

Texas and New Mexico

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Participants

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Snow Geese and Sandhill Cranes Bosque Del Apache

The two elements of this brand new tour provided a remarkably diverse range of birds, mammals and scenery. It was a massively successful trip neatly balanced between seeing established residents, winter rarities and some true avian spectacles. The whole tour enjoyed warm winter sunshine from start to finish.

Day 1: The first week of the tour concentrated on Central and Southern Texas. James was already waiting with the vehicle at George Bush International Airport when the group arrived on time after a direct flight from London to Houston. We crossed Houston in early afternoon, avoiding the worst of the rush hour traffic, and drove south towards the coastal bend region encountering our first birds: Black and Turkey Vultures, Red-tailed Hawk, Killdeer and Common Starling, followed by two Greater White-fronted Geese close to the road. About halfway through the journey a break for snacks and some birding at Lake Texana was productive. The lake itself was disappointing with nary a duck present, but the surrounding parkland and hedgerows had some good birds including American Pipit, Blue-grey Gnatcatcher, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Orange-crowned and Yellow-rumped Warblers, Eastern Phoebe and a rather smart Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. A calling Blue Jay here turned out to be the only one of the entire tour. With dusk creeping in as we approached Victoria, a Great Horned Owl gave excellent views close to the road. The tour was off to a fine start as our small group settled down for an evening meal and a good night's rest in Victoria.

Day 2: We met early for breakfast and left Victoria for a long day in the field. Since our scheduled trip to see Whooping Cranes was planned for the following day, our goal was to try and see at least a few cranes just in case a weather event or some other cancellation ruined our plans. As we drove through farmland to reach Aransas National Wildlife Refuge we started to encounter huge numbers of Laughing Gulls streaming to a nearby landfill. Even better, we noted our first Sandhill Cranes and Northern Caracaras but it was a large flock of geese feeding close to the road that provided the first major stop of the day. The flock was quite superb with good numbers of Snow and Greater White-fronted Geese, along with five Ross's Geese and a single 'Richardson's' Cackling Goose. The same field also held 50 Sandhill Cranes, 20+ Eastern Meadowlarks and a light-morph Ferruginous Hawk. Just as we were enjoying the scene, a farmer decided to scorch around the field in his truck successfully flushing all the geese off his crops. We decided to leave but not before we'd found two Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, Blue-headed and White-eyed Vireos and a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, all next to the vehicle. We pressed on towards Aransas NWR finding Cinnamon and Blue-winged Teals and other

waterfowl at a wetland along the way. On entering the refuge, Least Flycatcher, Couch's Kingbird and Blue-grey Gnatcatcher turned up close to the headquarters but it was a Nine-banded Armadillo that caused the biggest stir amongst certain members of our party. It certainly seemed odd to see this bizarre creature grubbing around at point-blank range in the middle of the day but no one complained about the photo opportunities, especially Kenny. The rest of the morning and early afternoon covered the drive loop and various stops around this beautiful refuge. Thanks to some skilled bird finding amongst our party we did see four Whooping Cranes, albeit distantly, and also came across other notables included Reddish Egret, Clapper Rail, Bufflehead, Hermit Thrush, Grey Catbird, Lincoln's Sparrow and a huge raft of Black Scoters. With a fine morning behind us, we made the decision to twitch! A small flycatcher, reputedly a Pine Flycatcher (one of the *Empidonax* group), had been discovered at a large state park south of San Antonio. The hotlines were full of it and the bird had the potential to be the first for the ABA area, new to the USA. The journey across the Texas countryside was quite long but our group rallied well and were in good spirits upon arrival at Choke Canyon State Park. The place was 'hopping' with birds as well as birders! Somewhat surprisingly, species more typically associated with the Lower Rio Grande Valley were obvious including our first Green Jays, Long-billed Thrashers, Black-crested Titmouse and Olive Sparrow. Two Vermilion Flycatchers gave great views and the only Golden-crowned Kinglet of the whole tour was present in the dense mesquite scrub. Kenny and Catriona, with their penchant for mammals, turned up Collard Peccary (Javelina), White-tailed Deer and Hispid Pocket Mouse. As for the target bird, the putative Pine Flycatcher, well patience did eventually reward us with some reasonable looks but with a Least Flycatcher on site as well it was never easy being sure that we had exactly the right bird all the time. There was a great deal of discussion concerning subtle plumage and call differences between this bird and Least Flycatcher. It later transpired, long after the tour was over, that experts familiar with Pine Flycatcher from breeding grounds in Mexico were quite sure that the Choke Canyon flycatcher was not that species, and perhaps, arguably, a hybrid *Empidonax*. In any event, it had been an exciting day of birding and an educational experience. We reflected on the mysterious flycatcher as we ambled back to Victoria for a late supper and bed.

