

## Road Trip USA, Texas and New Mexico

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Travelling from December 2015 to January 2016 and traversing the vast state of Texas and its neighbouring New Mexico, this three-week epic covered over 7900 km and included some of the most iconic winter birding localities on the North American continent. Plenty of adventure along the way, not least with temperatures hitting 29 C in the Big Bend of southern Texas, before then plummeting as I arrived in New Mexico simultaneously with Winter Storm Goliath, this resulting in raging blizzards, temperatures down to -10 C, waist-depth snow and hundreds of miles of closed roads.

With a route beginning on the Texas coast and thereafter following the Rio Grande all the way from the Gulf of Mexico to Albuquerque in New Mexico, the trip covered virtually every conceivable type of habitat from extensive wetlands and subtropical thicket in the south to arid desert and mountains in the interior, thereafter concluding with snow-decked forests in central New Mexico. This superb range of habitats also contributed to the very high species total on the trip, an impressive 279 species of birds noted during the three weeks, a total higher than on any of my previous dozen trips to North America. Not a bad selection of mammals seen too, some of the highlights being a mamma Black Bear with cubs, a pair of Bobcats, a couple of Virginia Opossums and multiple Coyotes.

In short, the itinerary included the following: 1. Texas Coast (Aransas NWR, Rockport, Port Aransas, Laguna Atascosa)2. Lower Rio Grande Valley (South Padre, Estero Llano, Frontera Audubon, Santa Ana, Anzalduas)3. Upper Rio Grande Valley & Big Bend (Salineno, Falcon Dam, Del Rio, Big Bend, Fort Davis, McNary)4. Central New Mexico (Bosque del Apache, Bernardo WMA)5. Albuquerque and Sandia Crest (Sandia Crest, Three Gun Spring, Rio Grande Nature Centre)6. Houston (Prairie Chicken NWR, W. G. Jones State Forest) DAILY LOG

14 December. Transit. Flight from Paris, arrival in Houston late afternoon. Massive queues at immigration, arsehole at car rental company who tried to downgrade my pre-paid rental. Two hours on, I finally hit the road for the three-hour drive to Rockport, base for the next few days. Dark for most of the drive, a Virginia Opossum the only critter of note, a single individual by the roadside somewhere near the journey's end.

15 December. Aransas NWR, Goose Island & Port Aransas. Aransas National Wildlife Reserve, 22,000 hectares of coastal wetland, key wintering ground for the world's entire population of Whooping Cranes. From a fragile low of just 18 birds in 1938, the global population currently stands at about 300 birds, almost all of which alternate between Aransas and their summer home 3650 km north in Canada's Wood Buffalo National Park. Rising an hour before dawn, I was trundling down the access road just as the sun broke the horizon, a bunch of Wild Turkeys strutting across the verge, Ospreys perched on roadside posts and Northern Mockingbirds adorning virtually every other bush. A Raccoon watching me from a grassy patch was a nice start, Sora Rail, Green Heron and Tricoloured Heron following soon after, along with flights of both Brown and American White Pelicans and oodles of noisy Great-tailed Grackles and Red-winged Blackbirds. Also numerous Yellow-rumped Warblers, quite a few Eastern Phoebes and one Belted Kingfisher. Taking the small Heron Flats Trail, the birding got even better &ndash; my first-ever Pyrrhuloxia in bushes near the start, then as the trail followed the edge of San Antonio Bay, a rich assortment of waterbirds &ndash; amongst many Great Blue Herons and Great Egrets, a dotting of other allies, Reddish Egret included, so too a dozen Roseate Spoonbills. On the marsh just ahead however, two stately white figures graced a small tussock of an island, preening in the early morning sunshine. I continued along the path and soon was adjacent, a pair of Whooping Cranes in all their glory. With a bit of yodelling and courtship thrown in, this was a very nice experience indeed. Pied-billed Grebes floated on a pool to my rear, a Common Yellowthroat peered and scolded from deep sedges. Out in the bay, lines of duck sat on the still waters, hundreds of Redhead and Lesser Scaup accounting for the bulk, but adding variety a few Greater Scaup, Red-breasted Mergansers and Buffleheads too, plus Northern Pintails and Gadwalls. Also quite a few Eared Grebes, at least three Horned Grebes and a lots of Double-crested Cormorants. Brown Pelicans floated amongst. Thereafter however, Aransas was a little of a disappointment &ndash; somewhere in my mind, I had imagined it was one vast area of wetlands teeming with waterfowl and wintering waders. The non-accessible parts are surely this, but the main 16 mile auto loop cuts through rather dry scrub savannah, not very productive on my visit &ndash; abundant American Kestrels, two-a-penny Northern Mockingbirds and, the highlight, a couple of White-tailed Hawks. Also Feral Hogs and White-tailed Deers, no Armadillos or Collared Peccaries unfortunately. Still, a stop at large observation tower midway round was fun, hordes of Black and Turkey Vultures using it as a convenient roost, and none-too-keen to vacate it as I arrived, then splendid views across extensive marshes from the top. Several distant Whooping Cranes visible here, so too assorted herons and egrets and, very much closer, stunning eye-to-eyes with fly-by Crested Caracaras and Northern Harriers.

Leaving Aransas, a stop near the visitor centre adding Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and Couch's Kingbird. Almost back in Rockport, my next stop was at Goose Island State Park. This was quite a strange place. Basically set over to fishermen with campsites dotted around and fishing piers jutting out into the bay, it was nevertheless quite good for birds &ndash; 40 or so White Pelicans clamored around a fish-gutting dock waiting for titbits, while nearby sandspits harbored my first gull and wader roosts of the trip. In a big gaggle, nine species of wader, including American Avocet and American Oystercatcher, and six species of gull and tern, a tight flock of about 40 Black Skimmer accompanying them. Also more Redhead and Lesser Scaup here, plus a couple of Common Loons and a few Neotropical Cormorants amongst the Double-crested Cormorants. The highlight here though was the accidental finding of a field of rough pasture some distance to the south &ndash; not overly impressed with the waterfront, I drove further around the coast towards the 'Big Tree', a historic oak reportedly over a thousand years old. Just before this, I came across the field &ndash; with a pool at its centre and to the echo of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks flying in and out, the field alive with birds. Masses of Red-winged Blackbirds wheeled around, a few Cattle Egrets and White Ibises stalked across the grass and, most majestic, a

couple of dozen Sandhill Cranes were dotted across the vista with two splendid Whooping Cranes at their heart. I had originally planned to spend the entire day at Aransas, but finding myself with time still to spare, I decided to explore a little to the south, concluding this first day on the Texas coast at Port Aransas. Accessed by ferry, there are two main areas of interest here – the excellent Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Centre and the port Aransas Jetties. Only had a brief look at both, but at the first of these a short boardwalk led through a freshwater marsh giving stunning views of a large Alligator at a range of about 50 cm! At not much greater range, also Great Blue Heron, Tricoloured Heron, Great Egret and Pied-billed Grebe. Blue-grey Gnatcatcher in the car park, Common Yellowthroat in the marsh, Belted Kingfisher in a small channel, Yellow-rumped Warblers in bushes. The Port Aransas Jetties, jutting out far into the Gulf of Mexico, were a fine place to end the day. A beach full of assorted gulls, terns and pelicans made a nice sunset, Bottlenosed Dolphins cruised alongside the jetties and Ospreys drifted around overhead.

And so it was, the first day of the trip over, close to 100 species notched up, I would return to the Port Aransas Jetties next day, but for now it was back to Rockport. 16 December. Goose Island, Rockport & Port Aransas. A brisk wind throughout the day, dashing any chances of the likes of Sedge Wren and Seaside Sparrow, etc. Started the day again aside the 'Big Tree' pasture on Goose Island, the spectacle even better than the day before - a feeding operation was clearly operating in an adjacent field with both the Whooping Cranes and many hundreds of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks crowding in to gobble the offerings, other ducks also. Constant overhead noise as the ducks and occasional Sandhill Cranes flew back and fro, most eventually ending up by the pool in the pasture. Killdeer in the field too, plus a Cooper's Hawk through, big flocks of Red-winged Blackbirds and a stunning Vermillion Flycatcher, a male in full vivid red. For showtime finale, the Whooping Cranes did a little yodelling, then took to the air and flew directly overhead, landing in the pasture adjacent, a little more display to conclude. In increasing winds, I then backtracked and began to explore the western fringes of the Rockport peninsula, a series of bays and lakeside edges offering much potential but little actual result. Wrens and sparrows were the targets, but they clearly had no wish to show their heads in such conditions - I drew an absolute blank! I did fortunately bump into my first Eastern Bluebirds and Loggerhead Shrikes of the trip, along with several Eastern Phoebes, a few Eastern Meadowlarks and another Vermilion Flycatcher. The highlight of this segment however was a small pool aside road 1781 that was absolutely crammed with birds - plenty of diving and dabbling ducks, three Belted Kingfishers, five fantastic Least Grebes (a new species for me, more common in the lower Rio Grande Valley), a single Glossy Ibis and, best of all, concealed amongst a gaggle of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, a single Fulvous Whistling Duck, the only one I would see on the whole trip.

Due to the wind, I gave up on ideas to explore marshlands further along the bay and instead decided to return to Port Aransas, a good idea it turned out. At the Port Aransas Nature Preserve, a boardwalk across salt flats and intertidal shallows was nice - Roseate Spoonbills, assorted herons, waders including Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Willets, Black-bellied and Semi-palmated Plovers, Dunlins and Least Sandpipers, etc, plus raptors such as Northern Harrier, Crested Caracara and White-tailed Hawk. Also a frustratingly brief couple of sparrows that were presumably Seaside Sparrows. By mid-afternoon, the winds were finally abating, the day now warm and sunny and just perfect for a walk along the jetties that jut out into the sea. Truly a remarkable abundance of birds at close range - hundreds of Brown Pelicans cruising past barely beyond arm's reach, Forster's Terns in flickering flocks, Snowy Egrets and Great Blue Herons stalking fishermen for titbits, hordes of Laughing Gulls, other species present too, plus near constant Bottlenosed Dolphins cruising the shipping channel adjacent to the jetties, plentiful turtles also. Alongside, a flock of about 25 Black Skimmers were roosting on the beach, overhead a couple of Ospreys mingled with numerous Turkey Vultures. As the sun dropped, I returned to Rockport, the ferry trip back from Port Aransas marked by hundreds of Double-crested Cormorants roosting on jetty pilings and a vast flock of White Pelicans circling high above, Brown Pelicans in the sunset.

