

## Texas – Christmas and New Year 2005/06

Iain Robson, Tony Wales and Tony Stewart

- Day one – 26<sup>th</sup> December 2005

We caught an early morning flight from Newcastle to Paris Charles de Gaulle to connect with the onward flight to Texas. Tony W was travelling via Manchester and was to meet us in Paris. Tony W's day started badly with a large fuel spillage on the runway resulting in a full turn out by the fire brigade and as a consequence he was severely delayed. Absolute bedlam greeted us upon arrival with thousands of commuters packing the airport and to complicate matters further our arrival / departure terminals were at opposite ends of the airport resulting in a mad dash through the airport. A stressed out TW finally made it too the departure gate with seconds to spare and having survived one or two frantic moments, courtesy of some maniac organisation by Air France we were soon leaving Paris heading for the United States via the Western Isles, Iceland, Greenland and Canada. We landed on time at 14.10 and made our way to the security hall to clear immigration and we eventually cleared homeland security at Houston's George Bush International Airport. Retina and fingerprints were electronically scanned and we were destined to become another vital statistic in America's ongoing war on terror. Despite everything the process was relatively painless and the security people were extremely well mannered and organised.

We headed for the car hire depot and despite T.S forgetting the car rental voucher we were eventually united with a vehicle and we were off on the road heading south towards the Gulf of Mexico. It was late afternoon and we faced a journey of nearly two hundred miles to reach our first stop which was to be at Fulton Beach, Rockport a 3 to 3 ½ hour drive. First birds on our trip list were European Starling just outside the airport - what an introduction to American birding. Shortly afterwards we added both Common and Great-tailed Grackles, species that were numerous during the trip with many hundreds seen each day as they brought in the new day by perching in long lines on the telegraph wires before heading off to do what Grackles do.

After an hour's driving we decided on a pit stop for a coffee and toilet break and we pulled over at a drive in Starbucks Coffee house perched on a light in the car park was our first Northern Mockingbird of the trip - the State bird of Texas.

A flock of six White Ibis flew over the highway and an Osprey was perched on the roof of an industrial unit. It was dark as we eventually made it to the Hotel at Fulton beach and there was just time to make a mad scramble over the road to the diner to grab some dinner. We were panicking a little as the restaurant was in the throes of closing, but to the staff's absolute credit they pulled out all the stops to make us very welcome and knock up a great meal with a few Buds to wash it down with. After a few pints in the bar next door it was time to get to bed however as we walked back towards the Hotel we noticed a Great Blue Heron fishing on the waters edge, we watched the bird for a while before Iain noticed some

dark shapes on the water and as we got a little closer it became apparent that there were several Lesser Scaup roosting on the sea.

Our hotel - The Sandollar Resort was situated on the beautiful Aransas Bay and a great base for our first night in Texas. Our reservation for three people cost \$74 per night. <http://www.sandollar-resort.com/>

- Day Two - 27<sup>th</sup> December 2005

The main reason for having our first night in Fulton Beach was it put right on the door step for Captain Tommy's Whooping Crane tours. Historically Whooping Cranes ranged from the Arctic coast, south to central Mexico and from the Rocky Mountains in Utah, eastward to the Atlantic coast. This immense range was reduced by 1887 due to the conversion of their primary nesting habitats into pastureland, hay and grain production. The population was estimated to be between 500 and 700 hundred individuals. By 1941 the pressures of hunting, specimen collecting, draining and filling wetlands reduced the population of migrating Whooping Cranes to just 16 individuals. A non migrating flock in south eastern Louisiana had just "disappeared". The range of the last migrating flock was found to cover a 2500 mile migration route from Wood Buffalo National Park in Saskatchewan in Canada to Aransas Pass National Wildlife Refuge on the Texas Gulf coast. In 1967 the Cranes were listed as a critically endangered species with the he Aransas population currently consists of approximately 190 birds which continue to nest in Canada. A non-migratory flock has been established on the Kissimee Prairie in Florida and contains 103 birds and there are 114 birds held in captivity.

Captain Tommy's trip had been recommended to us and we had pre- booked by e-mail, for a 07.30 departure from the nearby dock. We rose early and packed the car for the short drive to the departure point. The first bird of the day was the Great Blue Heron that we had seen the night before soon followed by our first Laughing Gulls and a flock of twenty Brown Pelicans, Ring-billed Gull and Franklins Gull were soon added with a flock of American White Pelicans nearby.



American White & Brown Pelicans

We booked into the boat house and joined other expectant birders on the dock as we waited for Tommy to bank the cash. The Skimmer, which we were to board, has two decks the upper deck, and by the best vantage point for the tour, is limited to twelve people for insurance reasons. After a quick count dockside we realised that there were far more people than the top deck could cope with thus we pushed in and made a point of boarding first to bag the prime positions up top (Apologies to persons unknown if you were offended by our actions).

We soon underway and were heading out into the Gulf of Mexico aboard the Skimmer accompanied by the larger than life Captain Tommy. The advantage that the Skimmer has over other tour boats is that it has a very shallow draft which allows access to areas of lagoon and shorelines which teem with birdlife and to which other boats cannot reach for fear of grounding. The trip cost \$35 dollars each and we were out until 12.30 which was exceptional value for money, the birding was superb, and Tommy was is also a very knowledgeable birder and was soon in full flow and once he realised we were visiting from England Tommy went out of his way to keep us informed of Habitat, tides, trends etc. Top Man.

