

Trip from Texas to Colorado - Spring 2006

by Sylvia R. Gallagher

Part 2

San Ygnacio, TX

San Ygnacio RV Park, Sun., March 26, 2006

No entry.

Falcon State Park, TX

2:30 p.m., Mon., March 27, 2006

Yesterday we drove 230 miles from Del Rio to San Ygnacio, stopping for lunch in Laredo at Lin's Chinese Buffet. It was a huge place, beautifully decorated and full of people. Delicious. Don't know whether it's a chain or not, but we've never seen one before. None of the patrons seemed to be Asian, and most were Latinos.

Our destination was San Ygnacio, where White-collared Seedeaters were supposed to be locatable. We knew there was a scroungy RV park in the town because Terry and John Hill had stayed there just a month or so ago. It really wasn't as bad as they had led us to believe. It's true that some of the electrical boxes had their wires hanging out and that there were no restrooms or showers, but the place was tidy and there were very few permanent residents there. Two or three rigs with birders were the main clientele.

Terry and John had seen a Yucatan Jay in this town when they were there, but we hadn't kept up on the rare bird alerts (we rarely do) and didn't really expect it to be still around, but Joe, the substitute manager of the RV Park, told us all about it and how to find it. He said "turn before the convenience store and go to the end of Treviño St." There we would find a steeply descending closed street with a bulletin board at the top showing recent bird sightings. Walking down the road would lead to the sanctuary.

When we got to the convenience store, the street was not called Treviño, so we kept going and never did find that street. So we finally turned somewhere and zigzagged back and forth through town and never found that street. Not every corner had a street sign on it, so it was a challenge. However, the ABA Lane guide had said to go to the end of Treviño, Washington, or Grant streets. So we decided to settle for Washington. When we got to the end of that street, lo and behold, there was Treviño perpendicular to Washington. Anyway for anyone trying to find the spot, the correct directions from the main highway are to turn westward (toward the Rio Grande) at the first street south of the Exxon gas station and Pepe's Convenience Store, then drive to the end.

We were very glad we had done our exploring last night, because Joe at the RV Park had told us the jay usually only comes out once before it is fully daylight to the birdseed thrown on the trail, feeds briefly, then disappears. We got there at 6:30 and found four other people plus Joe, who had arrived before daylight to broadcast birdseed all over the place. He told us which pile of birdseed it used and that the Chachalacas would come out first, then the Green Jays, and then the special one. That's almost exactly what happened, except it came in with the Green Jays, not afterwards. I had my scope set up at

the top of the hill and could see the identification marks. (I had forgotten to bring a Mexican field guide, but someone else there had one.)

No one seemed to know whether the Texas rare bird committee had accepted or was likely to accept the bird as a legitimate vagrant, or dismiss it as an escapee. Someone said it occurs regularly only 100 miles south of the border, but I really don't know anything about it. Anyway, I saw it and if it's accepted, it'll be a first North American record and, of course, a life bird for me. It was much too far away and too dark for Jim to photograph, so he won't count it. According to Terry Hill, when she was here there was some argument as to whether it was a Yucatan or a San Blas Jay. There are a number of differences between the two—leg color, eye color, whether it's crested, etc., none of which I was able to see under the conditions we had. Observers who saw it well when it first appeared noted that there was no sign of cage wear, which favors it being a legitimate vagrant. Note added two weeks later: Terry checked the internet and folks seem to agree it's a Yucatan Jay, but the bird records committee has not acted yet. Those things always take a long time.

After the jay had come and gone, I wandered down into the tangle of trees and shrubs along the Rio Grande. The local folks have created a very nice bird sanctuary with lots (far too many!!) of feeding stations. Many of them are up against shrubs, which they've draped with wide mesh wire so the local cats can't sneak up on the birds. All in all, a very nice area. They ask a \$5.00 per person donation for the upkeep of the place, which we were glad to pay. This is a very impoverished town.

I heard Bell's and White-eyed vireos, saw a Nashville Warbler and several other regular south Texas birds. Others saw a Hooded Warbler. Whether these were wintering here or are the first spring migrants I don't know.

I spent a lot of time hanging around the likely spots for seedeaters, but to no avail. Around 10:30 we went back to the trailer and hooked up and drove the 44 miles south to Falcon State Park, where we are now situated. I debated stopping in Zapata to look for the seedeaters where we had searched last time. But I knew the habitat had been destroyed (we watched them do it when we were here, and the ABA\Lane guide mentions the destruction), so we figured it would be hopeless.

Then just a few minutes ago a couple who had been birding with us in San Ygnacio, Brian and Dorothy --?-- from British Columbia, stopped by and told us they had checked the area in Zapata and seen at least one, and probably three, of the birds. Drat it. Now we'll have to drive back to Zapata and look for them.

The conditions yesterday and today have been rather windy, less so today, muggy, and overcast. Temperature in upper 70's or low 80's. After all the frigid weather we've been having, it's hard to get used to the change. (I really think I prefer the cold.) The humidity affected Jim's cameras this morning. Two of them wouldn't shoot, but are working now that the day has warmed up so the humidity isn't quite so high.

As soon as we pulled into our campsite here at Falcon State Park, we were greeted by the resident roadrunner. A bit later, he was "coo-coo-coo..."ing in a nearby mesquite. I went out and recorded him. Unfortunately there was some loud equipment running in the distance, but it still was probably better than any other recording I have of that bird, which seems to have me jinxed.

Falcon SP, TX

Tues., March 28, 2006

No entry.

Falcon SP, TX

3:15 p.m., Wed., March 29, 2006

And, since other birders were present, Jim didn't feel free to ask to go closer. HighThe noise that interfered with recording the roadrunner has turned out to be constant 24 hours a day. It's from some sort of small refinery or gas compression plant visible a mile or so away. There's also some other sort of noisy plant at the opposite end of the park, so I can't even aim my mic away from noise. In addition, it's been windy all the time, day and night, since we've gotten here. Early mornings aren't too bad, though.

Temperatures have risen steadily, with yesterday topping out in the upper 80's and today heading for a bit higher. The wind is from the southeast, right off the Gulf of Mexico, and carries a heavy load of moisture.

