



BIRDING TEXAS & BEYOND

ITINERARY, 2026

Rio Grande Valley Winter in South Texas & Whooping Cranes



Whooping Cranes © Greg Lasley

The tour focuses on exploring the Rio Grande Valley, including its wintering birds, specialties and any rarities that may be found in the area. This tour also includes a three-hour boat trip to Aransas National Wildlife Refuge located on the Central Texas Coast to see Whooping Cranes and a King Ranch tour to see the Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl. Our itinerary will remain flexible to maximize our opportunities to see as many species as possible. Some of the locations we visit include Aransas National Wildlife Refuge and Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Center in the Central Texas Coast and Salineño Wildlife Preserve, Santa Margarita Ranch, Falcon State Park, and other iconic birding sites including Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park, and Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge in the Rio Grande Valley. Winter is an optimal season for observing vagrant bird species in the Rio Grande Valley. Examples of past rarities

that have been seen in the area among many others include Fan-tailed Warbler, Bat Falcon, Gray-collared Becard, Crimson-collared Grosbeak, and Bare-throated Tiger-Heron. We will enjoy comfortable lodging accommodations, great regional cuisine and moderate drives to various birding locations to enjoy the varied bird life in this exciting region.

The tour begins in the Rockport area, located north of Corpus Christi where we take a boat trip through the coastal marshes in and around the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge is best known as the wintering home (November through March) of over 500 Whooping Cranes which migrate annually from north-central Canada. The salt marshes, bay waters and mudflats provide a stable, protected habitat with abundant food sources. We next explore the northern end of Mustang Island at Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Center. This location has an extensive boardwalk and observation platforms that extend over freshwater marshes where we may find a variety of bird species.

We dedicate a full day of the tour to exploring the historic King Ranch, Norias Division. The ranch is located south of Kingsville, and it is the best place in Texas to see the Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl. The ranch features a variety of habitat types, including live oak mottes, mesquite savannas, freshwater wetlands, coastal prairies, and marshes. In addition to the Pygmy-Owl, several bird species can be observed in these diverse habitats, such as the Northern Beardless Tyrannulet, Tropical Parula, Audubon's Oriole, Cassin's Sparrow, and Botteri's Sparrow. Other wildlife we might encounter includes White-tailed Deer, Javelina, Wild Turkey, Feral Hog, and Nilgai antelope.

The next portion of the tour leads us to the eastern end of the Rio Grande Valley, which includes Harlingen, South Padre Island, and Brownsville. The extensive mudflats and wetlands in this region provide habitat for waterfowl and shorebird species. In addition, the wooded habitats allow for resident species and wintering passerines such as Black-throated Green, Orange-crowned, and Black-and-white Warblers. The coastal prairie areas between Brownsville and the Gulf coast support a variety of raptor species including Aplomado Falcon, White-tailed Kite, Harris's Hawk and White-tailed Hawk. While in Brownsville, we stop at Oliveira Park to observe several species of Amazon parrots as they settle into their evening roost.

We continue the tour upriver to the mid-valley region. The habitat in this region is characterized by subtropical woodlands, featuring moss-covered cedar elm trees, ebony, willows, and an assortment of native shrubs and flowers. The wetlands in the area offer essential water sources for wildlife. Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park, Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, Anzalduas County Park, and Estero Llano Grande State Park are great places to see Altamira Oriole, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Great Kiskadee, Green Jay, Common Pauraque, Least Grebe, and Olive Sparrow.

We spend the final two days of the tour birding the upper valley, where diverse bird species can be observed due to the distinct habitats in the area. The arid uplands of Falcon State

Park include rolling hills covered with mesquite, wild olive, cactus and native grasses offer sightings of birds like Black-throated Sparrow, Pyrrhuloxia, Verdin and Cactus Wren to name a few. The riparian areas of Salineño and Santa Margarita Ranch along the Rio Grande River provide habitat for Audubon's Oriole, Muscovy Duck, Brown Jay, Ringed and Green Kingfishers, Morelet's Seedeater, and Red-billed Pigeon.

