

Trip Report – South Texas Specialties & Rarities, 2025

November 12-18, 2025 with Cameron Cox & Oscar Carmona



Rio Grande River from Santa Margarita Ranch Bluffs © Oscar Carmona

The South Texas Specialties and Rarities Tour from November 12-18, 2025, focused on observing the nearly two dozen Rio Grande Valley specialties and any rarities found in this region. Despite the weather being unseasonably warmer than typical for this time of year, the participants embraced the conditions, documenting an impressive total of 204 bird species. This remarkable tally underscores the exceptional biodiversity of the Rio Grande Valley, reaffirming its reputation as a premier birding destination.

Day 1: Arrival in Harlingen. After meeting everybody at the airport, we headed to Hugh Ramsey Nature Park where we immediately encountered Rio Grande Valley specialties such as Black-crested Titmouse, Great Kiskadee, and the charismatic Green Jay. Another notable

sighting was a well-camouflaged Common Pauraque, a South Texas specialty, observed in close scope views. This attractive nightjar, while common, can be difficult to see in the daytime and the views obtained through the scope were exceptional, allowing everyone to appreciate the intricate details and beauty of the Pauraque up close. The sighting was a highlight for



Common Pauraque © Oscar Carmona

participants, offering a rare and memorable look at this elusive nocturnal bird. Other highlights included a Solitary Sandpiper, Plain Chachalacas, and an Ovenbird flushed by a heard of Javelina. Our next stop was at a local sod farm hosting an extraordinary number of over 125 Long-billed Curlews. We also enjoyed a show from 6-7 soaring White-tailed Hawks and Crested Caracaras hunting the open fields along with a small procession of Franklin's and Laughing Gulls. After a few hours of birding, we drove to McAllen to check into our hotel for a brief break before our welcome and orientation dinner. Our first day of birding in South Texas was off to a great start!



Ringed Kingfisher © Jeff Lewis

Day 2: Upper Rio Grande Valley. The group ventured to the upper Rio Grande Valley in Starr County, a transitional zone between South Texas brushlands and the Chihuahuan Desert. Our first stop was Salineño, a small town right along the Rio Grande River. We headed to the boat ramp which offers a good view of this section of the Rio Grande and immediately started searching for birds. A surprising Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl call from the opposite

side of the Rio Grande River was a rare and exciting find. Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl had previously inhabited this section of the Rio Grande Valley, but it had been years since one had been found there. The morning also included sightings of all three kingfisher species, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Black Phoebe, Blue-headed Vireo, Pyrrhuloxia, Black-throated



Altamira Oriole © Oscar Carmona

Sparrow, Red-billed Pigeons, Double-crested and Neotropical Cormorants, White-tipped Dove, Lincoln's Sparrow, and Altamira and Audubon's Orioles at a feeding station. At the nearby Falcon County and State Parks, we observed Northern Bobwhite, Greater Roadrunner, American Herring Gull, and a soaring group of Wood Storks. Back in McAllen, we visited Quinta Mazatlán, an old hacienda turned into a beautiful nature and community

center with abundant native vegetation. The feeding station was overrun by Clay-colored Thrushes hogging the peanut butter. It's astounding that this was once a rare bird in the Valley, even now that they are relatively common it is still a joy to obtain such fantastic views of this large thrush. To our surprise a male Black-throated Gray Warbler flew into the trees right above us. This western species is still quite scarce in the Rio Grande Valley and to have one come to us rather than having to spend time tracking one down was surely welcome. In the vicinity, we observed the Buff-bellied Hummingbird —another regional specialty, feeding on native flowering plants. Additionally, the presence of Red-bordered Pixies, a rare and colorful butterfly species frequenting the same garden, was particularly noteworthy. In the back of the park, we had an even better view of Pyrrhuloxia than had obtained in the desert. After a successful day of birding, we arrived at the hotel for a brief break before dinner.