Yesterday morning we drove to the nearby community of Salineño. A road there goes down to the Rio Grande, but we saw very little there. A short distance--maybe 100 ft--back up the road on the right some people from Michigan (the De Winds) have their motor home on a piece of natural riverside habitat, which they apparently own. They seem to have an electrical and a sewer hookup, but have to haul their water--lots of bottles standing outside. They've established a major bird-feeding operation and welcome all comers. Their place is in all the bird-finding literature. It's such a big operation that instead of a single guest book, they have half a dozen, with sections for each state. When I signed for us, I found Roy Poucher's name back in November, when he was there with his tour group.

We sat for quite a while in the yard chairs they've placed outside their motor home for their guests, watching the birds coming and going. Most of the action was a bit out of range for photos at were both the Altamira and Audubon's orioles, a probable Brown-crested Flycatcher (had all the field marks, but Kaufman's "Lives of North American Birds" says they don't arrive til May--but I think I saw it in April last time I was here, and I know I've seen it in Lukeville, Arizona, in April). A Bewick's Wren was popping in and out of a nest cavity right in front of us and singing a variety of songs--one for a long time, then another in typical Bewick's fashion. One was quite different from those we hear in the west, but the others were typical. I got my tape recorder and recorded the unusual song, but with wind and people talking in the background. Quite a few Chipping and Lincoln's Sparrows were present, and people were identifying one Clay-colored. It was probably correct, but a little too far away to suit me.

We got back to the trailer in time for lunch. Most of the rest of the day I spent indoors, going out to sit in my chair only after it was cooling off in the late afternoon. Around 6:00 I took Toby for a long walk on the park roads, which have very little traffic. (I'd done that the day before, too.) Staying in the middle of the road keeps him out of mischief, of which he can find plenty. He has to pick up everything he catches sight of and carry it along until he finds something else!

One of the campers, who stays all winter here, has established and maintains a couple of birdwatching blinds, with the aid of park staff. One is right by the restrooms in the full hookup section not far from our site. There you look through small holes in a solid wood fence. The birds are pretty far away and no different from the ones coming right out in the open at our site. They've placed a tent-blind inside the wall for photographers, but it, too, is too far away from the attracting features for anything very good. Another observation blind is near the perennially closed "recreation building." It's newer and very nice. It's covered and draped with netting with camouflage strips attached. Holes to peek through are placed

at eye level, and this time they're close enough to the action to really see the birds. Water, seed, and orange halves are placed here and there. Jim has spent several hours there today. Altamira Orioles, Northern Bobwhites, and "dark-lored" White-crowned Sparrows (probably leucophrys here, not oriantha) are present. Because all the peepholes are at adult eye-level, photos of the ground-dwellers are not at a very pleasing angle, but those of the orioles are nice.

While Jim was in his blind this morning, I drove around and explored some of the other features of the park, especially one area where there was a view of the shoreline. I added a few gulls and one probable Black-bellied Plover (basic plumage) to my area list.

I decided not to drive back to Zapata for the White-collared Seed-eater. I can't see wasting 60 miles (round trip) of gasoline on that sort of a quest. It won't be the end of the world if I never see that bird.

Jim has spent all three afternoons we've been here outside in the heat (in the shade of the ramada over the picnic table) waiting patiently for an interesting subject--and chasing away the hordes of Red-winged Blackbirds, Brown-headed Cowbirds, and Great-tailed Grackles that descend from time to time. We asked the De Winds why they weren't at their feeding station, and they told us with hand gestures they'd used their slingshot so many times that the birds had learned to stay away. Jim's patience is incredible, and he's had precious little reward for his time. He was pleased with a Green Jay that posed nicely for him, and keeps hoping he can get the Inca Doves doing their wing-up threat display, showing their chestnut wing-linings.

We've been having problems with huge wood bees getting inside the truck when we've left the windows open in the late afternoon and have now figured out why. Jim carries a log with him that he uses as a photo prop and places birdseed and Magic Meal (cornmeal & fat) in a groove in it. The bees are all around it all the time, and Jim says they liked it at home, too, so it may have pheromones (or something) from that activity.

Most interesting of all, the roadrunner stakes out the log and catches the wood bees. Unfortunately it runs off into the bushes to eat them, so we can't watch that behavior. The roadrunner nearly always has something dangling from its beak; a piece of dried-up black electrical tape is one example. The trash doesn't seem to hinder its bee-catching skills, though. I've decided Toby should be renamed "Roadrunner." He, too, usually has something in his mouth that he's picked up--until he comes to something better. And he'd certainly like to be permitted to run pell mell down the road.

Two places we visited in this area last time we've not done this time. Chapeño is a tiny community with an extremely scroungy RV park, where the owner feeds Brown Jays. We've heard from others that the Brown Jays haven't been seen there recently, so we saw no reason to go over there. He charges a hefty fee to visit his place. The other birds are no different from Salineño. The other place is the overlook of the spillway for Falcon Dam. That we learned has been closed for security reasons. The people who told us about it had a canoe and said they had paddled clear up to that area from where they launched it and encountered no signs telling them to keep out. Our wonderful Department of Homeland Security at work!

We'll probably leave here tomorrow, but Jim wants a little more time in the blind over by the rec center. Maybe the Audubon's Oriole will come in. Light is best there in the morning. Then we'll head for Brownsville--130 miles away.

Breezy Lake RV Park, Brownsville, TX
Thurs. & Fri., March 30 & 31, 2006

No entry.

Breezy Lake RV Park, Brownsville, TX
3:00 p.m., Sat., April 1, 2006

The previous two days have been uneventful. On Thursday Jim spent a couple of hours in the blind by the rec room. A Green-tailed Towhee that all sorts of people have been looking for showed up, but he didn't care about it. The Audubon's Oriole didn't. So he finally gave up, and we left. The drive was pretty slow. The first part went through several towns with lots of traffic signals and local traffic. When we came to the freeway, there were innumerable construction zones with narrow lanes and concrete barriers on the sides of them. To top it off we were driving into a 20-30 mph headwind off at about a 45 degree angle, which made driving difficult. We were really glad to get to our destination.

