



*Field Guides Tour Report*  
**Spring in South Texas 2015**

Mar 14, 2015 to Mar 22, 2015  
Chris Benesh

*For our tour description, itinerary, past triplists, dates, fees, and more, [please VISIT OUR TOUR PAGE.](#)*



*Spring wildflowers on the King Ranch (Photo by guide Chris Benesh)*

Well, you couldn't say that south Texas did us any favors with the weather this year, with a week of somewhat unsettled, occasionally drizzly weather. The particularly wet spring did green things up nicely and produce quite a few wildflowers, certainly one of the best blooms in recent years. Despite what mother nature threw at us, we managed to have super time with so many of the great birds that make the Rio Grande Valley such a marvelous place to visit.

There were quite a few highlights, but when pressed, our group came up with a fine bevy of favorites. Topping the list this year was the colorful Altamira Oriole, brilliant orange and possessing a wonderful lilting song. Of course the Whooping Cranes, seen so well while we were aboard the Skimmer with Captain Tommy Moore, the iconic Green Jays with all of their colors and voices, and the dapper group of Fulvous Whistling-Ducks seen at Cape Velero near the start of the trip all came in a close second. Other vote getters included the white morph Great Blue Heron that showed well on our boat trip; the sleek Gray Hawks that are increasingly widespread in south Texas; the Barn Owl that flew past us on the King Ranch; the confiding Burrowing Owl right on the border; the Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls so well seen at the King Ranch thanks to our guide Jim Sinclair; the spritely Green Kingfishers seen at a couple of sites in the valley; the colorful Golden-fronted Woodpeckers; a couple of fine warblers by way of Prothonotary and Louisiana Waterthrush; sneaky Sprague's Pipits; and finally, colorful Hooded Orioles.

This was a wonderful group of birders, and I enjoyed my time with you immensely. Thanks for coming along and making the trip so much fun. Until next time, good birding!

--Chris

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**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

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**BIRDS**

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

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

**FULVOUS WHISTLING-DUCK** (*Dendrocygna bicolor*) – This turned out to be one of the real highlights of the trip for folks. We had five on a pond at Cape Velero.

**GADWALL** (*Anas strepera*)

**AMERICAN WIGEON** (*Anas americana*)

**MALLARD (NORTHERN)** (*Anas platyrhynchos platyrhynchos*) – We did see a male green-headed Mallard at Salineno.

**MALLARD (MEXICAN)** (*Anas platyrhynchos diazi*) – We did have a couple of these along the Rio Grande at Salineno.

**MOTTLED DUCK** (*Anas fulvigula*)

**BLUE-WINGED TEAL** (*Anas discors*)

**CINNAMON TEAL** (*Anas cyanoptera*) – A couple of handsome males seen during the trip.

**NORTHERN SHOVELER** (*Anas clypeata*)

**NORTHERN PINTAIL** (*Anas acuta*)

**GREEN-WINGED TEAL (AMERICAN)** (*Anas crecca carolinensis*)

**REDHEAD** (*Aythya americana*)

**RING-NECKED DUCK** (*Aythya collaris*)

**LESSER SCAUP** (*Aythya affinis*)

**BUFFLEHEAD** (*Bucephala albeola*)

**COMMON GOLDENEYE** (*Bucephala clangula*)

**HOODED MERGANSER** (*Lophodytes cucullatus*)

**RED-BREASTED MERGANSER** (*Mergus serrator*)

**RUDDY DUCK** (*Oxyura jamaicensis*)

*Cracidae (Guans, Chachalacas, and Curassows)*

**PLAIN CHACHALACA** (*Ortalis vetula*) – Well heard before we saw our first. One of the characteristic sounds of the south Texas woodlands.