Day 3: The day began early once more but this time we had an appointment to keep in Rockport. Our cruise around Aransas Bay was scheduled to start at 07:30. On arrival we found breezy conditions but an enthusiastic Captain determined to take us out on to the bay. We had excellent views of Whooping Cranes including the oldest known male in the world at some 31 years old. The birding throughout the bay was typically excellent with Roseate Spoonbill, American White Pelican, Black Skimmer, American Oystercatcher, 'Hudsonian' Whimbrel, Royal and Forster's Terns, Mottled Duck and some nice rafts of Lesser Scaup and Redheads. Scarcer species, slightly less expected, included American Bittern, Hooded Merganser, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Seaside Sparrow and very curiously, the white morph of Great Blue Heron, normally restricted to Florida. Inshore Bottle-nosed Dolphins seen around the harbour and in the bay secured the mammal fix for the day. After a fine harbourside lunch we began the long journey south to Weslaco. We elected to leave via Mustang Island, which produced some fine birding at a major wetland at its northern end. Here we found thousands of Northern Pintail, American Wigeon and other waterfowl, along with hundreds of American Avocets. The real highlight though was incredibly close views of Wilson's Snipe, Sora and King Rail. With time pressing, we breezed through the rest of the island though a stop just before crossing the causeway to Corpus Christie produced a Gull-billed Tern and 8+ Semipalmated Plovers. South of Corpus Christie we followed the 'Texas Tropical Trail' which produced good roadside birding, especially in the form of raptors with Red-tailed, White-tailed, Ferruginous and Harris's Hawks and the occasional Peregrine all seen, often lingering around large flocks of Sandhill Cranes. Despite the seemingly late hour, we arrived in Harlingen in good time for supper and from there it was just a short drive to our new base in Weslaco for the next four nights. As if we hadn't had enough birding for one day, our arrival at the motel was greeted by a pair of very vocal Barn Owls nesting just on the other side of the road!

Day 4: What a delight to wake up in the Lower Rio Grande Valley! The air was comfortably cool, lacking the humidity that we've been accustomed on our spring tours. After our hosts kindly provided breakfast, we ventured out electing to start at the fabulous Frontera Audubon Preserve close to our Motel in Weslaco. The morning was long and enjoyable, wandering the trails or just simply sitting by the water features. Birds came

thick and fast ranging from over-wintering wood warblers to key residents of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. The latter included Plain Chachalaca, Great Kiskadee, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Altimira Oriole, Long-billed Thrasher, Olive Sparrow and Black-crested Titmouse, along with exceptional views of Golden-fronted and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers. Although somewhat aloof, we all eventually had excellent views of Clay-coloured Thrush and a Curve-billed Thrasher posed atop the roof of the preserve's HQ. This tiny preserve also held a fascinating selection of North American warblers and it seemed bizarre to be logging Ovenbird, Nashville, Wilson's and Black-throated Green Warblers in the middle of January! After a fine lunch in town, we ventured north of Weslaco where we spent the remainder of the day checking flood meadows and wetlands for Masked Duck. There had been numerous reports of from this area since the Christmas bird counts in mid-December but with nothing recent, coupled with the elusive nature of the bird itself, it was always going to be a struggle. We failed to find any Masked Ducks but did have a really enjoyable afternoon with dozens of Least Grebes, Ring-necked and Ruddy and Mottled Ducks and Cinnamon Teal. Raptors working the fields included White-tailed and Harris's Hawks and our first White-tailed Kites. More surprising was a locally scarce Say's Phoebe flycatching from a barbed wire fence, along with a very smart Vermilion Flycatcher. After a decent supper in Weslaco it was back to our lodgings and more Barn Owl watching.

