

ROCKPORT, TEXAS

A BONANZA OF WINTERING BIRDS

NOVEMBER 13–17, 2017



Whooping Cranes hunting Blue Crabs © Michael O'Brien

LEADERS:
MICHAEL O'BRIEN & LOUISE ZEMAITIS

LIST COMPILED BY: MICHAEL O'BRIEN

VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS, INC.
2525 WALLINGWOOD DRIVE, SUITE 1003
AUSTIN, TEXAS 78746
WWW.VENTBIRD.COM

ROCKPORT, TEXAS
A Bonanza of Wintering Birds
November 13–17, 2017

By Michael O'Brien

We had a very pleasant visit to this bird-rich part of the country, and we enjoyed a wonderful mix of wintering waterbirds, South Texas residents, and of course, the magnificent Whooping Cranes. Before arriving, we had concerns about how well this area was rebounding after being devastated by Hurricane Harvey back on August 25. Rockport was at ground zero when this storm made its first landfall, and the damage was considerable. Much cleanup remains to be done, and rebuilding will likely take years, but we were pleased to see that many businesses were fully operational and most birding sites reasonably intact.

On our first morning, we jumped right in with the trip every birder visiting the Texas Coast needs to take: a boat cruise to the back bays of Aransas National Wildlife Refuge aboard *The Skimmer* with Capt. Tommy Moore! Capt. Tommy is a real pro at this gig and always runs a great trip. It was a delightful cruise from start to finish, highlighted by up-close views of several Whooping Crane pairs, including one with a juvenile in tow. The pools, channels, and vast Aransas saltmarsh harbored many other birds including hundreds of pelicans, cormorants, and ducks, and numerous Reddish Egrets, Roseate Spoonbills, and Long-billed Curlews. During our transits across Aransas Bay, we frequently had Sandwich and Forster's terns feeding around the boat, and we also came across both Greater and Lesser scaup and a single Common Goldeneye. After lunch, a visit to Cape Valero Drive provided great learning opportunities with a mixed flock of shorebirds, including Long-billed Dowitcher, Dunlin, Greater and Lesser yellowlegs, and Least and Western sandpipers. We also had close views of a Wilson's Snipe hiding in the ditch right outside our vans! This stretch of marsh was also full of waterfowl, with large numbers of Redhead, Pintail, and Green-winged Teal, along with several Canvasback, Mottled Duck, and others. Nearby, we had excellent views of a small flock of Sandhill Cranes.



Sandhill Cranes © Louise Zemaitis

On our second day we headed west to Hazel Bazemore Park where we were met by local expert and Swarovski Optic representative Clay Taylor. The brushy habitats at Hazel Bazemore harbor a number of species more typical of the Rio Grande Valley than the Texas Coast, and we were pleased to find White-tipped Dove, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Great Kiskadee, Couch's Kingbird, Green Jay, Black-crested Titmouse, and Long-billed Thrasher. The park is perhaps best known as a concentration point for migrating raptors as they head south, and our visit coincided with the final day of this season's raptor migration count. By this date it was mainly Turkey Vultures that were still passing in numbers, but waterbirds were also on the move. Though distant, we saw several flocks of Snow, Ross's, and Greater White-fronted geese, Sandhill Cranes, and a swirling mass of American White Pelicans. After some brief but very productive butterflying in Clay's yard, we cruised through some nearby ranch country where we had nice looks at Crested Caracara, Loggerhead Shrike, Lark Sparrow, and a huge "murmuration" of blackbirds. To cap off the day, we stopped in Corpus Christi to visit a roost of Monk Parakeets and had wonderful views of the noisy, charismatic birds as they came in to a grove of palm trees.



Monk Parakeet © Michael O'Brien

It was back to the coast on our third day, starting in the very birdy town of Port Aransas. After having dazzling views of a Sedge Wren at the community park, we headed out to the beach by Port Aransas Jetty. Many of the birds here are used to people wandering nearby, so they allow close approach. As a result, we had wonderful studies of Caspian, Royal, and Sandwich terns, plus an array of shorebirds including several Red Knots and a color-banded Piping Plover, originating from breeding grounds along the Missouri River in North Dakota—always exciting to know where a banded bird came from! At the Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Center, damage to the boardwalk cut our visit short, but we still had great views of Common Gallinule, several waterfowl and heron species, and an amazingly cooperative American Bittern. As we cruised down Mustang Island, we found more shorebird

concentrations at Packery Channel including some showy Black-necked Stilts and Long-billed Curlews, as well as excellent studies of peeps, dowitchers, and plovers, including another banded North Dakota Piping Plover! We finished the day at Oso Bay where we found large rafts of ducks, good views of Marbled Godwit and Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, and a surprise Yellow Warbler (rare this late in the season).