17 December. Aransas Boat trip & Highway 77 South. My final day in the Rockport area, marked by a great morning out on Skimmer for a birding trip out to the marshes and bays of Aransas NWR. Darn cold at 7.00 a.m, especially as we began motoring out across Aransas Bay, several Common Loons en route, so too Lesser Scaups and Buffleheads, one Parasitic Jaeger an unexpected bonus. Great skipper on board, top notch at picking up birds, so too plentiful coffee and hot chocolate, quite welcome as the that nippy chill brought water to the eyes. Fortunately as we neared Aransas NWR, the speed was cut and as we gently chugged into channels and bays, the cold seemed to evaporate, the birding immediately went up and the next couple of hours were quite glorious - ahead we could already see a pair of Whooping Cranes on the marsh, but even before arriving, we were in the midst of numerous birds - Great Blue Herons everywhere, several close-range Reddish Egrets, abundant Tricoloured and Little Blue Herons, one juvenile Black-crowned Night Heron and much more. Also a large flock of Hooded Mergansers on a single pool, five Sandhill Cranes flying over and several Belted Kingfishers. Eventually we drew level with the Whooping Cranes, a pair feeding quite sedately. So there we stayed a while, Whooping Cranes in the sunshine a mere eighty metres or so distant, a Northern Harrier drifting over them, White-tailed Kites more distant.

Continuing along this channel, yet more Whooping Cranes were encountered, mostly more distant, but by the morning's end we had seen about thirty of these superb birds, including both territorial pairs and small flocks of presumed adolescents. Quite impressive indeed, as were the amazing quantities of Ospreys ...dotting virtually every other post or buoy, dozens of them were seen, many chomping into a breakfast of a healthy-sized fish. Also chugged past sand islands populated by mixed flocks of Double-crested and Neotropic Cormorants and visited small mangrove island used

by numerous Great Blue Herons. With a final detour via a small bay cluttered with 50 or so White Ibises, a few American Oystercatchers and three Roseate Spoonbills, it was then back to Rockport and the end of this first segment of my trip. Nipping back to the hotel and collecting my bags, I was now shifting to the Lower Rio Grande Valley, a drive of just a few hours, but in terms of birds, a world away - I was about to enter the realm of the Green Jays and Plain Chachalacas, a U.S. border zone where a whole bunch of semi-tropical species maintain a finger hold in this most southerly point of Texas.

To get there, I had to first navigate a major road accident near Corpus Christi which closed the Interstate, then travel down Highway-77, a road fringed by numerous small pools and endless thicket. Raptor delights, dozens and dozens of American Kestrels along the entire route, Crested Caracaras common, Harris's Hawks becoming so, several Northern Harriers, three White-tailed Hawks. Also waterfowl common on many small pools, a pair of Least Grebes amongst them, so too a flock of about 250 Snow Geese at one location (along with 30 Greater White-fronted Geese). Stopping at a picnic site some six miles south of Sarita, provision of food had impressive results ...an immediate swamping by countless Brewer's Blackbirds and lesser numbers of Brown-headed Cowbirds, then a flash of colour and my first Green Jays sitting on the grass in all their fluorescent glory! Not bad for a highway picnic area, Great Kiskadees and Golden-fronted Woodpeckers also added to the fun, both species also specialities of the lower Rio Grande. A few miles further, as I entered a land of vast flat agricultural plain, three birds flying in to land behind a tractor proved to be another top-notch species - a regular wintering species in south Texas, but rarely at any particular location, the birds were Mountain Plovers, a bird I have looked for several times before in the U.S. Predictably, this journey ended up taking rather more time than I had planned, especially when I decided to detour to have a quick skirt through the Laguna Atacosa area - I quite fancied a Aplomado Falcon for my effort, but my luck didn't quite go that far. It did however extend to my first Coyote of the trip, a Couch's Kingbird and, at the feeders at the Laguna Atascosa visitor centre, a covey of Northern Bobwhites, plus a real flurry of action with at least 20 Green Jays, a Long-billed Thrasher, a couple of Great Kiskadees and several Golden-fronted Woodpeckers.

Nilgai, Coypu, Fox Squirrel and Feral Hog added to the mammal list, then as dusk approached crossed the two-mile road bridge to South Padre Island, settling into a hotel for the next few days. 18 December. Estero Llano Grande State Park. What an incredible place, a moderately small chunk of wetland and native woodland in an otherwise expansive area of agriculture, but absolutely crawling with all the specialities of the lower Rio Grande. Within moments of arriving, I was surrounded by a dizzying array of species, quite a number of new ones for me too - feeders around the visitor centre were absolutely choc a bloc, the lake out front also full of superb birds. A Buff-bellied Hummingbird sipping at nectar feeders, one Ruby-throated Hummingbird too, Great Kiskadees dodging hundreds of Red-winged Blackbirds hogging feeders out on the lawn, a dozen or so Green Jays adorning yet more feeds in shrubbery. Settling down on conveniently placed benches, soon yet more new birds were appearing ...both Long-billed and Curve-billed Thrashers, my first Clay-colored Thrushes of the day, a couple of Black-crested Titmice and, piece de la resistance, a superb male Altamira Oriole. Also White-tipped Doves, Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, Great Kiskadee and plenty of regulars such as Northern Cardinals, Great-tailed Grackles and Northern Mockingbirds ...along with quadrillion House Sparrows. My ABA area list was soaring, these mere feeders had already given me six new species! Having also enjoyed the Least Grebes and Cinnamon Teals drifting amongst the abundant water birds on the adjacent lake, I then decided it was time to explore further ...there were two species in particular that I wanted to find at Estero Llano and both were most likely on the far side of the reserve, one in a patch of woodland, the other along the levee that marks the southern boundary. I checked in with the reserve centre and got directions for the first ..."half way down this trail, a pile of sticks midway between two these two points, be careful not to tread on the bird". Off I went, a Sora Rail on route, so too White-eyed Vireo and Tropical Kingbird. I got to the allotted spot, a bunch of Yellow-crowned Night Herons roosting in trees adjacent, then began to squint amongst the fallen leaves and twigs. Less than a metre before my eyes, a mosaic of dried leaves evolved, a cryptic shape materialized and crystallized, there the bird was - in an act of a superb camouflage, a Common Pauraque roosting on the ground, sticking out like a sore thumb now seen, yet effectively invisible seconds earlier. What I didn't know at that moment was that there were actually two more roosting in plain view even closer! These two came with a bit of a shock .... crouching down by the side of the path to photograph the first, I almost fell over backwards as I suddenly noticed first one almost under my nose, then another amongst branches alongside! Twenty or so metres along the same trail, yet more delights as I encountered another of the Estero Llano regulars - a faithful Eastern Screech Owl squashed into the entrance hole of a nestbox. This bird is a bit of a lottery ...most often he is tucked up inside the box, but sometimes he sits looking out. I got lucky! More luck to follow ...after a couple of Anhingas stretching their wings, a pod of Common Ground-Doves fluttering up from a path, two Pyrrhuloxias and two unexpected Painted Buntings in scrubby grass, I ventured up onto the levee to search out my main target. The bird in question was Groove-billed Ani, a prehistoric-looking bird that is that quite common in summer in this southernmost edge of Texas, but decidedly rare in winter. Fortunately, over the previous month or so, several records had originated from this particular levee and, with the weather most splendid (sunny, no wind, 22 C), conditions seemed optimal. One Green Kingfisher on a stalk overlooking a small inlet, 25 American Avocets on the river, Harris Hawk and White-tailed Kites taking to the air, along with several hundred Turkey Vultures and a few Black Vultures. No immediate sign of a Groove-billed Ani, so I sat myself down on the top of the levee to watch the thick hedges, a favoured spot for the birds. Quite a wonderful place with Lincoln's and Savannah Sparrows flitting about in the grass and Tree Swallows hawking above, a quick scan of which quickly produced five Cave Swallows, another south Texas speciality. What I was not expecting however was what I saw next! Emerging from thickets a little way along the levee, two resplendent Bobcats out for a stroll in the morning sunshine! Paying little heed to me, the pair sauntered along the base of the levee for several hundred metres, pausing to sniff here and there, stopping to sit and gaze on occasion. An Eastern Cottontail came darting out, the cats barely gave it a glance.