There were many birding highlights on this trip including several Whooping Cranes - both Adults and Juveniles were present feeding on the salt marsh. The Juveniles were a rusty orange colour compared to the magnificent white plumage of the adults. The reason that the Cranes winter in the Aransas Bay area is the presence of Blue Crabs, but currently there are major concerns from scientists about the amount of freshwater that flows into the bay. The freshwater inflow is affected by the demands of the human population and the current drought which Texas is experiencing. As we motored by one of the islands two adult Cranes flew incredibly close to the boat affording those on board incredible views.



Whooping Cranes

The boat trip gave us nearly 70 trip ticks with many lifers for us - the main highlights (in no particular order) were Roseate Spoonbills, White-faced Ibis, Mottled Duck, Fulvous Whistling Duck, Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser, American Coot, Sandhill Crane, American

Oystercatcher, Greater & Lesser Yellowlegs, Willet, Spotted, Western and Least Sandpipers, Long & Short-billed Dowitchers, Long-billed Curlew, Caspian, Royal and Forsters Terns, Double-crested & Neotropic Cormorants. Egrets included Great, Snowy and Reddish and Herons included Great Blue, Little Blue and Tricoloured. On the various islands we observed several Raptors including 7 Crested Caracara, 20 Turkey Vultures, 2 Osprey, 3 White-tailed Hawks, 5 Northern Harriers, 2 Peregrine Falcons and a single Merlin. We also caught up with the first Belted Kingfisher and 2 American Barn Swallows.

After returning to dry land we made our way around the bay to Rockport Beach Park, where we had been told there was a flock of Black Skimmers. We arrived at 12.30 and sure enough there were the Skimmers which numbered c350.



Black Skimmers

Also present were 30 American White Pelicans, 1 Redhead, 5 Killdeers, numerous Forsters Terns, 30 Black Ducks, Snowy Egret, Great Egret, Great Blue Heron, Royal Tern, 10 Caspian Terns and 2 Willets. Moving off at 13.00 we headed further around the Bay to Cove Harbour. Here we had our first Loggerhead Shrike of the trip as well as 12 Brown Pelicans, 2 Lesser Yellowlegs, Ring-billed & Laughing Gulls, Common Grackle and an obliging Clapper Rail.

We left Cove Harbour and headed off up Highway 188 towards the bypass Highway 35 for our next port of call the Aransas Woods, enroute we observed Red-shouldered, Red-tailed Hawks and White-tailed Hawks perched on the telegraph wires above the road. At 13.45 we reached the woods, the weather was baking hot and it was easy to forget that this was Christmas and probably bitter cold back in the UK. One of our first birds here was a Juvenile Vermillion Flycatcher

and over the woods were American kestrel, Crested Caracara and Turkey Vulture and nearby Eastern Phoebe and Northern Mockingbird. The woods bordered an expanse of marsh land which was teeming with Mosquito's and it soon became pretty uncomfortable and we therefore decided to move off towards our next scheduled stop at Loyola Beach. We made a couple of roadside stops as we headed south. At one we saw 2 Lark Sparrows, 1 American Pipit, 30 Mourning Doves, Dunlin, Wilson's Snipe, Willet, Killdeer, Greater Yellowlegs, Eastern Phoebe, Loggerhead Shrike, Northern Harrier and a calling (not seen) Ladder-backed Woodpecker.

Late afternoon we eventually reached the beach to be greeted by a pack of 25 dogs. Nervously we got out the cars to bird the nearby area however we needn't have worried though as the dogs weren't in slightest bit interested in us. Birding highlights here was our first Rio Grande speciality - Great Kiskadee. there were three birds in total loudly calling to each other "kiskadee, kiskadee". The call was to become a familiar one to us.





Clapper Rail & Great Kiskadee

Just off the beach there were 40 Redheads, 2 Buffleheads, numerous Lesser Scaup, Caspian & Forsters Terns, and Ring-billed & Laughing Gulls. On shore there was a single Lesser Yellowlegs and several Killdeers. several House Sparrows and a now familiar Northern Mockingbird were also present.



Ring-billed & Laughing Gull

We headed off towards our next base at the town of Alamo in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. We had been recommended a hotel in the town called the Alamo Inn by Northumberland Birder Roger Foster. The Alamo Inn was run by a birder called Keith Hackland who turned out to be an excellent host. A birders Shop and artist studios were attached to the hotel which sold lots of birding goodies such as optics, books, cd's and clothing. The Hotel had a separate cottage and this was to be our base for the next couple of days.  
[www.alamoinnsuites.com](http://www.alamoinnsuites.com)

- Day Three - 28<sup>th</sup> December 2005

A 06.30 start for breakfast saw us on the road for 07.15 to maximise our birding time in the Rio Grande Valley, Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge. Three Cattle Egrets sitting on a large wheelie bin was a surprise as we loaded the car for the day. It was quite misty as we left for the reserve and a wrong turning en route proved profitable as we stopped to read our map. Two Golden crowned Woodpeckers were showing well together with a Common Ground Dove, Eastern Phoebe, 2 Red -winged Blackbirds, Loggerhead Shrike and a Great Kiskadee. We eventually arrived at Santa Ana Reserve and as we approached we saw a couple of American Pipits feeding by the roadside with another Golden-fronted Woodpecker and Three Green Jays another of the Rio Grande specialities.

