

April 16-25, 2023
A South Texas Adventure



A ten day Nature Trip & birding tour of Texas:
The Texas Gulf Coast and Lower Rio Grande Valley including Mustang Island, South Padre Island, Laguna Atascosa, Sabal Palm Sanctuary, Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, Bentsen State Park, Estero Llano Grande and the King Ranch.

Especially for:

Nisse Rosenlund



www.naturetrip.com

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April 16-25, 2023



Day 1: Sunday, April 16 – Travel to Corpus Christi.

Meeting Point: Corpus Christi International Airport

Arrive in time for pre-arranged transport to the hotel and a group welcome dinner.

Please let us know your inbound and outbound plans.

For those that arrive in the morning or afternoon there is good birding near the hotel. Depending on airport schedules there are many options along the shore of the Laguna Madre or one of the nearby Oak Mts.

Overnight: Best Western “Flour Bluff”

Day 2: Monday, April 17 – Mustang Island, Port Aransas and (northern) South Padre Island:

Breakfast at hotel

Our adventure begins along the plains, marshes and barrier islands of the Coastal Bend. We'll spend the morning on Mustang Island starting in the south around Packery Channel making our way north to the Port Aransas area hitting well known hotspots such as the locally famous Paradise Pond and “the willows” searching for migrants. Next we check the marshes at Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Center before heading over to nearby Robert's Point Park for Terns & Turnstones. Many Gulf Coast specialties such as Mottled Duck, Least Bittern and Neotropic Cormorant are seen at close range from the boardwalk, recently rebuilt after Hurricane Harvey devastated this area in March 2018.

Roseate Spoonbills, Black-bellied Whistling Duck and, at times, Black Tern may be seen flying about from the observation tower; Rails are commonly heard and occasionally seen as well and the new wetland design favors shorebirds too.



After lunch we'll continue to bird our way along Mustang Island and, if times allows, the northern portion of lengthy South Padre Island. We'll visit well known “migrant traps” such as Paradise Pond or Charlie's Pasture”, check the beaches for shorebirds and scan for possible seabirds. This evening we'll enjoy local seafood and other fare at one of the area's fine restaurants.

Overnight: Best Western “Flour Bluff”

Day 3: Tuesday, April 18: Corpus Christi to South Padre Island

Breakfast at hotel

If there has been a cold front from the north we may return to nearby hotspots to see what has dropped in over-night. Otherwise we'll pack up and head over to Hazel Bazemore in Corpus Christi to check the freshwater marshes for shorebirds and the uplands for our first chance at Green Jay.



Hazel Bazemore is one of the most famous fall raptor migration sites in the U.S. Each autumn hundreds of thousands of raptors pass through. Spring movement is more subtle for raptors but we often get a nice mix of hawks and falcons in April and land birds are plentiful at the impressive hawk watch tower.

Our afternoon will be spent in cruise mode as we meander our way to the evening's destination: South Padre Island, one of the most productive drop in points for migrant birds flying across the Gulf. Birding from the car can be quite good along our route especially for raptors such as Swainson's, Harris's Hawks and Crested Caracara.

As we transition from coastal plains to the Rio Grande Valley we'll stop along the way to check road side rests and woodland scrub for migrants and an increasing number of South Texas specialties such as Great Kiskadee and Green Jay. By late afternoon we'll arrive at South Padre Island, check into our rooms in time to freshen up before dinner. Depending on timing and energy we may enjoy an optional, after dinner, stroll near the hotel.

Overnight: Holiday Inn, South Padre Island

Day 4: Wednesday, April 19: SPI, Laguna Atascosa

Begin at SPI: Breakfast at lodge

We begin our day checking the pulse of the current migration, inspecting several of the better known drop-in locations. Local conservation groups have turned small wood lots into sanctuaries by encouraging native habitat and installing water features which become super attractors to migrant birds, many of whom have been flying non-stop across the Gulf for 24+ hours. At times, with the right weather conditions, hundreds or even thousands of our most colorful migrants such as buntings, tanagers, warblers, grosbeaks and orioles descend en masse for a spectacle that delights even non-birders.



Even if migration is slow this morning, we will have opportunities to study shorebirds and a large variety of sub-tropical waders at close range on the beaches and from boardwalks above marsh habitat.

We'll spend more or less time on the island depending on the flow of migrants but leave time in the afternoon to visit one of America's premier National Wildlife Refuges: Laguna Atascosa.





Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge

Perhaps there is no better site in the region to get a flavor of the unique wildlife this region offers. The refuge's bird list of over 400 species (most in the entire NWR system) includes many rare vagrants. Expected birds just around the Visitor's Center include Buff-bellied hummingbird, Green Jay, Plain Chachalaca, White-tipped Dove, Long-billed Thrasher and Olive Sparrow. With a little luck we may see a Greater Roadrunner stalking lizards, a nesting Altamira Oriole or maybe a roosting Eastern Screech Owl. Bronzed Cowbirds, Lark Sparrows and Eastern Meadowlarks frequent the entrance road.

White-tailed Hawks & Crested Caracara often perch from the tops of Yucca hunting Northern Bobwhite and Mexican Ground Squirrels in the Tamaulipan Thornscrub and we have had luck with Aplomado Falcons some years, albeit, usually at a distance.

After dinner, for participants who are up for it, we may venture out to a marsh to listen for the low cooing song of Least Bittern and look for Gallinule and other Rails.

Overnight: Holiday Inn, South Padre Island

Day 5: Thursday, April 20: Rio de Los Palmas, Boca Chica, SPI

Begin at SPI: Breakfast at lodge

After a quick check of the local island hot spots we'll set out across the coastal plains in search of any target species we may have missed such as Cassin's or the less common Botteri's Sparrow, Harris's Hawk and another chance at Aplomado Falcons. We'll leave our morning itinerary somewhat flexible to follow up on any recent reports of rarities. Barring chase-able birds we will visit National Audubon Society's Sabal Palm Sanctuary.



This historic sanctuary maintains the finest remnant stand of mature Sabal Palm north of the Rio Grande, a river once named "Rio de Los Palmas" by the Spanish explorers due to the former ubiquity of these trees which extended 80 miles upriver from here.

Texas Ebony and native scrub, courtesy of the staff's diligent conservation efforts, compliment the palms and attract migrant, resident and occasionally uncommon visitors such as Audubon's Oriole. We'll leave our afternoon somewhat flexible to either continue exploring the lower river or perhaps make the 20 mile jaunt to remote and birdy Boca Chica Beach to track specialty birds such as Chihuahuan Ravens or Botteri's Sparrow who nest in the Zacahuiste bunch grasses along the road. The beaches, uplands and open marshes harbor a large variety of shorebirds and raptors perch regularly from the many Yuccas in the area.

By late afternoon we'll make the short jaunt back to South Padre to check the traps before gathering for a farewell to SPI dinner.

Overnight: Holiday Inn, South Padre Island

Day 6: Friday, April 21: Upriver Rio & Estero Llano Grande

Begin at SPI: Breakfast at lodge

Today, after gathering our gear and breakfast, we'll continue our Rio Grande Valley exploration upriver with several hot spot stops along the way but spend much of our day at the most excellent World Birding Center at Estero Llano Grande. In recent years this site has become dependable for a number of regional specialties. With a little luck we have the possibility of seeing Altamira Oriole, Clay-colored Thrush and Curve-billed Thrasher in the "tropical" section.

From the sanctuary's veranda, overlooking a shallow pond, ducks, Least Grebes, shorebirds, swallows, rails and waders are all on show.

At times Black-chinned Hummingbirds can be picked out from the very similar Ruby-throated Hummers that visit the feeders along with an occasional oriole looking for a sweet drink.

A stroll along the Estero trails should turn up Neotropic Cormorant or perhaps a Heron Rookery. Every year is different. If our timing is good there's a chance for Common Pauraque.



Overnight: Best Western Town Center, Weslaco

Day 7: Saturday, April 22: Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge

Breakfast at lodge

First up: Santa Ana - feeding stations at the Visitor's Center are often busy with Chachalacas, Ladder-backed Woodpeckers and Indigo Buntings. Just inside the entrance a short walk takes us to three "Hawk Watch" towers where we scan the skies for late migrant raptors and eye level views of tree top birds such as Brown-crested Flycatcher or perhaps the diminutive Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet. We've had good luck with Gray Hawk and Groove-billed Ani here as well.

In the afternoon we'll search in places nearby such as the Fronterra Audubon Thicket or historic Quinta Mazatlán for any specialty species we may have missed or follow up on reported vagrants. If time and energy allows, we'll re-visit Estero Llano Grande to witness the Nighthawk fly out at dusk or some night birding around Santa Ana.



Overnight: Best Western Town Center, Weslaco

Day 8: Sunday, April 23: Bentsen State Park & Hugh Ramsey Nature Park

Breakfast at lodge

First up: Bentsen - Specialties such as Black-crested Titmouse and Couch's Kingbirds are common here. Ringed and Green Kingfisher appear with some regularity at the park's "resacas" and rarities such as Hook-billed Kite, Tropical Parula or Blue Bunting, while not expected, are always possible. Bentsen along with Santa Ana NWR has also become an important spring Hawk Watch site so we'll keep one eye in the sky for late migrant raptors as well. We'll use a combination of well maintained walking trails and the park's tram to visit the park's excellent observation towers, decks and bird blinds.