Day 3: Santa Margarita Ranch and Bluffs. We had an early pre-dawn excursion to see Margarita the Magnificent, a female Mottled Owl, taking up residence at Santa Margarita Ranch. The amount of planning, missed sleep, driving, and waiting that went into our pursuit of Margarita the Magnificent far exceeded the brief time we spent with her. Yet, none of us would have traded those few precious moments for anything. Her presence was truly majestic, and the



Mottled Owl © Cameron Cox

experience of encountering such an extraordinary bird was unforgettable. We then headed to the Bluffs at the ranch to see the sunrise and witness early morning bird activity on the river below. At the Santa Margarita Bluffs, the group witnessed territorial battles among Ringed Kingfishers, interactions with Belted and Green Kingfishers, and heard the songs of Audubon's and Altamira Orioles. Here we had a rare opportunity to see all three species of kingfisher perched in the same scope view lined up from smallest to largest! We also observed the



Green Kingfisher © Jeff Lewis

rare Morelet's Seedeater at length and encountered Scaled Quail and Wild Turkey near the border wall. The feeding station attracted a variety of fruit-eating birds including Altamira Oriole, Green Jay, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Plain Chachalaca, Olive Sparrow, and a pair of Javelina. Other notable sightings included Black-throated Sparrow, Rock Wren, Lark Bunting, and Red-billed Pigeon. A hike into the riparian woodlands yielded views of Gray Hawks and a bathing Black-throated Gray Warbler, while a Rose-throated Becard was heard in the distance. The day concluded with an entertaining encounter with a family group of Cactus Wrens. We had a long but successful day. After dinner at a festive Mexican restaurant, everyone was ready for a good night's sleep to prepare for the next day's adventure.



Groove-billed Ani © Jeff Lewis

Day 4: Bentsen State Park, Santa Ana NWR and Estero Llano Grande State Park. The day started at Bentsen State Park, where we spotted a Ringed Kingfisher and brief glimpses at the elusive Northern Beardless Tyrannulet. We also enjoyed seeing the antics of Plain Chachalacas, Inca Doves, Green Jays, and Altamira Orioles at the park's feeding stations. Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge offered more bird activity, including a Merlin hunting dragonflies, various hawks (Gray, Harris's and White-tailed), Anhinga, Wilson's Snipe, Northern Pintail, Least Grebe, Clay-colored Sparrow, Vermilion Flycatcher and many dabbling ducks. The ducks, however, took a backseat to the many Least Grebes, with incredible views of a family group of grebes feeding their stripy-face offspring dragonfly larva (tough day to be a dragonfly). We also flushed a

number of sparrows, but only a gorgeous Clay-colored Sparrow cooperated with us by perching in view. Estero Llano Grande State Park, another fantastic State Park, was our next stop. We birded the tropical area where the second roosting Common Pauraque of the trip was the highlight. Other species observed in this location included American White Pelican, Black-necked Stilt, Roseate Spoonbill, White-tailed Kite, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Yellow-crowned Night Heron, and Black-crowned Night Heron. We also got good looks at a Burrowing Owl found in an agricultural area on our way to Harlingen. Our next birding destinations around Harlingen in the late afternoon and evening produced Groove-billed Ani, Green Parakeets, numerous shorebirds, and a spectacular evening gathering of parrots including Red-crowned, Red-lored, and Yellow-headed Amazons. We watched these highly charismatic birds until the light faded, then concluded the evening with dinner before heading back to the hotel.



Red-lored Amazons © Jeff Lewis

Day 5: Laguna Atascosa NWR and Coastal Birding. This morning, we headed toward the coast. At Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, the group was greeted by Sandhill Cranes and observed ducks including Redhead, Ring-necked Duck, and Lesser Scaup. Other species observed in this location included Reddish Egret, Gull-billed Tern, and



Aplomado Falcon © Oscar Carmona

Altamira Oriole. A favorite shorebird spot nearby yielded Snowy Plover, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Peregrine Falcon, and a covey of Northern Bobwhite. At Laguna Vista Nature Trail, Hermit Thrush, Tennessee Warbler, Orange-crowned Warbler, Verdin, Curve-billed and Long-billed Thrashers, Olive Sparrow, Altamira Oriole, and an Indigo Snake drinking at a water drip were the highlights. A roadside stop on the way to South Padre Island showcased hundreds of Redheads and Nilgai antelopes. Although the sought-after Aplomado

Falcon was initially elusive, it was eventually seen in flight and perched where we were able to have distant scope views. We also heard a King Rail at the same spot where one had been found the week before, along with a large number of waterfowl and shorebirds. We also had both Marsh and Sedge Wrens constantly calling in the nearby cattail marsh. A picnic lunch along Highway 48 offered views of American Oystercatcher, Marbled Godwit, Wilson's Plover, Western Willet, Ruddy Turnstone, Long-billed and Short-billed Dowitchers, Gull-billed Tern, and Black Skimmer.