Our timing was perfect as a guided walk around the reserve had just set off for the day, the warden hurried us along and told us to run and join the group. It was a couple of dollars to participate and he trusted us to return later and pay the money for the walk. A very knowledgeable and friendly guide led us into a fantastic reserve. First birds were Orange Crowned Warbler, Blue Gray Gnatcatcher and Ruby Crowned Kinglet - what a start. Soon we were at Willow Lake the first wetland pool which contained lots of birds including 15 Black-necked Stilts, 10 Blue-winged and 6 Green-winged Teals, 15 Long-billed Dowitchers, 6 Pintail, Shoveler, 5 American Wigeon, Pied-billed Grebe, Cinnamon Teal, 10 Lesser Yellowlegs and 7 Greater Yellowlegs, 6 Wilson Snipe and 5 Least Sandpipers and a nice White-faced Ibis. Kiskadees were calling all around and a stunning Common Yellowthroat worked its way through the reeds. As the walk resumed we headed off into the trees here we connected with 2 Olive Sparrows, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Long-billed Thrasher, House Wren, Black-crowned Tufted Titmouse and Yellow-rumped Warbler. Flyovers included Anhinga, Turkey Vultures, 2 Red-tailed Hawks and 3 Harris Hawks.

Reaching Pintail Lake which had similar species to the Willow Lake we added 10 Ruddy Ducks, American Coot, 6 Ring-necked Duck, 3 Least Grebes, Black-necked Grebe, Great crested Grebe and a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. Further down the trail we saw another Common Yellowthroat and a White-eyed Vireo, There were lots of Orange-crowned and Yellow-rumped Warblers, Gnatcatchers, Kinglets and a couple of Long-billed Thrashers. Nearing the end of the guided walk we came across two Olive Sparrows and more Thrashers, Kinglets, and Gnatcatchers. We approached the feeding station back at the visitor centre where there were 6 noisy Green Jays and Three Inca Doves. Raptors that flew overhead included 5 Harris Hawks with 2 Black Vultures and a Peregrine Falcon.



Black Vulture ( ©Dennis Rashe - Livermore California)

The walk ended at 12.30 and we returned to the visitor centre to pay for the walk and thank the staff for their trust. We rested for half an hour and had our picnic lunch overhead. 20+ Cave Swallows flew by and by now raptors were everywhere and more Harris Hawks, Red-shouldered Hawks and Black & Turkey Vultures soared in the sky.

After lunch we decided to retrace the guided walk to see if we could find anymore new birds. There were two marked trails imaginatively named A & B. We ventured down "A" and although nothing new was added there still a number of now familiar species. The end of "A" was the Waterside of Willow Lake. This time we turned left and joined Trail "B" which led around the other side of the lake with yet more Great Kiskadees and a Wren species which TS was convinced was a Marsh Wren but IR & TW felt that the possibility of Carolina Wren could not be ruled out- one that got away.

Along the trail we came across our first Kingbird of the trip, we were unsure of its identity because of the possibility of it being either Couch's Kingbird or Tropical Kingbird. The only sure way is by call. It would be later confirmed by the Wardens that it was a Couch's Kingbird.

Further into the trail we saw 1 of possibly 2 present White-tipped Doves and towards the end of the trail there was a large kettle of Raptors - mostly Hawks but too distant to positively identify. It was getting late in the day as we eventually reached the visitor centre which was getting ready to close. We said our goodbyes to the staff and made our way out of the reserve. Just outside the entrance we saw another Couch's Kingbird and opposite in a field were 40 feeding Kildeers. That night we enjoyed a few beers and a great meal in the Mexican Restaurant opposite the Alamo Day. We were all knackered but agreed it had been a stunning day with lots of stunning birds.

- Day 4 - 29<sup>TH</sup> December 2005

We rose at 05.30 for a 06.00 start; we grabbed an assortment of goodies from the breakfast buffet, which we demolished in the car before heading North West through the Rio Grande Valley, up the state highway bound for Falcon State Park. Tens of thousands of Common and Great-tailed Grackles gathered on the telephone wires as Dawn broke, it was like a scene out of Alfred Hitchcock's "The Birds". We passed through Rio Grande city at 08.00 and saw a Loggerhead Shrike and just outside the town of Roma a dead Coyote lay dead by the side of the road.

The first stop was to be an old trailer park at Salineno. We found the track leading down to the R.V Park and slowly drove down. More Kiskadees were seen, together with our first 2 Cardinals of the trip. Whilst admiring the Cardinals 3 Altamira Orioles showed well and 6 White Winged Doves were close by. At the bottom of the track we reached the River, we were hoping to catch sight of the Muscovy Duck which is a very rare bird in the U.S. Sadly no birds were found but the river was full of birdlife. There was a huge Turkey Vulture roost and Three Osprey patrolled the River. 30 + Double Crested Cormorants and numerous wildfowl were present including American Wigeon, Coots, Shoveler, Gadwall, Canvasback,

Moorhen, Bufflehead, Great Egret, and 2 Pied-billed Grebes and a fabulous noisy Ringed Kingfisher was flying to and fro over the river.

