

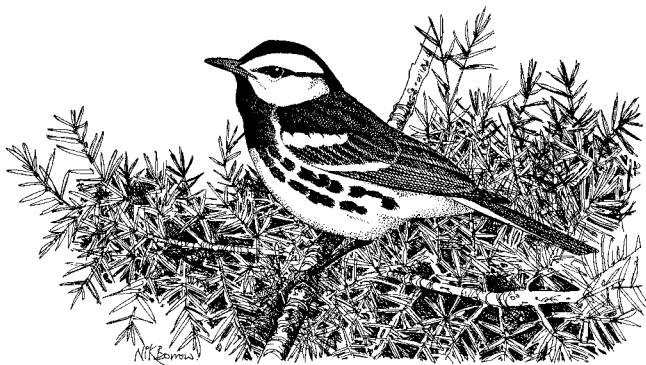
TEXAS

Monday 11th April – Tuesday 26th April 2012 (16 days)

Leaders: Matt Denton and assistant

Group Size Limit: 12

Tour Category: Easy (apart from one optional fairly Demanding hike)



Golden-cheeked Warbler (Nik Borrow)

From its eastern to its western extremities Texas spans more than 800 miles (about 1300km), with a land surface area of over 268,000 square miles (over 696,000 square kilometres) making it by far the largest of the contiguous 48 states in the USA and larger than many European countries.

Ornithologically this famous state boasts a diversity which is second to none in North America. Here, in spring, one can see a very large number of North American species, both eastern and western, in a relatively short period of time. Our itinerary is carefully crafted to concentrate on Texan specialities including the last of the wintering Whooping Cranes.

We will begin our springtime transect of Texas in the southernmost part of the state. At the huge Aransas refuge we will see the magnificent Whooping Crane as well as many other waterbirds. After crossing the vast King Ranch with its many raptors, we shall reach the lower Rio Grande Valley, one of Texas's most exciting birding areas with a rich

avifauna including a number of 'Mexican' specialities and a wide range of habitats from coastal wetlands to riverine woodland and semi-desert. Here we can look for Green Parakeet, Black-crested Titmouse and long-billed Thrasher (three species endemic to southeast Texas and northeast Mexico), as well as many other exciting birds including the noisy Plain Chachalaca, the miniscule Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Ringed and Green Kingfishers, Brown and Green Jays, and Audubon's and Altamira Orioles.

Next we will explore the eastern part of the state. The pine forests of eastern Texas hold such specialities as Red-cockaded Woodpecker and Bachman's Sparrow, while along the coast Fish Crows reach the limit of their distribution.

The marshes and mud flats of the Upper Texas Coast teem with a wide variety of shorebirds in the spring as well as large numbers of herons, ibises and egrets, pelicans and cormorants, gulls, terns and skimmers and a sprinkling of lingering ducks. However, it is for the number

and variety of its migrant land birds that this area is justly famous. The woods at High Island attract an extraordinary variety of migrant passerines ever spring, making them one of the premier migration hot spots anywhere on the continent. Here, thrushes, vireos, tanagers, orioles and grosbeaks compete for one's attention with an amazing array of American wood-warblers, all resplendent in their dazzling breeding plumage. Shy cuckoos skulk in the bushes, raptors migrate overhead and several similar species of tyrant-flycatchers test our identification skills.

From this flat landscape we will travel to the elevated expanse of limestone west of San Antonio known as the Edward's Plateau, or Texas Hill Country. Here the display of roadside flowers in the spring can be breathtaking and the area is noted for its charming scenery. Our main avian targets on the plateau are the Black-capped Vireo and Golden-cheeked Warbler, both of which are classified as threatened, with very restricted ranges. The plateau has many other ornithological attractions from the Cave Swallows and Green Kingfishers which breed along crystal clear rivers to the Yellow-throated Warblers, Northern Parulas and Summer Tanagers which nest in the

impressive cedars along their banks. Male Painted Buntings flaunt their dazzling colours and Vermilion Flycatchers engage in aerial display flights. Spectacular Scissor-tailed Flycatchers are common and easily seen here. As well as a fair sprinkling of migrant landbirds we should also see several wintering species including Clay-coloured Sparrow.