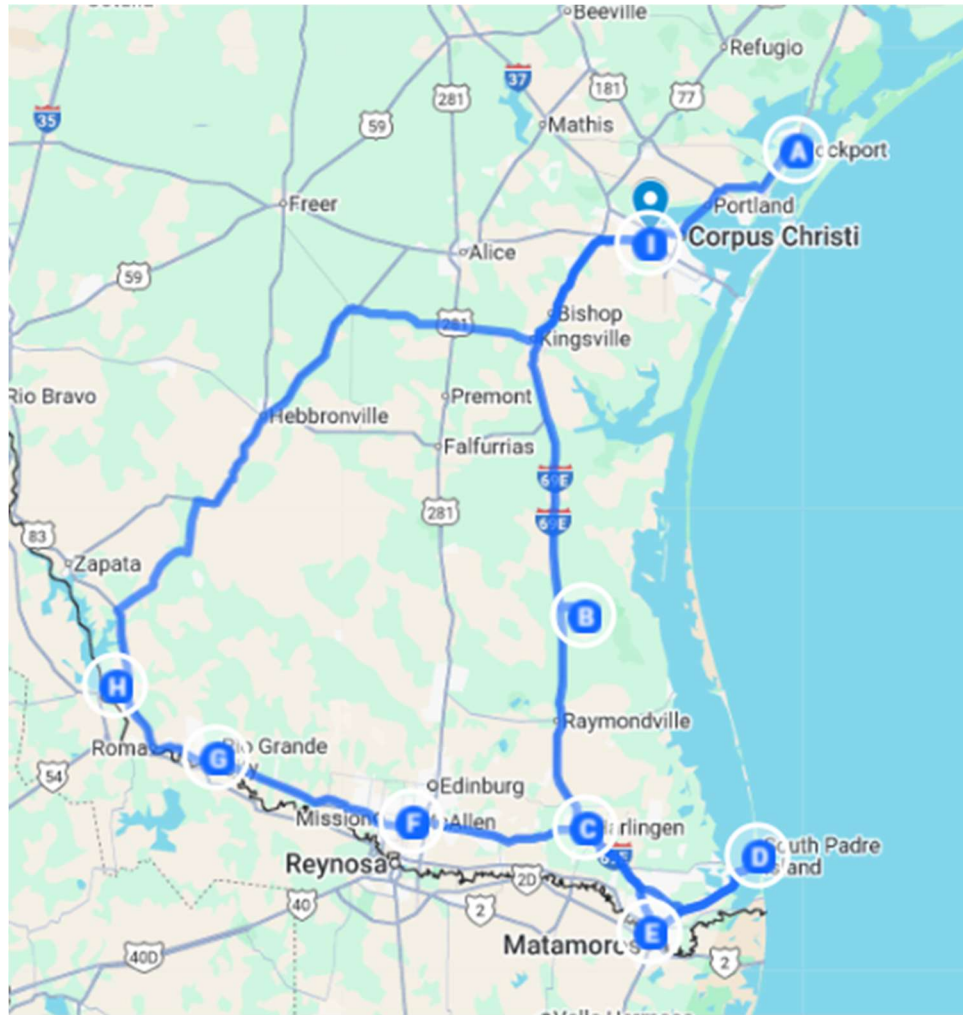
TOUR HIGHLIGHTS

- Enjoy a boat trip through the coastal waterways of Aransas National Wildlife Refuge to get close views of Whooping Cranes.
- Look for Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, Audubon's Oriole, and Northern Beardless Tyrannulet in the oak mottes and mesquite savannas of the legendary King Ranch.
- Look for desert species such as Black-throated Sparrow, Scaled Quail, Cactus Wren and Greater Roadrunner at Falcon State Park.
- Marvel at the variety of tropical bird species that reach their northernmost range in this region including Green Jay, Altamira Oriole, Ringed Kingfisher, Plain Chachalaca, Morelet's Seedeater and Hook-billed Kite.
- Observe large numbers of wintering waterfowl and shorebirds at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge and South Padre Island.
- Spot several raptor species including Gray Hawk, White-tailed Hawk, Harris's Hawk, Crested Caracara, Hook-billed Kite and Aplomado Falcon.
- Witness the nightly flight of Amazon parrots and Green Parakeets as they come to their evening roost.
- Welcome the possibility of seeing rare vagrant birds from south of the border.

TOUR SIZE: This tour is limited to 8 participants

DIFFICULTY LEVEL & PACE OF THE TOUR: Moderate (2-3 miles of daily walking). Field time each day is typically between 7-10 hours (weather permitting). Most of the birding is done on trails, boardwalks, beaches and along the road as we drive to various birding locations. Walking on uneven, soggy terrain, or in the rain is possible. Days start with breakfast at the hotel and departure for the field between 6:30 to 7:00 am, with the exception of an earlier morning start for the King Ranch Tour. We bird throughout the morning, take a break for lunch and resume birding until 5:00 pm followed by dinner at a local restaurant.

TOUR ROUTE



I: Start/End: Corpus Christi International Airport (CRP)

- A – Rockport (Nights 1-2) / Aransas National Wildlife Refuge / Mustang Island
- B – King Ranch – Norias Division
- C – Harlingen (Nights 3-4)
- D – South Padre Island Convention Center Boardwalk / Valley Land Fund Migratory Bird Sanctuary Lots
- E – Brownsville / Resaca de la Palma State Park / Coastal Plains
- F – McAllen (Nights 5-6) / Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park / Estero Llano Grande State Park / Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge
- G – Rio Grande City (Hotel-Overnight Stay, Nights 7-8) / Salineño / Santa Margarita Ranch
- H – Falcon State Park / Fronzon

DAILY ITINERARY

