

TEXAS' BIG BEND & HILL COUNTRY

Apr 21, 2012 to Apr 30, 2012

Chris Benesh



*Always a much-wanted bird in the southwest, a harlequin male Montezuma Quail is surprisingly cryptic despite its boldly patterned plumage.
(Photo by guide Chris Benesh)*

This year's Big Bend and Texas Hill Country trip was memorable for several reasons, and was characterized by mostly great weather, great wildlife sightings, and great company!

We started out at the San Antonio airport where nearly all of us headed out on schedule to bird our way to Del Rio. George caught up with us there, and we enjoyed some nice views of things, though our sought-after vireos proved a bit elusive. We did enjoy a lovely pair of Zone-tailed Hawks, though. The next morning, we birded a couple of sites near the Rio Grande in Del Rio and added a number of "South Texas" specialties to the list, with such goodies as Olive Sparrow, Great Kiskadee, Couch's Kingbird, and even White-collared Seedeater. Then it was time to head west to Big Bend National Park.

Conditions were rather dry once we got all of the way out to Big Bend. While that made it tough for a few things, it did make the oasis birding a little more interesting, and thankfully, the oaks had leafed out on the hike to Boot Spring, so the Colima Warblers were happy and singing. It was beautiful the day we made the hike up to the springs, and there were a few other birds to distract us along the way.

Once we had finished at Big Bend, we headed north to the Davis Mountains for an overnight. The highlight of this venture was certainly the lovely pair of Montezuma Quail that greeted us soon after we arrived. A number of other interesting species were coming in to feed and keep us entertained.

Then it was off again the next morning, this time heading east to the Hill Country and Utopia. We made a major stop along the way at Lake Balmorhea, which was a treasure trove of aquatic birds. All of the Clark's Grebes (some with chicks), the flocks of Wilson's Phalaropes and Franklin's Gulls alone were worth the price of admission. Then it was on to Utopia.

The Hill Country was greener than where we'd been, and we had some good luck with most things. Golden-cheeked Warbler was a real highlight, and we had a couple of unexpected warbler bonuses in the way of Tropical Parula and a Rufous-capped Warbler. More color was provided by Painted and Indigo buntings. And there can't be any better way to wrap up a tour than an evening visit to the Frio Bat Cave. The sight of millions of bats streaming out of the mouth of the cave is an experience that will stay with you for a lifetime.

So I hope everyone is already making their plans for the reunion tour. You were a great bunch of folks to travel with and it would certainly be my pleasure to travel with you again. Maybe southeast Arizona in 2013? Until we get together again, all the best and may you have plenty of wonderful birding experiences along the way.

--Chris

For more information about this tour, including future departures, visit our website at www.fieldguides.com. And to see this same triplist online, go to <http://www.fieldguides.com/triplists/big12LIST.pdf> and you will find the list in its entirety.

KEYS FOR THIS LIST

One of the following keys may be shown in brackets for individual species as appropriate: * = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic, N = nesting, a = austral migrant, b = boreal migrant

BIRDS

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

BLACK-BELLIED WHISTLING-DUCK (*Dendrocygna autumnalis*)

FULVOUS WHISTLING-DUCK (*Dendrocygna bicolor*) – Seen well enough to ID by Francois.

WOOD DUCK (*Aix sponsa*)

GADWALL (*Anas strepera*)

AMERICAN WIGEON (*Anas americana*)

MALLARD (MEXICAN) (*Anas platyrhynchos diazi*)

BLUE-WINGED TEAL (*Anas discors*)

CINNAMON TEAL (*Anas cyanoptera*)

NORTHERN SHOVELER (*Anas clypeata*)

REDHEAD (*Aythya americana*)

LESSER SCAUP (*Aythya affinis*)

RUDDY DUCK (*Oxyura jamaicensis*)

Odontophoridae (New World Quail)

SCALED QUAIL (*Callipepla squamata*)

NORTHERN BOBWHITE (*Colinus virginianus*) [*]

MONTEZUMA QUAIL (*Cyrtonyx montezumae*) – Fantastic luck with a pair of birds just as we arrived in the Davis Mountains! What a show!