Eventually they halted their progress, sat on a mound for a while, then cut into the thicket, show over. Five minutes later, a single Bobcat emerged for the bushes further along ...a third individual I believe. Well that was good! And as if to put the icing on the cake, I then spotted a gang of black long-tailed birds flying low into long grass at the rear of the hedge line. Hmm, pretty sure I knew what they were! Not many minutes later, I was happily watching a family party of Groove-billed Ani, cracking birds indeed! Five in all, they spent quite a while clambering around, alternating between the hedge and long grass, generally giving excellent views. Via assorted pools, I then wandered back towards the visitor centre, birds on route including Green Heron, White-faced Ibis, a very confiding Sora Rail and a Vermillion Flycatcher. Back at the visitor centre, still Altamira Orioles were dropping down onto fruit and quite a mix of Great Kiskadees and Clay-colored Thrushes squabbled at a water trough. In the nearby caravan park, nine Plain Chachalacas flopped about in a fruiting tree, another somewhat prehistoric-looking bird. Unfortunately, I failed to find a Tropical Parula that was lurking in this area, encountering only Orange-crowned Warblers & Blue-grey Gnatcatchers. Estero Llande had impressed me, a truly stunning reserve, but now I had a little mission - to twitch a major U.S. rarity a few miles to the west. Early winter 2015 had seen a mini influx of Northern Jacanas into to the lower Rio Grande valley and adjacent areas. Departing Europe, I had hoped to see a long-staying individual at Choke Canyon, but unfortunately this bird disappeared the day before I arrived in Texas. Luckily however, a second individual turned up at Santa Ana the following day, so here I was, a week later, driving the mere 20 minutes to reach this excellent reserve. Didn't have a lot of time here, but the Northern Jacana proved most cooperative, padding across lily pads on one of the reserve's many pools, flashing the florescent yellow wing patches as it flew briefly from one patch of lilies to the next. Pied-billed and Least Grebes a backdrop, one Northern Harrier drifting over, six Olive Sparrows scrubbing about in undergrowth nearby. With a quick skirt around a few trails, Green Jays, Green Kingfisher, White-tipped Doves, Long-billed Thrashers and White-eyed Vireos added, this was a splendid end to the day - I drove back to South Padre Island, cruising the highway most content. 19 December. Laguna Atacosa & Brownsville. With desires on Aplomado Falcon, today saw me a returning to Laguna Atacosa. The best area for the falcons are the grassland plains at the heart of the 15-mile auto-route, a nesting platform half way round one of the very best spots. Unfortunately for wannabe falcon-spotters, the auto-route is currently closed to vehicular traffic to protect the critically-endangered Ocelots that also reside here - the U.S. population of Ocelots stands at something like 60 individuals, approximately a quarter of which are at Laguna Atacosa. As a result of two being killed by cars on the auto-route, the authorities had little option but to close the auto-route until they devised measures to halt these unacceptable losses. Avoiding key Ocelot areas and having built-in underpasses, a new auto-route is expected to open in the next year, but until then it is bicycles only or a twice-daily three-hour 'toy train' tour. Not having a bicycle, I opted for the latter, the scheduled denture being 9.30 a.m. Till then, the very active feeders kept me more than occupied - hordes of Green Jays heading the east, probably more than 35 in all, plus Plain Chachalacas making a right din and many other specialities of the area present too, Olive Sparrows, Golden-fronted Woodpeckers and Long-billed Thrashers included. Also several Brown Rats, a couple of Eastern Cottontails and, just up the road, a family party of five Coyotes. At the appointed 9.30 a.m., off we chugged, the official toy train tour now underway. Actually, it was not so bad &ndash; in reality termed the 'Habitat Tour', rather than toy train tour, it is an open-sided tram-type thing that meanders at a very sedate pace through the 15 miles of varied habitats along the Bayside Drive. A guide points out bits and bobs (though was not very good at birds!) and the tour stops at various points, though obviously doesn't give the opportunity for random stopping wherever you fancy. Passing through grassland and bushes near the beginning, a covey of Northern Bobwhites went skittered off from the side of the track, while Crested Caracaras and White-tailed Kites decorated many a bush top and distant pools supported numerous waterfowl, Redhead particularly abundant. Later, stopped at Laguna Madre, Ospreys, White Pelicans and assorted waders and herons prominent, but not Aplomado Falcon unfortunately. On we chugged, mostly through thicket scrub (preferred habitat for Ocelots, but not amazing for birds), then almost two-thirds the way round, we finally reached the point of my main interest &ndash; the platform favoured by Aplomado Falcons, both for breeding and roosting. No birds present! Darn, my whole rationale for being on the toy train had come to zilch! I decided to abandon the tour and walk the rest of the way back, the hope being one of the falcons would come zipping across. Well, it didn't happen. Still, I notched up two Merlins, quite a few Northern Harriers, several White-tailed Hawks, a couple of Harris Hawks, a bunch of Crested Caracaras and one Cooper's Hawk, so not all was lost. Also one Nilgai, one Coyote, a pair of Least Grebes with a chick and several fly-over Sandhill Cranes. It was a long hot walk however, temperatures now around 24 C. Back at the main part of the reserve, I took one final walk where I was very impressed to find an Alligator nest ...no mama in sight, but a good dozen and a half little beady-eyed Alligators tucked up in a tight clump, snapping at flies and generally looking fairly cute. It was a cautious move to take a few photographs, where was that mama?! Mid-afternoon, I departed Laguna Atacosa, no new birds this day I mused. Might as well end it by a tour of downtown Brownsville I thought, ideas of parrots being the attractant. Several of the urban areas in the lower Rio Grande valley support parrot populations, but none more than Brownsville, the city especially famous for the winter roosts of Green Parakeets and Red-crowned Parrots, though strangely they do not mix and the best areas for each are in quite distinctly different districts. The Green Parakeets were supposed to be a doddle to see, roll up at the favoured roost site, wait until an hour or so before dark, then savour the birds as they fly in. Then, with plenty of time to spare, nip across town to search for the Red-crowned Parrots as they fly in at dusk. Ah, an easy plan ...and of course subject to failure! Got to the allotted vantage point for the parakeets, mere paces from the Mexican border, and waited. On a small lake, eighty of so Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks hogged an island, a few Neotropic Cormorants and feral-type Muscovy Ducks present too, in palms that fringed this lake the parakeets should arrive. As time wore on, I began to doubt they would arrive ...a lone Vermillion Flycatcher occupied the palms, not squawking parakeets of any kind. Eventually I bottled, stay any longer at this site and I would be too late to have any hope of the Red-crowned Parrots across town. So off I went, winding the windows down as I departed just in case any wayward parrot decided to squawk as I departed. Then it all went surreal &ndash; several blocks from the lake, distinctive raucous squawks drifted across rooftops, the birds were

somewhere nearby! Took a few side streets, then suddenly there they were, a mass of about 300 Green Parakeets in tight formation briefly touching down on electric lines before rising and sailing off over yet more roof tops. The next five minutes felt like Starsky and Hutch chase as I zoomed round the blocks trying to keep up with them! Then down into a garden they went, one more quick maneuver from me and I was parked right next to them ...stuffing their faces in a fruiting tree in someone's garden, super. A Hispanic gentleman strolled out from his house and joined me to admire the birds ...'\$1 a bird if you can get them over to Mexico', he smiled. So, parrot number one under the belt, it was now getting late, so I zoomed off to try and find the next batch. And almost an exact repeat of events occurred &ndash; as I was nearing the best area, a mass flock of them flew over, me needing to keep one eye on the sky and one on the road as I desperately tried to keep up. Lost them for some moments, then heard the squawks again, reconnected and followed them all the way to roost &ndash; 220 Red-crowned Parrots cramming into a few compact trees, feeding on small fruit, spitting out pips. I had not expected much thrill from the parrots, but these turned out to be most rewarding. Minutes later. The sun dipped beneath the horizon, another day over. 20 December. Anzalduas Country Park. The lower Rio Grande valley is brimming with simply dozens of top rate birding localities - amongst the best that I didn't visit being Sabal Palm and Bentson-Rio Grande. I did however visit Anzalduas Country Park, a small recreational park in a loop of the Rio Grande that at first glance might seem a shadow of some of these other localities. Prime reasons for me visiting were that the site was holding a Greater Pewee at the time of my visit, a Texas rarity, and that Zone-tailed Hawks were being reported with some regularity. So it was, a little before dawn, I departed South Padre for the 50 mile cruise along Highway 101 and Interstate 50 to reach the site, one abrupt stop on the former producing a Ringed Kingfisher on wires peering down into a roadside pool. A site that sometimes attracts Short-eared Owls, I began the morning by exploring a levee along the Rio Grande about half a mile before Anzalduas. No owls on this day, but quite splendid all the same - sprawling across a small field and adjacent hedge, no less than 50 Black Vultures and 25 Crested Caracaras at roost, most simply sitting on the ground. Also one Northern Harrier, a couple of White-tailed Kites, a half dozen American Kestrels and, powering across the sky, one adult Peregrine. Also a Coyote here. Moving across to Anzalduas itself, flocks of Western Meadowlarks were immediately apparent in a riverside field and a mixed bunch of Lark Sparrows, Chipping Sparrows and Savannah Sparrows fed on lawns dedicated to picnic areas, 14 Eastern Bluebirds also in the same area. Parking at the main boat quay, Mexico a mere stone's throw across the water, my second Ringed Kingfisher of the day sat on a tree stump mid-channel, while Spotted Sandpiper, Osprey and Caspian Tern were also noted. One Canvasback, my only one of the whole trip, associated with about 80 Lesser Scaup. My main target for the day, the Greater Pewee, should have been an easy enough bird to find - a large flycatcher tending to perch on open exposed snags, favoring a relatively limited area of the picnic grounds. Hmm, perhaps it was asleep, but I zigzagged around the relevant area, and most of the rest of Anzalduas, for a good couple of hours without a slightest glimpse of the bird!