*Odontophoridae (New World Quail)*

**NORTHERN BOBWHITE** (*Colinus virginianus*) – Nice looks at a couple of coveys at the King Ranch.

*Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)*

**WILD TURKEY** (*Meleagris gallopavo*) – Lots on the King Ranch, several in full display.

*Gaviidae (Loons)*

**COMMON LOON** (*Gavia immer*)

*Podicipedidae (Grebes)*

**LEAST GREBE** (*Tachybaptus dominicus*) – Our first were on a small pond on the King Ranch. Also seen at Estero Llano Grande.

**PIED-BILLED GREBE** (*Podilymbus podiceps*)

**EARED GREBE** (*Podiceps nigricollis*) – One tight flock of birds seen from the Skimmer as we were zooming across Aransas Bay.

*Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)*

**NEOTROPIC CORMORANT** (*Phalacrocorax brasilianus*)

**DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANT** (*Phalacrocorax auritus*)

*Anhingidae (Anhingas)*

**ANHINGA** (*Anhinga anhinga*) – We did connect with a few at the Old Hidalgo Pumphouse and then had a migrating flock of some 30 plus birds.

*Pelecanidae (Pelicans)*

**AMERICAN WHITE PELICAN** (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*)

**BROWN PELICAN** (*Pelecanus occidentalis*)

*Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)*

**GREAT BLUE HERON** (*Ardea herodias*) – Very notable was the white morph bird seen on our boat ride aboard the Skimmer. This is only the second one I've seen in Texas and likely the same individual. Once considered a good species, there is no consensus as to whether these are just color morphs or represent a distinct subspecies.

**GREAT EGRET** (*Ardea alba*)

**SNOWY EGRET** (*Egretta thula*)

**LITTLE BLUE HERON** (*Egretta caerulea*)

**TRICOLORED HERON** (*Egretta tricolor*)

**REDDISH EGRET** (*Egretta rufescens*)

**CATTLE EGRET** (*Bubulcus ibis*)

**GREEN HERON** (*Butorides virescens*)

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

**YELLOW-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON** (*Nyctanassa violacea*)

*Threskiornithidae (Ibises and Spoonbills)*

**WHITE IBIS** (*Eudocimus albus*)

**GLOSSY IBIS** (*Plegadis falcinellus*) – A dark ibis seen in Port Aransas shows characteristics of the rarer Glossy.

**ROSEATE SPOONBILL** (*Platalea ajaja*)

*Cathartidae (New World Vultures)*

**BLACK VULTURE** (*Coragyps atratus*)

**TURKEY VULTURE** (*Cathartes aura*)

*Pandionidae (Osprey)*

**OSPREY** (*Pandion haliaetus*)

*Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)*

**WHITE-TAILED KITE** (*Elanus leucurus*)

**NORTHERN HARRIER (AMERICAN)** (*Circus cyaneus hudsonius*)

**SHARP-SHINNED HAWK** (*Accipiter striatus*)

**COOPER'S HAWK** (*Accipiter cooperii*)

**HARRIS'S HAWK** (*Parabuteo unicinctus*)

**WHITE-TAILED HAWK** (*Geranoaetus albicaudatus*)

**BROAD-WINGED HAWK** (*Buteo platypterus*) – The weather was not conducive for a big migration, though we did encounter one at Resaca de la Palma.

**GRAY HAWK** (*Buteo plagiatus*) – A few views of this species with the first at Anzalduas.

**SWAINSON'S HAWK** (*Buteo swainsoni*) – A fun afternoon migration flyin and several others seen on subsequent days.

**RED-TAILED HAWK** (*Buteo jamaicensis*) – Nice views of a juvenile Krider's Red-tail on the drive back to Corpus Christi.

*Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)*

**SORA** (*Porzana carolina*)

**COMMON GALLINULE** (*Gallinula galeata*)

**AMERICAN COOT** (*Fulica americana*)

*Gruidae (Cranes)*

**SANDHILL CRANE** (*Grus canadensis*) – Three seen on Goose Island were late wintering birds.

**WHOOPIING CRANE** (*Grus americana*) – Wow! What a great experience with these birds aboard the Skimmer on Aransas Bay. Quite a few seen well, and the group of nine was great to see when they took flight.