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

WILD TURKEY (*Meleagris gallopavo*)

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

PIED-BILLED GREBE (*Podilymbus podiceps*)

EARED GREBE (*Podiceps nigricollis*)

WESTERN GREBE (*Aechmophorus occidentalis*)

CLARK'S GREBE (*Aechmophorus clarkii*) – We had a grebe filled morning at Lake Balmorhea, and especially big numbers of this species (twenty or so).

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

NEOTROPIC CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax brasiliensis*) – A couple of these were seen in Del Rio.

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

GREAT BLUE HERON (*Ardea herodias*)

GREAT EGRET (*Ardea alba*)

CATTLE EGRET (*Bubulcus ibis*)

BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON (*Nycticorax nycticorax*)

YELLOW-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON (*Nyctanassa violacea*) – We had a beautiful adult bird fly past us in Del Rio.

Threskiornithidae (Ibises and Spoonbills)

WHITE-FACED IBIS (*Plegadis chihi*)

Cathartidae (New World Vultures)

BLACK VULTURE (*Coragyps atratus*)

TURKEY VULTURE (*Cathartes aura*)

Pandionidae (Osprey)

OSPREY (*Pandion haliaetus*)

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

MISSISSIPPI KITE (*Ictinia mississippiensis*) – This was a nice find along the South Llano River in Junction.

NORTHERN HARRIER (*Circus cyaneus*) – Two seen on the trip. One flying over Boot Canyon in the Chisos Mountains was a real surprise!

COOPER'S HAWK (*Accipiter cooperii*)

COMMON BLACK-HAWK (*Buteogallus anthracinus*) – Great looks at this stakeout at Rio Grande Village campground.

GRAY HAWK (*Buteo nitidus*) – We had birds at both Rio Grande Village and at Cottonwood Canyon. Sharp-looking birds that received a vote as trip favorite.

SWAINSON'S HAWK (*Buteo swainsoni*)

ZONE-TAILED HAWK (*Buteo albonotatus*) – Good views of this species on a couple of occasions beginning on the first afternoon of the trip when we had a pair north of Bracketville. Another vote getter for trip favorite.

RED-TAILED HAWK (*Buteo jamaicensis*)

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

CRESTED CARACARA (*Caracara cheriway*) – Francois spotted the first that brought us to a grinding halt. A few more followed on the final morning of the trip on our way back to San Antonio.

AMERICAN KESTREL (*Falco sparverius*)

PEREGRINE FALCON (*Falco peregrinus*) – Great looks at one hanging out on the banks of Lake Balmorhea.

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)

COMMON GALLINULE (*Gallinula galeata*)

AMERICAN COOT (*Fulica americana*)

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

KILLDEER (*Charadrius vociferus*)

Recurvirostridae (Stilts and Avocets)

BLACK-NECKED STILT (*Himantopus mexicanus*)

AMERICAN AVOCET (*Recurvirostra americana*) – Some lovely avocets swimming in a roadside pond near Marathon.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

SPOTTED SANDPIPER (*Actitis macularius*)



This close to the southern border of the US, there's always the hope of a Mexican vagrant. Hopes were fulfilled when this beautiful Rufous-capped Warbler was found at Park Chalk Bluff just before the tour began! (Photo by guide Chris Benesh)

WESTERN SANDPIPER (*Calidris mauri*)

LEAST SANDPIPER (*Calidris minutilla*)

BAIRD'S SANDPIPER (*Calidris bairdii*)

LONG-BILLED DOWITCHER (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*)

WILSON'S PHALAROPE (*Phalaropus tricolor*) – Great views of some handsome looking birds at Lake Balmorhea.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

FRANKLIN'S GULL (*Leucophaeus pipixcan*) – More eye candy at Lake Balmorhea where there was a flock of about 25 or so birds.