Several Green Jays present, three Eastern Phoebes, even a couple of Black Phoebes near the river, but not a Greater Pewee anywhere. American White Pelicans and Double-crested Cormorants flew up the valley, a few Tree Swallows skimmed over the river, one Couch's Kingbird and one Great Kiskadee added to the day list. Then, after a pause for coffee and now mid-morning, I took another walk around the favored area ...and there, as prominent as could be, the Greater Pewee atop a dead branch poking up from one of the big trees! And there it stayed for the duration of my visit, flying sorties to catch flies, returning to the same or other equally obvious vantage points. I really couldn't imagine where the bird had been earlier - perhaps a quick trip over to Mexico or maybe Greater Pewees really are late risers! Anyhow, with success on the main bird, I then turned my attention to the rising thermals just to the west ...huge kettles of Turkey Vultures were rising out of riverside woodland, perhaps a few things in their midst? Settling down on a sunny bank, I began to scan ...some hundreds of Turkey Vultures - almost too many, virtually every bird, distant dot or close thing lumbering, turned out to be one. But not quite all ...quickly picked up a couple of Red-tailed Hawks, then considerably later, first an immature Grey Hawk, then an adult Zone-tailed Hawk. Success! On route back, a small detour to the Hidalgo pumphouse successfully added the third member of Psittacidae family to the trip list - Monk Parakeets at the junctions of East Gardenia and 5th Street, several pairs actively nest-building on electricity posts. Also saw several House Finches here, my first of the trip. With that, I returned to the coast for a change of scene, deciding to spend the rest of the day on the beaches and mudflats of South Padre Island. Took me a few tries to find a really good area, randomly turning towards Laguna Madre at various points. Osprey, Roseate Spoonbill, Reddish Egret and Black Skimmer along the way, then I stumbled across what I was looking for - a couple of small bays, the low tide exposing flats of mud quite full of roosting waders. A couple of hundred waders in the first, Snowy Plovers, Semipalmated Plovers, Least Sandpipers, Dunlins and Sanderling making up the bulk, but in the second bay, though total wader numbers were lower, the prize was awaiting ...one most quaint Piping Plover, a sparse breeder along this coast. Also in these bays, a few Western Sandpipers, a bunch of Black-bellied Plovers, both Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, a whole load of Ruddy Turnstones and several Long-billed Curlews. 21 December. Salineno & Falcon Dam. I had been in the lower Rio Grande for just three days, a pretty incredible three days that had added 27 birds to my ABA list, rather more than I had expected. Now however was time to move - my next planned destination was the legendary Big Bend National Park, a drive of 1050 km to the west. I had initially planned to do this jump in a single overnight haul, but eventually modified my plans to do it over two days with prolonged stops at Salineno, Falcon Dam and Amistad Reservoir. Famed for its feeders, Salineno is basically a nondescript patch of scrub tucked up against the Mexican border. Here, some years back, a couple established feeders that soon became a magnet for birders across the U.S. Attracting not only the typical specialities of the Rio Grande, the site also hosted up to three species of oriole and, more importantly, Brown Jays - the last ever locality to hold them in the United States. Unfortunately, the range of Brown Jays has continued to contract and, as of 2010, the species no longer occurs at Salineno, thereby becoming extinct in the U.S. Fortunately, other than the Brown Jays, the feeders still attract many other birds. To an unexpected overcast sky, I arrived at Salineno about an hour after dawn, first exploring the banks of the Rio Grande - no wintering Red-billed Pigeons this year, but a good medley of

riverine birds including Ringed Kingfishers, Neotropic Cormorants, Pied-billed Grebes and Spotted Sandpipers, plus Black-crested Titmice and Blue-grey Gnatcatchers in the scrub. Just up the slope, the feeders were a treat indeed - loads of action at a dozen or more feeders: Green Jays and Great Kiskadees a couple of dozen apiece, 60 plus Red-winged Blackbirds, several Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, a handful of Black-crested Titmice, White-tipped Doves and White-winged Doves both plodding the ground, plus occasional Long-billed Thrashers, Olive Sparrows and Orange-crowned Warblers. House Sparrows and Great-tailed Grackles both abundant. The undoubted stars of the site though are the orioles - Altamira, Audubon's and Hooded all possible during the winter. With at least six present, Altamira Orioles were very easy to see, almost non-stop feeding on the citrus fruit. The other two were more problematic - Hooded was basically not present, while a pair of Audubon's were visiting two or three times a day, though generally elusive. So, I sat back to wait, the bustle of the feeders quite a pleasure, a Sharp-shinned Hawk emptying the site on a couple of occasions as it came hurtling through, overhead Crested Caracaras having no such impact. After an hour or so, with no joy on the alternative orioles, I decided to have another look along the river, maybe I could find one of the orioles there. And that is exactly what I did - a quarter hour on, I found a male Audubon's Oriole feeding in a big riverside willow. The bird however was moving fairly fast ...directly towards the feeders! I doubled back and plonked myself on one of the chairs at the feeders just in time for the bird to arrive, a nice double act of one male Audubon's Oriole feeding to my immediate right, one male Altamira Oriole feeding to the immediate left! Next stop, just a handful of miles further, Falcon Dam. No real targets here, just a stroll around the arid hillsides abutting the large reservoir. One very photogenic Greater Roadrunner on arrival, one skittish covey of Northern Bobwhites also. I parked in the picnic area and then walked a trail that looped round the slopes ...a typical bunch of species seen, Harris Hawk, Inca Dove and Eastern Bluebird included, also Bewick's Wren and a nice flock of mixed sparrows - five species at least, Savannah Sparrows most, but Cassin's, Chipping, Vesper and Lincoln's Sparrows all also present. Also found my only snake of the trip - a long black Indigo Snake that slithered into a hole - and, almost back where I had left the car, a rather nice pack of 12 Collared Peccaries. One Black-tailed Jack Rabbit too. Thereafter it was a long drive westbound, a brief stop at a pool in Zapata failing to produce hoped-for White-collared Seedeaters (but resulting in a Green Kingfisher). As dusk fell, approaching the city of Del Rio, the ghostly shapes of two Great Horned Owls appeared on roadside posts, the birds dueting to each other. Checked into a hotel in Del Rio, the large Amistad Reservoir nearby for morning exploration. 22 December. Amistad Reservoir & Big Bend National Park. Started the morning on the arid shores of Amistad Reservoir. Having left the lower Rio Grande, it was a far more desert mix of species here, smart Black-throated Sparrows becoming common, super stunning Cactus Wrens poking about in succulents, the first Chihuahuan Ravens flying over. Adjacent to a small campsite, one particular patch of thick scrub proved most productive - amongst small flocks of Savannah and Black-throated Sparrows, a little group of Black-tailed Gnatcatchers were buzzing about, a couple of Ladder-backed Woodpeckers also and two Pyrrhuloxias. Also several Cactus Wrens popping up and down, bunches of Western Meadowlarks, a few Eastern Phoebes and one Loggerhead Shrike. With relatively limited time, I didn't pay a lot of attention to the actual lake - other than to note that several bays off Highway 277 were crammed with American Coots and assorted ducks and, rather more impressive, a bay near the main dam on Highway 90 held a Pacific Loon, a vagrant species in Texas. Belted Kingfisher, Eared Grebe and Pied-billed Grebe here too. With that, it was back to the road, 420 km still to go, desert landscapes rolling by as the kilometres and hours passed, relatively few birds in the arid lands, no significant stops. Encountered a herd of Pronghorns as I approached the junction settlement of Marathon, then made an abrupt turn to the south. An hour later, I was in Big Bend National Park. Land of the big skies, of canyons and arid mountains, of Mountain Lions and Black Bears, this was a destination I have wanted to visit for many a year. Was late in the day by the time I arrived, the sun casting wonderful shades over the meandering road that dropped towards the Rio Grande, a couple of Greater Roadrunners awaiting in the riverside campsite to greet our arrival, Desert Cottontails under bushes. Chucked up the tent, had a quick look round the majestic cottonwoods that provided shade, both Black and Say's Phoebes noted, plus a bevy of woodpeckers including at least five Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers and four Golden-fronted Woodpeckers. As the sun set, it was time for my first night-time explorations, re-tracking my route up towards the centre of the national park. High hopes of seeing critters all over the place were quickly dampened by the realisation that the high chaparral in many areas actually made it rather difficult to see anything more than a few metres from the road! Still, plenty of Desert Cottontails, one Black-tailed Jack Rabbit, an engaging pair of Coyote and, flying straight over the heads of the Coyotes, one Great Horned Owl. Back at the campsite, a Grey Fox sniffed around, clearly keen on a bit of scavenging, but keeping mostly to thickets. 23 December. Big Bend National Park. The Chisos Mountains dominate the heart of Big Bend National Park, an isolated massif with high slopes cloaked in pine and peaks rising to almost 2400 metres. Many restricted range species in these here hills, I was quite looking forward to a day of hiking. The fun however started in the parking lot at the Chisos Basin trailhead - hikers preparing for their climbs, folks trundling into the visitor centre, cars spilling out their inhabitants to gawk at the scenery around ...and right in their midst, a couple of Greater Roadrunners prancing around, a Say's Phoebe hawking from a sign post smack bang in the middle of all the people and quite a few Canyon Towhees hopping about on the little lawns and poking around under cars, the latter a new species for me. I had not expected to spend half the morning exploring a car park and its environs, but truly the birding was excellent. Coffee in one hand and camera in the other, I basked under the already warm sun and enjoyed the spectacle - all the above birds non-stop, plus a bunch of Cactus Wrens in planted vegetation around small cabins, a flock of Black-crested Titmice in bushes and, along a small track to more cabins, a mixed flock of sparrows that included two Black-chinned Sparrows (another new species for me), five Rufous-crowned Sparrows, three White-throated Sparrows and a Dark-eyed Junco. A quick skirt through the nearby campsite added four Black-throated Sparrows, another couple of Greater Roadrunners and Curve-billed Thrasher. I was however still missing one key bird - Mexican Jay. So, finally taking to the trails, I hiked upwards, a couple of Mule Deers on the ascent, Bewick's Wren too. Rather hot now, so reaching a relatively flat area a couple of kilometres up, I was quite happy to take a pause to seek out a

woodpecker tap tap tapping from pines nearby. Turned out to be not one bird in the grove, but at least four ...two Ladder-backed Woodpeckers, one Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and, best of the lot, one smart Red-naped Sapsucker. Then, retracing my way back to the path, a 'craa craaa' from pines just up the slope, then flashes of subtle blues and soft greys ...a family party of five, Mexican Jays! So it was, I had found my main target of the day, and very nice they were too. Found another party of five during the descent, plus one Texas Antelope Squirrel here too. Now middle afternoon, the temperature an amazing 28 C, I returned back to the Rio Grande, stopping in at the hot springs. Lots of Cave Swallow nests on the arid rocky overhangs, but no actual birds present. A short hike did however add a couple of Pyrrhuloxias, a flock of three Lesser Goldfinches, one Vermilion Flycatcher and, proving themselves most common, yet more Greater Roadrunners. Stunning sunset over the Chisos Mountains. Less than grand was the night drive, adding only a few Desert Cottontails!

