.

Lodging at Indian Lodge

Monday, May 7

We will spend the morning birding in and around Davis Mountain State Park. Hopefully, we will have seen Montezuma's Quail earlier in our trip. If not, we will try again this morning.

By noon, we will start our return trip to El Paso. We have a couple of options for our return trip. We will either retrace our earlier route through the Davis Mountains and rejoin I-10 at Kent or swing south to Marfa and then follow US-90 through the grasslands of southwestern Texas. We will choose the route that we feel gives us the best chance to see any of the species we may have missed earlier. By late afternoon, we will return to El Paso.

Lodging in El Paso

Tuesday May 8

We will provide early morning transportation to the El Paso airport.

Considerations:

1. All scheduled events are subject to change depending on the weather and other considerations. Our objective is to ensure that participants have the most enjoyable and safest trip possible.
2. There is a tremendous amount to see during our adventure along the Rio Grande River and in Big Bend National Park. Our pace will be fairly rapid, but we will ensure that our participants have good opportunities to see the birds and other wildlife.

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3. Please do not make your flight arrangements to and from El Paso until you have checked with the trip leaders.
4. Please note that this is a birding trip—*not* a vacation. We start early every morning and are active all day. While most of the walking during our trip will be relatively easy and of short duration, the hike along the Laguna Meadow Trail in Big Bend will be moderately difficult.
5. Transportation costs within Texas are included in the program fee. We plan to utilize 7-passenger vans. This trip requires a significant amount of driving. (Texas is a big state!) To make the trip as comfortable as possible, we will make frequent stops to stretch and exercise.
6. Meals are not included in the program fee. Meals will be informal. Breakfasts are often from grocery or convenience stores. Lunches are usually eaten in the field. We will make frequent stops to buy food and drinks to take in the vans. We will stop at a restaurant for dinner.
7. Rest rooms are *not* always available during many phases of the trip. We will stop at formal facilities whenever possible; otherwise, we must use what nature provides.
8. For your added enjoyment, you will receive a copy of our trip guide. This guide provides background information, maps, and checklists to help you prepare for our trip.

Program Cost (Per Person)

Members: \$1,395 per person, double occupancy. Air fare is *not* included.

Non-members: \$1,495 per person, double occupancy. Air fare is *not* included.

Single Room Supplement: \$450

A non-refundable, non-transferable deposit of \$400 is required at the time of registration. Final payment is due on April 1, 2018.

The program fee does not include air transportation, personal items, or meals (except some continental breakfasts). The fee does include ground transportation in Texas, entrance fees, lodging, and interpretive materials

For additional information, please contact:

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Please use the following form when registering for this trip. Thank you.

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**BIRDING BIG BEND AND
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Registration Form (Big Bend - 2018)

Name(s): _____

Address: _____

Tel. # Days: _____

Evenings: _____

E-Mail Address: _____

Deposit Enclosed: \$ _____
(\$400 per person. Please make check
payable to Mass Audubon.)

Cancellation Policy:

If you must cancel your trip with us, we can offer full refunds (less the initial deposit) up to 30 days before departure. Cancellations made less than 30 days before departure are non-refundable, unless we are able to replace you with another paying participant. In any case, your initial deposit is non-refundable.