After lunch and during the heat of the day we'll gradually make our way east. Along the way we'll check remnant pothole wetlands or hyper-saline lakes tracts that often attract western birds such as White-tailed Kite to its arid, scrubby habitat. Other raptors to look for here and along the roadways include Crested Caracara, Harris's Hawks and the gorgeous White-tailed Hawk.

Thornscrub habitat at Hugh Ramsey Nature Park in Harlingen is always worth birding and the butterfly list here is equally impressive. This evening we will want to retire on the early side as tomorrow we have a grand day planned with a very early start.



Overnight: Holiday Inn, Raymondville, Texas

Day 9: Monday, April 24: King Ranch

Begin in Raymondville: Breakfast at lodge

Kings Ranch Nature Tour

We're very excited to include in the itinerary a full day of wildlife watching at the famous King Ranch. This historic (1853) and enormous (825,000 acres!) ranch hired its first conservationist manager in 1946 and has effectively operated large portions of the ranch as nature reserves ever since. White-tailed Deer, Pronghorn and Bobcat are now common here and the ranch has recorded over 350 bird species including the largest nesting population of Ferruginous Pygmy Owl in the U.S.

This portion of the tour will be led by a King's Ranch Birding Guide as we search for these and other tough to see species such as Tropical Parula, Audubon's Oriole and Botteri's Sparrow in the remote southern section of the ranch.

Our full day customized tour also includes lunch and beverages.

Note: Tour is scheduled to begin at 7:00 AM allowing us to fully enjoy this all day adventure yet still have time to reach our evening's destination in Corpus Christi.



Overnight: Holiday Inn, downtown Corpus Christi

Day 10: Tuesday, April 25 Corpus Christi

Begin at Corpus Christi Hotel: Breakfast at lodge

For those with afternoon departures we'll have a few hours of final birding in the Corpus Christi area. We will bird one of many local hotspot parks in hopes of catching "fallout" that can happen when a cool front moves down from the north.

Barring that, it is still a super area to bird and we can spend our few remaining hours visiting one or more of the regional parks or preserves.

By noon we will drop off participants who are heading home back to the Corpus Christi Airport or other area departure point in the Corpus Christi area.

We wish you continued good birding and many more happy trails on your future adventures!



A South Texas Adventure

Expedition fees for this 9 nights / 10 days trip
\$3,400.00 per person USD based on double occupancy
Single Supplement of \$800.00

Maximum number of participants: 8 (plus 2 guides).

What's included? Expedition fee includes all transportation, guide service, park fees, lodging and meals (breakfast, lunch and dinner) from afternoon pickup in Corpus Christi on April 16 to drop-off by noon in Corpus Christi on April 25. Also includes a \$200 donation to Golden Gate Audubon Society Big Trips.

What is not included? Participants will be responsible for their own air or ground transportation to and from Corpus Christi. Plan to arrive in time for a 7:00 PM dinner on April 16. Departure from the hotel to the airport on April 25 will be provide by the hotel or by Nature Trip (airport drop-off by 2:00 PM)

Any necessary lodging in Corpus Christi prior to the trip's original debarkation or after the completion of the trip is not included. All meals and beverages are included with the exception of alcoholic beverages. Please see the attached Travel Resources for information on air travel and hotels.

Transportation: 15 passenger van with back seats removed for luggage.

Lodging: Whenever practical we select lodging that is immediately adjacent to natural features. Otherwise we stay at highly rated standard hotels.

Meals: Breakfasts will be provided throughout the tour by hotels and lodges and vary from basic continental style to more elaborate multi-course meals. One exception to that may be the morning of the King's Ranch tour. We will provide a continental style breakfast that can be consumed in your room that morning due to our exceptionally early start. Lunches and dinners will be taken at local restaurants with an emphasis on regional cuisines: Mexican, Tex-Mex, Seafood, Steakhouses. Some lunches will be picnic style provided by Nature Trip guides.

Guide Service: Your guides for this trip, Eddie Bartley & Noreen Weeden, have been leading Nature Trip tours since 2004 in California & touring Texas since 2005. Local birding and nature guides from Texas will also be employed during this expedition for areas where their expertise is unique such as at the King Ranch.