*Recurvirostridae (Stilts and Avocets)*

**BLACK-NECKED STILT** (*Himantopus mexicanus*)

**AMERICAN AVOCET** (*Recurvirostra americana*)

*Haematopodidae (Oystercatchers)*

**AMERICAN OYSTERCATCHER** (*Haematopus palliatus*)

*Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)*

**BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER** (*Pluvialis squatarola*)

**AMERICAN GOLDEN-PLOVER** (*Pluvialis dominica*) – Flocks of these seen flying low during the rainy morning at Port Aransas.

**WILSON'S PLOVER** (*Charadrius wilsonia*) – We found a pair near between Brownsville and Port Isabel.

**SEMIPALMATED PLOVER** (*Charadrius semipalmatus*)

**PIPING PLOVER** (*Charadrius melodus*) – A few were out feeding on a mudflat near the new Paradise Key restaurant.

**KILLDEER** (*Charadrius vociferus*)

*Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)*

**SPOTTED SANDPIPER** (*Actitis macularius*)

**GREATER YELLOWLEGS** (*Tringa melanoleuca*)

**WILLET** (*Tringa semipalmata*)

**LESSER YELLOWLEGS** (*Tringa flavipes*)

**LONG-BILLED CURLEW** (*Numenius americanus*)

**MARbled GODWIT** (*Limosa fedoa*)

**RUDDY TURNSTONE** (*Arenaria interpres*)

**STILT SANDPIPER** (*Calidris himantopus*)

**SANDERLING** (*Calidris alba*)

**DUNLIN** (*Calidris alpina*)

**LEAST SANDPIPER** (*Calidris minutilla*)

**PECTORAL SANDPIPER** (*Calidris melanotos*)

**SEMIPALMATED SANDPIPER** (*Calidris pusilla*)

**WESTERN SANDPIPER** (*Calidris mauri*)

**LONG-BILLED DOWITCHER** (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*)

**WILSON'S SNIPE** (*Gallinago delicata*)

*Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)*

**BONAPARTE'S GULL** (*Chroicocephalus philadelphia*)

**LAUGHING GULL** (*Leucophaeus atricilla*)

**RING-BILLED GULL** (*Larus delawarensis*)

**HERRING GULL (AMERICAN)** (*Larus argentatus smithsonianus*)

**LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL** (*Larus fuscus*) – An adult bird seen on our Aransas Bay boat trip aboard the Skimmer.

**GULL-BILLED TERN** (*Gelochelidon nilotica*)

**CASPIAN TERN** (*Hydroprogne caspia*)

**FORSTER'S TERN** (*Sterna forsteri*)

**ROYAL TERN** (*Thalasseus maximus*)

**SANDWICH TERN** (*Thalasseus sandvicensis*) – A few of these were present at Port Aransas sporting their pinkish blush.

**BLACK SKIMMER** (*Rynchops niger*)

*Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)*

**ROCK PIGEON** (*Columba livia*) [I]

**RED-BILLED PIGEON** (*Patagioenas flavirostris*) – Thanks to a heads up from Mary we had great flyby looks at one in Salineno.

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

**INCA DOVE** (*Columbina inca*)

**COMMON GROUND-DOVE** (*Columbina passerina*)

**WHITE-TIPPED DOVE** (*Leptotila verreauxi*)

**WHITE-WINGED DOVE** (*Zenaida asiatica*)

**MOURNING DOVE** (*Zenaida macroura*)

*Cuculidae (Cuckoos)*

**GREATER ROADRUNNER** (*Geococcyx californianus*)

**GROOVE-BILLED ANI** (*Crotophaga sulcirostris*) – Really cooperative birds seen along the entrance road to Laguna Atascosa. This species is still local and scarce in winter.