I had picked out three possible RV parks not far from the Sabal Palm Audubon Sanctuary, which I wanted to visit. Two (Rio and Paul's) were under the same ownership, based on having a combined ad in Trailer Life Guide. We drove into one of them, Rio RV Park. Despite the "OPEN" sign on the office window, the door was locked. So we took the liberty of driving around the place. The lots were sort of crowded and there was little shade, but it was not impossible. Since we couldn't rouse a proprietor, we decided to look at the third one, Breezy Lake. It turned out to be very nice. As soon as we drove in, we could see a large lake on the right with that southeast wind blowing right across it. The sites were much more spacious and we requested and were given a shady site. The lake turned out to be part of a resaca (oxbow lake where Rio Grande used to flow), of which Brownsville has many.

The trees we're parked under looked like large pines with limber, drooping needles up to a foot long. I remembered seeing something like that in my tree book. When I looked it up, I discovered that they were Australian-Pines, not a true pine, but a Casuarina. The "needles" are actually twigs and have segments about one-half inch in length. On the tips of many of them are tiny brush-like, brown bundles of what are probably tiny flowers. Apparently this introduced species has expanded into the wild in some area, hence its appearance in the book. It's really a pretty tree and gives good shade.

Yesterday was devoted to necessities. Our campsite turned out to be right across the park road from the laundry room. Since it's open all the time, I got in there at 5:00 a.m. and filled all four washing machines before other people would want to use them. Best of all, there was a nice clothes line outside, so I could dry some of my things there, especially the sheets and my T-shirts. I love the nice outdoorsy smell of fresh laundry. It's been interesting to observe that the clothesline is very popular. There's nearly always someone's laundry on it. I used about one-fourth of the line space, and by the end of the morning it was nearly all full. Too bad other RV parks don't provide this service. It saves people money and why use all that fuel to dry clothes in a machine?

After the laundry was taken care of, there was shopping (Super Wal-Mart just a mile away), refrigerator defrosting, dog-washing, and finally bed-making. By then it was early afternoon, and it was hot and I was tired, so that was it for the day!

This morning we arrived at the Sabal Palm Sanctuary at 7:00. I had read that the office opened at 9:00, but that you could walk around during daylight hours. It turned out that that means 7:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. now. We put our \$4.00 apiece (\$5.00 for nonmembers of National Audubon Soc.) in the place indicated, and set out down the trail. Sabal Palms are nearly extirpated in the U.S., and this is their last significant natural stand. The first part of the trail went through the heart of the grove. Very pretty, but not many birds. Later it came to a resaca, where there were quite a few ducks, but nothing special. The best were Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks. Also Neotropic Cormorants. There is a very nice observation and photo blind on a small pier out into the resaca, where the birds could be observed at close range. Masked Ducks sometimes occur there, but not today.

Continuing on, I met some people who had the scoop on where to look for the Gray-crowned Yellowthroat, which is resident here and not dependable anywhere else. They had seen a Common Yellowthroat in one of the two places they had been told to look, but not a Gray-crowned. I continued on and also saw the Common--and heard its call, too. (According to National Geographic Guide (NG), the Gray-crowned's call and song are completely different.) I continued on to the other spot, where the habitat looked more like that described in NG for the bird--tall grassland with scattered shrubs. I sat there on a bench in the shade for at least an hour hoping one would sound off or appear. After getting lost a couple of times, Jim finally arrived with his scenic camera, which I used to take a few habitat shots of the area.

When I got back to the center around 10:30, I learned that the bird had been seen in both areas in the last couple of days. I really wondered about the first place (by the resaca at the end of the boardwalk). Could people have been applying a heavy dose of wishful thinking and mistaken the Common Yellowthroat for the Gray-crowned? Anyway, now that I know where I'm supposed to look, I intend to go back tomorrow morning and head right for the two spots, which aren't far from one another. Daylight saving time starts tomorrow, so I can get there even earlier than today.

While in the Visitors Center I picked up a free "Bird and Butterfly Map of the Rio Grande Valley," published in 2004. From then on it was the main map I used. It's a nice large scale and is more up-to-date than the Coastal Birding Trail maps, which still have Governor George W. Bush's face on them. The only complaint I had was that there were no mileages between intersections indicated. I solved the problem fairly well by noting a few mileages on road signs and then writing the figures on my map. Then I could compare other segments with those known ones.

We made a fruitless search for an advertised fish place for lunch--apparently no longer where it was when the RV park brochure was printed. So we came back to the trailer, getting here around noon. Lunch and naps followed. That hot, humid wind really takes the starch out of me. I could never live here! Many of the snowbirds (winter Texans from Michigan, Ontario, Minnesota, Manitoba, etc.) have left, but a lot are still around, and some of the park models and mobile homes look like they're lived in all year. I talked to one man who had been here a couple of months and planned to come back next year. He'd never heard of Sabal Palm Sanctuary, but probably wouldn't be interested, since he's not a birder.

Sabal Palm Sanctuary is very nice, with well-kept trails--maybe two or three miles of them total. I may explore some of the botanical ones tomorrow--after I find or give up on the bird. I wish this awful wind would calm down, though. Recording is impossible, and

migrants don't make landfall in any concerted fashion when it's like this. However, we keep hearing about fronts (and also tornados) in Kansas and Indiana, so maybe we should be thankful we're south of that belt. [That weather continued up north for the duration of this diary installment and shows no signs of letting up. Apparently the storms that are bringing all that rain to southern California are continuing east and clashing with the warm, moist air from the Gulf of Mexico, with disastrous results.]

High temperatures have been in the mid-80's here. I'm sure the wind crossing the lake has a cooling effect, for it's been several degrees higher officially in Brownsville. Also, we're on the southeast side of town--closer to the Gulf.

Adolph Thomaes Jr. County Park, Arroyo City, Cameron Co., TX **8:30 p.m., Sun., April 2, 2006**

Yes, the name of the park is spelled correctly.

Daylight savings time started last night, so 7:00 a.m., when Sabal Palms Sanctuary opens, came an hour earlier. With sunrise at 7:20, we were able to get there about that time, and I made a beeline for the place where the Gray-crowned Yellowthroat is usually seen. Jim decided the bird was probably a lost cause for photography; he hates to stalk warblers. So he headed for the duck blind.

