

TEXAS: THE HILL COUNTRY AND BIG BEND

April 19-29, 2018

This springtime excursion to the Lone Star State has long been one of American birders' favorite experiences. Much of the region's popularity stems from the opportunity for visitors to see three avian species that can be found nowhere else in the United States: Colima Warbler, Golden-cheeked Warbler and Black-capped Vireo. However these three highly sought after birds are not the sole reason that birders flock to the area in early spring.

Thanks to a confluence of seasonal and geographic factors, a 10-day birding tour in late April that combines the lush Hill Country and Big Bend National Park, offers birders the chance to record up to 250 species of birds; an almost unheard of number for U.S. based tour. The high number of available species on the tour is possible due to the intersection of several biogeographic regions, each with a different avifauna. In the arid regions around Big Bend, both Rocky Mountain and Mexican species can be found, and as one moves westward from the Hill Country, common eastern species slowly give way to their western counterparts. The diversity of available species is also enhanced by the many varied habitats that we will visit. The lush deciduous forests of the Hill Country, the pine forests of the Davis Mountains and the arid venues in Big Bend NP all are home to a very different suite of birds.

In addition to the three key species noted above, there are also many other birds available on this tour that are difficult to find in other parts of the country. Examples of these include Lucifer Hummingbird, Gray Vireo, Black-chinned Sparrow, Crissal Thrasher, Montezuma Quail and many more that are simply too numerous to mention. If you're looking for a domestic birding tour that offers great birding and gorgeous scenery, look no further.

Day 1-Thursday April 19: The tour begins today with your arrival in San Antonio. Please try and schedule your arrival to San Antonio International Airport (airport code SAT) by 3:00 PM. Upon landing and collecting your baggage you can take the free airport shuttle to our hotel. Night in San Antonio.

Day 2-Friday April 20: We'll get an early start today as it is a 5+ hour drive to Fort Davis. Along the way, we'll make an initial attempt to find Gray and Black-capped Vireos, but most of our birding today will be at a large reservoir called Lake Balmorhea. At an elevation of 3100 feet in the midst of the Chihuahuan Desert, Lake Balmorhea is a magnet for waterfowl, herons and shorebirds in an otherwise very inhospitable environment. Both Western and Clark's Grebes are possible here and the lake has attracted many rarities over the years. We'll plan to arrive at our hotel in Fort Davis by

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late afternoon. After checking in, we will spend the late afternoon hours searching for Montezuma Quail. Night in Fort Davis.

Day 3-Saturday April 21: After breakfast we'll spend a few more hours birding in the environs near Fort Davis. Montezuma Quail will our primary focus here, but there will be lots of other species available including Gray Flycatcher, Western Bluebird, Steller's Jay, Virginia's Warbler, Cassin's Kingbird etc. By late morning we'll begin heading south to Big Bend NP where we will spend the next four nights. Night in Big Bend NP.

Days 4-6-Sunday-Tuesday April 22-24: We will have three full days to explore the vast reaches of Big Bend National Park. Our general course of action will be to begin with an early breakfast to allow us to get into the park before the heat of the day cranks up. We will return to the hotel for lunch and a mid-day break and then return to the field later in the afternoon. The particular sites and the order in which we visit them will be flexible and determined on a daily basis depending upon what is being seen where. One certainty is that on one of the days we will make the strenuous hike along the Boot Canyon Trail to Boot Springs as this is the only place in the U.S. to see Colima Warbler. This will be a vigorous 5-6 hour round trip hike with an elevation gain of about 1500 feet. It is not always necessary to go all the way to Boot Springs to see the Colima Warbler as sometimes they can be found 2-2.5 hours up the trail. Though it is strenuous, anyone in reasonably good physical condition should be able to make it to Boot Springs. We will take our time and walk at the pace of the slowest person to ensure that everyone can participate. If need be, we can also divide into fast and slow groups since there will be two leaders.

The remainder of our time in Big Bend will also involve hiking, but none of the other excursions will be as lengthy or steep as the climb to Boot Springs. The park is very large and contains a multitude of habitats making for a great variety of birds and we will try to visit as many different habitats as time allows. Along the cottonwood-lined Rio Grande floodplain we can look for things like Vermillion Flycatcher, Bell's Vireo, Summer Tanager, Painted Bunting, Common Black-Hawk, Crissal Thrasher etc. The Blue Creek Canyon area hosts a subset of more arid-loving species like and on at least one evening we go out in search of Common Poorwill, Lesser Nighthawk and Elf Owl. There is sure to be much more to do than we could possibly manage in three days. Nights in Big Bend National Park.

Day 7-Wednesday April 25: Today will be mostly driving as we have a 5-hour trip to the Hill Country west of Austin. We'll try to break up the drive as much as possible to alleviate the boredom. The long drive should provide a lengthy raptor list as there will be chances for Crested Caracara, Zone-tailed Hawk and Harris's Hawk. Depending on the time, we may also make a few attempts to see Black-capped Vireo. Night in Concan.

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Days 8-9-Thursday-Friday April 26-27: We'll spend the next two nights at a lodge on the Frio River in the heart of Texas's famed Hill Country. From our comfortable base we'll have two full days to bird the Texas Hill Country. Our schedule will include a visit to Lost Maples State Park, one of the best sites for the dwindling U.S. population of Golden-cheeked Warbler. There are numerous other parks and natural areas scattered throughout the Hill Country and we will visit as many as time allows. In addition to Golden-cheeked Warbler, Black-capped Vireo will be a large focus of our time here, but there are many other birds available in this region that will keep us occupied. On one afternoon we will visit the Rio Frio Cavern where at dusk millions of Free-tailed Bats emerge from the world's fourth largest bat roost. The birds in this part of Texas include a mingling of eastern and western species such as Great Crested Flycatcher, Brown-crested Flycatcher, Carolina Wren, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Yellow-throated Warbler, Scott's Oriole, Field Sparrow and Black-throated Sparrow etc. The diversity makes for great and exciting birding and lengthy day lists. Nights in Concan.