*Tytonidae (Barn-Owls)*

**BARN OWL** (*Tyto alba*)

*Strigidae (Owls)*

**EASTERN SCREECH-OWL (MCCALL'S)** (*Megascops asio mcallii*) – Well seen at Estero Llano Grande at a day roost.

**GREAT HORNED OWL** (*Bubo virginianus*) – A fun encounter with a family group on the King Ranch.

**FERRUGINOUS PYGMY-OWL** (*Glaucidium brasilianum*) – Great studies of a couple of birds on the King Ranch, this species stronghold in the US.

**BURROWING OWL** (*Athene cunicularia*) – One well seen at a traditional south Texas location.

*Caprimulgidae (Nightjars and Allies)*

**COMMON PAURAUQUE** (*Nyctidromus albicollis*) – We marveled at how well this species can blend in to its background.

*Trochilidae (Hummingbirds)*

**RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRD** (*Archilochus colubris*)

**BLACK-CHINNED HUMMINGBIRD** (*Archilochus alexandri*)

**BUFF-BELLIED HUMMINGBIRD** (*Amazilia yucatanensis*)

*Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)*

**RINGED KINGFISHER** (*Megaceryle torquata*) – Great looks at one at Anzalduas.

**BELTED KINGFISHER** (*Megaceryle alcyon*)

**GREEN KINGFISHER** (*Chloroceryle americana*) – A pair at Estero Llano Grande and another pair at Anzalduas.

*Picidae (Woodpeckers)*

**GOLDEN-FRONTED WOODPECKER** (*Melanerpes aurifrons*)

**YELLOW-BELLIED SAPSUCKER** (*Sphyrapicus varius*)

**LADDER-BACKED WOODPECKER** (*Picoides scalaris*)

*Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)*

**CRESTED CARACARA** (*Caracara cheriway*) – South Texas is a great place to see this species. We saw a bunch, including 32 that we counted between HWY 83 and Kingsville on our drive back to Corpus Christi.

**AMERICAN KESTREL** (*Falco sparverius*)

**APLOMADO FALCON** (*Falco femoralis*) – Nice scope views of a nesting pair near Port Isabel.

**PEREGRINE FALCON** (*Falco peregrinus*)

*Psittacidae (New World and African Parrots)*

**MONK PARAKEET** (*Myiopsitta monachus*) – Small numbers around the Old Hidalgo Pumphouse. [I]

**RED-CROWNED PARROT** (*Amazona viridigenalis*) – A fantastic showing of this species at Oliviera Park in Brownsville. A couple more pairs were prospecting at Estero.

**RED-LORED PARROT (YELLOW-CHEEKED)** (*Amazona autumnalis autumnalis*) – A handful of these were in the mixed parrot flock in Brownsville. [I]

**YELLOW-HEADED PARROT** (*Amazona oratrix*) – We saw 2-3 in Brownsville. [I]

**WHITE-FRONTED PARROT** (*Amazona albifrons*) – An impressive number of these (forty or so) in Brownsville. [I]

**GREEN PARAKEET** (*Psittacara holochlorus*) – A couple hundred of these were present in north McAllen near one of their traditional roost sites.

*Tyrannidae (Tyrant Flycatchers)*

**NORTHERN BEARDLESS-TYRANULET** (*Camptostoma imberbe*) – Nice views of a pair of birds at Estero. Another was heard at Anzalduas.

**BLACK PHOEBE** (*Sayornis nigricans*) – Several seen. This species has recently colonized the lower valley in small numbers.

**EASTERN PHOEBE** (*Sayornis phoebe*) – Quite a few of these were still around, with birds scattered all over the King Ranch.

**VERMILION FLYCATCHER** (*Pyrocephalus rubinus*)

**ASH-THROATED FLYCATCHER** (*Myiarchus cinerascens*)

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

**GREAT KISKADEE** (*Pitangus sulphuratus*)

**TROPICAL KINGBIRD** (*Tyrannus melancholicus*) – We got some practice telling this species from the Couch's.

**COUCH'S KINGBIRD** (*Tyrannus couchii*)

**SCISSOR-TAILED FLYCATCHER** (*Tyrannus forficatus*) – Another really fancy flycatcher that just seemed to be arriving during the course of the tour.

