



Montezuma Quail, Davis Mountains

Birds of Texas: Big Bend & the Edwards Plateau

22 April - 1 May 2010 Tour leader: Eric Horvath

The Big Bend country is a land of dramatic desert vistas, majestic mountains, and spectacular limestone cliffs overlooking the Rio Grande. This 800,000 acre National Park encompasses the most southerly mountains in the United States. Most of the park is Chihuahuan desert, with the Chisos Mountains rising from the arid landscape, a luxuriant island of woodlands and interesting Mexican flora. Big Bend has the highest cactus and bird diversity of any of the U.S. National Parks. By late April and early May, breeding birds have returned to Texas and north-bound migrants, including colorful eastern and western warblers, accumulate at hidden springs and desert oases. Regional specialties include Blue-throated Hummingbird, Common Black-Hawk, Golden-fronted

Woodpecker, Varied Bunting, Colima Warbler, and Black-chinned Sparrow. As we search for birds we will have ample opportunities to photograph and identify flowers and cacti, and to see mammals and reptiles distinctive to the region. Many cacti are often blooming during this season, and the unique forms make the desert fascinating to explore.

In the mysterious Davis Mountains we will search for Montezuma Quail and explore the Conservancy's Davis Mountains Preserve. Our last days are spent in the Edwards Plateau where we search for Golden-cheeked Warbler, Cave Swallow, Olive Sparrow, and Green Kingfisher. One evening we will visit a cave to watch over a million Mexican free-tailed bats emerge from their daytime roost to hunt insects over the surrounding woodlands. This tour includes several beautiful walks of a few miles or so. Flowers and other attractions of the desert spring will also be discussed. We will meet John Karges, the Conservancy's West Texas Conservation Biologist, to learn more about current projects in the region.



Chisos Mountains and Chihuahuan Desert

Itinerary

Day 1.....Thursday, 22 April.....El Paso

We meet in the lobby of our hotel at 6 PM prior to the welcome dinner.

Day 2..... Friday, 23 April.....El Paso to the Davis Mountains

Following an early breakfast we drive east from El Paso. We will look for birds of the desert scrub such as Pyrrhuloxia, Lark Bunting, and Brewer's Sparrow. Later on in the morning the panorama of the Davis Mountains is visible along the highway for many miles.

An aquifer charged by rainwater from the Davis Mountains creates Lake Balmorhea, the best place in all of West Texas for waterbirds. Typically there are Baird's Sandpipers along the shore, and a diverse mix of other migrant

shorebirds. Western and Eared Grebes are often present along with many ducks in bright plumage. At San Solomon Springs we will picnic under tall cottonwoods where we may see Orchard Oriole, Say's Phoebe, Curve-billed Thrasher, and pupfish endemic to this spring. In the late afternoon we will search for Montezuma Quail. We may encounter nesting Common Black-Hawks along Limpia Creek. Night at the historic Indian Lodge in Davis Mountains State Park.

Day 3.....Saturday, 24 April.....Davis Mountains to Big Bend

On an early bird walk near the lodge we will see Western Scrub Jays, Cassin's Kingbirds, and Black-headed Grosbeaks. We will then drive to the Conservancy's Davis Mountains Preserve. We will wander through the property's scattered oaks, pines, and junipers in search of Grace's Warblers, Plumbeous Vireos, and Western Bluebirds. We may see the Buff-breasted Flycatchers which nest here; this preserve is the only place they have ever been found in Texas.

In the afternoon during our drive to Big Bend, we should see pronghorn amidst the agave-studded grasslands. The desert vistas on the way to Big Bend are spectacular. Tonight and the next three nights will be in the Chisos Mountains Lodge, in Big Bend National Park. On at least one night we will take an optional drive where we may find Elf Owl, Western Screech Owl, and Common Poorwill. Interesting mammals such as coyotes, gray fox, bobcats, and collared peccaries are also possible.