Moving still further west, we will spend several days in the awe-inspiring scenery of Big Bend National Park where the Rio Grande dips southwards towards Mexico, encompassing the Chisos Mountains. Here a number of avian specialities can be found, including the very localized Colima Warbler, found here at its only breeding site north of the Mexican border. If we are reasonably fortunate we will also see Lucifer Hummingbirds relatively close to our lodge. Several other hummingbird species can be found in Big Bend including Black-chinned, Broad-tailed and the spectacular Blue-throated. Among the other specialities of this area are Grey, Common Black and Zone-tailed Hawks, Mexican Jay, Crissal Thrasher, Lucy's Warbler and Black-chinned Sparrow. Numerous desert species occur in the park, ranging from Scaled Quail and





Whooping Cranes (Nik Borrow)

Greater Roadrunner to Varied Bunting and Pyrrhuloxia.

All in all there is nothing in North America to compare with the sheer avian diversity of 'The Lone Star State'. Texas really is bigger and better!

Birdquest has operated tours to Texas since 1982.

Itinerary

Day 1 The tour begins in Houston in the early afternoon. From there we will drive southwestwards across the coastal lowlands to Rockport for an overnight stay.

Day 2 This morning we will make an excursion by boat to see the magnificent Whooping Crane at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. We should enjoy great views of these impressive birds which have significantly increased in numbers in recent decades. We may even see some interaction between the pairs,

each of which jealously guards its winter-quarters feeding territory (only sharing it with their young of the previous year), enjoying the bugling calls and dancing display of these spectacular birds. Although some young birds and adults that have lost their mates linger on at Aransas into late April, mid-April is the time when the last adult pairs leave the reserve for their subarctic breeding grounds in northwestern Canada. We should also encounter a wonderful selection of other waterbirds, including Common Loon (or Great Northern Diver), American White and Brown Pelicans, Double-crested Cormorant, Great, Snowy and Reddish Egrets, Great Blue, Little Blue and Tricoloured Herons, Black-crowned Night Heron, White Ibis, Roseate Spoonbill, Lesser Scaup, Red-breasted Merganser, American Oystercatcher, American Avocet, Willet, Long-billed Curlew, Marbled Godwit, Ruddy Turnstone, Laughing and Franklin's Gulls, American Herring Gull (split from European Herring), Caspian, Royal and Forster's Terns, and the bizarre Black Skimmer. This afternoon we will travel across the vast King Ranch to McAllen in the Rio Grande Valley for a three nights stay. We will stop frequently to check out the many birds of prey which are a feature of the area. The commonest species are Black and Turkey Vultures, Red-tailed Hawk, Crested Caracara (or Northern Crested-Caracara) and American Kestrel, so we shall be concentrating on the less numerous White-tailed Kite and Harris's and White-tailed Hawks. We can also expect Western Cattle Egret, Lark Sparrow and Eastern Meadowlark.

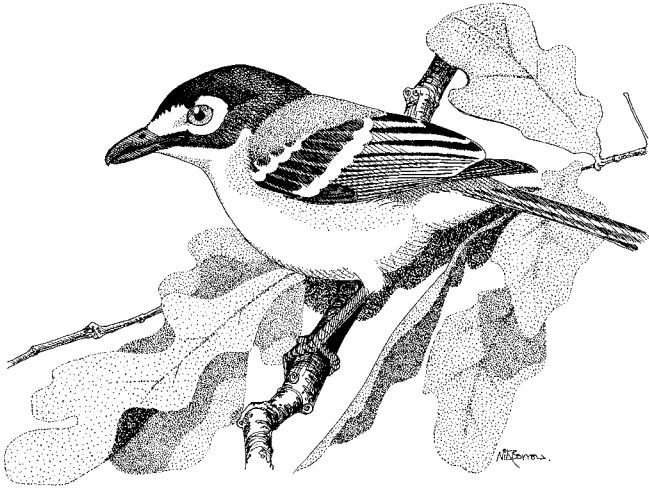
Days 3-4 Here in the deep south of Texas we are almost literally a stone's throw from Mexico and its influence is very obvious, both in the faces of the passers by and in the composition of