I had no sooner reached the end of the boardwalk where the bird was supposed to be than I saw a small form dart from one shrub to one right in front of me. A few seconds of binocular-peering, and I had my quarry! Then, to top it off, he hopped atop a bare, dead shrub and started to sing, not 15 feet from me. As luck would have it, the wind of the day hadn't started yet, so I was able to get excellent recordings. Despite NG's description of it as being a warble, which led me to believe it would be very different from the Common Yellowthroat's song, I could definitely hear a similarity between the two songs. The Gray-crowned's song just seemed to have a few extra syllables in each "witchity." Some Commons are a bit like this, others simpler. Anyway, I had confirmed it visually--very well. [A few days later, when we were with Bill Clark, he remarked that Gray-crowned Yellowthroats farther down in Mexico do sound quite different from Commons. He thought this bird might be a hybrid, even though its shape and plumage features are perfect for Gray-crowned, not Common. I told him that warblers are noted for mimicking one another without necessarily hybridizing, a fact he did not know. Luis Baptista had told me this, and I've since seen it in print.]

I called Jim on the radio, and told him I really thought this bird could be photographed, so he came. I was proven to be right. That bird flew back and forth, sang, and perched for long periods of time right out in the open only 10-15 ft from where Jim stood. He even finished a roll and changed film right in front of the singing bird, then took some more shots. He could even move left and right to get a better angle on the bird, and it still didn't flush. I wonder if it's because so many people have looked at it. Anyway, we were ecstatic about the experience. It was a lifer for both of us.

Three kingfisher species were present and high profile there today: Green, Ringed, and Belted. I got quick recordings of both of the special ones, but I suspect only those of the Green will be much good. The Ringed flew by very fast, and the wind was up by then.

After photographing the warbler, Jim returned to the blind, where he resumed shooting the ducks, etc. He felt good about the images he got of male and female Mottled Ducks. Others we have are pretty distant. It was amazing how many northern-breeding

ducks were still present. Blue-winged Teal were the most numerous, but there were also Northern Shoveler, Northern Pintail, American Wigeon, Gadwall, Ruddy Duck, Ring-necked Duck, and Redhead, but no Mallard.

There were both Pied-billed and Least Grebes. I hoped the Least would come close enough for Jim to get good pictures, but they always stayed far away. It was instructive to compare them from a distance. In addition to their smaller size, I found that the Least Grebes usually had their rear ends fluffed up like Eared Grebes, while the Pied-billeds did not. The smaller bills and orange eyes were impossible to see with binoculars. I could sort of make out the differences in dark-light pattern on the faces.

We were very impressed by the way National Audubon has laid out its trail and blind system for both the birds and their human observers. One section of the resaca has the trail concealed behind trees with only one place to view it, the blind, which is about 25 ft out in the water. The approach to the blind and the blind itself are walled and roofed, so the people inside are hard for the birds to see. The blind itself has nice big windows and is roughly a 15-ft-diameter circle. Sometimes Jim stood back from the opening in order to shoot close-up birds. All around the blind at a perfect distance for photography, they've placed logs and brush, which many of the birds like to perch on.

About 100 yds. beyond the portion of the resaca with the blind, is a berm across the resaca to a trail on the other side. Cutting off from the berm is a boardwalk over the water along the next section of resaca. This eventually becomes a trail right next to the water. This portion is devoid of ducks. In fact, when we went there first thing in the morning, we flushed some Blue-winged Teal out of there toward the portion next to the blind.

This was my first real visit to Sabal Palm Preserve. The other time, I'd driven there from miles away, arrived in the middle of the day with little time to explore. Furthermore the trails were extremely muddy and the day was muggy and the place was teeming with mosquitos. So we really only looked around the visitors center and left.

We finally tore ourselves away around 10:30 and went back to the trailer and had lunch. Then we drove the 35 miles or so north to Adolph Thomae County Park, which is actually a narrow enclave at the north end of Laguna Atascosa NWR, but not connected with the rest of the refuge by road. Linda Allen and Carole Sunlight had recommended the park highly as a place to attract birds to our site. We tried to get the site they had, #25 on the end of the row, but it was occupied. We're in #23, which really is fine, too. [When #25 vacated the next day, Jim elected to stay where we are.] Most of the sites are along the Arroyo Colorado, which looks like a sluggish river or tidal inlet from the nearby Laguna Madre. (Laguna Madre separates South Padre Island from the mainland.) The loop we're in is a little bit away from the water and backs up to the thornscrub of Laguna Atascosa.

Our site is somewhat shaded by large mesquite trees, but still gets plenty of midday sun. When we got here at 2:00, the temperature was 92', with a steamy, 20-30 mph wind. Jim really got hot unhooking and setting up his bird attractions. I went indoors and turned on the A/C right away. Still it took an hour or so to cool off the bedroom of the trailer. It's now 9:00 and around 75' outside--not supposed to cool below 70' before morning. We're just not used to this type of steaminess. Last night we slept with the A/C on, but the noise and the air blowing on us, plus the stuffiness, kept us from sleeping very well. Tonight I have all the bedroom windows open and a fan on. Maybe that'll work better. Jim has gone to bed and says it's fine.

The sites in this park have full hookups. They also have restrooms and showers, but Jim took one look at the latter and came back and took a shower in the trailer. He said they

were filthy dirty and covered with obscene graffiti. This place is popular, especially on weekends, with local folks fishing. Boat launching is possible. We timed our arrival for Sunday to avoid the worst of it, but Linda had told us that it was always pretty quiet in the row of sites away from the water, where we are. They stayed a long time here and liked it a lot. [We ended up staying a week here, and found Saturday night not to be bad at all. Even though all the waterfront sites were occupied, the people were quiet and well-behaved. No loud music.]

So far only a few birds have come to our setup: Northern Cardinal, Lincoln's Sparrow, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, and, best of all, Great Kiskadee. Jim probably got his best photos yet of that bird. It liked the water drip and came in for a drink a couple of times. The birds were used to drinking in the area because the site next to ours was dripping. Jim tightened the faucet and put up his own water drip. He'll have to remember to start it dripping again when we leave.

