BIRDING TOUR USA: TEXAS SPRING — RIO GRANDE, HILL COUNTRY AND WHOOPING CRANES

24 MARCH–04 APRIL 2027
23 MARCH–03 APRIL 2028
20–31 MARCH 2029



Buff-bellied Hummingbird *is one of the many Texan specials we will target on this tour.*

Overview

Due to its proximity to the humid tropics of Mexico, the subtropical woodlands of the Rio Grande Valley in south Texas boast over two dozen neotropical bird species that just barely spill across the border into the US. Here, the colorful **Great Kiskadee** and the personable **Green Jay** mingle with temperate species from further north. These tropical species occur nowhere else in the United States making for an incredible bird watching experience to a must-visit region for ABA area listers and international travelers alike. Along the gulf coast, muddy lagoons and shallow wetlands throng with thousands of shorebirds, herons, waterfowl, terns and cranes, including the magnificent, sadly Endangered (IUCN) **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 **Pyrrhuloxia**. As we move 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.



Plain Chachalaca *is often encountered in the Rio Grande Valley.*

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 the 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 this rare species. Continuing 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**. From here, we focus our attention on a long list of exciting tropical specials 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 hundreds of thousands of **Mexican Free-tailed Bats** swirling out of Frio Cave in the evening. The coastal areas of Texas host some of the continent's most spectacular spring movements of raptors, shorebirds and passerines, and so we head back to Corpus Christi for a day in the hope of experiencing this phenomenon. This should be a fantastic way to round off this exciting itinerary and by the end of the trip, you will surely have a list full of great Texas birds and amazing memories!

This Birding Tour USA excursion can be combined with our **Colorado: Lekking Grouse, Rocky Mountains and Open Plains** which immediately follows this tour, or even our **Florida Peninsula – Southern Specials and the Keys** tour.

Please also note that we can very easily arrange trips to the remote Big Bend National Park, the only place in the United States where you can see **Colima Warbler**, an otherwise Mexican species. We may be able to put a group together or you may want us to arrange this Colima Warbler/Big Bend tour as a private extension. Big Bend is over six hours' drive from San Antonio (and over eight from Corpus Christi) and to find Colima Warbler we have to hike 4.5 miles (just over 7 km) up the mountain to see it. But we love looking for this species (and we love the other wildlife and scenery of this great park!), so we'd be delighted to take you on this adventure if you ask us to arrange it!



*The beautiful **Golden-fronted Woodpecker**.*

Detailed 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 15 birds in the early twentieth century to a current population of over 300 individuals. Nonetheless, despite ongoing conservation efforts to establish new populations, Aransas National Wildlife Refuge hosts the wintering grounds of the only remaining self-sustaining population. On our first morning in Texas we will take a boat trip out on Aransas Bay to observe these special birds, as well as a wide variety of coastal species such as **Reddish Egret** and the magnificently colorful **Roseate Spoonbill**.

After our boat trip, we will visit the 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 specials 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 birds 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 the privately owned King Ranch. The habitat here features a subtropical savanna interspersed with 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 the trip's best chances of observing the declining **Audubon's Oriole** and the beautiful **White-tailed Hawk**.

In the afternoon, we continue our journey south to the lower Rio Grande Valley to seek out flocks of **Green Parakeet** and **Red-crowned Amazon** heading back to roost at urban sites in the valley. These feral species are countable for your ABA area list.

Overnight: McAllen

Days 4–5. Lower Rio Grande Valley

We spend two full days 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 amazing birding locations. 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 (which your guide will watch for on eBird). Although no particular species is especially likely, the possibility of a Mexican stray such as a **Crimson-collared Grosbeak** or a **Blue Bunting** adds excitement to the birding experience here. Regardless, a long list of neotropical specials awaits us, including the brilliant **Altamira Oriole**, the noisy **Plain Chachalaca** and the impressive **Ringed Kingfisher**. **Clay-colored Thrush**, once a rarity, is now a regularly breeding species that we hope to 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



Long-billed Thrasher *is one of many South Texas specials we hope to see.*

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 will head about an hour north to the area around Falcon Dam and Falcon State Park. Here, the lush riparian woodlands, so typical of the lower Rio Grande Valley, grow only along the immediate riverbank. Several species here hold onto a tenuous presence in the United States, found only within this thin strip of habitat, including **Muscovy Duck** and **Red-billed Pigeon**.

Overnight: Zapata

Day 7. Falcon Dam area

We will spend the morning at either the town of Zapata or San Ygnacio, depending on recent reports of the increasingly rare (for the US) **Morelet's Seedeater**. Due to an extensive taxonomic overhaul, this tiny bird is the only remaining member of the tanager family (Thraupidae) 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**, the boldly marked **Black-throated Sparrow** and the unique, tiny **Verdin**.

Overnight: Zapata



*The dapper-looking **Green Jay** should hopefully be seen on this tour.*

Day 8. Zapata to the Hill Country

We have an extra morning to try for **Morelet's Seedeater** or any of the arid brushland species 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 (980-2,460 feet / 300-750 meters), 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**, while **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**, **Woodhouse's Scrub Jay** and **Rufous-crowned Sparrow**. By evening we will visit a nearby sinkhole to witness the emergence of hundreds of thousands of **Mexican Free-tailed Bats** in one of the largest mammalian congregations on the planet.

Overnight: Uvalde



*The noisy and colorful **Great Kiskadee** is always a treat.*

Day 9. Hill Country

As the state's only breeding endemic, the Endangered (IUCN) **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 remaining populations of **Golden-cheeked Warbler**. 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**, thanks to aggressive land management practices to create the suitable habitat of live oak thickets with a low, dense understory. We have the entire morning to obtain views of this striking passerine, before driving back to Corpus Christi for the afternoon. Depending on the weather and time of our arrival, we can begin exploring birding sites near to the city.

Overnight: Corpus Christi



*We'll keep our eyes peeled for the amazingly camouflaged **Pauraque**.*

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. Considering the high diversity of resident species and migrating shorebirds in the area, today 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 has dropped in overnight, we will transfer back to Corpus Christi International Airport, where the tour concludes. Be sure to check out our **Colorado: Lekking Grouse, Rocky Mountains and Open Plains** tour immediately following this one, as well as **Alabama – Dauphin Island** and **Florida Peninsula – Southern Specials and the Keys** for more fun-filled birding adventures!

Overnight: Not included

Please note that the itinerary 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. In addition, we sometimes have to use a different guide from the one advertised due to tour scheduling or other factors.

Tour Details

Duration:	12 days
Group size:	4–8
Dates:	24 March–04 April 2027 23 March–03 April 2028 20–31 March 2029
Start:	Corpus Christi
End:	Corpus Christi
Prices:	US$ 5,390 per person sharing, assuming 4–8 participants (2027) US$ 5,590 per person sharing, assuming 4–8 participants (2028) US$ 5,690 per person sharing, assuming 4–8 participants (2029)
Single supplements:	US$ 980 (2027) US$ 990 (2028) US$ 1,020 (2029)

Price includes:

Meals/Water

Accommodation

Transport

Guiding fees

Price excludes:

Flights

Personal insurance

Alcoholic beverages

Gratuities (please see our tipping guidelines blog)

Laundry service

Personal expenses such as gifts