



**A TEXAS SPRING: RIO GRANDE, HILL COUNTRY, AND
WHOOPING CRANES**

26 MARCH – 6 APRIL 2020



Green Jay is one of our targets on this trip.

Due to its proximity to the humid tropics of Mexico, the subtropical woodlands of the Rio Grande Valley of Texas boast over two dozen Neotropical bird species that just barely spill across the border. Here colorful **Great Kiskadees** and personable **Green Jays** mingle with temperate species from further north. These tropical species occur nowhere else in the United States. Along the coast, muddy lagoons and shallow wetlands throng with thousands of shorebirds, herons, waterfowl, terns, and cranes, including the magnificent and highly endangered **Whooping Crane**. Further inland, a rolling, arid plain covered in thorn-scrub harbors a collection of species more typical of the American Southwest, such as **Cactus Wren** and **Pyrhuloxia**. Further north, the Hill Country stretches along the eastern flank of the Edwards Plateau, a land characterized by wooded hills, sunny slopes, and sparkling streams. In the spring the forests of the Hill Country ring with the song of **Golden-cheeked Warbler**, a Texas breeding endemic. Together, these widely disparate habitats give southern Texas one of the richest and most unique bird faunas in the United States. We time this tour just before the **Whooping Cranes** depart to their Canadian breeding grounds, but late enough in the spring for summer breeders and passage migrants to arrive.

The tour begins in the city of Corpus Christi, where coastal wetlands and mudflats are home to an abundance of waterbirds, such as the spectacular **Long-billed Curlew** and stately **American White Pelican**. However, the true star of this coastal avifauna is the **Whooping Crane**, and we will make a special effort to see it. Further south, King Ranch preserves tall-grass savanna dotted with live-oak groves (mottes), which are the US strongholds for **Tropical Parula** and **Ferruginous Pygmy Owl**. Afterwards we focus our attention on a long list of exciting tropical specialties found in the riparian woodlands of the lower Rio Grande Valley, such as **Altamira Oriole**, **Long-billed Thrasher**, and **Pauraque**. In the scenic Hill Country the range-restricted **Black-capped Vireo** and **Golden-cheeked Warbler** are our primary targets, but we also visit a site near Concan to witness the spectacle of thousands of **Mexican Free-tailed Bats** swirling out of a cave in the evening. The coastal areas of Texas are host to some of the most spectacular spring movements of raptors, shorebirds, and passerines on the continent, so we head back to Corpus Christi for a day in hopes of experiencing it, to round out this exciting itinerary.

This Birding Tour USA excursion can be combined with our **Colorado: Lekking Grouse, Rocky Mountains, and Open Plains 2020** tour.

Itinerary (12 days/11 nights)

Day 1. Corpus Christi

After arrival at Corpus Christi International Airport participants should plan on transferring to our hotel, where a room will be reserved in their name. We will gather in the hotel lobby at 5:30 p.m. to meet each other and have dinner.

Overnight: Corpus Christi

Day 2. Aransas National Wildlife Refuge for Whooping Crane

Although it remains one of the most endangered birds in North America, **Whooping Crane** populations have steadily increased from a low of fifteen birds in the early twentieth century to well over three hundred. Nonetheless, despite ongoing conservation efforts to create new populations, Aransas National Wildlife Refuge hosts the wintering grounds of the only remaining self-sustaining population. On our first morning in Texas we take a boat trip to

Aransas National Wildlife Refuge to observe these special birds, as well as a wide variety of coastal species such as **Reddish Egret** and **Roseate Spoonbill**.

After our boat trip we visit nearby Goose Island State Park in search of wintering sparrows and migrant warblers. This site may also provide us with our first taste of Texas specialties like **Black-crested Titmouse**, **Buff-bellied Hummingbird**, and **Golden-fronted Woodpecker**. Coastal sites along the way to Kingsville offer opportunities to catch up with any water, shore, or wading bird we may have missed earlier in the day.

Overnight: Kingsville

Day 3. King Ranch

After an early breakfast we drive to the Norias Division of King Ranch. The habitat here features a subtropical savanna interspersed by live oak groves, favored by two of the rarest breeding species found north of the border: **Tropical Parula** and **Ferruginous Pygmy Owl**. This site also offers our best opportunity to observe the declining **Audubon's Oriole** and the beautiful **White-tailed Hawk** on this itinerary.

In the afternoon, we continue our journey south to the lower Rio Grande to seek out flocks of **Green Parakeet** and **Red-crowned Amazon** heading to roost at urban sites in the valley.

Overnight: McAllen

Days 4 – 5. Lower Rio Grande Valley

We spend two full days of birding in the lower Rio Grande Valley, where an amazing diversity of birds flourish in the region's wildlife sanctuaries, state parks, preserves, and other sites. Superb birding locales such as Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park, Estero Llano Grande State Park, and Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge abound in the area, and our exact itinerary will depend mostly on the presence of any rarities. Although no particular species is especially likely, the possibility of a Mexican stray such as a **Crimson-collared Grosbeak** or **Blue Bunting** adds excitement to the birding experience here. Regardless, a long list of Neotropical specialties awaits us, including the brilliant **Altamira Oriole**, noisy **Plain Chachalaca**, and impressive **Ringed Kingfisher**. **Clay-colored Thrush**, once a rarity, is now a relatively common breeding species that we may encounter. We also spend one evening at Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park to look for **Elf Owl** and **Pauraque**. During our time in the valley we can also explore nearby sod farms for migrating shorebirds, such as **Upland Sandpiper** and **American Golden Plover**.