Day 5: The day dawned beautifully sunny and warm, later becoming very warm, almost hot. Again, we didn't have to travel far to find ourselves in a fabulous birding hotspot. Estero Llano Grande in Weslaco was hosting an impressive cast of mid-winter rarities and our goal was to try and connect with as many as possible. The only problem was that most of the rare birds had been found inside a restricted area requiring a guided tour by the park hosts. The day began well with Red-crowned Parrots and Tropical Kingbird seen in the parking area, and as we waited for our escort at the visitor centre, a Green Kingfisher perched out in the open amidst the Neotropic Cormorants. As the walk got under way one of the highlights came almost immediately as a Bobcat slithered by our extremely large group, almost being missed by the tail-enders. It was with some relief that our mammal enthusiasts, Kenny and Catriona, managed to get countable views before the Bobcat disappeared into the thickets. The rest of the guided walk went pretty well but it was our own, sharp-eyed, Kenny who picked out the Rose-throated Becard, immediately earning the adoration of the thirty-strong group! The views were brief but good and much more satisfactory than the long staying, clearly escaped, Black-throated Magpie-jay seen earlier. The guided walk continued around the refuge where we marvelled at the camouflage of two roosting Common Paurques rarely seen in daylight. There was another Green Kingfisher and rather excellent views of Tropical Kingbird near the visitor's centre. Way off to the south was a huge flock of distant but unidentifiable whistling-ducks. Whilst the increasingly warm morning had been superb we were still missing a few key birds. Fortunately, we hooked up with our good friend Mary Gustafson who had permission to take us back into the restricted area. It worked like a charm and with Mary's patience we found Tropical Parula, Black-throated Grey and Pine Warblers, and an Eastern Screech-owl. Morning became early afternoon and it was time for a break. Mary decided to pass on our lunch invitation but we were extremely grateful for help and promised to keep her informed of any unusual finds. After a leisurely lunch at the Blue Onion in Weslaco we returned to Frontera Audubon Thicket hoping to find yet another ABA rarity, a long staying female Blue Bunting. The place was thick with birders so we decided to spend most of our time near the water features finding Yellow-throated and Black-and-white Warblers and more good views of Clay-coloured Thrush. One of the better birds though was a cracking male Rose-breasted Grosbeak, again another species more typically associated with our spring tour. However, the species selection was very similar to our visit previous, plus the Blue Bunting was notable only by its absence. With the light fading we gave up on the bunting tried another local spot in Weslaco, reputedly good for a pre-roost gathering of parrots. As we pulled up to the street we were thrilled to find the overhead wires festooned with resting, screeching parrots and quite a gathering of birders admiring them. Initial views suggested that all were Red-crowned Parrots, but closer inspection revealed Yellow-headed and Lilac-crowned Parrots as well. Of these, only Red-crowned is ABA countable for the time being, and rather disappointingly we couldn't find any Green Parakeets at all. On the whole it had been another superb day, full of rare and difficult-to-see species. After a relaxing supper we retired to our comfortable motel with the prospect of a very early start the following day.

Day 6: Up early and away before breakfast. Our goal was to be on the Rio Grande at Saliñeno as near to first light as possible. This we achieved still managing to take in breakfast along the way. A cool breeze coming off the Rio Grande kept temperatures down for the first few hours of daylight, but by remaining close to the public boat ramp we found a number of the key birds that we were searching for. Red-billed Pigeons appeared in good numbers (60+) and although distant, offered good scope views in the morning sunlight. Ringed Kingfishers worked the river all morning along with a furtive Green Kingfisher. It was good to see Canvasbacks on the river and by carefully checking all the raptors above canopy height we bagged Red-shouldered and Grey Hawks and very luckily for Chris and James, a Hook-billed Kite sailed overhead. Just a few yards from the boat ramp, an impressive feeding station hosted a fabulous selection of bright and gaudy birds including many Green Jays, Altamira, Audubon's and Hooded Orioles, and Clay-coloured Thrush. It was also rather unfortunate that the viewing here was so compelling that most of our party missed the Hook-billed Kite at the boat ramp. The first part of the morning had been a tremendous success with the only disappointment being the non-appearance of Muscovy Ducks along the river. Having given a three-hour vigil we couldn't spend anymore time there and decided to move on to Zapata. It was pretty hot by the time that we arrived. First we came across a huge, basking Indigo Snake in the local city park. Birds were relatively few here in the rank vegetation so it was nothing short of miraculous that Catriona managed to spot a feeding male White-collared Seedeater deep in the vegetation just off the track. The bird wasn't calling, singing or advertising its presence in any way. It was one of the best birding finds of the entire tour and when Bob finally got on to it beads of perspiration visibly disappeared from his brow! This was Bob's fourth time in Texas and the seedeater had constantly eluded him until this day. With the seedeater well seen by all it was time for a lunch break in an air-conditioned building. After lunch we visited Falcon State Park briefly in the heat of mid-afternoon. Highlights included good views of Pyrrhuloxia, Cactus Wren and Lark Sparrow, but with time pressing and another key site reach before dusk, we moved on. We called in briefly at Roma Bluffs for one last shot at Muscovy Duck and enjoyed overlooking the Rio Grande into Mexico. Our final stop was a short grass field on the outskirts of Mission. By systematically working the field, and flushing tens of Eastern Meadowlarks, we eventually found our quarry – a beautiful Sprague's Pipit! It was difficult at first, but this grassland skulker ultimately gave good views just before the light faded. It was a superb to end to an excellent day, capped off by several Northern Bobwhites on the track as we drove out.

