

BIRDING THE TEXAS LOWER RIO GRANDE VALLEY!

November 16-24, 2026

A birding tour organized by Seven Ponds Nature Center

THE VALLEY. Two words that conjure classic images in birders' minds: Green Jay, Plain Chachalaca, Great Kiskadee, Clay-colored Thrush, Green Kingfisher, Olive Sparrow, Long-billed Thrasher, Altamira Oriole... the list goes on and on. The Lower Rio Grande Valley is where east meets west, where north meets south, where Mexican species regularly show up on U.S. soil. A place, as author Pete Dunne notes in his book *The Feather Quest*, "Where check marks grow on trees!"



Join us for a late-fall trip to this special place, which regularly shows up on top ten of lists of U.S. birding destinations. The wide variety of habitats in the Lower Rio Grande Valley – including desert scrub, riparian woodlands, tropical forest, coastal shoreline and estuaries, and others – attracts one of the greatest diversities of birds in North America: over 520 species have been documented in the Valley. We will visit such hotspots as Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park, Salineño Wildlife Sanctuary, Estero Llano Grande State Park, South Padre Island, Sabal Palm Sanctuary, Quinta Mazatlan, Laguna Atascosa NWR, Santa Ana NWR, and others. We'll spend both a day and an evening with a guided walk at famed Santa Margarita Ranch. A road trip up the coast to Aransas National Wildlife Refuge will give us the opportunity to see Whooping Cranes on their wintering grounds. These hotspots will give us access to a wide variety of habitats and put us in contact with upwards of 200 species of birds in November.

TOUR ITINERARY

Our daily activities will be flexible based on species we've seen to date and recent bird reports, but the following daily outline provides a preliminary plan of how we will spend our days. Our plans are subject to change based on rare bird sightings, weather conditions, and road closures. Note: the birds listed are not intended to be an exhaustive list – just a sampling of what may be found at each location.

DAY 1 – Monday, November 16 – Arrival in McAllen; shuttle to hotel; dinner & parrots: Plan your arrival in McAllen by 3:00 PM, take the complimentary hotel shuttle to our hotel and check-in. We'll have an early dinner then head out for some birding nearby. Weather permitting, we'll search for local flocks of either Red-crowned Amazons or Green Parakeets coming to roost at sunset.



DAY 2 – Tuesday, November 17 – Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park, Edinburg Scenic Wetlands: Bentsen's extensive thorn forest was slowly changing to thorn scrub due to altered flood regime. A massive flood in 2010 inundated the park for four months, hurrying the process. It remains a gem for birders to explore, in part because it is closed to vehicles. We'll start at the new park headquarters amidst lush gardens of native vegetation before venturing to the feeders at the Nature Center. We'll hope for an active morning with Plain Chachalaca, Green Jay, Clay-colored Thrush, Altamira Oriole, and so much more. We'll bird our way into the park, in search of forest birds like Olive Sparrow and Long-billed Thrasher. After lunch we'll visit the Edinburg Scenic

Wetlands, where we'll start working on sorting out Neotropic and Double-crested Cormorant, hope for some Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, and perhaps – if we're lucky – a diminutive Green Kingfisher!

Night trip to Santa Margarita Ranch for Mottled Owl: After dinner we will head west to the Santa Margarita Ranch for some nocturnal birding. Our target species will be Mottled Owl, a forest owl native to Central and South America which has made the ranch its home since 2023. This is the only Mottled Owl currently in the U.S. and is only the second of its kind to ever be found in the states (the first was near Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park in 1983).

DAY 3 – Wednesday, November 18 – Sabal Palm Sanctuary, Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge: Today we'll start at Sabal Palm Sanctuary, where one of the last natural stands of sabal palm forest is found; this habitat was estimated at 40,000 acres historically, now we have less than 80 acres in the USA. Sabal Palm Sanctuary has a system of resacas (oxbow lakes) surrounded by forest, and many of the area



specialty birds are found here, in case we have missed anything! We'll spend the afternoon at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, the refuge with the longest bird list of any NWR! We'll bird the forested headquarters for Altamira Oriole and Green Jay, scan the freshwater Laguna Atascosa for a spectacle of waterfowl, coots, and wading birds.

DAY 4 – Thursday, November 19 – Salineño Wildlife

Preserve, Falcon State Park: This morning we'll be up early for our drive an hour and a half west to Salineño Wildlife Preserve, a famous birding hotspot right on the Rio Grande. The feeding station is managed by volunteers who cater to the hordes of colorful birds dominated by Green Jay, Altamira Oriole, and Great Kiskadee. Many other species visit the feeders, and we'll look for Audubon's and perhaps a Hooded Oriole as well as birds on the river, including the massive and loud Ringed Kingfisher. If we're very lucky, we may see a Red-billed Pigeon or Muscovy Duck fly by! In recent years, the tiny Morelet's Seedeater has wintered in the reeds along the river, and we'll hope for a calm day to look for it. Gray Hawks patrol the river's edge. At nearby Falcon State Park, we'll look for desert species in the extensive brush, including Verdin, Cactus Wren, Black-throated Sparrow, and Pyrrhuloxia.