This place has no pay phone, and the cell phone signal is too weak to do Pocketmail on. The guy in the entry booth said we'd have to drive back down the road to "the restaurant" to find a pay phone. Jim didn't ask how far. Strange not to have a pay phone, but I suppose the type of people who use this place would vandalize one if it was there.

Arroyo City is really not a city in the usual sense. It's actually several miles of vacation homes along the Arroyo Colorado, most of which seemed unoccupied as we drove past. We saw one small grocery/hardware store, but that was all. We didn't notice the restaurant. If I had realized how poorly equipped the place was, I'd have made a last trip to Wal-Mart for bread, lettuce, and a few other perishables, but we'll have to see what the local store has--or else drive farther afield if we stay more than a couple of days.

Enough nattering on. Better quit before everyone gets bored.

Adolph Thomae Jr. Park, TX **8:15 p.m., Mon., April 3, 2006**

We pretty much stayed in the park today. It turned out the post office that Jim wanted is at least a dozen miles away, so he decided his mail didn't have to go right away. The park office was gracious about letting us call Pocketmail's 800 number to check our e-mail, so we only had to make a foray to the grocery store. The bread turned out to be white or wheat, and the wheat, although Sara Lee, was just about as soft and white as "white." The lettuce was almost rotten, so they gave me a head, and I threw away half of it. They expected more in the afternoon, but I'm all right for a while.

This morning I had Jim take me to the end of the park road and I walked back (1.2 miles). Part of the time I walked along the shoreline of the Arroyo Colorado, where there was an interesting assortment of herons, shorebirds, etc. Tricolored and Little Blue Herons were in high breeding and really pretty. They were quite tame and let me get very close before flying off. Jim will want to try for them another morning. [He never got them, because people were fishing in the area when he tried.] The light was perfect. The sandpipers were just ones that are common at home: Spotted, Willet, Long-billed Curlew. Royal and Caspian Terns, Laughing (lots and very noisy) and Herring Gulls, also one or two immature Brown Pelicans were also present.

Part of the time the road went through rather open thornscrub, where Mockingbirds ruled. It was fun to listen to them mimic the local birds, especially the Great Kiskadee.

A little farther along it became more wooded, with lots of mesquites. I heard a couple of Bewick's Wrens singing the same types of unusual (by my western standards) songs I'd heard at Salineño. I'll have to go back and try to record them.

The walk, although only a little over a mile, really pooped me out. It was very hot and humid, and I was glad to hole up in the air-conditioned trailer for the rest of the day.

Jim was really a dedicated photographer. Except for a short nap right after lunch, he spent the entire day in his blind, which was in the sun during the hottest (ca. 90') part of the day. I was able to see all the action from right inside the comfortable trailer. He was especially pleased finally to get excellent shots of the Great Kiskadee. On all previous trips, his photos had been angled up at one perched somewhere a bit far away silhouetted against the sky. This time the bird was on pleasant perches against greenery or at his water drip. Occasionally an Olive Sparrow came in and showed its greenish iridescence off perfectly. In addition to the birds listed yesterday, a Black-crested Titmouse discovered the scene late in the day. Even though he already has nice photos of that bird from other trips, I noticed his flash going off pretty often at that little cutie.

The Lincoln's Sparrows were his shills, though, for there were nearly always three of them around. Once I saw four, but one of the threesome quickly sent it on its way. It would be interesting to know the sex of the various birds, but of course there's no visual difference.

Tomorrow morning we're going hawk-watching with Bill Clark. He's promised us Aplomado Falcon and White-tailed Hawk, but said the mice he tried to use to trap some hawks for a recent local festival died in the heat, so he can't do that for us. Thus photos may or may not be possible.

Adolph Thomae Co. Park, TX
Tues., Apr. 4, 2006

No entry.

Adolph Thomae Co. Park, TX
8:45 p.m., Wed., April 5, 2006

We were so busy yesterday that I didn't have time to write up our activities.

Monday evening right at dusk I started hearing an ascending, then descending call, "wheoor" over and over about every two or three seconds. I had no idea what it was, but suspected it might be a Pauraque. The wind was pretty strong, but I recorded it as best I could. At dawn the next morning it was singing again and the wind had died down, but people were driving by with their fishing boats, and there were also boats passing in the Arroyo Colorado not far beyond, so that detracted from the recording. Tonight just at dusk I again heard the sound very close and tried to record it out the window of the trailer. Again the wind marred it as it whipped through the mesquite trees right outside. Maybe I'll get it really well before we leave. I looked up a description of the Pauraque's sound, and it's a pretty good match, although I can't hear the two soft intro notes that the book mentions. Maybe if there was no wind I could. I haven't listened to a commercial recording of the bird yet, but am pretty sure that's what I'm hearing. This evening Jim put on his hearing aid and went outside and was able to hear it. It's a rather clear sound with only a slightly buzzy or reedy quality, so seems higher than it really is.

Yesterday we drove to the Laguna Atascosa NWR headquarters parking area to meet Bill Clark. He felt that would be a good safe place to leave his car. We had him drive our truck. It seemed easier than having him give Jim directions all the time. Jim rode in the back seat with all his cameras. Toby stayed home, cooped up in his kennel.

Although there are Aplomado Falcons and White-tailed Hawks breeding in the NWR, Bill took us to some better places he knew outside the refuge--between there and Brownsville in the coastal prairie. I took very detailed notes about where those places were, but decided it might not be prudent to put them in the diary on the internet. If any of my birding friends want the information, I'll be glad to share it with them personally. [Ask for file: clarkday.404]

In the course of the morning we were able to see three pairs of Aplomado Falcons (two near manmade nesting platforms) and one single. The latter was found by Jim from the back seat. Bill and I had been too busy yakking in the front to be paying attention, a fact Jim won't let me forget. It was on a fencepost less than 15 ft from the right edge of a dirt road we were driving. We were past it by the time Jim got Bill to stop the truck. He carefully got out the left side of the truck and was able to get a lot of shots peeking around the rear of the truck. The range was perfect, although he commented later that he wished he had taken his doubler off in order to get an even crisper shot. It still would have been a good sized image. He'd had his doubler on for the very distant ones we'd been seeing before that. I never got a good look at the bird, for I stayed in the truck so as not to spook it. That was good, for when Jim was through photographing it and I did get out, it immediately took flight. It did give me a nice look at the long-tailed silhouette of this unusual falcon. Another pair was courting and I was able to record their sounds, although there was also fairly loud traffic in the recording.