the local birdlife. During our stay in the Rio Grande Valley we shall visit a series of famous birding localities, including Brownsville, Sabal Palm Grove, Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge (which protects a relict tract of the subtropical woodland which once covered the Rio Grande Valley), Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park and Falcon Reservoir. These sites are famous for their many southern specialities and there is always the chance of a wandering rarity from south of the border, such as Clay-coloured Thrush. Amongst the more interesting resident specialities that we should encounter are three species restricted to Texas and northeast Mexico; Green Parakeet, Black-crested Titmouse and Long-billed Thrasher. (Tamaulipas Crow, a northeast Mexican endemic, used to wander over to Brownsville quite regularly, but nowadays has become rare and unpredictable.) More widespread species that extend into Texas include Least Grebe, Neotropic Cormorant, Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, Grey Hawk, the noisy Plain Chachalaca (so habituated at some places that they run up for handouts!), Red-billed Pigeon, White-tipped Dove, Red-crowned Parrot (or Red-crowned Amazon, which has recently colonized the lower Rio Grande, but perhaps not naturally), Pauraque, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Ringed and Green Kingfishers, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Couch's Kingbird, Great Kiskadee, the striking Green Jay, Brown Jay (a species which has become a resident of the valley in comparatively recent times), Olive Sparrow, Altamira and Audubon's Orioles, and Bronzed Cowbird. Amongst the many other species we may well see are Anhinga, Green Heron, Sharp-shinned and Red-shouldered Hawks, Mourning, Inca and White-winged Doves, Common Ground-Dove, Great Horned Owl,

Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Northern Flicker, the brilliant Vermilion Flycatcher, Chihuahuan Raven, Carolina and House Wrens, Blue-grey Gnatcatcher, Northern Mockingbird, White-eyed Vireo, Northern Cardinal, Brewer's Blackbird, Great-tailed Grackle and American Goldfinch. In addition, passerine migrants are often much in evidence at this time of year. We should also see a selection of mammals, including Coyote, Common Raccoon, Collared Peccary, Eastern Fox Squirrel and Eastern Cottontail, during our visit to the region.

Day 5 After some early morning birding in the Rio Grande valley we will head northeastwards to Jasper near the eastern border of Texas for an overnight stay.

Day 6 The Longleaf Pine forests of the Jasper area offer a rich diversity of woodland birding opportunities. Our main quest here will be for several species that are largely confined to this habitat. Family parties of the threatened Red-cockaded Woodpecker use trees infected with red heart disease as nesting sites, and several groups occur in the Jasper area. The threatened Bachman's Sparrow is also a specialized breeder here, preferring bluestem grasslands within the forest, and we should be able to locate one by listening for its beautiful song. The 'piney woods' also hold Red-headed Woodpecker, the huge Pileated Woodpecker, Brown-headed Nuthatch, and both Pine and Prairie Warblers, while additional species include Northern Bobwhite, Chuck-will's Widow, Red-bellied and Downy Woodpeckers, Northern Flicker, Loggerhead Shrike, Blue Jay, American Crow, Purple Martin, Tufted Titmouse, Eastern Bluebird, Brown Thrasher and Common Grackle. There will also be a chance of seeing migrant



Black-capped Vireo (Nik Borrow)

Mississippi Kites and other raptors overhead. Later in the day we will drive to Winnie near High Island for a three nights stay. En route we will make a detour to look for Fish Crow (a species restricted to the eastern and southern coasts of the United States, which just enters Texas) and if we have time we will also visit one of the coastal migrant traps.

Days 7-8 Much of our time will be spent in the woodlands around the village of High Island, particularly in the early mornings. These areas can be simply full of migrant land birds in spring, especially during 'fall' conditions. An extraordinary variety of American wood-warblers can be found here at this season, all in pristine breeding plumage! The more common warbler species should include Tennessee, Orange-crowned, Yellow, Magnolia, Black-throated Green, Blackburnian, Bay-breasted, Black-and-white, Kentucky and Hooded Warblers, Northern Parula, American Redstart, Ovenbird, Northern Waterthrush and Common Yellowthroat. In addition, Blue-winged, Golden-winged, Nashville, Chestnut-sided, Blackpoll, Cerulean, Prothonotary, Worm-eating, Swainson's and Wilson's Warblers, and Northern and Louisiana Waterthrushes, also

turn up regularly during this part of April. Other migrants could well include Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Common Nighthawk, Chimney Swift, bewildering *Empidonax* species such as Least, Yellow-bellied, and Willow Flycatchers, Eastern Kingbird, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Wood, Swainson's and Grey-cheeked Thrushes, Veery, American Robin, Grey Catbird, several species of vireos (including Red-eyed, Warbling, Philadelphia and Blue-headed), Scarlet and Summer Tanagers, Rose-breasted and Blue Grosbeaks, Indigo Bunting, and Orchard and Baltimore Orioles. With so many migrants being in their glorious summer plumage, a good day for migration can be a riot of colour!

