

Texas

December 26th 2009 to January 2nd 2010

Tony Stewart
John Willis
Jordan Stewart



Brown Pelican - Fulton

Where to go with lots of sun and some excellent birds to boot – Texas!!! So we headed off on Boxing Day armed with sun cream and sombrero looking forward to soaking up the rays and a week's good birding..... Or so we thought

Texas, Christmas 2009 will live long in the memory as the coldest bloomin Christmas in forty years, with a state of emergency declared by the Governor. Dallas and the north cut off by three foot snow drifts and a bitterly cold biting north wind (and I thought we had left it all behind ha!).

Nothing could dampen our spirits as we set off from Houston en route for our first port of call at Rockport where we had pre booked a hotel for the evening. We had booked to go on the Whooping Crane trip, the following day, with Captain Tommy (www.whoopingcranetours.com). This was a trip I had done previously in 2005 with Iain Robson.

This trip is essential if you want to catch up with the endangered Whooping Cranes which winter in Aransas Bay. The wild flock here numbers only 260 individuals and is a species of major concern. Conservationists are working hard to establish a second population in Florida from captive birds.

We set off from the harbour on time with our larger than life Captain – the all American, larger than life typical Texan Tommy. His boat has a very shallow draft allowing it to reach parts of the Aransas Bay Refuge that other boats cannot and at \$35 a head is an absolute snip. The birding was excellent with thousands of birds on show.

We had great views of the Whooping Cranes along with many Sandhill Cranes. Ducks included Mottled, Northern Pintail (1000's), Northern Shoveler, and huge rafts of Lesser Scaup. Herons included Great Blue, Tricoloured, Little Blue, Great White and Snowy Egret. Wader numbers were immense with the most common species being Least Sandpiper and Western Sandpipers. There were also many Greater Yellowlegs, Lesser Yellowlegs, Willets, American Oystercatchers, Long-billed Curlews and American Avocets. Both species of Pelican – Brown & White were seen along with lots of Black Skimmers. Good views were also had of Hooded Merganser, Bufflehead, White Ibis and Roseate Spoonbill.

Raptors included Peregrine, Crested Caracara, White-tailed Hawk, Turkey Vulture, Osprey and Merlin. There were also many other species seen during the excursion, which provided an excellent days birding at a very reasonable price.

We then headed south to our base at South Padre Island where we had hired a very cheap, rather luxurious condo.

28th December 2009

Day break saw us at the South Padre Island Convention Centre sheltering from the bitterly cold wind. The marsh held the usual Herons and Egrets along with Ten Roseate Spoonbills and five White Ibis. Duck species included Lesser Scaup and American Wigeon and there was also a good selection of Herons and Egrets. There were few passerines present except for the very common Orange-crowned & Yellow-rumped Warblers. The reed bed had a roost of Great-tailed Grackles and four Common Yellowthroats.

We made our way along South Padre Island and saw 12+ Northern Harriers, 3 Osprey and 3 Meadowlark sp which were to distant to positively identify. There were numerous Killdeers and Brown Pelicans seemed to be everywhere.

We left the Island via the causeway which connects the barrier island to the mainland and headed off to Laguna Atascosa NWR.



South Padre Island

Approaching the entrance to the reserve we came across several Raptors which were mainly Turkey Vultures but also present were a few extremely nervous Crested Caracaras, Harris's Hawks and two White-tailed Hawks. We stopped to investigate and found a dead cow in the dense bush which had obviously caught the attention of the Vultures.

Other birds in the area included American kestrel, Eastern Phoebe and huge flocks of Red-winged Blackbirds.



Turkey Vulture & Harris's Hawk

We arrived at the Reserve and checked in at the reception. After a welcome briefing from one of the many volunteers we were ready for the birds. Laguna Atascosa NWR is the largest protected area of natural habitat left in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, an oasis for wildlife. The refuge's 45,187 acres is home to the endangered Ocelot and the Aplomodo Falcon. It is also home to the reintroduced Aplomodo Falcon.

It was a fantastic place with a 15 mile circular loop taking you around the entire reserve; it is also home to nearly the entire North American wintering population of Canvasbacks and Redheads. There were tens of thousands of water birds with massive rafts of Lesser Scaup, Northern Pintail, Redheads & Canvasbacks. There were several hundred Black-necked Grebes and lots of assorted Herons and Egrets. Passerines included Pine Warbler, Orange-crowned Warbler and Yellow-rumped Warbler, Northern Mockingbird and up to a hundred Loggerhead Shrikes.