24 December. Big Bend National Park. Christmas Eve, hot in the southern deserts. A hour or two pre-dawn, I emerged from my tent, fantasizing over the thoughts of encountering a Mountain Lion for a Christmas treat. Scanning the chaparral all the way, I meandered back towards the Chisos Mountains, Black-tailed Jack Rabbits and Desert Cottontails along the way. Still dark, I reached the lower slopes of the Chisos, eye shine revealing several Mule Deer. At almost 7.00 a.m., with light beginning to etch form to the hillsides, suddenly a big blob on a slope adjacent to the road, a big black blob with smaller blobs alongside. Oh giddy me, Mexican immigrants & Black Bears! Extinct in the Big Bend for half a century, Black Bears began to recolonise the Chisos Mountains from Mexico in the late 1980s, the population steadily rising since then. And as non-hibernators in these warm southern climates, I was watching a mama bear and three cubs slowly making their way up a shrubby clearing, the rapidly improving lighting showing them a treat. Good advert to oppose the building of the US-Mexico border wall! Staying on the big critters theme, a Mountain Lion had been seen just after dawn two days earlier along the higher reaches of the Lost Mine Trail, other sightings also occurring in the weeks before. Thus, as the sun began to touch the high ridges, I left the bears and began this hike & Mexican Jays near the trailhead, a Hermit Thrush in a patch of deep forest. Meandering upwards, the path left the forest, crossed a relatively open ridge, then began a series of cutbacks as it climbed a steep lightly wooded slope. A pleasant dotting of birds, amongst them regular Mexican Jays, a flock of active Bushtits and quite a few Rufous-crowned Sparrows. Also Red-naped Sapsucker and, whilst scanning crags and slopes for a possible feline, I picked up my only White-throated Swifts of the trip, a flock of about ten soaring again a precipitous rockface on a distant peak. Mountain Lion was always going to be a long shot, so no big surprise that the only mammals I saw were three Mule Deer and a couple of Rock Squirrels. At the summit, marked by a large isolated boulder and expanse of exposed rock, views were splendid ...perfect Mountain Lion habitat stretching off in all directions. I sat quite a while and scanned, all to no avail, no cats moving on this morning. I did however have a Canyon Wren come exploring, an inquisitive bird checking out cracks and fissures in the rocks just below my position & a new bird for me and quite a stunning one at that. Dark-eyed Juncos and Canyon Towhees also around the summit, a couple of Red-tailed Hawks circling overhead. A little bit further down, I also saw two Spotted Towhees and yet more Mexican Jays. As the first regular hikers of the day began to appear, I left the mountain and returned to the Rio Grande area, Inca Doves, Eastern Phoebe, Vermilion Flycatcher and Rock Wren the highlights. In my original plans I had intended to stay in the Big Bend National Park for four days, but with the superb weather of the first couple of days, I had effectively seen all the species I had hoped to, so I now decided to depart early and add the Davis Mountains to my itinerary. So, with temperatures up to 29 C, I took down the tents in the early afternoon, packed the car and began the drive north. Regular Greater Roadrunners on route, plus one Loggerhead Shrike, a few Black-throated Sparrows and, prize of the afternoon, a little covey of Scaled Quails scurrying across the road, thereafter poking about between scant bushes and a cactus. Twelve Collared Peccaries also nearby. Spent the night in small town of Fort Davis, rustic 'wild west' style hotel, everything else shut for Christmas Eve.

25 December. Davis Mountains. Cold at dawn in these slightly higher altitudes, a pre-dawn hour or so on the roads failing to produce any hoped-for skunks or other nocturnal mammals. As dawn broke, I was at the McDonald Observatory, beginning a walk through a range of habitats from open lawns and scattered trees to lightly-wooded slopes. A good range of species here, including several new for the trip - these including at least 40 Western Bluebirds, a dozen Western Scrub Jays, one Northern Flicker and three White-breasted Nuthatches. Didn't find any Montezuma Quails that sometimes occur here, so then tried the Davis Mountains campsite, another locality that sometimes gets them. Didn't see them here either, but did find an Acorn Woodpecker, my only one of the trip, plus Ladder-backed Woodpeckers, a Curve-billed Thrasher, stacks more Western Scrub Jays and hundreds of Pine Siskins at feeders near the visitor centre. Collared Peccaries in the campsite too, a pack of them upturning cooler boxes and generally helping themselves to Christmas morning treats. Montezuma Quail surely deserved a longer stay, but I was keen to push on, the borderlands near El Paso and thereafter New Mexico were both in my sights. Departed Fort Davis at about 11 a.m., taking a westward route via Highways 118, 166 and 90 that crossed the excellent grasslands near Marfa & oodles of White-winged Doves along this way, so too Chihuahuan Ravens and Greater Roadrunners, but even better, a flock of 16 Lark Buntings. Numerous Red-tailed Hawks winter in the area, occasional Ferruginous Hawks also ...I found many of the first, none of the second! Plenty of American Kestrels too, plus one Peregrine and six Northern Harriers.

By late afternoon, with Marfa long behind me and corn dogs and coffees downed on Interstate 10, I reached the turnoff to McNary. One hell of a stink drifting across from a cattle station at the junction, the pause to scan the massive flock of attendant Red-winged Blackbirds brief indeed & a good thousand or so birds present, quite possibly harbouring a Yellow-headed Blackbird or two, but I really couldn't get a good vantage point, so departed before being over assaulted

by the stench. Five minutes later, I was aside McNary reservoir, a large waterbody sitting just 300 metres north of the Rio Grande/Mexican border and a magnet to birds in this otherwise arid land. A car sitting aside the border is also a magnet to the U.S. Border Patrol ...within ten minutes of arriving, windows were winding down on a large Border Patrol vehicle, the face of an official appearing. No problem whatsoever, I guess the guys have seen quite a few birders before. So to the reservoir &hellip; jam stuffed with Western Grebes, Eared Grebes, American Coots and Common Mergansers, all bobbing on the water in their hundreds! Did a quick scan through, hoping to find a Clark's Grebes ...didn't, but remarkably found another Pacific Loon! These are supposed to be vagrants in Texas, but I had now bumped into two in the space of a week! Also Lesser Scaups, Hooded Mergansers, Snow Geese and assorted herons here, including five Black-crowned Night Herons. Leaving the reservoir, I decided to take the 'back road' towards El Paso, i.e. cut along the levees and dirt tracks that hug the river for a few miles until detouring back up to the Interstate. Needless to say, I got stopped a grand total of four times more by the Border Patrol, but credit them, even when I was right by the river, i.e. metres from the Mexican border, they were nothing but friendly &ndash; a quick chat and no problems at all about birding this area. And, zigzagging through a maze of small agricultural fields, super birding it was, dozens of Gambel's Quails, commonplace Chihuahuan Ravens, assorted raptors including both Peregrine and Prairie Falcon and, peeping up from a hole in one levee, one Burrowing Owl. Rather surprisingly, I failed to find any flocks of longspurs, larks or sparrows, all of which I thought I had a good chance of here. The only small passerines of note here were singles of Say's Phoebe and Black Phoebe. Eventually, I turned back onto Interstate 10, zipped west to El Paso and turned north to cross into New Mexico. Arrived well after dark in the town of Truth or Consequences. Ominous warnings of a massive winter storm approaching, media channels talking of blizzards, record-breaking snow and total chaos. Outside, the sky was clear, stars twinkled in the sky.

26 December. Elephant Butte Lake & Bosque del Apache. Latest forecast ominous, Winter Storm Goliath due to hit from early afternoon, warnings to get off the roads. Outside, though still clear skies, temperatures were touching freezing, quite a bite after the 28 C of just two days before! Down at Elephant Butte Lake, all was glistening, the sun rising over arid hills, an adult Bald Eagle taking to the air. Quite a strange lake is Elephant Butte, though there were very few ducks (occasional Ring-necked Ducks and Redheads, etc), it was absolutely peppered from end to end with many thousands of Western Grebes and Clark's Grebes, quite an impressive sight indeed. All in winter plumage, it was a challenge to separate some of the more distant birds, but amongst those in sheltered bays, most flocks were mixed, perhaps Western Grebes predominating. Elephant Butte is also known for roosting gulls, often attracting occasional California Gulls or other oddities. I however managed to find almost no gulls, a mere 30 or so at Rock Canyon Marina, usually the best location on the lake, and a similar number at another marina further south. So with just a handful of birds to scan at Rock Canyon, all settled on a small island just offshore, it was not exactly taxing to sift the flock ...result, all Ring-billed Gulls bar three. And those three, one an American Herring Gull and the other two, fortunately, were my target birds, adult California Gulls. A bunch of Double-crested Cormorants roosted alongside the gulls, four White Pelicans drifted just beyond. To the north, thick cloud was edging in, skies darkening. A cold wind whipped the headlands. A Merlin skimmed the shoreline, sending small birds into flight. Nearby, a residential area revealed birds heading for feeders, Gambel's Quails and Northern Flicker included. Adjacent, a Crissal Thrasher appeared on a tussock. Still sunny where I was, but snow was now appearing on hills to either side ...time to move, hopefully to get to Bosque del Apache before the weather broke.