Day 1: Arrive to Corpus Christi International Airport (CRP) before 2 pm. After meeting everyone at the airport, we head north to Rockport to check in to our hotel. If time allows, we try to get in a few hours of birding at local sites before the evening orientation session and welcome dinner. Overnight: Hampton Inn & Suites, Rockport-Fulton.

Day 2: Aransas National Wildlife Refuge and Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Center.

This morning, we take a boat trip to the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge to see the Whooping Cranes and a variety of other wading, shore, and water birds. We have the opportunity to get close looks at family groups of Whooping Cranes as we cruise through these marshes that are brimming with bird activity. We are likely to see a large variety of waterfowl



Reddish Egret © Greg Lasley

including Brown and American White Pelicans, White Ibis, Tricolored Heron and a variety of wintering ducks. After the boat trip, we spend the remainder of the day birding in the Rockport area and Mustang Island. The Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Center is a great location with boardwalks going through coastal marshes where we will see a large variety of bird species including Roseate Spoonbill, Reddish Egret as well as a variety of wintering ducks, shorebirds and passerines. The pastures and agricultural fields in the area provide opportunities to see groups of Sandhill Cranes and wintering sparrows. Overnight: Hampton Inn and Suites, Rockport-Fulton.

Day 3: King Ranch and drive to Rio Grande Valley.

We spend the day birding the Norias Division of the King Ranch. Norias is located on the southern end of the vast 825,000 acre ranch. The mesquite brushlands and oak mottes in this area are one of the few places in Texas where our target bird, the Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, can be seen with some degree of regularity, although it is not guaranteed due to its secretive nature. Additional uncommon species of interest we may see include Tropical Parula, Audubon's Oriole,



Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl © Greg Lasley

Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, and Botteri's Sparrow. The various habitats in the ranch host many species predominantly found in south Texas, including Harris's Hawk, White-tailed Hawk, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Hooded Oriole, Green Jay, Olive Sparrow and Long-billed Thrasher. The King Ranch is a haven for wildlife; we have a good chance of seeing White-tailed Deer, Wild Turkey, Javelina, and exotic Nilgai antelope. We then start our journey southward to the Rio Grande Valley which will be our base for the next six days of the tour. Overnight: Hampton Inn and Suites, Harlingen.