What to expect: The pace of the tour will be relaxed consisting of auto tour loops, stationary observation and leisurely hiking generally on level terrain. Multiple hikes per day may be up to three miles but typically shorter. There are hawk-watch towers at some preserves which require climbing the equivalent of several flights of stairs in order to enjoy the structural advantage of being above tree top. Naturally all hikes are optional and at participants discretion. It is certainly OK to relax and wait at your leisure for the group at a planned meeting point and most walks will be under three hours, generally shorter. Of course for any who separate from the group it is vitally important to be at the agreed upon meeting point at the agreed upon time.

On most days we will begin our outings immediately following breakfast, generally about 7:00 to 7:30 AM and return to our lodging by about 5:00 PM to freshen up before dinner. During the heat of the day we may schedule a short siesta. Several dusk or evening outings will be offered (optional).

Weather & Climate: April in South Texas is generally very pleasant but naturally temperatures and weather vary a good bit from year to year. Severe weather is unusual in April but thunderstorms may pop up quickly and dissipate just as quickly. Temperatures typically vary from lows in the 50's F to highs in the 80's F and generally rise as one gets further from the coast. It is not unusual for the Upper Valley to reach the high 90s Fahrenheit by mid-April.



Health Considerations:

Water - Unless noted otherwise potable drinking water will be available from the tap at all lodges. Good drinking water is also widely at the various preserves we will visit on this trip. We recommend you bring a refillable water bottle.

Food - Food borne illness can occur anywhere however, we will only visit restaurants that we know to have delicious, safe food about or those that have been highly recommended to us. None of our guides or guests has ever contracted a food borne illness during our visits to Texas. We consider the chances of such to be less, or about the same as any other region in the U.S. Standard precautions apply.

Personal Health - If you are taking prescription or over-the-counter medication please remember to bring enough for the duration of the trip. Check with your airline for current policies on carrying pharmaceuticals on the plane.

Same as most everywhere, Texas has all of the typical now-endemic infectious diseases such as Covid-19, influenza, etc. April is generally an ebb period for most of these in the northern hemisphere. We recommend checking current disease control information on the area at the CDC Travelers Website:
<http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/united-states.htm>

Insect avoidance and protection - Mosquitoes, ticks and chiggers, like most all warm weather places, Texas has some of them.

Mosquitoes are mostly active at night and are relatively easy to annoy or ward off by using a DEET potion. Care in handling DEET however as it will damage plastics. **Spray away from others please.** Some natural oils may also work well.

Ticks occur wherever deer and other large mammals occur. They adhere to the undersides of leaves and other vegetation and grab onto passer-bys. Avoid brushing up against vegetation but if it is unavoidable, check yourself.

Chiggers, which can produce itchy welts, are the most irritating of these common pests. ***Below are recommendations to avoid chiggers:***

- **Most important: Stick to trails and avoid high grassy areas**
- **Spray your clothing with 5% PERMETHRIN before the trip**
- Watch what Noreen does. She is highly allergic to chigger bites.
- Tuck your pants into your socks; **don't wear mesh shoes or sandals**
- Chiggers love to tuck into tight fitting apparel such as compression hose
- Apply a skin safe cream style repellent before clothing
- Showering after a day in the field helps
- If bitten, Hydrocortisones, Calamine and Benzocaine lotions help

Wildlife - Texas and particularly the Tamaulipan region visited on this trip is abundant with wildlife we hope to see.

Mammals, being generally nocturnal, are seldom seen during the day and pose very little risk to trail hikers. Naturally, as nature lovers we never approach or attempt to feed any wild animal. If the animal appears with young then back off immediately. Reptiles, especially lizards are commonly seen along trails on sunny days. There are approximately 30 species of snakes in Southern Texas. There are 10 species which are venomous –and rarely seen. Most are rattle snakes but also Cottonmouth (a.k.a. Water Moccasin), Copperhead and the exquisite Harlequin Coral Snake. The usual precautions apply: Avoid tramping through knee high grass or large piles of leaves and stick to the trail. If you do see a snake, please alert the guide so that we can attempt identification of these noble but much maligned creatures.



Bird check list: In this package please find an extensive list of birds that are possible to see on this tour. Based on our previous Nature Trip excursions to South Texas we have ranked to the best of our estimation the chances of seeing a particular species of bird from 1 to 6, most likely to least likely.

What to Bring:

Clothing & Footwear – Dress will be informal throughout the excursion. Hat and comfortable hiking shoes or boots are essential. Light clothing (color & weight) are generally most comfortable. We also recommend a wind and water resistant jacket. Long sleeved shirts and pants may be more comfortable at times as protection from sun and possible insects. Swimwear will allow you to take advantage of lodge swimming pools and a possible dip in the Gulf or river.