*Laniidae (Shrikes)*

**LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE** (*Lanius ludovicianus*)

*Vireonidae (Vireos, Shrike-Babblers, and Erpornis)*

**WHITE-EYED VIREO** (*Vireo griseus*)

**YELLOW-THROATED VIREO** (*Vireo flavifrons*)

**BLUE-HEADED VIREO** (*Vireo solitarius*)

*Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)*

**GREEN JAY** (*Cyanocorax yncas*) – Always amazing. Always a treat. An iconic south Texas species.

**CHIHUAHUA RAVEN** (*Corvus cryptoleucus*)

*Hirundinidae (Swallows)*

**NORTHERN ROUGH-WINGED SWALLOW** (*Stelgidopteryx serripennis*)

**PURPLE MARTIN** (*Progne subis*)

**TREE SWALLOW** (*Tachycineta bicolor*)

**BANK SWALLOW** (*Riparia riparia*)

**BARN SWALLOW** (*Hirundo rustica*)

**CLIFF SWALLOW** (*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*)

**CAVE SWALLOW (TEXAS)** (*Petrochelidon fulva pallida*)

*Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)*

**BLACK-CRESTED TITMOUSE** (*Baeolophus atricristatus*)

*Remizidae (Penduline-Tits)*

**VERDIN** (*Auriparus flaviceps*) – After a couple of coy birds, we had great looks near Las Palmas.

*Troglodytidae (Wrens)*

**HOUSE WREN** (*Troglodytes aedon*)

**CAROLINA WREN** (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*) [**\***]

**BEWICK'S WREN** (*Thryomanes bewickii*)

**CACTUS WREN** (*Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus*)

*Poliophtidae (Gnatcatchers)*

**BLUE-GRAY GNATCATCHER** (*Poliophtila caerulea*)

*Regulidae (Kinglets)*

**RUBY-CROWNED KINGLET** (*Regulus calendula*)

*Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)*

**EASTERN BLUEBIRD** (*Sialia sialis*) – A small flock was present at Anzalduas.

**CLAY-COLORED THRUSH** (*Turdus grayi*) – The status of this species has really changed in the past decade. Several seen and heard.

*Mimidae (Mockingbirds and Thrashers)*

**GRAY CATBIRD** (*Dumetella carolinensis*)

**CURVE-BILLED THRASHER** (*Toxostoma curvirostre*)

**LONG-BILLED THRASHER** (*Toxostoma longirostre*)

**NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRD** (*Mimus polyglottos*)

*Sturnidae (Starlings)*

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

*Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)*

**SPRAGUE'S PIPIT** (*Anthus spragueii*) – This declining species can be a hard one to come across, but we were fortunate to get good looks at two birds at the King Ranch.

*Bombycillidae (Waxwings)*

**CEDAR WAXWING** (*Bombycilla cedrorum*) – A couple of birds were at Estero.

*Parulidae (New World Warblers)*

**LOUISIANA WATERTHRUSH** (*Parkesia motacilla*) – Good looks at a gorgeous individual at the King Ranch.

**BLACK-AND-WHITE WARBLER** (*Mniotilta varia*)

**PROTHONOTARY WARBLER** (*Protonotaria citrea*) – A glowing male was a real treat at Paradise Pond despite the drizzly weather.

**ORANGE-CROWNED WARBLER** (*Oreothlypis celata*)

**NASHVILLE WARBLER** (*Oreothlypis ruficapilla*)

**COMMON YELLOWTHROAT** (*Geothlypis trichas*)

**NORTHERN PARULA** (*Setophaga americana*)

**YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER (MYRTLE)** (*Setophaga coronata coronata*)  
**YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER (AUDUBON'S)** (*Setophaga coronata auduboni*)  
**BLACK-THROATED GRAY WARBLER** (*Setophaga nigrescens*)

*Thraupidae (Tanagers and Allies)*

**WHITE-COLLARED SEEDEATER** (*Sporophila torqueola*) – Fine views of a pair of birds in Zapata, this being one of the more sought after specialties of the area.