The wetlands at the Bosque del Apache make up one of the greatest winter birding localities on the North American continent. With dreams of seeing the iconic flocks of 60000 mixed Snow and Ross's Geese rising at dawn with 30000 Sandhill Cranes in their wake, this was the very reason that I had added New Mexico to my itinerary. Truly, I had expected it to be one of the highlights of the whole trip. Oh how it disappointed me, Bosque del Apache was a total flop, very much the low point of trip! My plan was to spend this first day exploring the reserve, discover the best roosting sites, then return pre-dawn the following day for the spectacular dawn flights. Stopping in at the visitor centre, the first major spanner to this plan was the news that very few Snow Geese had arrived this winter, a few hundred in all and none using any particular roost locality. Humph, that just about stuffed my idea to see the big flights! Just to add damage, they also said Sandhill Cranes were present in quite low numbers! Out on the five mile auto-route, time for the second spanner - no sooner had I entered the gates than Winter Storm Goliath began its assault! A vicious wind and within minutes, horizontal snow blighting visibility and making it none too pleasant to leave the car! Marsh Wrens and other reed-dwellers were immediately off the menu, so too anything more than a few hundred metres distant, these reduced to blurry shapes hunkered down in the growing blizzard. Abundant American Wigeons, Pintails, Shovelers and Gadwall, quite a few Buffleheads and Ruddy Ducks, also loads of American Coots and a few Mallards and 'Mexican Ducks'. I did see a lot of Canada Geese and a nice flock of Cackling Geese, but as for Snow Geese, I managed a grand total of just 60 birds! No Ross's Geese. In the meadows favored by the Sandhills Cranes, small flocks were present, quite picturesque to the backdrop of the blizzard, but total numbers were only a few hundred. All in all, it was a far cry from what I had been expecting! Snow was beginning to accumulate and hikes were now becoming totally pointless. A Bald Eagle sat hunched on an exposed tree, a handful of Northern Harriers battled through the snow. Passerines had more sense than to show themselves, Western Meadowlarks along the track and a bunch of Bushtits just about the only birds of note. Reserve staff decided to close early, the auto route would now be blocked, the visitor centre closed. And that was that, birding effectively over. Pools a short distance to the north were sometimes attracting the limited number of Snow Geese to roost, so I bunkered down there and waited, birding limited to occasional spells of winding the window down and scanning. Flocks of American Pipits at the water edge, single Cooper's Hawks and Sharp-shinned Hawks through, but wait almost till dusk I did, not a single Snow Goose arrived! Now in snow quite deep, I then edged up to the Interstate and headed north, just ten miles to Socorro and my planned hotel. Quite a number of cars already slithered off the road, half down the embankments, the others facing the wrong way on the central reservation. Road signs flashing 'Interstate

40 closed, seek local accommodation'. Fortunately that was up at Albuquerque, I didn't need to go that far. Got to Socorro without incident. The weather forecast was not looking good for next day, heavy snow forecast to continue all night and on into the next day ...no point returning to Bosque del Apache! 27 December. Bernardo Wildlife Management Area. Dawn, Central Mexico - still snowing, car sitting under a deep blanket of the white stuff, nothing moving on the roads. Over breakfast, T.V. coverage painted a dismay picture - 350 miles of Interstate 40 closed with no suggestion of opening in the future, record depths of snow a little way to my east with images already of cars totally buried in drifts. Well, what was I going to do? I had come to New Mexico with two main destinations in mind, Bosque del Apache and the Sandia Mountains north of Albuquerque. The first of these was definitely off the agenda, so I guessed my best option was to try and get north to Albuquerque, though I couldn't imagine the small roads up the mountains would be open. It seemed a bit nuts to try and move the car, but I really didn't fancy a day in the hotel, so a little after 7.00 am, I trudged out to open the car, starting the engine and slinging the heating on at full blast. I then got out to clear the mountains of snow off the windscreen. As I walked to the front of the car, there was a sudden 'clunk' ...the car had auto-locked! Doors locked, keys inside, engine happily chugging away, me standing outside! My heart sunk - this was not looking good, at this stage I could see the day was going to be a write-off. Back in the hotel, I phoned the car rent company Thrifty and explained the problem ...car malfunction they said, manufacturer's guarantee should cover it, they would send assistance free of charge. Then I told them I was in the middle of Winter Storm Goliath. 'Oo', they said, 'we will call you back'. With all roads effectively closed, I truly didn't expect any help would be forthcoming on this day. But credit to Thrifty, they called back and said a local company would call me and help. And that they did, fortunately not coming from Albuquerque, but Socorro itself. The guy said he first needed to dig his truck out, then would try to get to me. Good service, he was one of the first vehicles to use the roads that morning and not much after 9.30, my car was open. All I had to do now was attempt to use the roads. Fortunately we were right at the edge of the badly affected area, snow was only a half metre deep and the hotel was only a few minutes from the Interstate 10, that just about open, a single lane open in each direction, though slow going and slippery. No birding plans any more for this day, just get to Albuquerque and reevaluate from there. Once on the Interstate however, I passed a sign pointing to Bernardo WMA and remembered a report from some years earlier that had mentioned Snow Geese in higher numbers than at Bosque del Apache. Worth a try I thought, it was only a short distance off the Interstate. Struggled to get anywhere and initially saw very few birds, a Red-tailed Hawk in a tree, a few White-crowned Sparrows rooting around in the snow. Still snowing, but the wind had abated. Ahead, I saw another car at the road's edge, so I pulled up alongside. The sound of geese echoed across the valley, ooo that was a good sign!. A quick chat with the folk in the car, birders it turned out, and things were looking much better. Not only were there big flocks of Snow Geese and Sandhill Cranes visible in the distance, but the guy had been here the day before (before the snow) and had had immense flocks of both around the Bernardo WMA auto-route, tens of thousands he said. The autoroute was now totally closed of course, the barrier down with deep snow blocking the track. The main viewing platform however was not too far away, so it seemed a very reasonable proposition to abandon the car and set off. What was to follow was one of the best experiences of the trip. After hiking a couple of kilometres or so, with Mule Deer plodding through the snow and regular flights of Snow Geese passing over, I rounded a corner to a sight most spectacular - thousands upon thousands of Sandhill Cranes standing shoulder to shoulder on the track and an adjacent field, the snow not deep at these points. Like a parting of the waves, the birds slowly walked off the track, massing into a trampled cane field. Through this open path, I gradually moved, light snow falling as a backdrop, a melody of calls filling the air. Beyond, on the opposite side of the track, 20,000 mixed Snow and Ross's Geese, almost invisible against a carpet of snow, pure and utter magic. Over the next couple of hours, here I stood, small flights of geese and cranes regular, birds moving from one feeding area to another, then a Bald Eagle arrived, the entire flock of geese taking to the air ...wow, 20,000 birds rising into a sky of snow flakes. My disappointment of the day before was now a very distant memory! Also saw Merlin here, plus three Northern Harriers, a flock of Horned Larks and, just as I was about to depart, a large flock of Red-winged Blackbirds that on closer inspection harboured at least seven Yellow-headed Blackbirds, the only ones seen in New Mexico. Feeling quite happy with myself, the day having truly taken an unexpected turn for the better, I about turned, trudged back to the car and made my way back to the Interstate. Got to Albuquerque without incident, but Interstate 40 from there on remained closed. Checked into a hotel and watched the local media ...folks being rescued from cars by helicopter, vast parts of eastern New Mexico completely cut off and without power. 28 December. Sandia Crest. To my mind, rosy-finches are mystical birds that live high in wild and remote mountains, three species occur in North America and I have seen none ...for the various species, I have searched for them without success in California, Wyoming, Colorado and Alaska. In New Mexico however, I had hoped all of that would change - in winter, at probably the only locality on the continent, all three species occur together in mixed flocks at Sandia Crest. And more than that, rather than needing to hike endless miles across desolate mountain tops, all you need to do is drive to the Sandia Crest House, order a coffee and settle down in their nice warm cafe to await the swirling flocks that descend on the veranda to feed on provided seed. A doddle, the easiest place in the world to see these birds ...my nemesis birds would finally fall! Of all that presumed the road to Sandia Crest was open, which of course it wasn't. With the Interstate remaining closed, hopes of a little mountain road being cleared were somewhat fanciful. A mere couple of kilometres from the Sandia Crest House however is the Sandia ski area and this is accessible by cable car directly from the outskirts of Albuquerque ...if the cable car was operating and if the snow wasn't too deep, I reckoned I could hike from the top of the cable car to the rosy finch haunts. The day dawned with crisp blue skies and no wind. I got to the cable car at 8.30 am, was mighty pleased to find it operating for the first time in three days and so bought a return ticket. Loads of snow boarders taking the journey up, all cheering when it was announced that the temperature at the top was 34 F and snow depth 60 inches. Eeks, that is minus 10 C and 1.6 metres of snow! My spirits took a slight dive, hiking in that was not going to be any fun ...especially given I had no winter shoes or clothing. At the top, my fears were confirmed - a few steps along the trail that led towards my destination and I was floundering in soft snow up to my waist. No chance.