Piping Plover, banded in North Dakota © Michael O'Brien

Our final morning began with some excitement right in Portland with the surprise discovery of a pair of Tropical Kingbirds, a species that is rare anywhere north of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. We had good views of these birds as they interacted with each other and gave their distinctive twittering calls. Nearby Sunset Lake offered a pleasant mix of species in beautiful morning light, including Common Loon, Reddish Egret, Black-bellied Plover, Least and Western sandpipers, and American Pipit. Later, we cruised some agricultural fields south of Corpus Christi where we had beautiful views of a perched White-tailed Hawk, several Crested Caracaras, and a field jam-packed with more than 2,500 Sandhill Cranes!

ITINERARY

November 13 – Arrivals in Rockport; transfer to Hampton Inn, Portland, with stop at Indian Point Park; night in Portland.

November 14 – Boat tour to Aransas National Wildlife Refuge aboard *The Skimmer* with Capt. Tommy Moore; Cape Valero Drive; TX 1069; night in Portland.

November 15 – Hazel Bazemore Park w/Clay Taylor; brief butterflying and hawk watching at Clay Taylor's house in Calallen; Knolle Ranch area; night in Portland.

November 16 – Port Aransas area (including the Community Park, Jetty, and Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Center); Mustang Island; Packery Channel; Hans and Pat Suter WMA (Oso Bay); night in Portland.

November 17 – Portland; Sunset Lake; Tule Lake; agricultural fields south of airport; mid-day departures to airport.



Tropical Kingbirds © Michael O'Brien

N = nest or nesting activity observed

I = Introduced

BIRDS

Ducks (*Anatidae*)

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck (*Dendrocygna autumnalis*) – Several flocks flying by at Hazel Bazemore.

Greater White-fronted Goose (*Anser albifrons*) – Fly-by flock at Hazel Bazemore.

Snow Goose (*Chen caerulescens*) – Numerous distant fly-by flocks at Hazel Bazemore.

Ross's Goose (*Chen rossii*) – A few mixed in with Snows at Hazel Bazemore.

Gadwall (*Anas strepera*) – Seen at several locations.

American Wigeon (*Anas americana*) – Numerous at several locations.

Mottled Duck (*Anas fulvigula*) – Never in large numbers, but we saw this species every day.

Blue-winged Teal (*Anas discors*) – Small numbers at several locations.

Northern Shoveler (*Anas clypeata*) – Numerous at several locations.

Northern Pintail (*Anas acuta*) – Seen every day.

Green-winged Teal (*Anas crecca*) – Numerous at several locations.

Canvasback (*Aythya valisineria*) – Several at Cape Valero Drive.

Redhead (*Aythya americana*) – Perhaps the most abundant wintering duck on the Central Texas Coast, we saw large flocks at Aransas, Cape Valero Drive, and Oso Bay.

Greater Scaup (*Aythya marila*) – A few mixed with Lessers on the Aransas boat trip.
Lesser Scaup (*Aythya affinis*) – Seen at several locations, including large flocks at Aransas and Oso Bay.
Bufflehead (*Bucephala albeola*) – Several on the boat to Aransas.
Common Goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*) – One fly-by on the boat to Aransas.
Hooded Merganser (*Lophodytes cucullatus*) – Several at Aransas and Hazel Bazemore.
Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*) – Two on the boat trip to Aransas.
Ruddy Duck (*Oxyura jamaicensis*) – One at Cape Valero Drive.

Grebes (*Podicipedidae*)

Pied-billed Grebe (*Podilymbus podiceps*) – Small numbers scattered at many locations.

Doves and Pigeons (*Columbidae*) □

Rock Pigeon (*Columba livia*) (I) – Seen every day.
Eurasian Collared-Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*) (I) – Seen every day.
Inca Dove (*Columbina inca*) – Several at Hazel Bazemore.
White-tipped Dove (*Leptotila verreauxi*) – One at Hazel Bazemore.
White-winged Dove (*Zenaida asiatica*) – Locally numerous around Hazel Bazemore.
Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*) – Seen every day.

Hummingbirds (*Trochillidae*)

Black-chinned Hummingbird (*Archilochus alexandri*) – Two at Hazel Bazemore.

Rails, Coots, and Gallinules (*Rallidae*)

Clapper Rail (*Rallus crepitans*) – Heard at Oso Bay.
Common Gallinule (*Gallinula galeata*) – Numerous at the Port Aransas Birding Center.
American Coot (*Fulica americana*) – Seen at several locations; particularly numerous at Cape Valero Drive.