*Emberizidae (Buntings and New World Sparrows)*

**OLIVE SPARROW** (*Arremonops rufivirgatus*)  
**SPOTTED TOWHEE** (*Pipilo maculatus*) – A female seen on the King Ranch was a significant find for the lower Rio Grande Valley.  
**CASSIN'S SPARROW** (*Peucaea cassinii*)  
**CHIPPING SPARROW** (*Spizella passerina*)  
**CLAY-COLORED SPARROW** (*Spizella pallida*)  
**LARK SPARROW** (*Chondestes grammacus*)  
**BLACK-THROATED SPARROW** (*Amphispiza bilineata*)  
**LARK BUNTING** (*Calamospiza melanocorys*)  
**SAVANNAH SPARROW** (*Passerculus sandwichensis*)  
**GRASSHOPPER SPARROW** (*Ammodramus savannarum*)  
**SEASIDE SPARROW** (*Ammodramus maritimus*)  
**LINCOLN'S SPARROW** (*Melospiza lincolni*)

*Cardinalidae (Cardinals and Allies)*

**SUMMER TANAGER** (*Piranga rubra*)  
**NORTHERN CARDINAL** (*Cardinalis cardinalis*)  
**PYRRHULOXIA** (*Cardinalis sinuatus*)

*Icteridae (Troupials and Allies)*

**RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD** (*Agelaius phoeniceus*)  
**WESTERN MEADOWLARK** (*Sturnella neglecta*)  
**EASTERN MEADOWLARK** (*Sturnella magna*)  
**BREWER'S BLACKBIRD** (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*)  
**BOAT-TAILED GRACKLE** (*Quiscalus major*)  
**GREAT-TAILED GRACKLE** (*Quiscalus mexicanus*)  
**BRONZED COWBIRD** (*Molothrus aeneus*)  
**BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD** (*Molothrus ater*)  
**HOODED ORIOLE** (*Icterus cucullatus*) – A few good views of the rather orange birds in south Texas.  
**ALTAMIRA ORIOLE** (*Icterus gularis*) – What a stunning species seen well on several occasions.  
**AUDUBON'S ORIOLE** (*Icterus graduacauda*) – Great looks at a pair coming to feeders in Salineno.

*Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)*

**HOUSE FINCH** (*Haemorhous mexicanus*)  
**LESSER GOLDFINCH** (*Spinus psaltria*)  
**AMERICAN GOLDFINCH** (*Spinus tristis*)

*Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)*

**HOUSE SPARROW** (*Passer domesticus*) [I]

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## MAMMALS

**EASTERN COTTONTAIL** (*Sylvilagus floridanus*)  
**BLACK-TAILED JACKRABBIT** (*Lepus californicus*)  
**MEXICAN GROUND SQUIRREL** (*Spermophilus mexicanus*) – Good views of one coming to the window feeders at Laguna Atascosa.  
**FOX SQUIRREL** (*Sciurus niger*)  
**NUTRIA** (*Myocastor coypus*) [I]  
**BOTTLENOSE DOLPHIN** (*Tursiops truncatus*)  
**WILD BOAR** (*Sus scrofa*) [I]  
**WHITE-TAILED DEER** (*Odocoileus virginianus*)  
**NILGAI** (*Boselaphus tragocamelus*) – Great looks at one and three more bounding in front of us on the King Ranch. [I]  
**IMPALA** (*Aepyceros malampus*) – A group of these were hanging around the headquarters on the King Ranch. [I]

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## ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

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Totals for the tour: 215 bird taxa and 10 mammal taxa