One of the recommended sites in most guides to Texas is the Windts Family RV site a stones throw from the river. Here we were to spend probably the most memorable hour of the trip. The Windts have been spending their winters in the sun for as long as anyone can remember, travelling south to avoid the harsh northern winters. Their passion for birds is remarkable as is their energy as they are getting on in years. Their love of birds has seen them establish a fantastic feeding station in the garden by their R.V. Favourites with Woodpeckers was Peanut Butter and Green Jays had a liking for the multicoloured Marsh mallows on offer., and the Orioles favoured the sugared water which they drank from various feeders around the station. For peoples comfort, they have set out a couple of rows of deckchairs and people visit from all corners of the world. For the record each visitor is asked to sign the visitor's book, Iain noticed that our friend the famed Evertonian and Woodpecker Expert of Eastern Europe Gerard Gorman had signed the book and left a card strategically placed in the book. We just took a front row deckchair, sat back and relaxed as the show began to unfold before our eyes. It was a thoroughly enjoyable spectacle.

There were so many highlights here it is almost impossible to start - here goes  
5 Audubon's Orioles, 20 Altamira Orioles, 1 Hooded Oriole, 20 Cardinal, 1 Inca Dove, 15 White -tipped Doves, 1 Common Ground Dove, 1 Bewicks Wren, 2 Long-billed Thrashers, 2 Clay Coloured Robins, 20 Green Jays, 2 Black-crowned Tufted Titmice, 5 Great Kiskadees, 3 Golden -fronted Woodpecker, 1 Ladder-backed Woodpecker, 3 Orange-crowned Warblers, 3 Yellow-rumped Warblers, 10 House Sparrows, 1 White-crowned Sparrow, 10 Chipping Sparrows, 5 Lincoln Sparrows and 5 Brown Jays. What an hour it turned out to be, an hour that will stay with us forever, birds were just everywhere. We had met a guy called Dennis Rashe from Livermore California like us he was in Texas trying to see most of the specialities. Dennis was at the feeding station, when we got there afterwards asked to follow us to the next site or two. We had a quick whip round and threw \$10 each in the kitty to donate to the Windts to replenish food stocks when things were running low. We said our goodbyes to the couple and made our back to the river, about 100 yards away.



Altamira Oriole



Hooded Oriole





Audubon's Oriole



Golden-fronted Woodpecker



Green Jays



Long-billed Thrasher



Brown Jay



Black-crested Tufted Titmouse

At the river 30 Greater White-fronted Geese went over and 2 female Mottled Duck swam by and the Ringed Kingfisher was still present. A superb Male Vermillion Flycatcher flew into a nearby tree. Dennis managed to take a quick photo before it flew off.



Vermillion Flycatcher (© Dennis Rashe)

We moved off to Shapeno which was recommended in one of the guide books. When we arrived there was a lot of Border guard activity. The site was pretty run down and not particularly good, although there were 4 more Ringed Kingfishers and a Osprey on the River. The banks of the river on the U.S side of the border were strewn with cast off clothes and floatation devices. The Mexicans desperate for a better life risk all by swimming the river at night. Once across they ditch their wet clothes and floats and head off into the unknown.

Arriving at Falcon State Park we made our way to the entrance and paid our \$2 entrance fee. Familiar species were seen here including Grackles, Green Jays, Long-billed Thrashers, Northern Mockingbirds, Red-winged Blackbirds and Golden-fronted Woodpeckers. There were a few screens scattered about and beyond the screens a small amount of food had been put out by the rangers to attract the birds. It was at one of these screens that we connected with a superb Black-throated Sparrow. There were 2 possibly 3 birds present.



Black-throated Sparrow



We moved to another screen where we were lucky enough to see our only Greater Road Runner of the trip.



Greater Road Runner ( © Dennis Rashe)



American Kestrel

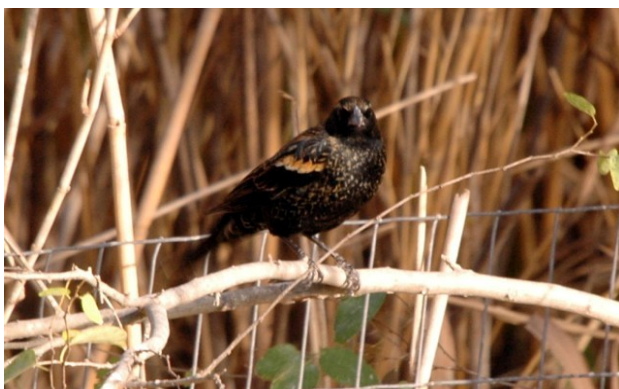
We said our goodbyes to Dennis and we went off to check the nearby reservoir. On the water were 2 Least Grebes, 5 Black-necked Grebes, 2 "Mexican" Mallards, 1 Great Egret, 7 American Coots, 1 Great Blue Heron and 3 Neotropic Cormorants. In the nearby scrub were a family party of wild boar and 8 Red-Winged Blackbirds.

We then headed off towards San Ignacio on the road for Laredo, for our next scheduled stop; a brief stop enroute at Zapata produced another Vermillion Flycatcher and an Osprey. At A petrol stop we had a cracking showy American Kestrel.

We reached San Ygnacio at 15.30 and quickly found the private reserve situated at the corner of Washington Avenue and Treveno Street. Our target species was White-collared Seedeater. At the entrance to the reserve was a recent sightings board with a couple of pictures of the seedeater and an honesty box asking for donations for the up keep of the reserve. The path into the main reserve had been heavily seeded and we disturbed a number of Cardinal and 4 Chipping Sparrows. In the heavy scrub were 2 Plain Chacalacas. A small accipiter went through later identified as a Sharp-shinned Hawk.