Cranes (*Gruidae*)

Sandhill Crane (*Grus canadensis*) – Seen at a few locations; most impressive was a flock of more than 2500 at in farm fields south of Corpus Christi.
Whooping Crane (*Grus americana*) – We had excellent views of these magnificent birds on our boat trip to Aransas.

Avocets and Stilts (*Recurvirostridae*)

Black-necked Stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*) – Seen at several locations.
American Avocet (*Recurvirostra americana*) – Seen at several locations.

Oystercatchers (*Haematopodidae*)

American Oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*) – A few on the boat trip to Aransas.

Plovers (*Charadriidae*)

Black-bellied Plover (*Pluvialis squatarola*) – Small numbers at Packery Channel, Oso Bay, and Sunset Lake.
Semipalmated Plover (*Charadrius semipalmatus*) – Seen at Packery Channel, Oso Bay, and Tule Lake.

Piping Plover (*Charadrius melodus*) – Several at Port Aransas Jetty and Packery Channel, including color-banded birds at both locations; both of these birds were banded on the breeding grounds in North Dakota, one at Lake Sakakawea, and the other along the Garrison reach of the Missouri River.

Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferous*) – Seen every day.

Sandpipers and allies (*Scolopacidae*)

Long-billed Curlew (*Numenius americanus*) – Small numbers at many locations.

Marbled Godwit (*Limosa fedoa*) – Seen at Aransas, Packery Channel, Oso Bay, and Sunset Lake.

Ruddy Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*) – Small numbers at several locations.

Red Knot (*Calidris canutus*) – Five at the Port Aransas Jetty.

Sanderling (*Calidris alba*) – Numerous on the beach at Port Aransas; a few at other locations.

Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*) – Seen at several locations, but closest views were at Cape Valero Drive.

Least Sandpiper (*Calidris minutilla*) – Seen at many locations; excellent studies at Cape Valero Drive, Packery Channel, and Tule Lake.

Western Sandpiper (*Calidris mauri*) – Good views at Cape Valero Drive, Port Aransas Jetty, and Packery Channel.

Short-billed Dowitcher (*Limnodromus griseus*) – Somewhat distant views of several Packery Channel.

Long-billed Dowitcher (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*) – The commoner winter dowitcher in Texas, we saw these birds at several locations, from freshwater ponds to protected brackish coves.

Wilson's Snipe (*Gallinago delicata*) – Close views of one in a roadside ditch at Cape Valero Drive; numerous at Hazel Bazemore, but mainly in-flight views there.

Spotted Sandpiper (*Actitis macularius*) – A few at Aransas, Rockport, and Packery Channel.

Greater Yellowlegs (*Tringa melanoleuca*) – Seen every day, often offering nice comparisons with Lesser Yellowlegs.

Willet (*Tringa semipalmata*) – Seen every day, with largest numbers on the Aransas boat trip. All birds we saw belong to the “Western” subspecies (*T. s. inornata*), which breeds in interior prairie wetlands. The local breeding “Eastern Willet” (*T. s. semipalmata*) winters outside the U.S..

Lesser Yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*) – Seen at several locations.

Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers (*Laridae*)

Laughing Gull (*Leucophaeus atricilla*) – The most abundant gull along the Texas Coast, we saw them every day, often in numbers.

Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*) – Small numbers seen at many locations.

Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*) – Small numbers at many locations.

Caspian Tern (*Hydroprogne caspia*) – A few at many locations.

Forster's Tern (*Sterna forsteri*) – Seen every day, with largest numbers at Aransas.

Royal Tern (*Thalasseus maximus*) – Seen at several locations, but particularly good views at the Port Aransas jetty.

Sandwich Tern (*Thalasseus sandvicensis*) – Several locations, but best views were at the Port Aransas jetty, and of birds feeding around our boat on the trip to Aransas.

Black Skimmer (*Rynchops niger*) – Good views around Packery Channel and Sunset Lake.

Loons (*Gaviidae*)

Common Loon (*Gavia immer*) – A few on the boat trip to Aransas, plus singles at Hazel Bazemore and Sunset Lake.

Cormorants (*Phalacrocoracidae*) □

Neotropic Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax brasilianus*) – Small numbers seen every day.

Double-crested Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax auritus*) – Seen every day; generally more abundant in coastal areas than Neotropic.

Pelicans (*Pelecanidae*)

American White Pelican (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*) – Seen every day, often in large flocks.

Brown Pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis*) – Seen every day.

Hérons and Egrets (*Ardeidae*)

American Bittern (*Botaurus lentiginosus*) – Close views of one at the Port Aransas Birding Center.

Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) – Seen every day.

Great Egret (*Ardea alba*) – Seen every day.

Snowy Egret (*Egretta thula*) – Seen every day.

Little Blue Heron (*Egretta caerulea*) – A few each at Aransas, Cape Valero Drive, and Oso Bay.

Tricolored Heron (*Egretta tricolor*) – Seen on four days, often in good numbers.

Reddish Egret (*Egretta rufescens*) – Seen well at several locations along the coast.

Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) – Small group at Cape Valero Drive.

Black-crowned Night-Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) – Several each at Port Aransas Birding Center and Oso Bay.

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron (*Nyctanassa violacea*) – One at Oso Bay.

Ibises and Spoonbills (*Threskiornithidae*)

White Ibis (*Eudocimus albus*) – Numerous and seen every day.

White-faced Ibis (*Plegadis chihi*) – Seen at Cape Valero Drive and Port Aransas.

Roseate Spoonbill (*Platalea ajaja*) – Small groups at several locations.

New World Vultures (*Cathartidae*)

Black Vulture (*Coragyps atratus*) – Seen every day, and abundant in some areas.

Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*) – Seen every day; particularly numerous at Hazel Bazemore and Knolle Ranch.

Osprey (*Pandionidae*)

Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) – Small numbers seen at most coastal locations.

Hawks and Eagles (*Accipitidae*)

White-tailed Kite (*Elanus leucurus*) – Pair at Hazel Bazemore.

Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*) – One or two seen every day.

Sharp-shinned Hawk (*Accipiter striatus*) – One at Knolle Ranch.

Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*) – Seen at many locations.

Harris's Hawk (*Parabuteo unicinctus*) – Three at Tule Lake.

White-tailed Hawk (*Buteo albicaudatus*) – Seen at several locations, with excellent views in farm fields south of Corpus Christi.

Red-shouldered Hawk (*Buteo lineatus*) – Several at Hazel Bazemore and Knolle Ranch.

Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) – Seen at several locations; numerous at Knolle Ranch.

Kingfishers (*Alcedinidae*)

Belted Kingfisher (*Megasceryle alcyon*) – One or two seen every day.

Woodpeckers (*Picidae*) □

Golden-fronted Woodpecker (*Melanerpes aurifrons*) – Seen at Hazel Bazemore and Portland.

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours

Ladder-backed Woodpecker (*Picoides scalaris*) – Three at Hazel Bazemore.

Falcons (*Falconidae*) □

Crested Caracara (*Caracara cheriway*) – Seen every day.

American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*) – Seen every day, though not in very large numbers.

Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) – Distant bird at Aransas, and close pair at Port Aransas.

African and New World Parrots (*Psittacidae*)

Monk Parakeet (*Myiopsitta monachus*) – 45 at the OLCC Campus in Corpus Christi.

Tyrant Flycatchers (*Tyrannidae*) □

Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*) – A few seen every day.

Vermilion Flycatcher (*Pyrocephalus rubinus*) – Seen at Cape Valero Drive, Hazel Bazemore, and Port Aransas Community Park.

Great Kiskadee (*Pitangus sulphuratus*) – Seen at Hazel Bazemore and Oso Bay.

Tropical Kingbird (*Tyrannus melancholicus*) – A rarity this far north, we were pleased to find a pair of these in Portland.

Couch's Kingbird (*Tyrannus couchii*) – Numerous at Hazel Bazemore.

Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus forficatus*) – Several at Hazel Bazemore and Knolle Ranch.

Shrikes (*Laniidae*)

Loggerhead Shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*) – Small numbers at several locations.

Vireos and Allies (*Vireonidae*)

White-eyed Vireo (*Vireo griseus*) – Heard and seen briefly at Hazel Bazemore.

Crows, Jays, and Magpies (*Corvidae*)

Green Jay (*Cyanocorax yncas*) – Several at Hazel Bazemore.

Larks (*Alaudidae*)

Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris*) – Two at Sunset Lake.

Swallows (*Hirundinidae*)

Tree Swallow (*Tachycineta bicolor*) – Small flocks at several locations.

Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) – One on the boat trip to Aransas.

Chickadees and Titmice (*Paridae*)

Black-crested Titmouse (*Baeolophus atricristatus*) – Several at Hazel Bazemore.

Wrens (*Troglodytidae*) □

House Wren (*Troglodytes aedon*) – Seen or heard every day.

Sedge Wren (*Cistothorus platensis*) – Nice views at Hazel Bazemore and Port Aransas Community Park.

Marsh Wren (*Cistothorus palustris*) – Heard at Port Aransas Birding Center.

Carolina Wren (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*) – Heard at Hazel Bazemore.