Day 7: The morning began with calling Barn Owls from the motel grounds and a fine breakfast kindly provided by our hosts. Weather-wise, a comfortable start to the day gave way to a 'toasty' ninety degrees Fahrenheit by noon! Our focus was very much oriented around seeing Blue Bunting, perhaps the only rare bird still being regularly reported from "the valley" but missing from our lists. The first port of call was the magical Frontera Audubon Thicket where we decided to divide our efforts in the hope that one of us would come up with a Blue Bunting somewhere. The bunting eluded us once again but James relocated the female Crimson-collared Grosbeak whilst Kenny found a Green Heron and Bob recorded a Hermit Thrush. Most of us however, did connect with a couple of handsome Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Blue-grey Gnatcatchers and a good selection of typical Rio Grande Valley residents such as Buff-bellied Hummingbirds and Clay-coloured Thrush. Despite the prospect of a long drive to Victoria we decided to give the bunting one last try, this time at Bentsen Rio Grande Valley State Park. After checking in we didn't bother to wait for the next tram and hiked into the park at a brisk pace. For such a glorious morning the park's roads were surprising desolate and the only folks to be seen were two birders approaching us from a distance. As they got closer, both had beam of delight across their face. It was the type glow that exudes from a birder who's just seen a very good bird! After just a few words exchanged it became clear that they had just seen a Blue Bunting – this one a female coming to a dripping pipe at the Kiskadee Blind. Five minutes later we were there, sitting quietly in the blind watching Collared Peccaries, Green Jays, Common Ground-doves and Orange-crowned Warblers. It was cool and shady in the blind as we approached the warmest part of the day. Perhaps, we thought, the unusual heat would bring the female Blue Bunting back in for another drink before too long. After just ten minutes she appeared! First at the rear of the feeding area, and then approaching through the thick tangles of vines to ultimately give extended views as she drank from the same dripping pipe described by the birding friends that we'd met on the way in. It was a sweet moment. A female Blue Bunting, being mostly dull, tan-brown may not be the most exotic bird to view but it

was certainly one of the most exciting and our efforts had been justly rewarded. The rest of the walk around Bentsen was rather quiet and hot. We waited in the shade for the tram to arrive and notched up soaring White-tailed, Red-tailed and Harris's Hawks and heard (but didn't see) a calling Verdin. Refreshment was in order and we rested for a while at the headquarters before tackling the hummingbird feeders and flower gardens. After some waiting and an informative chat with the senior ornithologist on site, we eventually caught up with several Rufous-type Hummingbirds and the star attraction, an over-wintering male Allen's Hummingbird that should have been somewhere in Southern Mexico! Bentsen had been good to us and we departed in mid-afternoon feeling pleased with our efforts. Journeying north, we again checked the roadside flood meadows north of Weslaco finding plenty of Ruddy Ducks but not its much rarer cousin – Masked Duck. As we headed North through Kennedy County we called in for an appointment for a tour of private ranch land, driving four miles deep into the brush country. It wasn't long before we'd found our key bird, Ferruginous Pygmy-owl, and enjoyed wonderful views and great photo opportunities in beautiful late afternoon light. Our host, Letti, had given us a wonderfully entertaining visit including showing us a Barn Owl's nest in one of the hunting blinds. With dusk approaching it was time to hit the road. Northern Bobwhite, Wild Turkey, Vermilion Flycatcher, White-tailed Deer, and introduced Nilgi were all seen as we drove out from the ranch. From there it was pretty much a solid drive to our motel in Victoria breaking only for supper in Kingsville.