This turned out to be a little gem of a reserve. With a raised platform viewing area c/w with seats giving the observer a good view over the nearby vegetation. 12 Cardinals, 2 Long-billed Thrashers, 3 Orange-crowned Warblers, 1 Yellow-rumped Warbler, 115 Red winged Blackbirds came into roost in the reed beds, Altamira & Audubon's Orioles, Mockingbirds, Green Jays, Kiskadees and Inca Doves ,30 Feral Pigeons, 2 Olive Sparrows and 10 Lincolns Sparrows were all present.

There were seed feeders and a supply of fresh running water from a hose pipe which attracted a lot of birds to drink. It was then we had our first Lesser Goldfinches, with 12 birds feeding and drinking.



Red-winged Blackbird

During a quiet moment Iain notice something zip in to feed. He quickly shouted out that he had a Buff-bellied Hummingbird. There was a nature trail which followed the river, so off we went. Halfway down the track in an area of dense vegetation a small bird hopped out onto a branch in front of us - we had got our prize a first year male White-collared Seedeater. We watched it for a while before it disappeared into the vegetation. Spirits high we had a final look at the river as it was approaching 18.30 and beginning to get dark. On the river were 3 Ringed Kingfishers, 7 Neotropic Cormorants, 2 Spotted Sandpipers, 2 Great Egrets, 1 Great Blue Heron, Vermillion Flycatcher and an unidentified Flycatcher were seen on the Mexican side of the river. On our return to the car 3 more Olive Sparrows and 2 Chipping Sparrows were seen together with the Sharp-shinned Hawk of earlier on.

What a day.

- Day 5 - 30<sup>th</sup> December 2005

Another early start saw us heading down the old military road - route 281 Alamo to Brownsville. First birds of the day other than Grackles were a couple of American Kestrels followed quickly by a superb White-tailed Kite perched on an overhead wire.

Three more American Kestrels were quickly added before we came across the remarkable sight of c10000 Red-winged Blackbirds feeding in open farmland together with several Brown-headed Cowbirds. Further down the highway we had a single Green Parakeet. We eventually reached our destination which was the Sabal Palms Audubon Sanctuary at Brownsville. On entering the reserve we had 10 Lark Sparrows and at least 20 Mourning Doves and 5 Eastern Phoebe. The first thing we noticed about Sabal Palm was the multitude of biting mosquitoes. We tried to forget about them as we made our way around the reserve. 10 Green Jays were seen and 2 Black-crested Tufted Titmice. We reached an area of water which was alive with birds. The birds on the water were familiar ones with the following being seen - 2 Little Blue Herons, 5 Black-crowned Night Herons, Pied-billed Grebe, numerous American Wigeon, Coot and Gadwall, 4 Blue-winged Teals, 4 Ruddy Duck, 1 Ring-necked Duck, 1 Redhead, 2 American Black Duck. Overhead flew c850 Snow Geese followed shortly afterwards by another estimated flock of 850 with 7 Sandhill Cranes in tow. As we watched the geese we spotted our first and only Green Heron of the trip. Ringed and Belted Kingfisher were perched close by allowing excellent views and on the fringes of the lake were a couple of Spotted Sandpipers, a single Solitary Sandpiper and a Wilson's Snipe. 10 Tree Swallows flew over and we watched a Vulture roost which contained well over



a hundred Turkey Vultures and 25 Black Vultures. Passerines included 2 Couch's Kingbirds, Common Yellowthroat, Blue Gray Gnatcatcher; Orange-crowned Warbler and Northern Cardinal. We then spotted a superb Green Kingfisher perched over the water, waiting for an unsuspecting fish.



Green Kingfisher & Harris Hawk

The mosquitoes eventually got the better of us and with the temperatures soaring we decided to move onto the next site.

We drove along the highway 4 towards Boca Chica Beach. We saw more large flocks of Red-winged Blackbirds, Grackles and 3 Brown-headed Cowbirds. By the roadside we watched a Sharp-shinned Hawk eying up the blackbirds. Also along this road were plenty of Raptors with 2 White-tailed Kites, 2 Red-shouldered Hawks and lots of Harris Hawks perched on telegraph wires. We reached an area of extensive salt marsh where two Ospreys were perched and 5 Loggerhead Shrikes were dotted around the area with 4 American Kestrels. We then saw our first Chihuahuan Ravens with four flying close to the car. Further along the road we spotted a pair of Eastern Meadowlarks with one bird perched prominently on top of a nearby shrub. The Meadowlark was a gorgeous bird.



Eastern Meadowlark

Eventually we reached Boca Chica beach a vast area of sand and dunes which stretched as far as the eye could see. To our surprise we noted that there were lots of 4 wheeled drive

vehicles and R.V's on the beach. We weren't sure if we should risk the hire car on the beach but we threw caution to the wind and went for it; after all it wasn't our car! So we drove the hire car across the sand and followed the shore hoping to see some birds. It wasn't long before we came across lots of Dunlin and Sanderling. Also present were a single Grey Plover, 10 Willets and a Slavonian Grebe on the Sea. Numerous Ring - billed and Laughing Gulls were counted and four species of tern were seen - Sandwich, Royal, Caspian and Forsters and 10 Brown Pelicans. Iain went for a paddle at one point and added a "Sea" tick to his worldwide "Sea List".