Day 4.....Sunday, 25 April.....Big Bend National Park

Today we begin exploring the Chisos Mountains. We will have a gentle hike to Blue Creek, a canyon with red rock spires and balanced rocks. Wildflowers that may be blooming include ocotillo, anisicanth, and cholla. Lucifer Hummingbird, Gray Vireo, and Varied Bunting may be found along the trail along with Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Blue Grosbeak, Verdin, Scott's Oriole, and a variety of north-bound migrants.

Near sunset we will have an optional foray to Santa Elena Canyon, where the Rio Grande has cut a spectacular gorge through towering limestone cliffs. Rough-winged Swallows will be darting over the river, and Painted Buntings may be singing from the tops of mesquite trees.

Day 5.....Monday, 26 April.....Big Bend National Park

This morning we will leave the lodge early to bird the cottonwoods and mesquite thickets along the Rio Grande floodplain. Golden-fronted woodpecker, Greater Roadrunner, Vermilion Flycatcher, Bell's Vireo, Summer Tanager, and Painted Bunting are common, and we can also expect to find an interesting mix of migrants. Gray Hawk, Lark, Varied and Lazuli Buntings are possible. We will also visit a cottonwood grove where Common Black-Hawks have nested in recent years.

Many of the park's most fascinating plants are those that have adapted to survive in the hot desert. A nature trail at Rio Grande Village is a good area to investigate lowland desert plants, such as lechuguilla, candelilla, and various cacti. Earless lizards and whiptails may be active along the trail, especially later in the morning.

Late in the afternoon, we can visit a hidden desert spring, where we relax in the shade on a bench and quietly watch for birds to come to drink and bathe.

Day 6.....Tuesday, 27 April.....Big Bend National Park

Today we seek the Colima Warbler, an essentially Mexican species that inhabits the pine-oak forests of the higher elevations of the park. This is the only breeding locality in the United States for the Colima Warbler. Our hike to Boot Spring typically produces several views of the warbler right over the trail, along with Broad-tailed and Blue-throated Hummingbirds, Hutton's Vireo, and Black-chinned Sparrow. We may also see the Painted Redstart, Zone-tailed Hawk, and Peregrine Falcon. The hike is long and strenuous, but the trail is well maintained, and the vistas and photo opportunities are great.

One can choose not to hike to Boot Spring, and there are a variety of short trails near the lodge in Big Bend where one can see Black-chinned Sparrow, Mexican Jay, and Hepatic Tanager.

Day 7.....Wednesday, 28 April.....Big Bend National Park to Concan

After some final morning birding in Big Bend, we will begin the long drive through West Texas to the Edwards Plateau. As we proceed eastward, we will stop for Cave Swallows, Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, Great Kiskadees, and possibly Ringed Kingfisher. When we reach the Hill Country we will find wooded hills, valleys, and cypress-bordered streams, and a different mix of bird and plant life. Yellow-throated Warblers, Long-billed Thrashers, and Green Kingfishers occur on the grounds of Neal's Lodge where we will spend two nights.

At dusk we will have an optional outing to view several million Mexican free-tailed bats coming out of the Frio cave in a long undulating column. This is an amazing spectacle, and often one or two Red-tailed Hawks are hunting bats by snatching them in midair. On the way back we will search for armadillos and nightbirds which include Common Poorwill and Chuck-will's-widow. The yellow-green lights of fireflies may be winking on and off under the trees after dark.

Day 8.....Thursday, 29 April.....Concan

We'll visit Garner State Park, quite close to Neal's lodge. We can look for Golden-cheeked Warblers which nest in the junipers. This bird is a specialty of Texas, they nest only in this area of central Texas. Sometimes a Ringed Kingfisher visits the pools. We'll have the afternoon on the grounds of Neal's lodge, getting good looks at the common birds of the area, including White-eyed Vireos, Long-billed Thrashers, and Olive Sparrows.