There were raptors everywhere but sadly no sign of the Aplomodo Falcon which had been present in the area earlier in the day. Other birds were 6 Green Jay, 2 White-tipped Doves and two Inca Doves.

29th December 2009 – Santa Ana

Santa Ana Reserve is one of the jewels of the Rio Grande Valley – but it didn't feel like it today. It was a wet, cold miserable day with driving rain. However Birdlife was good and we managed to rack up a good list for the day.

Highlights included field guide views of Plain Chacalaca, Great Kiskadee, 9 Olive Sparrows, Rufous and Black-chinned Hummingbirds both lifers. Thanks to the centres staff for clinching the tricky identification of the Rufous Hummingbird.

Other good birds were Long-billed Thrasher, Black-crowned Tufted Titmouse, Black and White Warbler and 9 Least Grebes. The journey back to South Padre added Ringed Kingfisher, 5 Anhinga and 3 White-tailed Kites.



Plain Chacalaca & Olive Sparrow

29th December 2009 – Mexico

Spent the day in Mexico – few beers & a big plate of Chilli. Bronzed & Brown-headed Cowbird's in the car park but little else of interest.

30th December 2009 – Bentsen World Birding Centre

The local free paper on South Padre carried a story that a big twitch was underway at Bentsen, a first for America, a Bare-throated Tiger Heron. It was a two hour drive up the interstate to the reserve.

Upon arrival there were dozens of birders milling around. The bird had been seen feeding on a field at first light but had disappeared at around 9.00 am – never to be seen again. Birding was good though and a wintering Allen's Hummingbird provided me with another life tick as well as a belter Ferruginous Pygmy Owl which hunted the large flocks of Kinglets and Warblers. Golden-fronted Woodpecker and Coopers Hawk were both seen well along with many other familiar birds



Cooper's Hawk & Golden-fronted Woodpecker

A while later I came across several U.S Birders who were busy snapping away at a Merlin. The Yanks informed me that the bird in question belonged to the race *Richardsonii* a.k.a Prairie Merlin – it is paler than the Taiga race. But to be honest I didn't have a clue.



Possible *richardsonii* a.k.a. Prairie Merlin

I spent an hour in warm sunshine at the Hawk watch hoping for Hooked-billed Kite but despite loads of Raptors I failed to see this desirable species.

31st December 2009 – Los Ebanos Preserve

This was a smashing little reserve and the visit was primarily to target the Brownsville Common Yellowthroat (*Geothlypis trichas inseperata*). This is an endemic sub-species of the Common Yellowthroat. It is restricted to the southern half of the Texan county of which the reserve is situated. It was thought to be extinct but was rediscovered in 1988 and it is thought that the population currently numbers 200 – 250 individuals. The population at Los Ebanos is one of the most accessible.

Luckily 2 birds were seen in the reed beds with another possible nearby. This was after an hour of sitting quietly. Also seen was a Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet (Resident & a lifer), Black and White Warbler, Ringed Kingfisher, 5 Annihinga, Hooded and Altamira Orioles and a couple of very vociferous Great Kiskadee's.

A surprise discovery was five roosting Common Pauraque's which allowed very close approach before taking flight and landing a few metres away. Blending superbly with the surroundings as Nightjars can do. It's a pity that I had left the camera back at the digs.

At dusk we returned to South Padre Island, grabbed the camera, and headed off to the Convention Centre to look for Rails. An amazing sunset greeted us but it was bitterly cold as we made our way to the boardwalk. We soon spotted a Clapper Rail but alas no Black/Yellow/King/Sora or Virginia.

As the light disappeared several Roseate Spoonbills flew into the Lagoon to Roost together with hundreds of Great-tailed Grackles.



Roseate Spoonbill & Clapper Rail

January 1st 2010

Another trip to Laguna Atascosa and another dipped Aplomodo Falcon which means another trip to Texas. There seemed to be considerably more water birds present including large flocks of newly arrived Snow Geese including several Blue Morphs and a handful of Ross's Geese. There also a few Greenland Whitefronts present.

We were fortunate to see two superb Male Alligators at close quarters, Coyote, Red Fox and dozens of Wild Pigs.

Waders included both species of Yellowlegs, Long-billed Dowitcher, Stilt Sandpiper, Marbled Godwit and Western Sandpiper. Fourteen Ospreys were on the reserve and Gull-billed, Forsters and three Royal Terns.

January 2nd 2010

Flew home to winter