Day 8: The day dawned cool and breezy, reminding us that despite a week of warmth and sunshine, it was still January and still winter in Texas! With a flight to New Mexico scheduled for mid-afternoon it was always going to be hit and miss as to how much birding we could do on the way to Houston. In the event, the journey from Victoria (including a break for breakfast) went very smoothly and we arrived at W.G. Jones State forest in mid-morning with enough time for an extremely productive hour of woodland birding. The place was simply 'hopping' with Pine Warblers and Eastern Bluebirds, White-throated and Chipping Sparrows, all foraging on the ground and relatively easy to see. Joining them, and surprisingly easy to find, a lovely Brown-headed Nuthatch one of the key birds of our visit. Venturing a short distance into the open pine woodland, some excellent bird finding produced a fine haul of woodpeckers with Pileated and Downy Woodpeckers, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and perhaps the chief prize, Red-cockaded Woodpecker – endemic to open pine woods of the south-eastern US. With only a short drive to the airport, we departed after a thrilling hour and waved good-bye to a fantastic week in Texas. The state had more than lived up to its bird-rich reputation, and coupled with a week of glorious weather and great company we had few complaints. It was time to move on to stage two of the tour. Travel logistics and flights went smoothly and before long we were enjoying views of snow-capped peaks rising up from the barren winter plains of New Mexico. The flight into Albuquerque was nothing short of spectacular leaving us with the curious feeling that we'd landed in a different country rather than a state that shares one of its borders with Texas. Frances was already in the arrivals hall to join our small but cordial group and Jim Hamilton arrived on a much later flight, but still with enough time for dinner at a wonderful 'New Mexican' restaurant. We retired to the motel in preparation for an assault on Sandia Crest the next day.

Day 9: Our first full day in New Mexico dawned chilly but sunny. From Albuquerque it looked perfect for mountain birding and so, after a breakfast and a quick stop to pick up supplies, we climbed the mountain roads towards Sandia Crest. It was warm, sunny and nearly windless – perfect for high elevation birding. The first birds of note, right by the road, were two Townsend's Solitaires and after enjoying good views, with our hearts really set on rosy-finches, we drove up to the crest and parked. For next two hours we lingered enjoying the views and the comfort of the gift shop and café at 10,600 feet in elevation. The goal of the morning was to try and see all the possible rosy-finches and we watched amazed as flocks of hundreds arrived at feeders placed just off the balcony of the café. Black, Brown-capped and Grey-crowned Rosy-finches (including 'Hepburn's' Grey-crowned) could all be viewed and photographed at close range. Common Raven, Steller's Jay, Mountain Chickadee, Red-breasted and White-breasted Nuthatches and several forms of Dark-eyed Junco, all set against an exceptional vista, produced a truly memorable morning. Further down-slope, the snow-covered trails turned out to be a bit of an anti-climax after such an exceptional morning, though at our picnic lunch we did find Northern Flicker, Hairy Woodpecker and several fly-over Red Crossbills. Heading south, and by way of a complete contrast, we found ourselves birding in the low-lying fields and semi-desert of the Rio Grande Valley

by mid-afternoon. It gave us more than a taste of the spectacle to come. We found thousands of Snow and Ross's Geese and Sandhill Cranes at a refuge well north of Bosque Del Apache and spent the rest of the afternoon just enjoying the experience of being surrounded by thousands of birds. As it happened, the actual numbers of Ross's Geese (about 4,500) would turn out to be much higher than our counts at the more famous location further south. It was so tranquil that we stayed on close to dusk watching Northern Harriers quarter the fields and lines of Sandhill Cranes, Snow and Ross's Geese constantly streaming overhead. We also found a single Canada Goose, a 'Harlan's' Red-tailed Hawk, Say's Phoebe and about a dozen 'Lesser' Sandhill Cranes. We moved onto the quiet town of Socorro, which would serve as something of a hub for much of our time in New Mexico. A fine Italian meal and a few beers provided a fitting end to our first full day in New Mexico.