White-tailed Hawk © Greg Lasley

Day 4: South Padre Island, Coastal Plains, and Brownsville.

Today we depart for South Padre Island to visit the Convention Center Boardwalk as well as the Valley Land Fund Migratory Bird Sanctuary lots which provide habitat for neotropical migrants and overwintering species. The coastal marshes and mudflats are brimming with birds including Wilson's Plover, Snowy Plover, Reddish Egret, Brown Pelican among others. We also spend time along the Gulf beach looking for any ducks, shorebirds or pelagic species. The island can be full of avian surprises as there have been a number of rare visitors including Great Black-Hawk,



Aplomado Falcon © Greg Lasley

Yellow-billed Loon, Slate-throated Redstart, and Flame-colored Tanager. In the afternoon we bird the coastal prairies located between Brownsville and Port Isabel. Our main target in this location will be the Aplomado Falcon, which has re-established a small population in this area after disappearing in the 1930s. Other birds we may see in the coastal prairies include White-tailed Hawk, Chihuahuan Raven and a variety of shorebirds and sparrows. We end our day in Brownsville visiting Oliveira Park to witness the nightly flight of Amazon parrots coming into the park to roost. Here we can observe Red-crowned, Red-lored, Yellow-headed and White-fronted Amazons in addition to Green Parakeet. Overnight: Hampton Inn and Suites, Harlingen.

Day 5: Estero Llano Grande State Park, Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, and Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park.

We focus our efforts on the mid-valley visiting Estero Llano Grande State Park, Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, and Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park. Estero Llano Grande State Park is a small park offering a variety of habitats and with that a large array of bird species. We can find Common Pauraque and Plain Chachalaca in the wooded areas as well as White-tailed Kite, Least Grebe and Black-bellied Whistling-Duck in the open fields and wetlands. We continue west to the iconic Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge has a long history of being one of the top birding spots in the country and has hosted such rarities as Crane Hawk and Bat Falcon. We spend a few hours exploring the subtropical woodlands and ponds in the refuge where we may see Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Golden-fronted Woodpecker and Green Kingfisher. The refuge has a hawk watch tower which we visit to get a



Buff-bellied Hummingbird © Greg Lasley

bird's eye view of the park's canopy and open skies. Our final destination for the day is Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park, which has hosted many rarities in the past including Masked Tityra, Stygian Owl and Collared Forest-Falcon. Here we have a chance to see an extensive list of Valley specialties including White-tipped Dove, Green Jay, Olive Sparrow, Altamira Oriole, Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet and more. Like Santa Ana, Bentsen has a hawk watch tower which is an excellent place to scan the treetops and sky above the park for both Hook-billed Kite and Gray Hawk. Overnight: Home2 Suites, McAllen.

Day 6: Anzalduas County Park and Mid-Valley.

Located right on the Rio Grande River, Anzalduas County Park is a great location to look for mixed species flocks which often include Tropical Parula and Black-throated Gray Warbler. The fields near the entry of the park make this location an ideal spot to look for wintering raptors, sparrows, and Sprague's Pipit. We spend the afternoon visiting local sites including Frontera Audubon Nature Preserve in Weslaco and Quinta Mazatlán in McAllen. Although both



Green Parakeets © Greg Lasley

sites are in residential areas, these locations offer a surprising variety of bird species with vagrants like Crimson-collared Grosbeak and Mexican Violetear reported in recent years. We end the day in McAllen visiting a local Green Parakeet roosting location. In addition to seeing a number of these tropical parakeets, we may also see a few Bronzed Cowbirds amongst the hundreds of Great-tailed Grackles. Overnight: Home2 Suites, McAllen.