RING-BILLED GULL (*Larus delawarensis*)

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) [II]

EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE (*Streptopelia decaocto*) [I]

WHITE-WINGED DOVE (*Zenaida asiatica*)

MOURNING DOVE (*Zenaida macroura*)

INCA DOVE (*Columbina inca*)

COMMON GROUND-DOVE (*Columbina passerina*)

WHITE-TIPPED DOVE (WHITE-TIPPED) (*Leptotila verreauxi angelica*) – At the edge of their range at Chalk Bluff.

[*]

Cuculidae (Cuckoos)

GREATER ROADRUNNER (*Geococcyx californianus*) – These crazy birds came out once the coyotes had departed. Another trip favorite.

Strigidae (Owls)

EASTERN SCREECH-OWL (*Megascops asio*) – Great teamwork from Francois and George netted us this roosting bird in Del Rio!

ELF OWL (*Micrathene whitneyi*) [*]

Caprimulgidae (Nightjars and Allies)

COMMON Nighthawk (*Chordeiles minor*)

COMMON POORWILL (*Phalaenoptilus nuttallii*) – Francois got this one at the Indian Lodge after most of us had headed off to bed.

CHUCK-WILL'S-WIDOW (*Caprimulgus carolinensis*) – Good flight views of this large nightjar near Concan.

Apodidae (Swifts)

CHIMNEY SWIFT (*Chaetura pelasgica*)

WHITE-THROATED SWIFT (*Aeronautes saxatalis*)

Trochilidae (Hummingbirds)

BLUE-THROATED HUMMINGBIRD (*Lampornis clemenciae*) – Good views of birds coming to drink at the feeders near the lodge.

LUCIFER HUMMINGBIRD (*Calothorax lucifer*)

RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRD (*Archilochus colubris*)

BLACK-CHINNED HUMMINGBIRD (*Archilochus alexandri*)

BROAD-TAILED HUMMINGBIRD (*Selasphorus platycercus*)

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

RINGED KINGFISHER (*Megaceryle torquata*) [*]

BELTED KINGFISHER (*Megaceryle alcyon*)

GREEN KINGFISHER (*Chloroceryle americana*) – Good scope looks at a couple of birds at Chalk Bluff, and heard at



Adding a splash of color to the dry landscape, a trio of brilliant Gulf Fritillaries share a thistle flower. (Photo by guide Chris Benesh)

Neal's the next day too.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

ACORN WOODPECKER (*Melanerpes formicivorus*) – The clown-faced woodpecker was one of Francois's favorites.

GOLDEN-FRONTED WOODPECKER (*Melanerpes aurifrons*)

LADDER-BACKED WOODPECKER (*Picoides scalaris*)

Tyrannidae (Tyrant Flycatchers)

WESTERN WOOD-PEWEE (*Contopus sordidulus*)

EASTERN WOOD-PEWEE (*Contopus virens*)

ACADIAN FLYCATCHER (*Empidonax virescens*) – Terrific views of this species at Lost Maples.

BLACK PHOEBE (*Sayornis nigricans*)

EASTERN PHOEBE (*Sayornis phoebe*)

SAY'S PHOEBE (*Sayornis saya*)

VERMILION FLYCATCHER (*Pyrocephalus rubinus*) – What incredible color! Lots of them around to entertain us.

ASH-THROATED FLYCATCHER (*Myiarchus cinerascens*)

GREAT CRESTED FLYCATCHER (*Myiarchus crinitus*) [*]

BROWN-CRESTED FLYCATCHER (*Myiarchus tyrannulus*)

GREAT KISKADEE (*Pitangus sulphuratus*) – Some good views of a nesting pair of birds in Del Rio.

COUCH'S KINGBIRD (*Tyrannus couchii*) – Great views in Del Rio, though we missed them at Cottonwood this year.

CASSIN'S KINGBIRD (*Tyrannus vociferans*) – Best looks were in the Davis Mountains.

WESTERN KINGBIRD (*Tyrannus verticalis*)

SCISSOR-TAILED FLYCATCHER (*Tyrannus forficatus*) – What a great looking bird. We enjoyed a number of these in the Hill Country.