We will also visit the nearby coastal marshes at Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge which harbour Pied-billed Grebe, American and Least Bitterns, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, White-faced Ibis, Fulvous Whistling-Duck, Mottled and Ruddy Ducks, Green-winged and Blue-winged Teals, American Wigeon, Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, Redhead, Purple Gallinule, Common Moorhen, American Coot, Black Tern, Belted Kingfisher, migrant Barn, Tree, Bank, Northern Rough-winged and Cliff

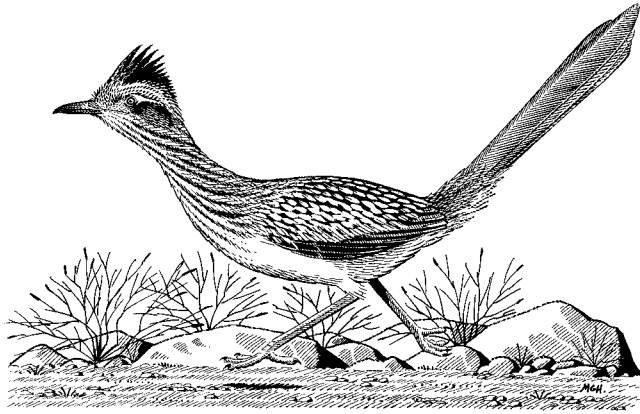
Swallows, Swamp and Seaside Sparrows, Dickcissel, Red-winged Blackbird and Brown-headed Cowbird. One of the highlights here is joining in one of the 'rail flushing' walks that are a regular organized event each weekend up until the end of April, after which they cease to prevent disturbance to breeding birds. Birders form a line abreast before walking through the marshland, seeing what emerges. There is even a very good chance of seeing the sought after Yellow Rail, which is a winter visitor here, as well as Clapper and King Rails, and Sora. Raptors are numerous in the Anahuac area and could include Swainson's and Broad-winged Hawks, Northern Harrier, Osprey and Peregrine Falcon. Flooded fields attract migrant shorebirds such as American Golden Plover, Hudsonian Godwit, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Spotted, Buff-breasted, Upland, Pectoral, Solitary and Stilt Sandpipers, Wilson's Phalarope, Long-billed Dowitcher and summering Black-necked Stilts. An evening visit here could produce Barn Owl and we may even hear the secretive Black Rail, although seeing one would be extraordinarily lucky.

Just south of High Island lie the famous Bolivar Flats, which are a Mecca for shorebirds, gulls, terns, and pelicans. Here up to 30 species of shorebirds can be expected in spring, with good numbers of Black-bellied (or Grey), Snowy, Wilson's, Piping and Semipalmated Plovers, Hudsonian Whimbrel (split from Eurasian), Short-billed Dowitcher, Red Knot, Sanderling, Dunlin, and Semipalmated, Western, Least, White-rumped and Baird's Sandpipers. Other species to be found here include Eared (or Black-necked Grebe, Common, Least and Sandwich Terns (and a chance of Gull-billed Tern), Horned Lark and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow, and this is one of the few

areas along the Gulf Coast where Boat-tailed and Great-tailed Grackles occur side by side.

Day 9 This morning we will either have a last look around at High Island or, if we missed Red-cockaded Woodpecker earlier, visit another forest in the Houston area that is a favoured area for this uncommon bird. Later we will drive westwards to the Edward's Plateau for a two nights stay at Kerrville. On the way we will stop north of San Antonio in an area where we should find a rare Texas speciality, the stunning Golden-cheeked Warbler.

Day 10 The Texas Hill Country, or Edward's Plateau, is known as an area where many eastern bird species reach their western limits and many western species reach their eastern limits. The scenic beauty of this elevated limestone plateau is a surprise to many people who think of Texas as a singularly flat state comprised of desert and ranch land. The roadside display of flowers in the spring can be incredibly spectacular and the birding is excellent. Most of the day will be spent at Kickapoo Caverns, named after the American Indian tribe which still lives in this area. Kickapoo is located on the western edge of the Edward's Plateau and is probably the best place to find Black-capped Vireo as well as being one of the best general birding localities in the region. The vireos skulk in dense thickets of scrub oak and can be hard to find, although perseverance generally pays. There are also small numbers of nesting Grey Vireos here, although finding one can be even more difficult. Rufous-crowned Sparrows are common and we should also be able to find some gorgeous Scott's Orioles in the open oak woodland. Cave Swallows nest in the cavern and can be seen flying around outside it. Other species we may well encounter include Zone-tailed



Greater Roadrunner (Michael Hodgson)

and Cooper's Hawks, Wild Turkey, Western Kingbird, Verdin, Bewick's Wren, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Cedar Waxwing, Bell's Vireo, Yellow-breasted Chat, the spectacular Painted Bunting, Black-throated Sparrow and Hooded Oriole. One evening we will try for Eastern Screech-Owl in a wooded suburban area of Kerrville.