Equipment – Along with binoculars you may want to bring a small pack for carrying of cameras, sunscreen, insect repellent, field guide, water bottle, etc. A travel alarm is important and we recommend a small flashlight (for possible owling excursions as well). Remember your chargers for cameras & electronics.

Guides will have a spotting scope and various field guides but we encourage you to bring your own if you would enjoy that. Check out the recommended reading list at the end of this section.

Suggested Checklist:

- ☐ Comfortable clothing (for duration of trip or laundry options at some lodges)
- ☐ **PERMETHRIN TREATED clothing for the upper valley**
<https://www.epa.gov/insect-repellents/repellent-treated-clothing>
- ☐ Water and wind resistant jacket
- ☐ Comfortable water resistant shoes, light hiking boots
- ☐ Personal health kit: toothbrush, paste, etc.
- ☐ RX - enough for the trip duration
- ☐ Small travel alarm, batteries
- ☐ Binoculars
- ☐ Camera, charger
- ☐ Small flashlight, batteries
- ☐ Repellent (DEET) – guide will have as well
- ☐ Sun Screen – guide will have as well
- ☐ Sun glasses
- ☐ Hat(s) for sun
- ☐ Tour information and bird checklist

- At your pleasure:
- ☐ Small Day pack
 - ☐ Personal Field guides
 - ☐ Scope and tripod
 - ☐ Cellular or, “Smart” phone for ebird, charger
 - ☐ Small laptop or mobile pad w/ charger

Note: Your tour guide will have a laptop with wireless internet capability for tour functions and checking Nature Trip email. Depending on availability you may borrow the laptop for short periods to check your own email, etc. Many lodges offer a business PC for use, often free of charge, sometimes for a small fee.

Suggested Reading for “A South Texas Adventure”

As a general bird field guide for this trip we recommend either:

National Audubon Society: The Sibley Guide to Birds, 2nd edition, Sibley, David Allen, Doubleday, 2015.

Field Guide to the Birds of North America: 7th edition, The National Geographic Society, 2017.

You may also want to peruse or bring some of the following guides, several of which will be made available during the tour by your guides:

Exploring the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail, White, Mel, Globe Pequot Press, 2004

A Birder's Guide to the Texas Coast, 5th edition, Cooksey, Mel and Weeks, Ron. American Birding Association, 2006.

A Birder's Guide to the Rio Grande Valley, Mark W. Lockwood and McKinney, William B., American Birding Association, 2018.

A Birder's Guide to the Texas Coast, Holt, Harold Lane/ American Birding Association, 1993.

Butterflies of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Wauer, Roland H., Big Earth Publishing, 2004.

Plants of Deep South Texas, Richardson, Alfred and King, Ken, Texas A&M University Press, 2011

Texas Wildflowers: A Field Guide, Loughmiller, Miller & Campbell, University of Texas Press, 2018.

Wildflowers of the Texas Hill Country, Enquist, Marshall, Lone Star Botanical, 1989.



Trip Resources for South Texas

Air Travel: All major U.S. airlines travel to Texas from the San Francisco Bay Area. On recent checks American Airlines and United Airlines were offering the best deals with convenient flight options to Corpus Christi. Arrival in Corpus between noon and 5:00 PM is best for making it to the group dinner on time and some early birding. Southwest Airlines probably has the most flights to and within Texas as they began in Dallas but also have a major presence at Houston. Currently they allow two free checked bags (under 50lbs) whereas most other carriers charge for each bag (\$50 or more). They are considered a “no frills” discount carrier.

Tip: Southwest airline has a boarding arrangement whereas a ticket holder is assigned a “Boarding Zone and number” based on when they check in. The sooner you check in (on-line or at the counter), the earlier in the order you are allowed to board and select the seat(s) of your choice. You can check in online up to 24 hours (exactly) in advance of your flight’s departure. Seasoned SWA travelers know this and check in as soon as allowed on line. As an alternative, passengers can pay extra for the airline to pre-assign a seat ahead of the other passengers. Southwest is just one option of course and we are certainly not promoting them over any other carrier but have often found them to be a fair value for our Texas air travel.

We recommend you CARRY ON your optics!

Accommodations before and after the trip:

Contact us via email or phone for any clarification or additional suggestions for your travels before and after the completion of this tour on places to bird, routes, lodges, etc.

For the final evening of the South Texas Adventure tour, our group is booked in downtown Corpus Christi. From there we will make arrangements to get you to the Corpus Christi airport or drop off point of your choice. For those who can stay until mid-day we will bird that morning in Corpus Christi. **At your earliest convenience please let us know your travel plans to and from Corpus Christi so that we may optimize your time there.**

When questions come up, contact us by phone at 415-355-0450 or email:

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