Maybe I'd find a few birds around the ski station I thought. Nope, nothing anywhere. Resigning myself to another miss on the mystical rosy-finches, I then stumbled across a ski trail of compressed snow that led north from the ski station. Quite easily walkable, I followed it for a couple of kilometres and, though I saw an impressive grand total of zero birds, I was quite heartened that the trail was actually heading in the broad direction of the Sandia Crest House, albeit that this was going downhill, while I needed to be going uphill. At the tracks end, Mountain Chickadees appeared in the snow-laden pines, one Pine Siskin too. I was now at the road that winds up to the Sandia Crest House. Predictably it was not cleared, but it was passable. Another 40 minutes or so of hard slog and I was there. As I feared however, the place was locked, drifts of snow were piled up against the doors and all the feeders totally devoid of birds. I was also aware that the best feeding area was not actually viewable without entering the restaurant, which I obviously couldn't do. A cold breeze was clipping the ridge, my feet were blocks of ice and there was not a bird to be seen anywhere. These darn rosy-finches, I thought, there seemed to be some conspiracy to stop me ever seeing one. Well, given the effort it had taken to get here, I sure wasn't giving up now, I reasoned that even if the feeders hadn't been filled for a couple of days, birds would still pop in every now and then to check the site out. So, my new strategy was to stay put, sit on the ridge top viewpoint and hope for the best. Worked to a certain degree, a flighty flock of six rosy-finches came flitting in after about half an hour, settling for a brief second or so in the car park before rising and dropping behind the house ...Black Rosy-Finches I thought, though I was far from certain. Hmm, very frustrating. Ten minutes later, another small flock landed in shrubs beneath the ridge, again rising and vanishing all too quick. Couldn't swear to the identity of those either. Common Ravens circled overhead. It was now midday, still about minus 10 and I was getting seriously cold, maybe it would be a good idea to begin my hike back to the ski lift. Just then however, the birding gods must have taken pity on me - out from the forest, a lone skier appeared, cutting through the snow directly to Sandia Crest House and me! 'Have you come to feed the birds?' I asked, half in jest, half in desperation. Indeed he had though, it was the owner of the establishment and unable to drive up for the last few days, he too had taken the ski lift to come and restock the feeders and generally check the place out. 'Not opening up' he said, 'but you're welcome to come in, I'll be around for about an hour'. Not half did I want to go in ...not only was it nice and toasty inside, but he chucked out a nice bucketful of grain onto the veranda and left me to await the birds. Grand, I was defrosting and very soon the first birds began to appear - a few Mountain Chickadees zipping in and out, two Steller's Jays too. Then, the magical moment arrived, a mere fifteen minutes or so of waiting and then a flock of finches alighted on trees just beyond the veranda. Moments later, they were feeding on the grain, glorious birds in glorious sunshine ... just a metre or so from my nose, my nemesis birds, a mixed flock of a dozen. Ah, the aches and pains of the cold were now paying off ...Black Rosy-Finches in the main, a few of the males real stunners, backed up by several Grey-headed Rosy-Finches too. And so they came and went, regular little flocks over the next hour, the splendid conclusion coming with the arrival of a group of eight: three Black Rosy-Finches, four Grey-headed Rosy-Finches and one Brown-capped Rosy-Finch! Back to the ski lift I went, the return route far easier, a truck having ready pushed up the road. Still in bright sun, I took the two-mile cable car back to Albuquerque. Quick look round some residential areas, Western Bluebirds and House Finches the main birds seen, then returned to my hotel to recover. Joined the hype train in the evening, went to see Star Wars with the masses. 29 December. Albuquerque and Sandia Foothills. Foothills and lower slopes, I visited quite a number of sites this day, beginning at the Three Guns Trail, east of Albuquerque. Snowing again, but birding was very productive - not only a Western Screech Owl in the residential areas, but also a good selection along the actual trail, the absolute highlights being Juniper Titmouse and Townsend's Solitaire, this latter bird most evocative as it sat atop a juniper to a backdrop of light snow. Also of note, a couple of dozen Western Bluebirds, 30 or so White-crowned Sparrows and a massive flock of at least 180 American Robins (elsewhere on this trip, my only records were a couple of singles at Estero Llande). Texas Antelope Squirrel, Mountain Cottontail and Mule Deer all seen here too. From Three Guns, I then ventured up the lower slopes of the Sandia Crest mountains - deep snow again and lots of folk out enjoying the fun, but quite reasonable birding too - Steller's Jays and Mountain Chickadees again, along with Downy Woodpeckers, Hairy Woodpeckers, Northern Flickers, White-breasted Nuthatch and a flock of 200 Pine Siskins. One Abert's Squirrel too. Next came a swing across to the west, first stopping at the Albuquerque Nature Centre, a created set of wetland pools and trails not far from the Rio Grande. Amazingly active feeding stations here, Black-capped Chickadees and Spotted Towhees amongst the hordes of White-crowned Sparrows, Dark-eyed Juncos and House Finches, but I was really here to find one waterbird. A very easy waterbird to find, a quick scan of the main pool near the visitor centre was all it took, bright gaudy males and more subtle females, a whole bunch of Wood Ducks drifting amongst more abundant Mallard, Shoveler and Gadwall. A local speciality here, these would be the only Wood Ducks that I would see on this trip. With a couple of hours of daylight left, the New Mexico element of my trip was coming to a conclusion ...just one last locality to visit, the Petroglyph National Monument. A valley of sage brush and black volcanic basalt, the site is obviously best known for the ancient petroglyphs that adorn numerous boulders t the slope edge, but my main interest lurked somewhere in the broad expanse of sage brush. Quickly found a flock of Black-throated Sparrows, soon added White-crowned Sparrow, but the bird I was seeking took rather longer. Had a look at many of the petroglyphs en route, then zigzagged across the valley for an hour or so to finally locate the birds in question ...Sagebrush Sparrows, four smart birds sitting up on bushes. For good measure, one Crissal Thrasher here too, plus at least ten Black-tailed Jack Rabbits. With the sun now dipping towards the horizon, I turned my car to the south, taking Interstate 25 to the New Mexico/Texas border and onward to El Paso. Stopped in a small motel just east of the city, the plan next day to cover rather many miles. 30 December. McNary, Marfa & Langtry. Rather ambitious plans of visiting several birding sites today, yet still cover almost 700 km. Mass covey of Gambel's Quails at first light, a splendid 90 or more birds scurrying along the levees near McNary, Chipping Sparrows, White-throated Sparrows and Lark Buntings here too, sadly no longspurs. Followed the Mexican border for a few miles, one brief encounter with the Border Patrol, added Merlin, Burrowing Owl, Belted Kingfisher, Verdin and Pyrrhuloxia to the day's tally, then crossed country to get back up to Interstate 10. Ahead one long drive via Highway 90, stopping whenever birds seen from the road -

standard stuff much of the way, but again the Marfa area proved especially good, one particularly fine Ferruginous Hawk on the grasslands here, along with two dozen Red-tailed Hawks, two separate Golden Eagles, four Northern Harriers, one Prairie Falcon and at least 20 American Kestrels. With more time, I would say a day or two exploring these rich grasslands would be time very well spent. Much of the rest of the day was spent pushing east, I had reason to try and get to the small settlement of Langtry before light faded. With clear roads, I fortunately arrived with a good couple of hours of day left. Headed straight for the Judge Roy Bean Visitor Centre, a weird cactus garden and museum dedicated to a charismatic sheriff of bygone centuries. I had seen on Texas rare bird alert that a couple of Anna's Hummingbirds were frequenting their feeders, so task number one was hang out near the feeders and wait. One Rock Wren scuttling about for a while, then in zipped one of the Anna's hummingbirds, a fine bird indeed to see in Texas. I relocated a little later to the opposite end of the garden and there, frequenting another feeder, not only the other Anna's Hummingbird, but one Black-chinned Hummingbird too! Quite an impressive little garden all in all, Say's Phoebe and Eastern Phoebe both hawking form succulents, Verdin flicking through, a Golden-fronted Woodpecker in a palm and one smart Boulder Wren pottering around one stone wall. Top of the lot however, flying in just before dusk, one splendid flock of about 50 Cedar Waxwings. With that, now basically dark, I continued on my way, critically low on petrol, fortunately not running out before I reached Del Rio, destination for the night. 31 December. Del Rio and Eastbound. Travel day again, continuing eastward. Two days earlier a Rufous-backed Robin had been found on the outskirts of Del Rio, so it seemed a little rude to not pop in and see if it was still about. It was not, but a cracking start to the day nevertheless - with a slight mist rising over a meandering stream, I plodded along the line of trees that had harboured the Rufous-backed Thrush, a rich assortment of Rio Grande birds most active: Great Kiskadees, Couch's Kingbird, Ringed Kingfisher, Black-crested Titmouse, etc, etc. A lot of wintering Yellow-rumped Warblers and Orange-crowned Warbler too, then as I wandered towards gardens in the vague hope that the robin might have wandered, I bumped into two right crackers - in a mixed flock of warblers and Ruby-crowned Kinglets, one Prairie Warbler and, even better, one Black-throated Grey Warbler, not a bird I had been expecting to see on this trip! Also other odds and ends, including Northern Flicker and Eastern Phoebe and, second flock in little over 12 hours, a mass of about 45 Cedar Waxwings gorging on berries. Missed out on White-collared Seedeaters however that often lurk in these riverine edges. Time to hit the road again. Plan was to get all the way back to McAllen with idea of a 'big day' on the 1st January. Not amazing weather with on-off drizzle much of the day, not amazing success on further attempts at White-collared Seedeaters either - missed them at both Laredo and Zapata. Top birds of the journey, a Ringed Kingfisher along the Rio Grande at Laredo, a Grey Hawk nearby. In rapidly deteriorating weather, arrived late afternoon at McAllen, checked into a hotel. Celebrated New Year watching fireworks shooting off into driving rain, occasional Great-tailed Grackles scared out of roost and zipping across to new cover. 1 January. Estero Llande Grande & Frontera Audubon. Poor weather, drizzle and cool all day, but absolutely fantastic birding - visiting just two sites, I notched up a grand total of 109 species during the day, including an amazing array of Nearctic warblers and most of the Lower Rio Grande specialities. All started at the fabulous Estero Llande, standing under the visitor centre veranda, water dripping from trees all around. Olive Sparrow under the bushes, three species of hummingbird attending the feeders, Great Kiskadees, Altamira Oriole and Green Jays active, a good dozen and a half species seen here. Swinging around to adjacent pool, abundant waterbirds took the tally even higher, Least Grebes, Cinnamon Teals and Sora Rail amongst the many birds present. One Roseate Spoonbill flew over, a drift of White Pelican too. As 9.00 a.m. came and went, with it clear that the drizzle was not going to let up, I set off around the reserve, quickly mopping up on quite a number of specialities, not least four Common Paurques at their faithful roost, the Yellow-crowned Night Herons nearby and the Eastern Screech Owl peering out of his nestbox. A little less expected, also one Black-crowned Night Heron, one Green Heron and one Harris Hawk. Venturing up onto the levee, getting distinctly damp for my efforts, a most pleasing sight awaited & pushed down by the weather and now zipping close over the heads of American Avocets, a big bunch of hirundines hawked low over the river ...wonderful views of Cave Swallows here amongst the more common Tree Swallows. Assorted sparrows hopping about in the grass. Back on the main reserve, I detoured via a series of pools back to the visitor centre. Here I was quite surprised to find massed of waders in the shallows & Wilson's Snipe, Lesser Yellowlegs, Killdeer, Least Sandpiper and Spotted Sandpiper were perhaps expected, but also present were 25 Long-billed Dowitchers, one Stilt Sandpiper and one Solitary Sandpiper, the latter two being the only ones I would record on the whole trip. Belted Kingfisher, Vermilion Flycatcher, Blue-headed Vireo and Loggerhead Shrike also seen in this general area. There was still a bird however that was proving most elusive for me & somewhere at Estero Llande Grande, a Tropical Parula lurked somewhere, seen every few days, but not reliably anywhere in particular. The key was to find roving mixed flocks and hope it would be amongst them. So, with drizzle still much in control, I padded off to the open groves, a flock of bedraggled Plain Chacalacas on route, several Clay-coloured Thrushes and Green Jays too. Almost immediately found a Brown Creeper, a rarity at this site that would later attract quite few birders, then wandered on. Found a few flocks quite quickly, Blue-grey Gnatcatchers and Orange-crowned Warblers predictably dominant, but pleasingly also harbouring not only both Blue-headed and White-eyed Vireo, but also single Nashville Warblers and Pine Warblers, both additions for the trip list, as well as burgeoning year list. Try as I might however, I could not find the Tropical Parula! 'Try Frontera Audubon', said some guys at the visitor centre, 'they have a Tropical Parula too, easier to see ours'. A reasonable proposition, so early afternoon, with 95 species now logged, I drove a handful of miles to this Audubon preserve. Quite an amazing place, it is basically a small chunk of dense thicket, paths meandering through the thick vegetation, birds only visible if mere metres away. Dark and gloomy in the overcast conditions, I nevertheless set off in quite some anticipation, not least because both Crimson-collared Grosbeak and Black-headed Grosbeak had also been seen here the previous day. Well, I failed to find either of these Texas rarities and also didn't manage the Tropical Parula, but what a superb selection of birds I did encounter & the absolute tops being an incredible eight species of wintering Nearctic warblers, a smart Black-and-White Warbler amongst them, along with one Yellow-throated Warbler, two Black-throated Green Warblers and, a personal favourite, an Ovenbird strolling