Day 10-Saturday April 28: After a final morning around Concan we will drive back to San Antonio to prepare for flights home and to have a final dinner together. Night in San Antonio.

Day 11-Sunday April 29: Participants can schedule flights home anytime today.

TOUR LEADER: The tour will be led by Mark Korducki from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Mark has led this tour several times in the past and has had extensive experience birding in this region of Texas. He will be assisted by Jan Hansen from Otus asio Tours.

BIRD LIST: This trip has consistently produced a list approaching 250 species. For complete lists of birds seen on previous trips go to www.otusasiotours.com and check Past Trip Lists/North America.

TOUR SIZE: This tour will be limited to 7 participants.

TOUR COST: The cost of the tour will be \$2750 per person from San Antonio. A single supplement of \$500 will be charged to anyone in a single room. Please note that single rooms may not be available in Concan and Big Bend. The price includes all lodging, meals beginning with dinner on Day 1 and ending with breakfast on Day 10, ground transportation during the tour, guide service and park entrance fees. It does not include alcoholic beverages, tips or round trip airfare between your home and San Antonio.

REGISTRATION & DEPOSIT: In order to reserve a space on the tour, a completed and signed registration form is required along with a \$500 deposit. Registration forms are available on the website www.otusasiotours.com

Deposits should be mailed to:

Otus asio Tours at 900 Hillsborough Road Chapel Hill NC 27516.

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CANCELLATION POLICY: Refunds are made according to the following schedule: If cancellation is made

90 or more days before the tour departure date (January 20, 2018 or before): 50% of the deposit will be refunded

Less than 90 days before the departure date (January 21, 2018 or later) and after full payment has been received will be limited to that which can be recouped from vendors, airlines and booking agencies. This may be as little as 25% of the amount paid.

Registrants are strongly encouraged to consider purchasing trip insurance to protect them from financial loss due to cancellation of the tour less than 90 days prior to departure.

TRANSPORTATION: We will be traveling in a 15-passenger van throughout the tour.

BAGGAGE: Space in the vehicle will be limited, so please restrict your luggage to one medium-sized bag and one small carry-on bag. Large hard suitcases are strongly discouraged on this tour. There is a very limited amount of storage space in the van and hard-sided luggage takes up much more space than soft-sided bags.

PACE OF THE TOUR: This is a tour that requires some degree of physical fitness in order to fully participate. Portions of this tour will be physically demanding in terms of hiking. The most strenuous hike will be an all-day 8-9 mile round trip hike in Big Bend National Park to search for Colima Warbler. This hike has an elevation gain of about 2000 feet. We will do several other hikes in Big Bend of 3-5 miles, although these will not be as difficult in terms of the elevation gains. Heat will also be a factor as the weather in Big Bend can be quite hot in later April. Bear in mind that all of these hikes will be optional and staying back at the lodge during activities that one deems overly strenuous is an acceptable alternative. Big Bend is very birdy in April and the lodge is located in a setting that will allow anyone choosing to remain there ample opportunities for birding. Having said that, it should also be noted that one needn't be a world-class athlete to fully participate on this tour. Anyone with a reasonable level of physical fitness should be able to do any of the hikes. There will be two leaders on the tour and while hiking we will split into a faster and slower group if necessary. We will also hike at the pace of the slowest person in the group to give everyone a chance to complete the activity.

LODGING: In San Antonio we will stay at a standard chain hotel. In Fort Davis we will stay at a lodge in a state park operated by Texas State parks. The only option for lodging in Big Bend is at the Chisos Mountain Lodge. It is located in a beautiful setting in the park at an elevation of 5400 feet. The lodge is very popular and space is limited, so it may not be possible to provide single accommodations there. In Concan we will stay at a lodging complex on the Rio Frio river. Lodging here will be in cabins and again, depending upon the makeup of the group it may not be

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possible to offer single accommodations. Many of the cabins have separate bedrooms, so people opting for single rooms may be in a unit with another person, but will have a private bedroom.

CLIMATE: The weather during this tour should be very pleasant with daytime temperatures between 75-85. Evenings will be cool and temperatures may fall to low as 50. Rain would be highly unusual during the Big Bend portion of the tour as that area of Texas is quite arid. The Hill Country experiences more rain, but any significant rain anywhere during the tour would be unusual.

CLOTHING: Lightweight, quick-dry clothing will be most appropriate as day wear during the tour. This provides sun protection and takes up less room in luggage than heavier cotton clothing. Perhaps the most critical item for the tour will be a comfortable and sturdy pair of walking shoes or hiking boots. Given the terrain we will be negotiating during the hikes, the latter is probably a better option as it will provide more support and traction while walking.

EQUIPMENT: Pack a pair of binoculars in good condition, along with a belt pack or daypack for your daily accessories. Some essential equipment to carry would include sunglasses, lip balm or chapstick and an alarm clock. It is always a good idea to pack your binoculars, a change of clothing, toiletry items and medications in your carry-on bag, so that in the event of lost luggage you will have your essentials.

INTERNET AVAILABILITY: Wi-Fi will be available at the hotel in San Antonio. In Fort Davis, Big Bend and Concan it will be available only in the lobby

INFORMATION: For further information contact Jan Hansen at 919-259-9423 or otusasiotours@gmail.com.