Overnight: McAllen

Day 6. Lower Rio Grande Valley to the Falcon Dam area

Our schedule today depends on which targets we may still be missing from the valley. At some point after lunch we head about an hour north to the area around Falcon Dam. Here, the lush riparian woodlands so typical of the lower Rio Grande Valley grow only along the immediate riverbank. Nonetheless, several species hold onto a tenuous presence in the United States only around this thin strip of habitat, including **Muscovy Duck** and **Red-billed Pigeon**.

Overnight: Zapata

Day 7. Falcon Dam area

We spend the morning at either the town of Zapata or of San Ygnacio, depending on recent reports of the increasingly rare (for the US) **White-collared Seedeater**. Due to an extensive taxonomic overhaul, this tiny bird is the only remaining member of the tanager family occurring in the United States. Away from the river the landscape becomes an increasingly arid, hilly brushland, and the birdlife becomes similar to that of the American Southwest.

Species we will look for in this dry habitat include the dapper **Scaled Quail**, boldly marked **Black-throated Sparrow**, and unique **Verdin**.

Overnight: Zapata

Day 8. Zapata to the Hill Country

We have an extra morning to try for **White-collared Seedeater** or any of the arid brushland specialties around Falcon Dam. Afterwards we continue to the scenic eastern portion of the Edwards Plateau, more popularly known as the Hill Country of Texas. Due to its Cretaceous limestone composition, this rolling landscape of modest elevation (300-750m) features a karst topography of rugged hills, caves, and deeply cut valleys. Although it covers a relatively small area of Texas, it forms an overlap region, where the eastern and western bird faunas of the United States meet. In these wooded hills, **Louisiana Waterthrush** shares gurgling forest streams with **Black Phoebe**, **Carolina Wren** sings from the same valleys as **Canyon Wren**, and **Carolina Chickadee** feeds in the same trees and shrubs as **Black-chinned Hummingbird**.

We spend the afternoon exploring the vicinity of the Frio River and the surrounding area, which includes a range of habitats from dry hillside, covered in thorny vegetation, to wetter forests, dominated by oak and bald cypress. Our first walk through the Hill Country can produce species common on the plateau such as **Field Sparrow**, **Canyon Wren**, **California Scrub Jay**, and **Rufous-crowned Sparrow**. By evening we will visit a nearby sinkhole to witness the emergence of thousands of **Mexican Free-tailed Bats** in one of the largest mammalian congregations on the planet.

Overnight: Uvalde

Day 9. Hill Country

As the state's only breeding endemic, the endangered **Golden-cheeked Warbler** is a flagship species of the Texas Hill Country. Found exclusively in mixed juniper and oak woodland, this warbler depends on the presence of Ashe Juniper for nesting material. Birds use small strips of bark from mature juniper trees to construct their nests. Due to the clearing of habitat for agriculture and development, this species suffers from an increasingly fragmented distribution.

Lost Maples State Natural Area, famous for its relict population of Bigtooth Maples, protects one of the largest populations of **Golden-cheeked Warbler** left. We have the entire day to explore the trails of this lovely wilderness in search of this warbler and other species. **Black-capped Vireo**, the other key species of this region, inhabits shrubby oaks on the sunny hillsides. **Zone-tailed Hawk** patrols these same hillsides, while **Black-and-white Warbler** and **Yellow-throated Vireo** sing incessantly from wetter forested areas. With so many species in full song, it will really feel like spring!

Overnight: Kerrville

Day 10. Hill Country to Corpus Christi

Kerr Wildlife Management Area hosts a thriving population of **Black-capped Vireo**, due to aggressive land management practices to create suitable habitat: live oak thickets with a low, dense understory. We have the entire morning to obtain views of this sharp passerine, before driving back to Corpus Christi for the afternoon. Depending on the weather and time of our arrival, we can begin exploring sites near the city.

Overnight: Corpus Christi

Day 11. Spring Migration at Corpus Christi

Holding the title of “America’s Birdiest City” for more than a decade, Corpus Christi in April offers some of the most exciting birding in the country. Few places in the United States can boast such large and diverse spring movements of birds. If the weather is in our favor today, coastal migrant traps such as Paradise Pond and Packery Channel Park can be literally dripping with warblers. Although it will be a bit early in the season to expect large concentrations of songbirds, early migrants such as **Hooded, Prothonotary, Worm-eating, and Black-throated Green Warbler** are still a distinct possibility. Taking into account the high diversity of resident species and migrating shorebirds in this area, we will potentially tally our highest day list of the entire trip.

Overnight: Corpus Christi

Day 12. Transfer to Corpus Christi International Airport

After some morning birding at nearby migrant traps to see if anything dropped in overnight, we transfer back to Corpus Christi International Airport, where the tour ends.

Duration: 12 days
Limit: 4 – 8
Date: 26 March – 6 April 2020
Start: Corpus Christi
End: Corpus Christi

Price: US\$4310 per person sharing
Single supplement: US\$799

Price includes:

Meals
 Accommodation
 Guiding fees
 Entrance fees
 All transport while on tour
 Tolls

Price excludes:

Flights to and from Corpus Christi
 Items of a personal nature, e.g. gifts
 Alcoholic drinks
 Personal insurance
 Gratuities

Please note that the itinerary above cannot be guaranteed as it is only a rough guide and can be changed (usually slightly) due to factors such as availability of accommodation, updated information on the state of accommodation, roads, or birding sites, the discretion of the guides and other factors.