Day 9.....Friday, 30 April.....Concan

Our destination today will be Lost Maples Natural Area. This is a very beautiful area, with clear streams, sylvan glades, and limestone cliffs. We will seek the Golden-cheeked Warblers. Black-capped Vireos also can occur here, and if one is singing on territory, we have a good chance to see it. We'll see an interesting mix of eastern and western birds including Acadian Flycatcher, Green Kingfisher, Black-and-White Warbler, Indigo and Painted Buntings, Yellow-throated Vireo, Canyon Wren, and Rufous-crowned Sparrow.



Golden-cheeked Warbler

Day 10.....Saturday, 1 May.....Concan to San Antonio

We will bird Neal's Lodge and the Concan area before breakfast, and then pack up and head towards San Antonio. Along the way we will make several stops, looking for Upland Sandpiper, Black-bellied Whistling Duck, Crested Caracara, Harris' Hawk, and Cassin's, Clay-colored, and Lark Sparrows. We may see singing Dickcissels amidst a beautiful wildflower display.

The trip ends at noon in San Antonio at the airport. Participants can either catch a flight out in the afternoon or continue on their own travel plans.

Leadership

Eric Horvath holds a degree in zoology from Oregon State University, and has written a number of scientific papers on birds and mammals. Eric has conducted ornithological research in Oregon, Arizona, Mexico, and Australia, and has led birding tours since 1990 for The Nature Conservancy to Arizona, Texas, Florida, and Oregon. His interests also include botany and geology.



Tour Leader Eric Horvath, South Rim of Chisos Mtns, Big Bend National Park

Lodgings, Meals, Transportation

We will be staying in comfortable hotels and cabins. All meals are included, but alcoholic drinks must be paid for on an individual basis. Formal dress is not necessary. The group will be limited to 14 participants. Transport will be in one or two 15-passenger vans with air conditioning.

Rigors

In desert areas most of our activity will be in the cool of the morning, however we may experience temperatures in the 90's in some places. There will be several walks for distances of about 3 leisurely miles. One long, strenuous hike to Boot Spring is planned, but it is optional. A few days we will be driving about four hours and one day a six to seven hour drive will occur. Be prepared for plenty of sun and heat.

Preparation

Participants will be sent maps, an equipment list, bird lists, copies of selected articles, and a list of suggested reading to aid in preparation for the trip.

Cost

Reservation deposit	\$100	made payable to Eric Horvath
Final payment (Due 22 Jan 2010)	\$1,890	made payable to Eric Horvath
Contribution (Due 22 Jan 2010)	\$300	made payable to The Nature Conservancy

Total Trip Cost (not including airfare):	\$2,290	

(The contribution is a suggested tax-deductible donation to help fund our work in both Texas and Oregon and is not a part of the trip fee.)

Single Supplement: If you prefer to have your own private room and do not want to share it with a roommate, you may specify this and pay an additional \$300 (made payable to Eric Horvath).

Please send all checks to: Eric Horvath Telephone: 541-867-6791
P.O. Box 721
South Beach, OR 97366

Reservations

Reservations are made on a first-come, first-served basis. A deposit of \$100 per person is required to reserve one space. The final payment and contribution to The Nature Conservancy are due 90 days before the trip. Please make a note of this deadline.

Cancellations

The suggested contribution to The Nature Conservancy is non-refundable, but may be applied to a future trip. If you must cancel and a replacement is found, you will be refunded the amounts paid to Eric Horvath. Other cancellations are subject to the following: forfeit of \$1500 of ground costs if cancellation is received between 90 and 30 days prior to departure; and forfeit of 90% of ground costs for cancellations received between 29 and 10 days prior to departure. If you cancel less than 10 days prior to the trip, you will forfeit the full trip cost. The non-refunded portion of the trip helps defray non-recoverable expenses and is not a contribution to The Nature Conservancy. If for any reason Eric Horvath cancels a trip, you will be fully refunded.

Participants are encouraged to buy trip cancellation insurance through a travel agent in case you cannot attend due to unforeseen circumstances.

Questions? Contact the trip leader, Eric Horvath
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Or the Conservancy's Field Trip Program Manager, Rudy Dietz
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