DAY 5 – Friday, November 20 – Estero Llano Grande State Park, Santa Ana National

Wildlife Refuge: Beautiful Estero Llano Grande State Park opened in 2006 with a network of trails, wetlands, and a forested tropical zone. We'll spend time looking for roosting Common Pauraque along the trails, birds visiting the birding blind, and wintering warblers in the tropical zone. Santa Ana's 2000 acres of wetlands and Spanish moss festooned forest hosts a wide diversity of birds including the diminutive Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet. We'll walk up the Tree Tower to get a view over the extensive forest to Mexico.

DAY 6 – Saturday, November 21 – Santa Margarita Ranch: Santa Margarita Ranch is a ~900 acre working family ranch (cattle) along the Rio Grande in Roma, Texas. Located about 1.5 hours west of McAllen, this ranch is well known for its breeding populations of south Texas specialty birds such as Brown Jay, Red-billed Pigeon, Rose-throated Becard, Hook-billed Kite, and Morelet's Seedeater. Site access is restricted to guided trips only, as there is no public access to the ranch.

DAY 7 – Sunday, November 22 – Aransas National Wildlife Refuge for Whooping Cranes and more: Today we will venture out of the Valley, up the Gulf Coast to Rockport. Once there, we will board the Skimmer, operated by Rockport Birding Adventures, for a *Whooping Crane* and





Coastal Birding Tour. Our target bird will be the magnificent Whooping Crane, whose entire world population winters in the Texas Gulf Coast area – mostly in Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. By 1941, the world's population of wild Whooping Cranes had been reduced to 21 birds. Through intensive conservation and management efforts, the population has steadily risen to its current level of ~600, but the Whooping Crane is still one of the rarest birds in North America. Along with the Whooping Cranes we should see a nice variety of shorebirds and waders.

DAY 8 – Monday, November 23 – South Padre Island and vicinity: We'll start out looking for the strikingly marked Aplomado Falcon in the extensive coastal prairies east of Harlingen before continuing on to South Padre Island and the adjacent Laguna Madre. We'll explore the lengthy boardwalks of the South Padre Island Bird and Nature Center, hoping to see or hear Clapper Rail, Roseate Spoonbill, Snowy and Reddish Egret, Willet, Royal Tern, Sandwich Tern, and more. We'll make a few stops to look for coastal birds including Black Skimmer, Gull-billed Tern, Wilson's Plover, American Oystercatcher, and raptors including White-tailed and Harris's Hawk.



DAY 9 – Tuesday, November 24 – Departure from McAllen: Plan your departure for any time today. Take the complimentary hotel shuttle to the nearby McAllen Airport. Hotel check-out is 11:00 AM.

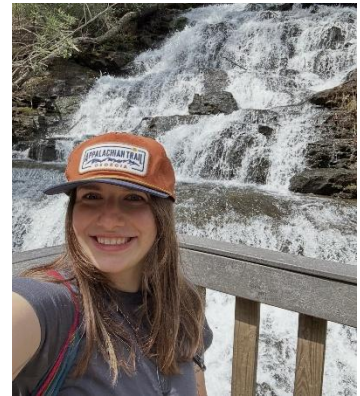


TOUR LEADERS



Daryl Bernard is a long-time birder and amateur naturalist who loves being outdoors and embraces every opportunity to share nature with others. He enjoys organizing and leading trips and tours and strives to ensure that every participant has a thoroughly memorable experience. Daryl has organized and led numerous birding field tours throughout North America, many local birding trips in Michigan, and bird walks for Seven Ponds as well as birding festivals. He has been to the Lower Rio Grande Valley several times and considers it one of his favorite birding destinations. Daryl is the Birding Field Tour Leader for Seven Ponds Nature Center in southeast Michigan.

Madison Christol is a Naturalist and Land Steward at Seven Ponds and has been involved in the planning and leading of Natural History Field Tours for several years. She currently leads the monthly Bird Walk program which explores hotspots in Southeast Michigan. Madison also frequently creates and teaches bird-focused programs for local birding groups, garden clubs, libraries, and nature center visitors. Madison earned a B.S.F.R. in Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management from the University of Georgia's Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources. She is excited to share the magic of the Lower Rio Grande Valley with everyone.



ACCOMMODATIONS

Lodging for the entire tour will be in one location in McAllen, near the McAllen International Airport. Staying in one location will allow us to establish a "home base" and provide us the luxury of not needing to pack and unpack each day. Our central location puts us within easy reach of numerous birding hotspots. Most of our destinations are under two hours from our lodging, so mileage for daily treks will be relatively limited. Eliminating packing time and reducing driving time will increase our birding time!