Royal Tern

We left the beach and retraced our route back along the road until we came to the junction signposted for South Padre Island. When we reached South Padre we were surprised at how commercial it all was. A huge holiday resort greeted us as we left the mainland and headed off over a very long connecting bridge to the island itself. This long, narrow barrier island on the Gulf of Mexico is situated at the southern most tip of Texas and is famed for its All American conventions and more importantly RAILS. We were also aware that there was a Texas Twitch taking place on the island for a Snow Bunting. A mega rarity for Texas.

We headed straight for the Convention Centre and parked up. It was a glorious afternoon and there was a huge amount of birdlife in the area. We made our way towards the famous raised boardwalk hoping to catch up with some of the Rail species that are a speciality of this area. We had a slow walk above the reeds which had been badly damaged by the devastating hurricane which wiped out New Orleans. The storm had left hundreds of fish marooned and the smell was quite powerful as they rotted away in the heat. We scoured the reeds for the elusive Rails but alas only a single Clapper Rail was seen. The main highlights were the Water birds and Waders. Familiar birds such as Dunlin, Sanderling and Moorhen were complimented by a feast of goodies such as 2 Black-necked Stilts, 3 Stilt Sandpipers, 4 Dowitcher species (probably short billed), 4 Greater Yellowlegs, 4 Roseate Spoonbills, 16 Least Sandpipers, 7 Piping Plovers, 6 Semipalmated Plovers, 3 Snowy Plovers and a probable Pectoral Sandpiper. Duck species included 4 American Wigeon, Blue-winged and Green-winged Teals, 25 Pintail and 2 American Black Ducks. Egrets included 1 Little Blue Heron, 1 Snowy Egret, 2 Reddish Egrets and a cracking Tricolored Heron. Passerines noted in the reed beds were 10 Red-winged Blackbirds and 2 Common Yellowthroats and near to the convention centre a House Wren was observed. A Northern Harrier flew low across the

beach and got everything agitated. The Northern Harrier was an impressive bird, so very different from our own Hen Harrier. There were plenty of Gulls, Black Skimmers and Pelicans present.



Tri-colored & Little Blue Heron

It was getting late so we headed over to the east side of the island to check out the beach before heading to an area of mangroves. The Mangroves were fairly productive with 30 Kildeers present with numerous Snowy Egrets and a few Great Egrets. Two Ospreys were close by, but try as I might I couldn't persuade the lads to go for the Snow Bunting. I wonder as we begin to build our American lists whether or not we will come to regret not trying for it.

It was nearly dark so we decided to head back across the main Queen Isabella causeway bridge to the mainland where we parked up and had a fabulous Italian meal with fantastic portions of freshly caught scallops and a couple of pints in a local inn complete with a foot stomping country and western band.

#### Day 6 -New Years Eve

We were gradually nearing the end of our holiday and another early start was par for the course as we tried to cram in as much as we could in the remaining time allowed. First off we headed towards the La Joya track. We journeyed through quite a lot of early morning mist which delayed the birding upon arrival. However after a short while the sun tried its best to get up and very gradually set about burning off the mist. Once it begun to clear (it never quite did) the birds began to show and soon we were rewarded with lots of birds as we drove slowly up the track ticking off the species as we went with 11 Vesper & 3 Black-throated Sparrows, 9 Killdeer, 1 Male Northern Harrier, 1 Crested Caracara, 3 Long-billed Curlews, 3 Curve-billed Thrashers (New Bird), 4 Loggerhead Shrikes, 12 Northern Mockingbirds, 2 Great Kiskadees, 1 Orange-crowned Warbler, 2 Mourning & 3 Common Ground Doves, 7 Cardinals and best of all 5 Pyrrohxulia. The Pyrrohxulia were fantastic little birds and a welcome addition to the trip list. Driving back down the track we saw 11 unidentified sparrow species (damn fog) and a 1<sup>st</sup> winter male Lark Sparrow. Whilst watching the Lark Spuggy we saw a cracking Cactus Wren which showed for a short while before disappearing into the undergrowth.

We left La Joya and headed off towards the Chihuahuan Woods reserve. The reserve had a very impressive trail which led through a "forest" of Cactus; we soon connected with another little cracker in the shape of a Verdin and quickly saw another a short distance away. The woods were quite devoid of birds and the only other birds we saw during a long circular walk were Numerous Northern Mockingbirds, 2 Golden-fronted Woodpeckers and 3 Long-billed Thrashers.

Next on our frantic itinerary was the Bentsen World Birding Centre. We arrived fairly early in the afternoon and decided on a quick stop on the perimeter of the park as we were way too early for Nightjar target species. Around the perimeter were 4 Harris Hawks and 7 Kestrels. On a levy near to Bentsen were c200 Cattle Egrets and 3 Great Egrets. A quick conference saw us look at the guide book and we agreed to squeeze in another site before coming back later. We were soon driving back towards Alamo to our hastily arranged next site.

Next up was a visit to a private house at 750 West Sam Houston Boulevard. The owner was soon out to greet us and explained that the garden was open to visitors for a once only entrance fee of \$10 per person which allowed you to come and go as you pleased. It turned out to be money well spent as the garden was a little paradise. One of the first birds we spotted, as we were signing in, was an absolutely stunning Black-throated Green Warbler which was wintering in his garden, 2 White-eyed Vireos were quickly ticked followed by 2 Black-crowned Tufted titmice. Single Golden-fronted & Ladder-backed woodpecker were seen along with 2 Great Kiskadees, 2 Cardinals, 2 Orange-crowned Warblers, 2 Ruby-crowned Kinglets, 1 Long billed Thrasher and another stunning wood warbler this time a Yellow-throated Warbler.

