WEST TEXAS NEW MEXICO

March 11 -18, 2018

Aside from the temperatures in the high thirties and snow on Sandia Crest, we had mild weather throughout the tour along with a few out of range birds. We enjoyed the last vestiges of winter and the beginnings of spring. Our small group of four participants, two guides, and a trusty Ford Expedition, traveled from the mountains of New Mexico to the deserts of West Texas in search of birds, hiking opportunities, and scenery, and we found all three in abundance.

Our first morning found us hiking up Eubudito Canyon north of Albuquerque where we spied Cactus Wren, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Western Bluebird, Curve-billed Thrasher, White-crowned Sparrow, Canyon Towhee, Black-throated Sparrow, and House Finch. The walk proved to be an excellent way to start our tour, it offered mild temperatures, desert scenery, and a good introduction to desert birds we would see throughout the trip.

After a taste of the desert we were off to over 10,500 feet, snow, and finches on Sandia Crest. After spreading half a bag of seed on the crest, the mountain birds began to appear. First the Black Rosy-Finches materialized, then the Gray-crowneds, and finally a smattering of Brown-capped Rosy-Finches. Along with the finches we had ample time to study male and female Cassin’s Finch, Mountain and Black-capped Chickadee, Steller’s Jay, and Dark-eyed Junco. After a few more appearances of the finches we worked our way down the winding mountain road for a chilly lunch at Sulphur Canyon Picnic area where we worked hard to get great looks at an out of range Pacific Wren. After lunch we went to the Tijeras Ranger Station where we enjoyed a short walk through pinyon pines and desert scrub. Here we spotted our only Townsend’s Solitaire, more Western Bluebirds, and Bushtit. With plenty of daylight left we made our way across town to the Rio Grande Nature Center where we had nice looks at Mallard, Gadwall, American Wigeon, Cinnamon and Green-winged Teal, Ring-necked Duck and everyone’s favorite, the colorful male Wood Ducks about twenty feet away. The nearby trees yielded both Hairy and Downy woodpeckers, a slightly out of range White-throated Sparrow, and Gambel’s Quail on the ground coming to seed. We were then off to an inauspicious drainage ditch under a main freeway for an out of range American Dipper, and we were not disappointed. After several desperate minutes of searching the dipper showed itself, as well as its white nictitating eye membranes. With the day ending we were heading to Columbus Park for the staked out Western Screech-Owl that was missed during scouting, however, it was in its daytime roost and allowed scope views as it squinted back at us showing yellow eyes.

The following day was also spent birding in Albuquerque, as we visited Fairview Cemetery early in the morning for both Pygmy and Red-breasted Nuthatch, Yellow-rumped Warbler, and more. Tingley Park allowed us another opportunity to study ducks up close. Here we enjoyed the same ducks as at the Rio Grande Nature Center, plus Hooded Merganser, Bufflehead, Canvasback, Redhead, Lesser Scaup, Northern Pintail, and Ruddy Duck. In addition to the wealth of ducks we had Neotropic Cormorant and breeding plumaged Pied-billed Grebes. Petroglyphs National Monument held birds of the sage, including great looks at Sagebrush Sparrow and nice looks at Sage Thrasher. We enjoyed seeing a jackrabbit and hearing Rock and Canyon Wrens calling. At Los Pablanos Open Space we finally had extended, close looks at a Greater Roadrunner as it hunted for a meal. We eventually departed Albuquerque for two nights in Socorro.

At Bosque del Apache we drove the south and north loops getting nice looks at, yet again, more ducks up close, distant Snow Geese, Gambel’s Quail, Ring-necked Pheasant, Dunlin, Red-naped Sapsucker, more Ladder-backed Woodpeckers, Spotted Towhee, Black and Say’s Phoebe, White-breasted Nuthatch, and Marsh and Bewick’s Wren. After two nights in Socorro we were off for three nights in El Paso with productive stops at Elephant Butte Lake State Park, Caballo Lake and Percha Dam State Parks, where we added the two large grebes, Clark’s and Western, California Gull, Sharp-shinned hawk, Belted Kingfisher, stunning looks at a male Vermilion Flycatcher, several nice looking Phainopepla, and Brewer’s Blackbird.

Our first order of business in El Paso was Memorial Park where there were more Steller Jays than I have ever seen in any one location and a very cooperative Verdin in a nearby yard. The hit at the park though had to be the Red Crossbills that we had in the scope allowing all to see the crossed bills. The El Paso Country Club area gave us scope looks at an out of range Lewis’s Woodpecker and the uniquely patterned Acorn Woodpeckers that were at their nest cavities. Crossroads Ponds offered more ducks up close allowing participants to learn more duck field marks. At a private residence we watched Scott’s and Hooded Orioles coming to oranges and hummingbird feeders while seated on the back porch enjoying a fantastic view. Ascarate Park was our first stop on our second day, and here we once again enjoyed close looks at numerous ducks, a flyby Green Heron, Brewer’s Blackbirds, and a pair of Burrowing Owls. Later in the day we had a small group of Harris’s Hawks near the Rio Bosque Wetlands.

March turned out to be an ideal time to visit this area in terms of weather, though the cranes and most of the geese had already winged it northward. Brandon and I plan on doing another tour to this same general area, the same time of year either in 2019 or 2020.