Bill spotted a pair of White-tailed Hawks on a low bush 100-200 yards out from a road against the sun. I put my scope on them, but the heat shimmer was so bad, I really couldn't have identified them myself. Bill knew they were there, and showed us the nest they used last year and will probably use again. It's in an old Chihuahuan Raven's nest in a very insignificant mesquite. In that area the mesquites are very widely spaced and not very big.

Aplomado Falcons used to nest regularly in south Texas, but habitat destruction for agriculture caused their extirpation. They were reintroduced in the late 1980s and are now fully reestablished (and countable by the ABA). They normally nest in old Chihuahuan Raven nests on yuccas, but when biologists visit the nests, they show predators, especially raccoons, where they are. Manmade nest platforms are popular with the birds and yield better success. The "old" model, which we saw first, is a platform with low walls on a couple of sides. The latest model is platform with some dowels protruding upward and supporting a second flat platform, which serves as a roof. Bill said the dowels are there to keep raccoons, etc., from having access to the nest. I asked him about the roof, for the other nest we'd seen didn't have one. He said the birds sometimes nest in old raven nests, but also can nest in palm trees farther south. There the nest might have a roof of palm fronds.

As a break from hawkwatching, Bill decided to try to locate some Tamaulipas Crows in Brownsville. He said they're no longer seen at the dump, where I saw them years ago in a driving rain. They're also no longer nesting at the NOAA weather office on the north side of the airport. We did look for them there and found only a single Chihuahuan Raven. (Bill thinks people who report them there are confusing them with the ravens.)

The newest place is on a short residential street, called Utah Street, but the street sign is no longer there. To get to the street, drive south on FM-511 about half a mile past the junction with Boca Chica Rd. (SR-4) to a flashing yellow light. Turn right. We found a flock of six perched on a wire near the end of the block. Bill had also seen them from the NOAA station flying around over some Australian-Pines behind a house at the end of the block.

The Tamaulipas Crow is considerably smaller than either a Chihuahuan Raven or an American Crow, the latter not being there at all. In fact, it looks more like a short-tailed Great-tailed Grackle than anything else, and is about that size. (There were lots of Grackles!) Bill said we were lucky to see them, for they hadn't been seen for some time. He reported them to TexBird's website that very afternoon.

We drove back up to Boca Chica Rd. and out it a short distance. There I got the only definitive look of the morning at a White-tailed Hawk. It was quite dark, but the wing shape was quite distinctive. Bill thought it might be a sub-adult, but it was only a short look at the bird in flight. I'd love to have seen an adult or have had a better look at any age perched. Jim got no photos.

The Aplomado Falcon was a lifer for both Jim and me. I had seen White-tailed Hawks and Tamaulipas Crows before, but not very well. Jim photographed the six crows from a distance, so I suppose he can count them, even though they'll only be silhouettes on a utility wire.

Other interesting birds of the morning were quite a few Harris's Hawks and several Gull-billed Terns--always foraging over dry, grassy fields, not wetlands.

In the evening we drove into Harlingen and went out to dinner with Bill. Afterwards we went back to his house, where he showed us his latest powerpoint presentation. He's convinced that the Harlan's Hawk is not just a subspecies of Red-tail and should be split off from it. He's trying to make a case for it. His program presented his reasoning. I found it quite interesting and learned a lot about the two birds and how variable they are, especially the Harlan's. More data, including DNA work is needed to complete the evidence, so I'll certainly be watching what happens in the next few years.

I also learned that any Red-tails in southern California with white throats have some Fuertes blood. Regular Western Red-tails have dark throats. That had always bothered me, for I'd read that their throats were dark, yet had seen lots with pale throats.

We were interested in Bill's backyard. He's only had the house a couple of years, having moved there from Virginia. He had all the lawn torn up and replaced it with mulch, a brush pile, a water drip, and an old palm trunk with woodpecker holes. I asked him what his landscaper thought of his ideas, and he said the man was from Jamaica and just did what he wanted without saying anything much. Various plants, some wanted and some weeds, are growing up through the mulch. Shading it all is a large oak tree. He also has birdseed and syrup feeders and is attracting a nice assortment of local birds. Included is trap for House Sparrows, which he uses to bait his hawk traps. It must be fun for him, since he lived in a condo in Virginia. The backyard requires no watering, but the front has another big tree and a nice lawn. That has to be watered, but has an automatic system--out of order right now. He does a lot of travel, but when he gets that fixed, the yard will take care of itself while he's away, with only regular mowing by a yard man. The house itself is nice and airy, with plenty of space for one person. Jim and I agreed it was the perfect place for him.

We got back to the trailer around 9:00.

This morning we decided to try to find the White-tailed Hawks and Aplomado Falcons again. Unfortunately the wind was blowing a gale again. (We were really lucky that yesterday was merely breezy.) I did hear a sound I couldn't identify. I got one lousy recording of it, I think, and will try to figure it out sometime. I wondered if it was possibly a Grasshopper Sparrow or even a Horned Lark sound. It was very hard to hear the details in the wind.

After our unsuccessful hawk search, we drove out to South Padre Island and looked over the birding spots there. Right at the end of the causeway on the right there is space for a couple of cars. Jim didn't feel we should stop there, but Bill AND and bird-finding literature had indicated it was OK and a good place for Reddish Egret. I found a white-morph one, but it flew off behind some mangroves before I could persuade Jim to get out and go look for it. He didn't want to even try because his longest lens has quit working, probably due to the humidity. At least, we hope that's all that's wrong with it, although I don't know what we can do about the humidity. He finally did get out with a shorter lens, but by then the bird had disappeared.

After that we drove north four miles on the main road on South Padre Island to the Convention Center, a garish yellow building more or less out by itself on the Laguna Madre side of the road. Near the building is a small patch of native plants, which is a noted migrant trap, but not today. There's also a nice boardwalk out through the fresh, then salt, marsh to the shore of the Laguna Madre. It passed through a variety of habitats in a very short distance. Lots of people were on it, only some of them birders, and the wind was blowing a gale by then (20-30 mph with gusts to 40, according to TV in the evening), so few marsh birds were out, and besides, it was almost noon and we were hungry. There were quite a few birds out on the shore--herons, skimmers, terns, gulls, shorebirds, etc. We're going back there first thing in the morning and spend some time there.