Green Kingfisher © Greg Lasley

Day 7: Falcon State Park, Starr County Park, and Fronzon. We head upriver to the western end of the Rio Grande Valley to bird the arid thorn scrub and riparian areas along the Rio Grande River. Our first stop is Falcon State Park, which sits on the shores of Falcon Lake. We explore the location in search of Black-throated Sparrow, Cactus Wren, Pyrrhuloxia, Greater Roadrunner and other desert birds. The lake can also be a good place to see American White Pelican, Neotropic Cormorant and a variety

of wintering ducks. The nearby Starr County Park offers many of the same bird species as Falcon State Park but provides us a second chance to pick up species we may have not seen at Falcon including Vermilion Flycatcher and Black-tailed Gnatcatcher. Later in the day we visit Fronzon, which is located along the Rio Grande River below Falcon Dam. The extensive river cane and brush in this location provide a great habitat for the highly localized Morelet's Seedeater. We drive some of the back roads in the area where we may add Scaled Quail, Rock Wren, and Lark Bunting. If time allows, we may spend some late afternoon time at Salineño to scan the Rio Grande River for Muscovy Duck, Mexican Duck and kingfishers. Overnight: Holiday Inn Express & Suites, Rio Grande City.



Morelet's Seedeater © Greg Lasley

Day 8: Santa Margarita Ranch and

Salineño. We return to the Upper Valley to pick up where we left off. Our first stop is Santa Margarita Ranch, which is a private ranch located downriver from Falcon Dam. This location offers a unique birding experience as you stand on high bluffs overlooking the Rio Grande River and the riparian woodlands of the property. Currently, the ranch is the only location in the United States where



Brown Jay © Greg Lasley

you can reliably see Brown Jay. In addition to the jays, we have a good chance to see Muscovy Duck, Red-billed Pigeon, Hook-billed Kite, Ringed Kingfisher, Green Kingfisher and a large number of wintering ducks in the river below. In recent years, several rare bird species have been observed on the ranch, including the Crane Hawk, Bare-throated Tiger-Heron, and Mottled Owl. Depending on what we saw yesterday and this morning, we may either spend time at Salineño or drive northwest to Zapata if we still need to locate Morelet's Seedeater to finish our day. Overnight: Holiday Inn Express & Suites, Rio Grande City.

Day 9: Tour Conclusion and Departures. Today we leave the Rio Grande Valley and make the drive to Corpus Christi. We will arrive at the airport by no later than 12 pm. Participants may arrange departing flights from Corpus Christi International Airport (CRP) after 2 pm.

FINANCIAL INFORMATION: The tour price is \$4,050 per person in double occupancy. The single supplement for this tour is \$680. You will be charged a single supplement if you desire single room accommodations, or if you prefer to share but have no roommate and we cannot arrange one for you. The package includes all meals from dinner on Day 1 to breakfast on Day 9, ground transportation during the tour, entrance fees to parks/preserves, accommodations as stated in the itinerary, and guided services provided by the tour leader(s). It does not include travel expenses including but not limited to airfare to and from the tour destination, travel insurance, extended stays (before and/or after the tour), alcoholic beverages, gratuities, and items/expenses of personal nature.

REGISTRATION & PAYMENTS: To register for this tour you will need to complete an online reservation form. The non-refundable deposit for this tour is \$300 per person. All payments, including initial deposits and final balances, may be made by credit card through PayPal, check, money order, or bank/wire transfer (we will provide our bank information). Deposits are due 14 days from the date you submit your reservation form. Full payment is due as soon as the tour confirms or 60 days prior to the tour start date, whichever comes first. We will invoice you accordingly.

Please read our Terms and Conditions for more information before booking any of our tours or services. Our Terms and Conditions include important information about how we operate our tours, including cancellation policy, travel insurance, health and fitness requirements, and more.