Day 10: We awoke early and departed early, well before first light to reach Bosque De Apache for the morning flight. The scene was haunting as carloads of hopeful birders lined the dirt tracks and disappeared in and out of the cold morning mist. Within minutes one of the best avian spectacles in the world erupted in a sudden and shocking departure as tens of thousands of Snow (and some Ross's) Geese and Sandhill Cranes dispersed from roost at Bosque Del Apache. The sight and sound was beyond words and absolutely awe inspiring. It was over all too quickly and somehow, 30,000 Snow Geese had passed over us in a matter of minutes, dispersing to feeding areas north and west of the refuge. We dedicated the rest of the morning to a long and thorough exploration of the refuge enjoying huge numbers of waterfowl including Bufflehead, Redhead and Green-winged Teal. We worked hard to see two calling Virginia Rails but had better luck in the same spot with Marsh Wrens. The raptor show was also excellent as we notched up a dozen Bald Eagles, Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks, American Kestrel and many Red-tailed Hawks. Of the latter, Jim checked each and every one carefully for his nemesis bird, Ferruginous Hawk, but came up empty. Passerines included Black Phoebe, Lincoln's Sparrows, Yellow-headed Blackbird and hundreds of Horned Larks and White-crowned Sparrows. Heading north back to Socorro for brunch, Catriona spotted a blue looking bird in a field which, on closer inspection, materialized into a stunning flock of 17 Mountain Bluebirds, a brilliant end to the morning. After a solid brunch, we made a short visit to a local park where highlights included White-winged Doves and the only 'Slate-coloured' Dark-eyed Junco of the tour found foraging amongst 'Oregon' and 'Pink-sided' Juncos. With the high plains west of Socorro on our agenda we pressed on. The journey was rudely interrupted after Kenny spotted an intriguing 'mammal' lurking in a gorge in some promising looking terrain that may have suitable for Mountain Lion or something equally impressive. It took us twenty minutes to establish an identity which turned out to be a dog chasing a Frisbee! Late afternoon on the high plains was cool, windy and daunting with seemingly very few birds on view. But with some work and patience we were ultimately rewarded with decent views of Chestnut-collared Longspurs, Horned Larks, American Kestrel, Merlin, and best of all, a magnificent Prairie Falcon.

Day 11: The morning brought a cold start and a change of scenery as we visited one of the beautiful canyons west of Socorro. The approach to the canyon was graced by a herd of about 72 Pronghorns, much to the delight of Kenny and Catriona. The canyon itself provided a steady succession of excellent birds – Band-tailed Pigeon, Acorn and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers, Red-naped and Williamson's Sapsuckers, Juniper Titmouse, Cactus Wren, Red Crossbill, Pine Siskin, Lesser Goldfinch, Western Scrub-jay, Western Bluebird and Townsend's Solitaire. A small chipmunk near the head of the canyon was carefully identified as a Cliff Chipmunk, a lifer for all. After a healthy lunch in Socorro we headed south, gradually dropping in elevation and entering semi-desert and grassland. We found nesting Golden Eagles en route and had good views of Chihuahuan Ravens over the highway. The expansive Elephant Butte reservoir was our next stop, which supported huge numbers of Clark's and Western Grebes, some Ruddy Ducks and several Red-breasted Mergansers. However, it was really the surrounding desert scrub that captured most of our interest for here we found Western Meadowlarks, Vesper Sparrows, huge flocks of Brewer's Blackbirds and Chestnut-collared Longspurs, our first Greater Roadrunner of the tour and perhaps the pick of the bunch, a party of five Scaled Quail. As we approached Truth or Consequences, there was just about enough light left in the day to try Rock Canyon Marina for gulls. We weren't disappointed. True, gulls aren't everyone's cup-of-tea, but for 'larophiles' this small, compact gull flock resting on the pontoons at the marina contained a thrilling selection – American Herring Gull, Ring-billed

Gull, California Gull (2), Mew Gull (2), Thayer's Gull and a Lesser Black-backed Gull, the latter being a state rarity with only a couple of accepted records. For those unimpressed by the gulls, a confiding Rock Wren provided a nice distraction. Night and evening meal in Truth or Consequences.