Laniidae (Shrikes)

LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE (*Lanius ludovicianus*)

Vireonidae (Vireos)

WHITE-EYED VIREO (*Vireo griseus*)

BELL'S VIREO (*Vireo bellii*)

BLACK-CAPPED VIREO (*Vireo atricapilla*)

YELLOW-THROATED VIREO (*Vireo flavifrons*)

HUTTON'S VIREO (*Vireo huttoni*)

RED-EYED VIREO (*Vireo olivaceus*)

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

WESTERN SCRUB-JAY (*Aphelocoma californica*)

MEXICAN JAY (*Aphelocoma wollweberi*)

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax*)

Hirundinidae (Swallows)

NORTHERN ROUGH-WINGED SWALLOW (*Stelgidopteryx serripennis*)

PURPLE MARTIN (*Progne subis*)

VIOLET-GREEN SWALLOW (*Tachycineta thalassina*)

BANK SWALLOW (*Riparia riparia*)

BARN SWALLOW (*Hirundo rustica*)

CLIFF SWALLOW (*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*)

CAVE SWALLOW (*Petrochelidon fulva*)

Paridae (Chickadees and Tits)

CAROLINA CHICKADEE (*Poecile carolinensis*)

BLACK-CRESTED TITMOUSE (*Baeolophus atricristatus*)



A Texas breeding endemic, the rare Golden-cheeked Warbler breeds only in mature oak-juniper woodlands on the Edwards Plateau. This was the overall winner as the top bird of the trip. (Photo by guide Chris Benesh)

Remizidae (Penduline-Tits)

VERDIN (*Auriparus flaviceps*)

Aegithalidae (Long-tailed Tits)

BUSHTIT (*Psaltriparus minimus*)

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

CACTUS WREN (*Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus*)

ROCK WREN (*Salpinctes obsoletus*)

CANYON WREN (*Catherpes mexicanus*) – We worked really hard to see our first one, but in the end we were rewarded with great looks at one near the entrance to the bat cave.

CAROLINA WREN (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*)

BEWICK'S WREN (*Thryomanes bewickii*)

HOUSE WREN (*Troglodytes aedon*)

Polioptilidae (Gnatcatchers)

BLUE-GRAY GNATCATCHER (*Polioptila caerulea*)

BLACK-TAILED GNATCATCHER (*Polioptila melanura*)

Regulidae (Kinglets)

RUBY-CROWNED KINGLET (*Regulus calendula*)

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

EASTERN BLUEBIRD (*Sialia sialis*)

TOWNSEND'S SOLITAIRE (*Myadestes townsendi*)

SWAINSON'S THRUSH (OLIVE-BACKED) (*Catharus ustulatus swainsoni*) – We had an olive-backed bird near Boot Springs that Francois photographed.

AMERICAN ROBIN (*Turdus migratorius*)

Mimidae (Mockingbirds and Thrashers)

NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRD (*Mimus polyglottos*)

LONG-BILLED THRASHER (*Toxostoma longirostre*)

CURVE-BILLED THRASHER (*Toxostoma curvirostre*)

CRISSAL THRASHER (*Toxostoma crissale*) – It was a good trip for this species, with a couple seen at Dugout Wells, and a couple more along the river.

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*) **[I]**

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

AMERICAN PIPIT (*Anthus rubescens*) – A couple were hanging out on the lawn outside of our rooms at the Chisos Lodge.

Bombycillidae (Waxwings)

CEDAR WAXWING (*Bombycilla cedrorum*)

Ptilogonatidae (Silky-flycatchers)

PHAINOPEPLA (*Phainopepla nitens*) – A male at the entrance to the Davis Mountains State Park was a real treat.

Parulidae (New World Warblers)

LOUISIANA WATERTHRUSH (*Parkesia motacilla*) – Great view of one along the creek at Lost Maples.

BLACK-AND-WHITE WARBLER (*Mniotilla varia*) – In addition to those seen and heard in the Hill Country, there were a few seen in Big Bend NP.