White-phase Reddish Egret © Oscar Carmona

At South Padre Island, we heard and saw the newly split Mangrove Yellow Warbler along with Northern Waterthrush and the call of a Clapper Rail coming from the adjacent salt marsh. The day ended with sightings of Black-throated Green Warbler, Western Palm Warbler, Indigo Bunting, Sandwich and Royal Terns, Northern Parula, and both Black-chinned and Buff-bellied Hummingbirds. We also enjoyed the antics of several

feeding Reddish Egrets of both color morphs as well as an imitation of the distinctive feeding style of Reddish Egret by a Tricolored Heron. We made several stops trying to see a Clapper Rail, though while the rails were happy to be heard, they had no intention of being seen. The sting of this rejection was greatly reduced by our delicious dinner at a local oyster bar in Port Isabel.

Day 6: Los Freson Nature Park, Resaca de la Palma State Park, and Brownsville. This morning's target was the Tropical Parula, a rare warbler, which we successfully located and viewed at Los Fresnos Nature Park. Here we also had good views of White-eyed Vireo, Wilson's Warbler, and Black-and-White Warbler. Returning to the location where we had only a brief and unsatisfactory look at the Aplomado Falcon the previous day. Before we even



Tropical Parula © Jeff Lewis

parked, we spotted a pair of falcons in the area. With the aid of a scope, our views were significantly better than before, although the birds remained somewhat distant for quality

photography. We waited for a while, hoping for an even closer encounter. Just as we were preparing to leave, one of the falcons suddenly took flight and began harassing a White-tailed Hawk nearby. Following this dramatic interaction, the falcon landed much closer to us, providing an excellent opportunity to capture memorable photographs of this striking raptor. At Resaca de la Palma State Park we enjoyed sightings of Couch's Kingbird (a common spring and summer resident,



Zone-tailed Hawk © Oscar Carmona

but scarce in the winter), a pair of hunting White-tailed Hawks, a juvenile Swainson's Hawk, and Cave Swallows. At Buena Vista Cemetery in Brownsville, we had over 50 Orange-crowned Warblers mixed in with a gorgeous Yellow-throated Warbler, a Nashville Warbler, several Black-and-White and Black-throated Green Warblers and good views of a Blue-headed Vireo. At the UTRGV campus, we had the opportunity to compare Tropical and Couch's Kingbirds, observed Anhinga, American Redstart, Lesser Goldfinches, and experienced multiple sightings of a Zone-tailed Hawk. The day concluded with a stop at a port connector rich in waterfowl including Cinnamon Teal, Gull-billed Tern, and a large Snowy Plover flock near the SpaceX launch site. Our final stop for the day was Palo Alto Battlefield Park. Here we had a fantastic time watching a particularly bloodthirsty Loggerhead Shrike that had several creatures impaled on a nearby yucca.



As the day drew to a close, the group was treated to an unexpected sighting of a Great Horned Owl during the drive to our final dinner in Harlingen. This thrilling encounter added a memorable touch to the evening, setting the stage for a celebratory meal at a popular local Mexican restaurant. During dinner, the participants took time to reflect on the tour's most notable moments. There was unanimous agreement in naming Margarita the Magnificent, the Mottled Owl, as the bird of the trip. The group also shared stories of personal milestones, including new lifers observed throughout the week, and engaged in lively conversation about upcoming birding destinations. The evening provided a fitting conclusion to a remarkable day, filled with camaraderie and shared enthusiasm for birding.



Vermilion Flycatcher © Oscar Carmona

Day 7: Final Day and Departures. On the final day, the group enjoyed an impromptu flycatcher appreciation session at La Feria Nature Center – here we had Black and Eastern Phoebes, Tropical Kingbird, Great Kiskadee, and several male Vermilion Flycatchers. Returning to the sod farm, we observed fewer Long-billed Curlews, several Horned Larks, and close views of two Sprague's

Pipits. The trip concluded with a visit to a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher roost, where eleven of these striking birds were seen, marking a fitting end to a successful and diverse birding experience before everyone headed back home. A great finale to a great trip!

We wish to extend our heartfelt gratitude to the participants of the South Texas Specialties and Rarities Tour. Your enthusiasm, camaraderie, and positive spirit made this journey truly memorable. Despite the unusually warm weather and the long hours we spent exploring the field each day, we were inspired by the good spirit and humor of the group. We thoroughly enjoyed sharing this adventure with such wonderful company and hope that the experiences and memories from this tour will be cherished by all. It is our sincere hope to welcome everyone again on a future tour for more remarkable birding discoveries together.

Link to eBird trip report: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/435785>