We took Toby with us today, so one of us had to stay in or near the truck all the time. We'll leave him in the trailer tomorrow.

Adolph Thomae Jr. Park, TX **9:00 p.m., Thurs., April 6, 2006**

Today was even windier and hotter than yesterday. According to the TV news, it was 93 degrees in Harlingen (somewhat cooler at South Padre Island, where we went) with winds of 20-30 mph, gusting to 40 mph. But for what we did, I don't think it was a handicap. The wind and heat were their worst in the afternoon.

This morning we got an early start and drove 50 minutes to South Padre Island and spent the morning at the Convention Center. I discovered that the ugly building isn't just yellow. From the water side, it also has lots of bright blue--plus one low wall that is bright fuchsia. Really garish and ugly, but in keeping with the surrounding beach resort area.

The wind had blown all night and was even getting stronger right after sunrise, when we arrived. It had changed from southeasterly to southerly. I checked the bushes near the buildings for any migrants, but didn't find anything. So we spent the morning on the boardwalk, especially out near the end of the longer leg. There was all sorts of action, and we could escape the worst of the wind by standing next to some low mangroves. Probably the best bird of the morning was the Gulf Coast form of the Clapper Rail. We heard them often and finally one came right out in the open and preened right in front of Jim's lens. Incidentally, his big lens suddenly decided to work again, so he was back in business. He

should have had a shorter lens for this bird; he said his photos may have too much bird in them.

A large flock of Black Skimmers hung out on the nearby beach, and when they decided to skim, the only moderately calm water was right in front of where we were standing, with perfect light from behind. Even though Jim has far too many Black Skimmer pictures, I know he took more. Also present and probably photographed were Tricolored Heron, Reddish Egret (dark morph close, white morph very far away), Sandwich and Royal Terns, Pied-billed Grebe, Sora. Jim also told me he took a photo of a sparrow, but didn't know what it was. That'll have to await the end of our trip when we look at the slides. (I won't let Jim shoot digital, for I can't face dealing with those images in planning workshops.)

Too far away for photos were three Roseate Spoonbills and a variety of shorebirds, which I identified with my scope: American Oystercatcher (one), lots of Long-billed Dowitchers still mainly in basic plumage, Sanderling (several), Piping Plover (several), Wilson's Plover (one), Black-bellied Plover (2 or 3 mainly in basic), Willet (a few--mostly flying over and calling loudly) and some anonymous peeps.

We wandered back and forth on the boardwalk from 7:30 to 11:00, watching the bird life change as the tide came in. I hadn't taken my tape recorder because of the wind. There's a noisy plant nearby, too. It looks like an electrical substation, but the sign says the water for the freshwater marsh is treated sewage, so maybe that's what it is. We didn't look at it very closely.

After we quit birding, we ate a forgettable lunch at a nearby coffee shop, then I did some extensive grocery shopping at Wal-Mart. By then the wind was so strong, especially whipping around the building, that I literally staggered as I walked across the parking lot to and from the store.

Again in the late afternoon, Jim spent several hours in his blind, hoping for more Couch's Kingbird photo opportunities, but the birds didn't make an appearance today. Maybe the wind? I stayed inside the cool trailer working on my embroidery and watching the birds through the window. It's been too unpleasant almost the entire trip so far to sit outside in my chair--first too cold, then too hot, and almost always too windy.

It's supposed to be even hotter (97') tomorrow, but not quite so windy. Guess we'll try again to relocate those hawks.

Adolph Thomaes Jr. Park, TX **8:40 p.m., Fri., April 7, 2006**

We drove the dirt road where Bill had showed us the Aplomado Falcons on Tuesday. Again we saw no sign of them. I guess Bill has a secret method of making them appear. There was almost no wind at first, and it never became very strong. I was able to hear the mystery sound of Wednesday's visit and record it. I'm fairly sure it's the rattle of an Eastern Meadowlark, but still the short, tonal note on the end is a bit of a surprise. The sound seemed to be coming from a spot from which more familiar Eastern Meadowlark songs and calls were also coming. I got a few more recordings of it and will check it out when I get home. It didn't do it very often. [The next day at Laguna Atascosa I again heard the same sound from an area where the only other sounds were from E. Meadowlarks.]

Cassin's Sparrows were very common. Although I have nice recordings from elsewhere of their songs, Jim has very few photos. When I saw one perched on a bush not far from the car and Jim photographing it, I tried luring it closer with a recording of its own

voice. It worked exceedingly well, and he came within 8 feet of me. Jim had to back up to get photos. He took quite a few, for he had trouble getting anything but a front view or a side view backlit. Finally, though, I think he got some excellent poses that showed the essential features of back, wings, and tail that distinguish it from Botteri's. Unfortunately I heard no Botteri's, although this is their range. We've only seen, photographed, and recorded this species in Arizona, and the Texas race is supposed to be slightly different.

We met a couple of birders peering through their scope at a sparrow and agonizing over whether it was a Botteri's. It was singing like crazy, so I quickly told them it was a Cassin's. They were just as happy with that, for it was a lifer.

It was 10:30 by the time we quit fooling around with the sparrows and trying to find the Aplomado Falcon. We had thought we'd make a quick run of the Laguna Atascosa tour road. But it was getting really hot and 16 miles of dirt road [turned out to be paved when we drove it the next day, but speed limit was 20 mph] didn't look very promising. So we headed back to the trailer, getting there around 11:15.

I spent the rest of the day inside, but Jim braved the 95' (or more) heat and sat in his blind most of the afternoon, hoping the Couch's Kingbird would come again, but the only time we saw it was while we were eating lunch. There was much less wind, merely a nice breeze, this afternoon. A "cold" front is supposed to come through tonight, bringing much drier air and temperatures about ten degrees cooler tomorrow. It was 72' for a low last night and is supposed to get down to 66' tonight. That will be welcome.

Tomorrow we'll drive that tour road at Laguna Atascosa.