Day 12: From Truth or Consequences we continued south to Percha Dam state park with the ultimate plan of returning to Socorro later in the day. Percha Dam and the area surrounding the state park was outstanding starting with prolonged views of a perched Crissal Thrasher, greatly appreciated by Bob. Cackling Goose, Say's and Black Phoebes, Bewick's Wren, several Hammond's Flycatchers, Cedar Waxwings, Phainopepla, Verdin and Western Bluebird all showed well along with Red-naped Sapsucker and Ladder-backed Woodpecker. As we drove away from the area we chanced upon a couple of 'Mexican' Mallard on a drain with a few Green-winged Teal. Feeling satisfied with the morning we then made the spontaneous but unanimous decision to devote the rest of the day to a long distance 'twitch' to find a previously reported Long-eared Owl roost near the Mexican border. Although the site was well south of our planned itinerary, it turned out to be a fine diversion and a sensible decision. Not only did we find the roost containing at least six Long-eared Owls, but we also enjoyed wonderful views of many desert and wintering species that might have been difficult to see elsewhere. These included Curve-billed Thrasher, Cactus Wren, Pyrrhuloxia, Black-throated, Brewer's and Vesper Sparrows and loads of Lark Buntings giving the best views anyone could wish for. Before leaving the area we found another Crissal Thrasher and marvelled at the abundance of Northern Harriers throughout the grasslands – they were simply everywhere! Remarkably, by the evening we were back in Socorro enjoying dinner at our favourite Italian Restaurant closing another brilliant day in New Mexico.

Day 13: The morning gave us one more chance to experience the stunning spectacle of thousands of Snow and Ross's Geese. This time they remain settled for longer periods giving some of the finest photographic opportunities of the trip as the sun rose through the mist etching out thousands of birds. Gambel's Quails and Mountain Bluebirds gave wonderful views at the refuge headquarters and another tour of the refuge produced good views of a flock of fifteen Ross's Geese feeding separately to the masses. The same area held Horned Larks and American Pipits, Canvasbacks, Wilson's Snipe and a couple of Spotted Towhees. Just as we were leaving the area, Jim finally cracked his nemesis bird – Ferruginous Hawk. A young bird, extremely accommodating, perched up close to the road offering prolonged scope views. It couldn't have been a more fitting end to our time at Bosque Del Apache and a rich reward for a man who'd scrutinized every raptor on the tour. Little did we know that the rest of the day would produce seven more Ferruginous Hawks as we crossed the vast plains and farmland north-east of Socorro! Much of the rest of the day was consumed by driving north towards Santa Fe but we did encounter a vast swirl of larks and longspurs at least 700 of which turned out to be McCown's Longspurs. The birds were highly mobile in the rather gusty, windy conditions but eventually settled down for long enough to be viewed through a scope. Scattered Pronghorns also graced the same fields. By the evening, we'd reached Santa Fe and at dinner Jim celebrated his Ferruginous Hawks by sharing a bottle of champagne with us all.

Day 14: The morning in Santa Fe dawned distinctly chilly as we climbed the road to Santa Fe ski-basin. Perhaps not unexpectedly, this was the coldest part of the trip. Birds were few but we did see several Clark's Nutcrackers, which were new to the tour. Hairy Woodpecker, Steller's Jay, and Mountain Chickadee were seen near the summit parking area but it was bitterly cold and slim pickings indeed. We retreated and had more very good looks at Townsend's Solitaires on the lower slopes. After a superb lunch in Santa Fe, we tried to follow up a report of Northern Shrike at a dog walking park of all places! The habitat was good but we didn't find the shrike. We did, however, have fantastic views of Mountain Bluebirds and our only Canyon Towhees of the tour. With this we headed south to the last birding of the tour at the Valley Nature Centre in Albuquerque. A concentration of Wood Ducks was the big attraction and they actually put on a fabulous display looking resplendent in the late afternoon sunshine. Gadwall, American Wigeon and Ring-necked Ducks were present and the feeders by the centre were rather productive as well with White-crowned Sparrows, Spotted Towhee, 'Pink-sided' and 'Oregon' Dark-eyed Juncos and really excellent views of a male Downy Woodpecker. We said our good-byes to Frances who was staying with friends in Albuquerque and then checked into our motel

before enjoying our final 'New Mexican' dinner of the tour.

Day 15: A relaxed morning for all before heading to the airport for check-in and a late breakfast. We travelled back to Houston as a group before taking our respective flights home. Remarkably this trip, with 275 species, instantly became Birdfinders third most diverse North American tour, bettered only by California (record 285 species) and Texas in spring (record 326 species). We also found 18 species of mammal thanks largely to the enthusiasm of Kenny Ross and Catriona Rayner. Thanks go to Bob Bailey, Christine Rose, Frances Cottrell-Dormer, Jim Hamilton, Kenny Ross and Catriona Rayner for helping to make this inaugural tour of Texas and New Mexico such an enjoyable experience.