The garden was home to at least three Buff-bellied Hummingbirds which put on a remarkable show for us. The 3 birds, each defended a nectar feeder and aggressively drove off the others by a emitting a series of loud ticks and a full on flight charge into each other. Oblivious to our presence we sat back and thoroughly enjoyed the spectacle in the afternoon sun.

After the exertions of the battle each bird would return to a feeder to enjoy a drink of sugared water.



Buff-bellied Hummingbird

Our host had informed us that his garden often had Whip Poor Wills roosting and careful scrutiny of the shrubbery may turn one or two up. Despite an extensive search we were unlucky and failed to uncover any birds. It was now getting close to 16.00pm and we decided to head back to Bentsen for the remainder of the afternoon. Nearing Bentsen a sugar beet harvest was underway in one of the fields and as the combines cleared the field in moved an army of Raptors to feast on small mammals in one field alone sat 20 White-tailed Hawks, 20 Turkey Vultures, 2 Crested Caracaras and a single Harris Hawk. 9 Cattle Egrets flew over the raptor fest.



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First stop at Bentsen was a visit to the well stocked visitor centre which was in the throws of closing. We quickly grabbed a couple of gifts and then made our way into the reserve. Our First birds were 8 Chacalacas and 8 Green Jays which were at a feeding station just inside the entrance. The Chacalacas were heard well before they were seen as they make an incredible racket. Next up were 1 Black-crowned Tufted Titmouse, 12 Great-tailed Grackles, 1 Great Kiskadee, 2 Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, 1 Ladder-backed Woodpecker and a gorgeous Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. A Nine banded Armadillo wandered across the path in front of us and nearby a Collared Peccary scavenged amongst the litter bins for a few morsels of grub.

We decided not to venture to far into the reserve as time was against us. We made our way back towards the entrance to scan an RV park situated close by. Here we had a stunning Male Vermillion Flycatcher and a couple of 'Hudsonian' Whimbrel flew over. As the light began to recede we headed back to the car to slowly drive the tracks looking for Nightjar species. As the car approached an area of heavily potholed road we surprised 2 Wilson Snipe which shot out of one of the potholes and flew away. We parked by a footbridge which spanned a levy and we had 6 probable Cave Swallows fly into roost under the bridge. It was too dark to positively identify them. 10 Killdeer were in a nearby field and close by was a Great Horned Owl loudly calling from the trees. Despite Tony Stews best efforts to try and lure the Owl out with a series of pitiful Tawny Owl calls the bird failed to show. At 18.30pm we had our first Common Pauraque and we notice that there were at least three or four hawking in the semi darkness. Further along the road Pauraque were roosting on the road. All told we saw about 10-15 birds.

New Years Eve in the town of Alamo was certainly different. We splashed out and got a twelve pack of Bud and had three bottles of Bud each!!!! We couldn't find a bar anywhere and it was quite a large town. The nearest restaurant was called Ann's and there was no way we were going there. Every night as we made our way home, we passed Ann's and it became something of a joke too us, as there was never anybody dining there - completely empty apart from the three waitresses. We were pleased about this as we imagined all sorts of things about the proprietor - Ann.

The town of Alamo is predominately Hispanic being close to the border with Mexico and that night every man and his dog went firework crazy. All along the main highways there are stalls selling all sorts of fireworks. This would never happen in the U.K as the Health and Safety Executive would never allow it. Most families brought in the New Year with a barbeque and then let their fireworks off in the street. Sadly for us we were close to a

family which probably bought their fireworks from the U.S version of "Everything's a Pound". They were rubbish, but we had a great laugh as each one ended in a damp squib and failed to sparkle.

### Day 7 - New Years Day 2007

The lack of a hangover was something of a novelty as we set out for day 7 and nearing the end of our holiday. First stop was the wonderful garden of 750 West Sam Houston Boulevard in Pharr. 8 Feral pigeons were amongst the many Grackles as the first birds of the day began to emerge. This was a pre breakfast outing and birds that were present this morning included Great Kiskadee, 2 Orange-crowned Warblers, 1 Golden-fronted Woodpecker, 1 Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, 1 Long-billed Thrasher, 1 Northern Mockingbird, 6 Starlings and a Ruby-crowned Kinglet. Surprisingly for us two Hummingbirds were also seen as it was quite cool. We saw the remains of a prey item in the garden which was a probable Woodpecker and we later saw the killer close by a superb Coopers Hawk which was posing in a nearby dead tree.

We then headed back to Alamo to grab a quick breakfast before heading out on route 281 to Progresso lakes. Along the road were 6 Kestrels, 1 White-tailed Kite, 1 Turkey Vulture, 8 Common Ground Doves and 10 Mourning Doves. Eventually we arrived at the lake which was situated in the middle of a private housing development. At first access to the water was difficult as we tried to find a path before trespassing over someone's property to get to the water. Viewing was still difficult but we did see lots of birds. A quick look at the map saw us jump back into the car and head round to the other side and ending up lost. Iain jumped out of the car and went to seek help from a local. The obliging man gave Iain the directions and before long we were off again with Iain as the navigator. Next stop the middle of a corn field, up to the windscreen in grass!