Gnatcatchers (*Sylviidae*) □

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (*Polioptila caerulea*) – Several at Hazel Bazemore.

Kinglets (*Regulidae*)

Ruby-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus calendula*) – A few at Hazel Bazemore.

Mockingbirds and Thrashers (*Mimidae*)

Long-billed Thrasher (*Toxostoma longirostre*) – Nice views at Hazel Bazemore.

Northern Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*) – Seen every day.

Starlings (*Sturnidae*) □

European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) (I) – Numerous and seen every day.

Old World Sparrows (*Passeridae*)

House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) (I) – Small numbers seen every day.

Wagtails and Pipits (*Motacillidae*)

American Pipit (*Anthus rubescens*) – Nice views at Cape Valero Drive; a few other fly-overs.

Siskins, Crossbills, and Allies (*Fringillidae*)

Pine Siskin (*Spinus pinus*) – Single fly-over at Port Aransas Birding Center.

Lesser Goldfinch (*Spinus psaltria*) – Three at Hazel Bazemore

New World Warblers (*Parulidae*) □

Orange-crowned Warbler (*Oreothlypis celata*) – Seen at several locations.

Common Yellowthroat (*Geothlypis trichas*) – Seen at several locations.

Yellow Warbler (*Setophaga petechia*) – Single female at Oso Bay; either a very late migrant or a wintering bird well north of their normal range.

Yellow-rumped Warbler (*Setophaga coronata*) – Several at Hazel Bazemore; these were of the northern “Myrtle” subspecies (*S. c. coronata*).

Sparrows and allies (*Emberizidae*)

Lark Sparrow (*Chondestes grammacus*) – Small flock at Knolle Ranch.

Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*) – Seen at several locations.

Lincoln’s Sparrow (*Melospiza lincolni*) – Good views at Hazel Bazemore.

Swamp Sparrow (*Melospiza georgiana*) – One at Tule Lake.

Cardinals and allies (*Cardinalidae*)

Northern Cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) – A few at Hazel Bazemore and Oso Bay.

Blackbirds and allies (*Icteridae*) □

Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) – Small numbers at many locations.

Eastern Meadowlark (*Sturnella magna*) – Seen at Aransas, Cape Valero Drive, Hazel Bazemore, and Port Aransas. Eastern Meadowlarks along the Texas Coast tend to occur in taller grass habitats than Westerns, and many are resident breeders.

Western Meadowlark (*Sturnella neglecta*) – Seen at Cape Valero Drive, Hazel Bazemore, and Port Aransas. Although sometimes intermingling with local resident Eastern Meadowlarks, wintering Westerns tend to occur in small flocks in short grass habitats.

Great-tailed Grackle (*Quisicalus mexicanus*) – Abundant everywhere.

Bronzed Cowbird (*Molothrus aeneus*) – Two in Portland.

Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*) – Huge flock at Knolle Ranch, plus a few others.

MAMMALS

Eastern Fox Squirrel (*Sciurus niger*)
White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*)
Feral Pig (*Sus scrofa*)
Bottlenose Dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*)

BUTTERFLIES

Pipevine Swallowtail (*Battus philenor*)
Giant Swallowtail (*Papilio cresphontes*)
Southern Dogface (*Colias cesonias*)
Cloudless Sulphur (*Phoebis sennae*)
Large Orange Sulphur (*Phoebis agarithe*)
Little Yellow (*Eurema lisa*)
Great Southern White (*Ascia monuste*)
Mallow Scrub-Hairstreak (*Strymon istapa*)
Ceraunus Blue (*Hemiargus ceraunus*)
Gulf Fritillary (*Agraulis vanillae*)
Bordered Patch (*Chlosyne lacinia*)
Phaon Crescent (*Phyciodes phaon*)
Painted Lady (*Vanessa cardui*)
Red Admiral (*Vanessa atalanta*)
Common Buckeye (*Junonia coenia*)
White Peacock (*Anartia jatrophae*)
Common Mestra (*Mestra amymone*)
American Snout (*Libytheana carinenta*)
Monarch (*Danaus plexippus*)
Queen (*Danaus gilippus*)
White-striped Longtail (*Chioides albofasciatus*)
Sickle-winged Skipper (*Achlyodes mithridates*)
Common Checkered-Skipper (*Pyrgus communis*)
Tropical Checkered-Skipper (*Pyrgus oileus*)
Laviana White-Skipper (*Heliopetes laviana*)
Eufala Skipper (*Lerodea eufala*)
Clouded Skipper (*Lerema accius*)
Fiery Skipper (*Hylephila phyleus*)
Sachem (*Atalopedes campestris*)