along the forest floor. Also, in a moment of excitement, I caught a flash of a parula ...here's my Tropical Parula I thought. Bah, it was not, a Northern Parula was also wintering at Frontera Audubon and I had found that! Not the icing on the cake, but you can't really complain with about a Northern Parula. By the time I left, I had added another ten species, the day tally was now sitting at 105. The weather was deteriorating, drizzle edging into a heavier rain, time to head back to the comforts of my hotel I thought. There was however just enough time to take a drive through neighbouring agricultural fields and dykes ...all from the car, I managed another four species &ndash; first American Kestrel on roadside wires, then in a mass flock of at least 600 Red-winged Blackbirds which contained the final three: at least 30 Bronzed Cowbirds, ten Brown-headed Cowbirds and one Yellow-headed Blackbird. Day over, a little bit cold by the time I got back to the hotel, but quite content, the day had far exceeded my expectations given the weather. 2 January. Frontera Audubon & Corpus Christi. The weather, plain yuk! An after-effect of Winter Storm Goliath, Louisiana and Texas were now being lashed by continual rain, quite heavy most of the time. Half of Louisiana was experiencing widespread flooding, with T.V. images showing mobile homes floating down rivers and folk being rescued from rooftops. Fortunately, it was not quite so bad in south Texas, so I decided to brave the elements with another quick attempt at the rarity duo at Frontera Audubon. Parked in the car lot at dawn, wrapping my optics to protect against the onslaught soon to hit them, I gazed out at the rain for a while before venturing out. Surprisingly, in the depths of the thickets, there was quite a lot of bird activity, Plain Chachalacas and others crowding the feeders, mixed flocks roving the surrounds. Picked up a male Wilson's Warbler in one of the flocks, then the Black-headed Grosbeak as it briefly fed at the back of a feeding station. Quite a number of birders were wandering in search of the Crimson-collared Grosbeak, one sighting occurring early on when the bird appeared in trees near a pool. Missed it then, but picked it up on call about an hour later, the female bird feeding high in fruiting trees, not very easy to see. Water dripped down my neck, my feet were sodden, views were so-so, Crimson-collared Grosbeak did not go down as one of the highlights of the trip! A few circuits of the reserve in search of the Tropical Parula were perhaps half-hearted, I soon gave up and went back to the hotel for coffee and drying out. Then hot the road, plans to get to Attwater by dusk, the weather forecast for that part of the State far better for the next day. Choosing localities where I could scope from the car, I stopped at a few coastal sites near Corpus Christi on route, loads of good birds seen in the process. Slurping coffee and munching corndogs, I can't say it was unpleasant to scan the wader flocks, highlights including Marbled Godwit and both Long-billed and Short-billed Dowitcher. A little less pleasant was a walk in the rain along a short boardwalk &ndash; got very wet, but did add three new birds for the trip, singles of each, Grey Catbird, Seaside Sparrow and Marsh Wren. Back in the car, heating now full blast, I continued the auto tour in the rain, Reddish Egrets, Eared Grebes and a Peregrine amongst the birds seen. Mid-afternoon, I called it quits, hit the road once again and drove direct to Sealy, a small town an hour west of Houston and a perfect base to visit the nearby Attwater Prairie-Chicken Preserve. Checked into a hotel, day over. 3 January. Attwater Prairie-Chicken Preserve & W.G. Jones State Forest. Glorious sunshine all day, a window before a new band of rain was set to hit a couple of days later. Navigating seriously muddy access tracks, started the day at the Attwater Prairie-Chicken NWR, an expansive area protecting some of the most important native grasslands remaining in Texas. Home to one of the last populations of the critically endangered Attwater's Prairie-Chicken, the bare statistics for this species making sobering reading indeed &ndash; once a numerous bird of the prairies of Louisiana and Texas, numbers have slumped from well in excess of a million individuals a century ago to the meagre present-day totals of less than 100 birds divided between just two localities in Texas! My first discovery on arrival was to find that both the visitor centre and five-mile auto-route were closed! The first was no big problem, but the second would deny me access to the best birding areas. Fortunately however, the track was only closed for ongoing route realignments and there would be no problem for me to simply walk round. So that is what I did and, although the chances of seeing Attwater's Prairie-Chicken on a casual visit were fairly remote (the birds favour areas not open to general access), it was quite a humbling experience to walk in their midst. And for all the lack of Prairie-Chickens, the site was still quite stunning for many other birds &ndash; Sandhill Cranes honked overhead, flocks of Snow Geese descended just yonder, Red-winged Blackbirds and Eastern Meadowlarks littered the grasslands in abundance. As I walked around the route, I focussed very much on the sparrows - Savannah Sparrows just about everywhere, Song Sparrows common too, but in their midst, quite a number of others picked up during the morning: a flock of four Field Sparrows aside woodland near the visitor centre, fifteen White-crowned Sparrows on a barbed wire fence, several Swamp Sparrows in damper areas, quite a number of Vesper Sparrows, a few Lincoln's Sparrows here and there. Crowning the whole collection however was one rather nice addition - a new bird for me, a single Le Conte's Sparrow, a true grassland speciality. Also, saw both Marsh Wren and Sedge Wren (the latter also a new bird for me), plus a covey of Bobwhite Quails, several Crested Caracaras, including one preening a Black Vulture!

Towards the later parts of the autoroute, a large area looked as though it had been dredged, the area now low-lying and flooded. Upon this, a mass of waterfowl and waders had gathered, hundreds of Green-winged Teals and Shovelers prominent, but of more interest, so too at least 300 Long-billed Dowitchers, 40 Least Sandpipers, a number of Western Sandpipers and a scattering of other waders, including Killdeer, Wilson's Snipe, Long-billed Curlew, Greater Yellowlegs and Lesser Yellowlegs. Good feeding grounds for a Peregrine that came swooping in. Also saw Coyote, Coypu and White-tailed Deer in this area. My time in Texas was now drawing to a close, there was however one last habitat I wished to visit, specifically the open pine forests in the Houston area. Though much diminished in extent, the pine forests harbour quite a number of species that I had yet to see on this trip and are also well-known for Red-cockaded Woodpecker, another endangered bird. I have seen this species in Florida, but you can never get bored of woodpeckers, so off I went, a drive of an hour or two from Attwater and there I was, at the parking lot at W.G. Jones State Forest, a moderate-sized woodland block with quite a few known colonies of Red-cockaded Woodpeckers.

Carolina Wrens making a racket in the undergrowth, a couple of Chipping Sparrows flying up with a few White-throated Sparrows, then into the forest I wandered. Active nest colonies are marked, so it is quite easy to find the best localities,

but the birds gave me a bit of a run-around &ndash; walked for a couple of hours, got the woodpecker tally flying with Red-bellied Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and Downy Woodpecker in short succession, then added a very nice Pileated Woodpecker as one flew over. Carolina Chickadees fairly common, one Brown-headed Nuthatch seen too, but as the sun began to dip, I was still struggling with the Red-cockaded Woodpeckers. Fortunately, these birds are colonial roosters and I reckoned I had a good chance if I returned to one active colony site near the parking lot and just waited. Twelve Cedar Waxwings settled adjacent, then in came the birds, four Red-cockaded Woodpeckers arriving together to feed very actively in the pines all around. Icing on the cake, a young Virginia Opossum lingered at the edge of the parking lot, a nice end to the day. Stayed in a hotel just nearby. 4 January. W.G Jones State Forest & Jessie Jones Nature Centre. And so the final day arrived, kicking off with a return to W.G. Jones State Park for a couple of hours, catching the Red-cockaded Woodpeckers as they left roost, a bunch of Eastern Bluebirds and Pine Warblers also in the immediate vicinity, along with a couple of Tufted Titmice, my only ones of the trip. With that, I reluctantly packed my bags and headed for the airport, a gap of an hour or two allowing a slight detour to one final locality, the Jessie Jones Nature Centre. Here, a mere stone's throw from the airport, a very busy feeding station was attracting packs of American Goldfinches and Carolina Chickadees. Photographed the Northern Cardinals, watched a bunch of Tufted Titmice zipping into the feeders, added the last new bird to the trip list &ndash; species number 279, Blue Jay. Early afternoon, I returned the rental car, 4920 miles (7918 km) added to the clock, then sat upon the shuttle for the short ride to the terminal of Houston International Airport, Mourning Dove and Turkey Vulture the last birds of the trip.