ORANGE-CROWNED WARBLER (*Oreothlypis celata*)

COLIMA WARBLER (*Oreothlypis crissalis*) – One of two multi-vote getters, this one was a real favorite owing in part to the wonderful, scenic, and not insignificant hike required to see it. After hearing a few, we had great looks at one just past the springs on the South Rim trail.

NASHVILLE WARBLER (*Oreothlypis ruficapilla*)

MACGILLIVRAY'S WARBLER (*Geothlypis tolmiei*)

COMMON YELLOWTHROAT (*Geothlypis trichas*)

HOODED WARBLER (*Setophaga citrina*) – One singing persistently (but out of our view) at Lost Maples was noteworthy. [★]

TROPICAL PARULA (NORTHEAST MEXICO) (*Setophaga pitiayumi nigrilora*) – A stake-out at Neal's Lodges in Concan, this bird was singing its heart out the entire time we were there. Great looks for everyone.

YELLOW WARBLER (*Setophaga petechia*) [★]

YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER (AUDUBON'S) (*Setophaga coronata auduboni*)

YELLOW-THROATED WARBLER (*Setophaga dominica*)

TOWNSEND'S WARBLER (*Setophaga townsendi*)

HERMIT WARBLER (*Setophaga occidentalis*)

GOLDEN-CHEEKED WARBLER (*Setophaga chrysoparia*) – The number one vote getter on this trip, this species eventually provided some outstanding views at Lost Maples. Its breeding range is entirely on the Edwards Plateau (Hill Country) of Texas.

RUFOUS-CAPPED WARBLER (*Basileuterus rufifrons*) – Found just before the tour started, we were able to make a trip out to Park Chalk Bluff to see this handsome bird. A rare visitor to the state (and anywhere north of Mexico).

WILSON'S WARBLER (*Cardellina pusilla*)

PAINTED REDSTART (*Myioborus pictus*) [★]

YELLOW-BREASTED CHAT (*Icteria virens*) – Terrific looks around Del Rio especially.

Emberizidae (Buntings, Sparrows and Allies)

WHITE-COLLARED SEEDEATER (WHITE-COLLARED) (*Sporophila torqueola sharpei*) – Tough to get decent looks at, but we did have a pair of these in Del Rio on our first morning. A first for this tour.

OLIVE SPARROW (*Arremonops rufivirgatus*)

GREEN-TAILED TOWHEE (*Pipilo chlorurus*) – Great looks at one at Cottonwood Campground.

SPOTTED TOWHEE (*Pipilo maculatus*)

RUFOUS-CROWNED SPARROW (*Aimophila ruficeps*)

CANYON TOWHEE (*Melozone fusca*)

CASSIN'S SPARROW (*Peucaea cassinii*)

CHIPPING SPARROW (*Spizella passerina*)

CLAY-COLORED SPARROW (*Spizella pallida*)

BREWER'S SPARROW (*Spizella breweri*)

FIELD SPARROW (*Spizella pusilla*)

BLACK-CHINNED SPARROW (*Spizella atrogularis*) – George only.

VESPER SPARROW (*Pooecetes gramineus*)

LARK SPARROW (*Chondestes grammacus*)

BLACK-THROATED SPARROW (*Amphispiza bilineata*)

LARK BUNTING (*Calamospiza melanocorys*)

SAVANNAH SPARROW (*Passerculus sandwichensis*)

GRASSHOPPER SPARROW (*Ammodramus savannarum*)

LINCOLN'S SPARROW (*Melospiza lincolni*)

WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*)

Cardinalidae (Cardinals and Allies)

HEPATIC TANAGER (*Piranga flava*)

SUMMER TANAGER (*Piranga rubra*)

WESTERN TANAGER (*Piranga ludoviciana*)

NORTHERN CARDINAL (*Cardinalis cardinalis*)

PYRRHULOXIA (*Cardinalis sinuatus*)



Is this the gaudiest bird in North America or what? The male Painted Bunting never fails to brighten his surroundings! (Photo by guide Chris Benesh)

BLACK-HEADED GROSBEAK (*Pheucticus melanocephalus*)

BLUE GROSBEAK (*Passerina caerulea*)

LAZULI BUNTING (*Passerina amoena*)

INDIGO BUNTING (*Passerina cyanea*)

VARIED BUNTING (*Passerina versicolor*) – With some effort, we did get some decent views in the end. Once also came to the drip at Sam Nail.