LOCAL TRANSPORTATION

We will be venturing out from our McAllen lodging for each day's birding in a 15-passenger van. Since we will be staying in the same accommodations the entire tour, our daily load of equipment will be minimal (no luggage!). Daily commutes will range from 20 minutes (to Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park) to three hours (driving to Rockport for the Whooping Crane tour). Most of our drives will be in the 30-90 minute range.

FEE and REGISTRATION INFORMATION

- Tour Fee: \$2350 per person in double occupancy from McAllen, Texas
- Single Supplement: \$500 (subject to availability)
- Deposit: \$500
- Final Payment Due: October 1, 2026
- Group size is limited to **8 individuals** and early registration is encouraged

WHAT THE TOUR FEE INCLUDES:

- full guide service with Daryl & Madison
- hotel accommodations for eight nights
- all meals from dinner on Day 1 to breakfast on Day 9
- van transportation in a single, large van
- all park entrance fees
- boat fee for Whooping Crane trip
- guided day trip to Santa Margarita Ranch (~seven hours)
- guided night trip to Santa Margarita Ranch for Mottled Owl
- trip report including a list of all birds observed
- eBird checklist sharing (for those using eBird)

WHAT THE TOUR FEE DOES NOT INCLUDE:

- airfare to/from McAllen, Texas
- snacks and additional drinks
- alcoholic beverages
- laundry
- other items of a personal nature

ONLINE REGISTRATION WILL OPEN FOR SEVEN PONDS MEMBERS ON TUESDAY, AUGUST 25, 2026 at 9:00 AM

ONLINE REGISTRATION WILL OPEN FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC ON TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 2026 at 9:00 AM (if space remains)

Registration for this tour will take place online at www.sevenponds.org with a \$500 deposit due at the time of registration. On the Seven Ponds home page, go to Programs then Seven Ponds Field Tours and select the Texas LRGV Birding Field Tour registration button. Upon successfully completing your online registration you should receive an email confirmation immediately. Participants will be sent a registration form to complete and return.

For more information, contact Daryl Bernard at (989) 513-5195 (cell) or via e-mail at dbernard@sevenponds.org.

TARGET BIRDS in the LOWER RIO GRANDE VALLEY

Black-bellied Whistling Duck	American Avocet	Great Kiskadee
Fulvous Whistling Duck	Willet	Tropical Kingbird
Greater White-fronted Goose	Long-billed Curlew	Couch's Kingbird
Mottled Duck	Marbled Godwit	Rose-throated Becard
Cinnamon Teal	Ruddy Turnstone	Scissor-tailed Flycatcher
Plain Chachalaca	Red Knot	Loggerhead Shrike
Scaled Quail	Western Sandpiper	White-eyed Vireo
Least Grebe	Stilt Sandpiper	Brown Jay
Eared Grebe	Wilson's Phalarope	Green Jay
Northern Gannet	Laughing Gull	Chihuahuan Raven
American White Pelican	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Cave Swallow
Brown Pelican	Glaucous Gull	Black-crested Titmouse
Neotropic Cormorant	Gull-billed Tern	Verdin
Anhinga	Royal Tern	Cactus Wren
Snowy Egret	Sandwich Tern	Bewick's Wren
Little Blue Heron	Black Skimmer	Clay-colored Thrush
Tricolored Heron	Red-billed Pigeon	Black-tailed Gnatcatcher
Reddish Egret	Eurasian Collared-Dove	Northern Mockingbird
Cattle Egret	White-winged Dove	Long-billed Thrasher
Yellow-crowned Night-Heron	Inca Dove	Curve-billed Thrasher
White Ibis	Common Ground-Dove	American Pipit
White-faced Ibis	White-tipped Dove	Sprague's Pipit
Roseate Spoonbill	Greater Roadrunner	Tropical Parula
Black Vulture	Groove-billed Ani	Yellow-throated Warbler
White-tailed Kite	Barn Owl	Summer Tanager
Hook-billed Kite	Burrowing Owl	Morelet's Seedeater
Harris's Hawk	Common Pauraque	Olive Sparrow
Gray Hawk	Buff-bellied Hummingbird	Green-tailed Towhee
White-tailed Hawk	Rufous Hummingbird	Black-throated Sparrow
Zone-tailed Hawk	Ringed Kingfisher	Seaside Sparrow
Crested Caracara	Green Kingfisher	Pyrrhuloxia
Aplomado Falcon	Golden-fronted Woodpecker	Black-headed Grosbeak
Clapper Rail	Ladder-backed Woodpecker	Great-tailed Grackle
King Rail	Green Parakeet	Boat-tailed Grackle
Whooping Crane	Red-crowned Parrot	Bronzed Cowbird
Snowy Plover	Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet	Audubon's Oriole
Wilson's Plover	Black Phoebe	Hooded Oriole
American Oystercatcher	Say's Phoebe	Altamira Oriole
Black-necked Stilt	Vermillion Flycatcher	Lesser Goldfinch