A mad dog went mental with us as we wound the windows up so it wouldn't climb in and try to eat us. Two Harris Hawks, 1 White-tailed Kite, 3 Yellow-rumped Warblers, 2 Golden-fronted and a Ladder-backed woodpecker were in the trees to the right of the field

Finally, after driving along a levy we managed to park up and scanned the entire lake. It was a remarkable sight that greeted us with an estimated 5 to 6 thousand Black-bellied Whistling Duck present. Also seen were 4 Adult Black-crowned Night Herons and a number of Juveniles together with 11 Yellow-crowned Night Herons again accompanied by Juveniles. 9 Anhinga were roosting in the trees with 8 Mourning Dove close by. On the water were 12 Ring-necked Ducks, 6 Gadwall, 2 Green-winged Teals, 2 Moorhens and a nearby Cormorant roost held 10 Neotropic and 14 Double crested. A Pied-billed Grebe put in an appearance, 2 Spotted Sandpipers fed on the mud and a Caspian Tern flew over the water. A fabulous White-tailed Kite which we believe to be the one seen earlier hovered just above us as it searched for food.



Black-bellied Whistling Duck, Yellow-crowned Night Heron, Pied billed Grebe

We left the lake and headed off towards the Progreso Bridge / Nuevo Progreso and the border crossing to Mexico. We were told that this was a great site for Bronzed Cowbirds and sure enough when we got there the Cowbirds were showing well. Indeed they scavenging scraps from the tourists in the main carpark and to think we thought they might be a tad difficult.



We decided to park up and headed across the border bridge into Mexico for a few beers. Birds added to our Mexican list as we crossed the Rio Grande were Feral Pigeon, House Sparrow, Great-tailed Grackle and Black Vulture. Below the bridge, on the Mexican side of the river poverty stricken children begged for money. If you are in the market for Viagra then this is the place to be. An amazing sight greeted us as we entered the town shop after shop selling Viagra, pills and elixirs of all descriptions, dentists and plastic surgeons plus the usual tacky gift shops

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Iain (bless him - I take it all back) had to drive all the way back to the hotel to collect my Green Card from the bedside table and some two and half hours later I was a free man.

We left Mexico behind and headed towards Estro Llandro World Birding Centre. Along the road to the centre we had 4 Kestrels, 2 White-tailed Kites, 1 Sharp-shinned Hawk and 2 Northern Mockingbirds. On reaching the centre we found that it was closed, due to the fact that the whole place was still under construction. Not to be undone we hopped over the fence and headed over to the lake side. The majority of the reserve resembled a ploughed field, but there were large areas of newly planted trees and the paths had been laid down. The lake looked as if it had been established for a long time and there was lots of bird life on and around the water. Birds included Black-necked Stilts, Shoveler, Tri-colored Heron, Great Egret and White-faced Ibis. We watched a Meadowlark species which showed characteristics of the Western race but our experience of the species was limited so we were unable to confirm its identity.

We moved off to the Edinburgh Scenic Wetland Centre, a 40-acre wetlands oasis in the midst of an urban landscape.

There were plenty of people at the wetlands enjoying a day out and there were lots of fab birds including numerous Neotropic & Double Crested Cormorants, Snowy Egrets, Great Egrets, 50 Pied-billed & 45 Least Grebe, 10 White Pelican, 8 Blue-winged Teal, 4 Moorhen, 5 American Coot, 7 Black-crowned Night Herons and 4 Great Blue Herons. Other birds observed were 3 Northern Mockingbirds, 1 Orange-crowned Warbler, 1 Green Kingfisher and a Juvenile Peregrine Falcon.

It was getting late in the day and we decided to head back to 750 West Sam Houston Boulevard. Travelling highway 281 we passed a school playing field with 7 Long-billed Curlews feeding on the playing fields.

We picked up no new birds during our last stop of the day at 750 W.S.H.B with only Buff-breasted Hummingbird, Long-billed Thrasher, Yellow-rumped & Orange-crowned Warbler, Northern Mockingbird and Great Kiskadees. We had a bit of a thrash around an adjacent field hoping to locate Owls but were out of luck.





Least Grebe

The last sight of the day was thousands of *Grackles* heading off to roost as we headed back to the Alamo to pack our bags, ready for an early start the next day back to Houston.

- Day 8 - The final day

We faced a long drive back to Houston this morning, so another early start was the order of the day. The journey was pretty uneventful for the first couple of hours with only *Grackles*, *Grackles* and *Grackles* being seen from the car with the odd Northern Mockingbird thrown in for good measure. Halfway up the road we pulled in for a refreshment break and to swap drivers. Back on the road Iain shouted out that he had seen an Owl perched on a fence, we slammed on the brakes and did an about turn and sped back up the road. Sure enough when we reached the approximate area there was a Barred Owl sunning itself on a five bar fence, we watched it for a while, as we frantically reached for the camera but sadly the bird became spooked and flew off.

Around the area of Lake Texana on Highway 59 we spotted thousands of Migrant Snow Geese and saw half a dozen probable American Crows but i.d could not be clinched due to the possibility of Fish Crow occurring in the area.

Eventually we reached Houston and said our goodbyes to Tony who was to undertake a rail journey through Middle America from Dallas to Chicago to visit his daughter.

An eventful and truly memorable trip was at an end.