WRITTEN SUMMARY WEST TEXAS AND NEW MEXICO

27 December – 5 January 2017

The smallest, week long Penfeathers Tour ever set out for the wilds of West Texas and New Mexico and no one was disappointed. Brandon Percival, myself and three others started our birding in El Paso at Arroyo Park were we enjoyed Curve-billed Thrasher, Verdin, Spotted Towhee, Pyrrhuloxia, and other birds of the desert. Arroyo Park is a small desert environment in the middle of a housing area and Tennis Club that always produces nice birds on day one of our West Texas tours. Next we worked our way to a private resident to “bag” the wintering Costa’s Hummingbird, an excellent bird for the state of Texas. However, all we turned up were Anna’s. At McKelligon Park we had nice looks at Cactus Wren, Curve-billed Thrasher, Black-throated Sparrow, Canyon Towhee, and a few other desert type species. At another private residence we enjoyed watching a Verdin eat from an orange, the same orange a Hooded Oriole pair would eat from later on. We did not have to wait too long for the young male Broad-billed Hummingbird to appear and give nice looks. A quick stop for lunch and a few more desert birds like Green-tailed Towhee were nice at Wilderness Park on the flanks of the Franklin Mountains. The El Paso Country Area turned up a few Phainopepla, numerous White-winged Doves, a Say’s Phoebe, Northern Flicker and Acorn Woodpecker, Ladder-backed Woodpecker. After sorting through a few hundred Ring-billed Gulls at Doniphan Marsh and Sunland Race Park we spotted and immature California Gull. Later that evening the expected 8,000 Yellow-headed that had come in to roost for the past 20 years was reduced to four birds, what a sad site. However, the Gambel’s Quail were nice.

The next morning it was off early to New Mexico with Percha Dam as our first stop in New Mexico. Our first stop in Texas was to take another stab at the Costa’s, however it was not to be as wind and rain kept things quiet. At Percha Dam we quickly came across some Western Bluebirds, more Phainopepla, Black and Eastern Phoebe, Chipping, Song, Swamp, and Lincoln’s, Sparrows, and a single observer sighting of the staked out Golden-crowned Sparrow. While studying the many sparrow species a stunning Crissal Thrasher popped up giving good looks to everyone. Before tracking down the staked out Great Kiskadee and enjoying scope views of a perched Prairie Falcon we stumbled upon a Purple Finch, a bird rather rare to the area. At Caballo Lake and Elephant Butte State Parks we enjoyed close looks at Clark’s and Western Grebes, Eared Grebe, American White Pelican, and another young California Gull, Mountain Bluebird, and Rock Wren.

The next day was devoted to the tour loops at Bosque del Apache NWR where we first watched birds like Gambel Quail, Green-tailed and Spotted Towhee, and White-crowned Sparrow from the warmth of the Visitor Center. On the tour we had close looks at a very cooperative, staked out Long-tailed Duck and distant views of three staked out Tundra Swans. Further along the loop we had numerous duck species with great looks at Ring-necked Ducks in particular. This year there was many Sandhill Cranes in easy view throughout the day along with many Snow Geese with a few hard to locate Ross’s Geese mixed in. After a pleasant lunch in the refuge we took another driving loop in the afternoon producing more great looks at more birds. As the sun was setting we set ourselves up in the area where the Sandhill Cranes came into roost and watched numerous of these large cranes drop in for the evening.

After a two fine nights in Socorro it was time to return to Texas. After all we had an appointment with a hummingbird and hopefully the hummingbird was aware of it this time. Our patience was being tested.

On our return to trip to Texas we stopped off at Percha Dam State Park once again and this time picked up the staked out Gray Catbird we missed the first time through. We were able to spend time enjoying the mild weather and numerous sparrows. Once in Texas we headed straight to the Costa’s Hummingbird spot a bit depressed about the slow, but steady rain that was falling. However, we did not have to wait long before the young male Costa’s came to drink and flash his partial gorget.

In the morning, after sleeping in a bit, we were off to the Indian Lodge in the Davis Mountains. On this, the first day of the New Year, we stopped at Ascarate Lake and enjoyed close up views of numerous ducks and a Neotropic Cormorant. As we headed east on Highway 20 we spotted a small group of Harris’s Hawks perched and flying. Tornillo Reservoir had birds close up including an unexpected Red-throated Loon. A quality picnic lunch was had in downtown Fort Hancock after which we visited Fort Hancock and McNary Reservoirs.

Along 505 heading into the Davis Mountains we checked out the numerous sparrows for a Baird’s, but no luck. We had nice looks at a perched Merlin and a surprise White-tailed Kite sitting on a fence post was a treat. We eventually rolled into the Indian Lodge for a quick dinner buffet and off to bed.

This morning we made our way to the famous Lawrence E. Wood Picnic Rest Area with a stop on the way at another private residence to enjoy Rufous-crowned and Black-throated Sparrows, Curve-billed Thrasher, Rufous Hummingbird, Pine Siskin, and a few other fun to watch birds coming to seed and water. A stop at the McDonald observatory was fun and slightly educational as we briefly read about the stars. Finally at the rest area we were pretty much greeted with silence, safe for a few Dark-eyed Juncos. A relaxing sack lunch at the park was nice followed by a drive up to Balmorhea State Park were we birded the man made cienega and a the small pond that held Lesser Scaup. The water level at Balmorhea Lake was the highest I had ever seen it and the birding was not particularly good, however, the calling Couch’s Kingbird in the town of Balmorhea was especially satisfying. Another dinner at the Drug Store in the tourist town of Fort Davis, with ice cream made for a nice end to a nice day of birding,

For our last day of birding in the volcanic Davis Mountains we started off early for 505 where we had seen good numbers of sparrows earlier. En route we stopped at a little county park just south of town that was awash with sparrows allowing us nice looks at Savannah and Vesper side by side along with Clay-colored and Brewer’s. On 505 we revisited the White-tailed Kite and many more sparrows. On US 90 between 505 and Marfa we encountered large numbers of raptors, with three cooperative Golden Eagles and two cooperative Ferruginous Hawks to go along with the many Kestrels, Northern Harriers, and Red-tailed Hawks. A group favorite was the cooperative Prairie Falcon we stopped to scope and study, beady eye and dark moustachial mark included. The bird then lifted off and powered along showing us its dark underwing axillaries and powerful flight. A stop at The Post Park just south of Marathon yielded an easy to view, once first located, Great-horned Owl and also new to the list Golden-fronted Woodpecker. In Marathon a stop at Gage Gardens was fun and allowed us nice looks at male and female Vermilion Flycatcher. On the way back to Fort Davis a stop at Calamity Creek was nice as was our final dinner at the Drug Store. The decision was made to forgo a stop at the always interesting Reptile Museum in Fort Davis.

An early morning start put us at the El Paso Airport a bit early for flights home, but allowed for a little time to relax and check our species total which was 158 for the week. This was a very interesting tour as there were no montane species present, whereas last tour they were present. However, making up for the lack of montane species we enjoyed an unprecedented number of trip rarites, and finding Purple Finch at Percha Dam, Red-throated Loon at Tornillo Reservoir, and Couch’s Kingbird in the quiet town of Balmorhea proved very satisfying. I am sure Brandon and I will return once again to one of my favorite parts of the US, the Trans Pecos.