Adolph Thomae Jr. County Park, TX

8:30 p.m., Sat., April 8, 2006

Another muggy, warm night, but suddenly just before dawn the wind, which had died down overnight, started coming strongly from the north. The front had come through, bringing with it a high temperature in the low 80s and much lower humidity. It was really a very pleasant day.

We drove the longer bayside tour route at Laguna Atascosa NWR--16 miles. Unfortunately we didn't see very much. There were some shorebirds on the edge of the Laguna Madre, but they were backlit against the morning sun and quite distant. I tried to scope a few flocks, but the wind shook my tripod so much that the scope was no better than the binoculars. I finally gave up and identified the easy ones by silhouette and added nothing I had not seen much better on South Padre Island yesterday.

I listened all along the road for a possible Botteri's Sparrow, but didn't even hear any Cassin's. The only birds in the grasslands were Eastern Meadowlarks. In the thornscrub I could hear a number of species, all of which are also in our campground and most of them coming to Jim's water and seed. All was not lost, for I took photos of the various habitats and can use them in workshops.

In the vicinity of the visitors center are all sorts of bird attractants--water, grapefruit halves, seed, etc., The area also has lots of native shrubs and trees and is very inviting. Again I saw nothing not in our campground except Chachalacas, but really didn't spend a lot of time there. Probably should have, but it was getting late by then.

At the end of the morning, I told Jim we might as well drive the short spur road west from the visitors center to an overlook of the Laguna Atascosa itself, a large body of dirty-looking (atascosa) water. He was getting bored and tired of the whole thing by then and

wasn't too anxious to go. Out at the viewpoint, I told him he could take a nap in the truck and I'd walk Toby back along the road for 15 minutes. Then he could come and pick us up. Our radios aren't working worth anything, so we're not using them. How I wished I had one, for a juvenile White-tailed Hawk was soaring just above the treetops, then high, then down above the treetops again. When he finally came to get me, the bird was very high again, and it never came back down--just drifted off. It seemed to be associating with a small group of Turkey Vultures. I wonder if that is a habit of theirs, for it seems to me I'd seen the one we saw with Bill along with a few TVs. Of course, TVs are everywhere. This bird really made my day, for it was by far the best look I've ever had of the species. I was just disappointed that Jim wasn't there to get photos. They'd have been great.

When we finished, it was close to noon, and Jim realized we were getting low on gas. This area is very undeveloped--mostly agriculture--so we probably had to detour 20-25 miles to get to a gas station in Los Fresnos. Afterwards we ate lunch at a Dairy Queen, then headed back to the trailer 25 miles away.

This was the first time we've left Toby in the truck for an extended period of time, with opportunity to get into things. It was a nice cool day, and we left the windows generously cracked to catch the brisk crosswind. Inside the restaurant we had a window table and could see Toby and monitor his activities. He stayed in his little bed the entire time. Occasionally he would rise up and bark for a short while, especially when people came and went, then he'd settle back down. Basically a good boy.

So far in south Texas we've seen essentially no spring migrants heading north--just lingering winter birds and residents. I said to Jim as we drove back this afternoon that maybe the weak front that had passed would have slowed the migration of something and it would be in our site when we got back. That northerly headwind certainly should be a deterrent. We were thrilled to have that wish come true in the form of a single Yellow-breasted Chat. It came in to Jim's water drip repeatedly all afternoon and drank and drank. It wasn't until very late in the day that it decided to take a bath, too. I looked up the wintering range of the bird and it looks like the closest place is about 200 miles south of the US border in Mexico. So this was truly a migrant. For Jim getting those pictures sort of made up for missing the White-tailed Hawk.

Yesterday when it was super-hot, the Green Jays were in and out of our site all afternoon. In between visits to the water, they'd sit in the trees with their bills open, gaping or panting. Today, when it was nice and cool, we never saw them once. The Couch's Kingbirds have never come back either.

We've heard the Pauraques nearly every night--most any time from just after dusk to the middle of the night to just before dawn. They sound off for several minutes, then quiet down. I finally got an excellent recording one evening of one right outside the trailer window. There was absolutely no wind or other extraneous noises--the kind of sound I try to get, but rarely do. [As I was editing this account, I finally took the time to listen to the recording on Stokes Eastern tape. It was a perfect match. The "one or more low 'pur'notes" mentioned in NG turned out to be a single barely perceptible introductory "p" sound, which I had been hearing all the time.]

It was so pleasant that we were able to do without the A/C all afternoon. I sat outside in my chair for only the second time on the trip. Toby fussed a bit, but I had my chair right next to the trailer window with the couch just inside. I put a bunch of pillows on the couch for him to lie on, so he could see me all the time. This kept him from whimpering, as he did when I sat outside at Falcon State Park. There I was 50 ft away, and seeing me

far away out the window really disturbed the boy. He just wouldn't stop whimpering, so we had to put him in his kennel where he couldn't see me.

South Texas term for speed bump: "Road Hump" We've seen it on signs several places. They also use "Speed Bump."

Adolph Thomaes Co. Park, TX

8:00 a.m., Sun., April 9, 2006

Despite the icky johns, we've really been happy the past week in this park. The waterfront sites were all full last night, and there was a unit in site 25, two down from us where Carole and Linda stayed. Even though the waterfront sites weren't too far from us, there was no objectionable noise. It just seemed to be family groups here for the fishing from the shore and the two piers. There's also a boat-launch area, but it's a mile from the camping area. It's really the only place now in the Lower Rio Grande Valley where you can camp in a natural setting. It has full hookups. Bentsen State Park used to be great, but it no longer allows camping, except for hike-ins.

I just got back from taking Toby for a long walk trying to see if any interesting migrants came in overnight. The only new species I found was several Black-and-white Warblers, but they could have been here all along. They winter in the southern US. Jim is sitting in his blind for an hour or so before we take off for a 200+ mile drive north to Goose Island SP near Rockport. This means we'll be leaving the Lower Rio Grande Valley and its special birds and seems like a good place to cut off this installment of my diary. So far Jim has photographed that nice chat again and is working on a thrush of some sort that's lurking in the bushes.

9:15 a.m. The thrush finally came in. It's an Olive-backed Swainson's, and he "bagged it."