Day 11 On our way up the scenic Guadalupe River today we will make a number of stops to look for Wood Duck, Great Crested Flycatcher and Yellow-throated Warbler. The rest of the morning will be spent at Kerr Wildlife Management Area, which abounds with passerines. This is another excellent locality for Black-capped Vireo, just in case we missed it at Kickapoo. There may still be good numbers of migrant sparrows around, including flocks of Chipping and Clay-coloured Sparrows, plus smaller numbers of Grasshopper, Vesper, Field, Savannah, White-crowned and Lincoln's. Other possibilities include Eastern Phoebe, Canyon Wren (with its remarkably beautiful song), Lesser Goldfinch and Pine Siskin. Later we will

visit Lost Maples State Park, another scenic locality which is full of birds. At least one pair of Green Kingfishers makes its home along the river, where Louisiana Waterthrushes also nest. Great Horned Owls, Common Ravens and a pair of the *fuertesi* race of the Red-tailed Hawk nest on the riverside cliffs and Western Scrub-Jays may well mob us at the picnic site. Sugar feeders at the park office attract large numbers of Black-chinned Hummingbirds and the occasional Ruby-throated, emphasizing the east meets west theme. Bushtits and Blue Grosbeaks nest on the scrub-covered hillsides, while the woodlands hold Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Eastern Wood Pewee, Acadian Flycatcher, Carolina Chickadee and Yellow-throated Vireo. After leaving Lost Maples for Del Rio, where we will overnight, the habitat soon changes to lowland desert and here we may well find Lesser Nighthawk and Chihuahuan Raven.

Day 12 Leaving Del Rio we will travel westwards to Big Bend National Park for a three nights stay, stopping

along the way to look for Rock Wren and Cassin's Sparrow. In the afternoon we will have an opportunity to explore riparian habitat along the Mexican border at Rio Grande Village. Here among the cottonwood trees we could find Common Black Hawk, Canyon Towhee, the brightly coloured *sennetti* race of the Hooded Oriole and House Finch.

Days 13-14 The incredible vistas of the Chisos Mountains will serve as a backdrop for some incredible birding. However, it will take a long and fairly strenuous hike to get us within range of one of our target species. The Colima Warbler nests mainly above an elevation of 1800m on remote mountain slopes and our quest for this bird will take us the best part of a day, but the incredible scenic views and the interesting birdlife of the area will make this supremely worthwhile. Other high elevation species to be looked for include Golden Eagle, Band-tailed Pigeon, White-throated Swift, Blue-throated and Broad-tailed Hummingbirds, Acorn Woodpecker, Cordilleran Flycatcher, Hutton's Vireo, Mexican Jay, Violet-green Swallow, White-breasted Nuthatch, Hepatic Tanager, Black-headed Grosbeak, Spotted Towhee and possibly also Painted Redstart and Magnificent Hummingbird. There may well be some migrants moving through the park and we could see some species which are close to their eastern limits on migration, such as Townsend's Solitaire, Townsend's, Black-throated Grey and MacGillivray's Warblers, and Green-tailed Towhee. In the lower-lying desert and riparian areas we may find

Scaled Quail, the strange Greater Roadrunner, Say's and Black Phoebes, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Cassin's and Tropical Kingbirds, the impressive Cactus Wren, Crissal and Curve-billed Thrashers, Lucy's Warbler, Black-chinned Sparrow, Varied Bunting, Pyrrhuloxia and possibly some lingering Lark Buntings. We will also make a concerted effort to find Lucifer Hummingbird. Although this species is uncommon here, this is one of the best areas to find it anywhere in the United States. Night birding should produce Western Screech-Owl, the delightful little Elf Owl and Common Poorwill.

Day 15 After spending a final morning at Big Bend we will return to Kerrville for an overnight stay.

Day 16 After some final birding on the Edwards Plateau we will return to Houston, where the tour ends in the late afternoon.

Accommodation & Road

Transport: The hotels/motels are of normal Birdquest standard throughout. Road transport is by minibus and roads are good.

Walking: The walking effort is mostly easy, but there will be at least one optional mildly strenuous hike in Big Bend.

Climate: It will vary between relatively cool and cloudy to fairly hot (or even hot) and sunny in the Texas coast region and on the Edward's Plateau, with the possibility of some light rain. Big Bend National Park is usually hot and dry.

Bird Photography:

Opportunities are quite good.