PAINTED BUNTING (*Passerina ciris*) – This was another highlight bird for some, and we had some really great looks in the end, particularly those at South Llano River SP.

DICKCISSEL (*Spiza americana*) – A couple singing in Utopia.

Icteridae (Troupials and Allies)

RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD (*Agelaius phoeniceus*)

EASTERN MEADOWLARK (*Sturnella magna*)

YELLOW-HEADED BLACKBIRD (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*) – Some were at Langtree, and more at Dugout Wells in BBNP.

BREWER'S BLACKBIRD (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*)

COMMON GRACKLE (*Quiscalus quiscula*)

GREAT-TAILED GRACKLE (*Quiscalus mexicanus*)

BRONZED COWBIRD (*Molothrus aeneus*)

BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD (*Molothrus ater*)

ORCHARD ORIOLE (*Icterus spurius*)

HOODED ORIOLE (*Icterus cucullatus*)

BULLOCK'S ORIOLE (*Icterus bullockii*)

SCOTT'S ORIOLE (*Icterus parisorum*) – Quite a few evident this year, their wonderful songs often one of the first morning sounds at the lodge.

Fringillidae (Siskins, Crossbills, and Allies)

HOUSE FINCH (*Carpodacus mexicanus*)

PINE SISKIN (*Spinus pinus*)

LESSER GOLDFINCH (*Spinus psaltria*)

AMERICAN GOLDFINCH (*Spinus tristis*)

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

HOUSE SPARROW (*Passer domesticus*) [II]

MAMMALS

WESTERN PIPISTRELLE (*Pipistrellus hesperus*)

BRAZILIAN FREE-TAILED BAT (*Tadarida brasiliensis*) – Always a jaw-dropping spectacle, we had quite a performance at the Frio Bat Cave on our last evening together.

NINE-BANDED ARMADILLO (*Dasypus novemcinctus*) – One showed briefly at the Lost Maples Cafe before disappearing underneath the cafe.

EASTERN COTTONTAIL (*Sylvilagus floridanus*)

DESERT COTTONTAIL (*Sylvilagus audubonii*)

BLACK-TAILED JACKRABBIT (*Lepus californicus*)

TEXAS ANTELOPE SQUIRREL (*Ammospermophilus interpres*)

ROCK SQUIRREL (*Spermophilus variegatus*)

FOX SQUIRREL (*Sciurus niger*)

NORTH AMERICAN PORCUPINE (*Erethizon dorsatum*) – Great looks at one that Barb spotted resting in a tree at Lost Maples!

GRAY FOX (*Urocyon cinereoargenteus*)



Contrary to popular belief, wily Coyotes are rarely seen in pursuit of roadrunners. (Photo by guide Chris Benesh)

COYOTE (*Canis latrans*) – Rather tame ones foraging at Rio Grande Village when we arrived in the morning.

BLACK BEAR (*Ursus americanus*) – A rather emaciated one hanging around the lodge area in the Chisos Mountains. We watched it for a while eating lots of juniper fruits.

COLLARED PECCARY (*Tayassu tajacu*) – Also known as javalinas, we had a group at the Davis Mountains SP.

SPOTTED DEER (*Axis axis*) [I]

MULE DEER (*Odocoileus hemionus*)

WHITE-TAILED DEER (*Odocoileus virginianus*)

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

A few other memorable critters include the pink Coachwhip snake that came in to drink at Sam Nail Ranch, and a number of Texas Earless Lizards and some Texas Spotted Whiptails.

Also memorable was the glow in the dark scorpion we saw under UV light near the lodge in the Chisos Mountains.

Totals for the tour: 205 bird taxa and 17 mammal taxa