

Birding In The Rio Grande Valley

By Quentin B. and Frances L. Dowdy (A revision of a paper presented at the September 16, 1970 meeting of the Memphis Chapter, Tennessee Ornithological Society)

In the extreme southern part of Texas, supported by a subtropical climate and fertile river-deposited soils, are the remnants of a former jungle-like forest of trees, shrubs and vines. Dependent on this vegetation are a large number of birds and other animals, which are more commonly found in Mexico.

When this land is cleared and irrigated, it produces a variety and abundance of crops. For this reason much of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, biologically unique to the United States, has been converted to citrus groves and other forms of agriculture. However, a few tracts have been preserved for scientific study and the enjoyment of nature lovers. Three of these tracts are the Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, Bentzen-Rio Grande State Park, and the Anzalduas Tract owned by the World Wildlife Fund.

Compared to the agricultural lands, these parks and refuges are "islands of green." Thorny shrubs, climbing vines, and trees draped with Spanish moss form an almost jungle-like mass of vegetation. The Mexican influence is reflected in the names of some of the interesting and unusual plants of the region; such as, Granjeno (Grawn-haino), Anaqua (A-knock-wa), Guayacan (Gwa-yah-kon), Guajillo (Gwa-hee-yo), Huiasche (Wee-satch), Retama (Ray-tahma), and Tepehuaje (Tay-pa-wa-hee). Other plants common to the area are Torry Wolfberry, Mexican Persimmon, several species of mesquite and acacia, Hackberry, Texas ebony, and prickly pear cactus.

In addition to the many migrants, most of which are found in other parts of the country, several species are present as breeding birds only in this portion of the United States. These include the Mexican or Least Grebe, Black-bellied Tree Duck, Chachalaca, White-fronted Dove, Red-billed pigeon, Groove-billed Ani, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Kiskadee and Wied's Flycatchers, and Lichtenstein's Oriole. Quite rare, but sometimes to be found, are the Beardless Flycatcher, Yellow-green Vireo, Black-headed and Hooded Orioles, Varied Bunting and the White-collared Seedeater.

Other birds which may be seen during most or all of the year include the Pauraque, Elf Owl, Tropical Kingbird, Green Jay, Lomita Wren (South Texas race of the Carolina Wren), Long-billed Thrasher, Bronzed Cowbird and the Olive Sparrow. Other birds that are common but also found in other parts of the Southwest are the Harris' Hawk; Roadrunner; White-winged, Ground and Inca Doves; Ladder-backed and Golden-fronted Woodpeckers; Curve-billed Thrasher; Boat-tailed Grackle, and the Pyrrhuloxia. All of these, in addition to such old friends as the Mockingbird and the Cardinal. Those who are lucky may catch a glimpse of the Mexican Black Hawk, Gray Hawk, Jacana, Green Kingfisher, Ringed Kingfisher, Clay-colored Robin, or some other Mexican rarity.

As to where these birds can be found; some, such as the doves, the wood-peckers, Green Jay, Cactus Wren, the thrashers, and the Boat-tailed Grackles, everywhere. Green Jays and grackles are especially numerous around the picnic areas and campgrounds. During the summer months, the doves keep up an almost incessant cooing. Most abundant in the summer months is the White-winged Dove, with smaller numbers of Ground and Inca Doves. The latter are usually found around feeders at the Park or Refuge Headquarters. The White-fronted Dove is present in the summer, but may be more easily found during the winter when it is more noticeable because of the absence of the large number of White-wings.

The Least Grebe can usually be found on the ponds at Santa Ana. A very good place is the ponds at the end of a short trail from the picnic area. Gallinules nest on these ponds, and Red-billed pigeons sometimes roost in the surrounding trees.

The Black-bellied Tree Duck is also at Santa Ana. Follow a short trail from Headquarters to North Lake. There are several nest boxes and a photo blind. In summer large broods of young can be seen, one parent in the lead followed by as many as 15 or more young, and the other parent bringing up the rear.

At Bentsen-Rio Grande Park behind the old Park Headquarters, is a cultivated field where sometimes in Winter the White-tailed Kite may be seen. Chachalacas are very common both at Bentsen-Rio Grande Park and at Santa Ana. At Santa Ana signs warn you to watch out for Chachalacas in the road, where they like to take dust baths.

The most likely place to find the Red-billed Pigeon is in Anzalduas Park or the area owned by the World Wildlife Fund which adjoins the park. The pigeons nested in the park in the Summer of 1970.

The Beardless Flycatcher and the Rose-throated Becard have also been found here, and the Yellow-green Vireo and the Varied Bunting are possible.

Groove-billed Anis are common in all three of the areas; but you have to look close to distinguish them from the much more abundant Boat-tailed Grackles.

Buff-bellied Hummingbirds are most likely to be found at Santa Ana. A map at Refuge Headquarters will have pins stuck in it to indicate the most recent sightings of this and other rarities.

The Green and Ringed Kingfishers may be seen along the river at Santa Ana or Bentsen Park; but they are more likely to be found further up the river in the vicinity of Falcon Dam. The Green Kingfisher is present in small numbers all of the year. The best time is early morning. The bird will be perched on rocks or low bushes just below the dam. The Ringed Kingfisher nested this past summer on the Texas side just below the dam. The Green Kingfisher can also be found at Garner State Park several miles to the north.

The Scaled Quail is very common at Falcon Dam State Park, and the Lesser Nighthawk can also be found there.

Tropical Kingbirds and Kiskadees are very common at both Santa Ana and Bentsen; also, most of the time at Anzalduas. The Long-billed Thrasher, a bird closely resembling our Brown Thrasher, is not as common as its curve-billed relative, but can usually be found by searching any of the brushy areas.

Lichtenstein's Orioles (like a Hooded Oriole, but larger; the sexes being almost alike), seem to prefer to build their nests at the end of a small branch overhanging the park roads. There were three active nests the Summer of 1970 in Bentsen Park. The Black-headed Oriole is very hard to find because of its retiring habits and shyness. The best place to look is in the picnic area at Santa Ana and the Ebony Grove at Bentsen Park.

After spending most of one day beating the bushes for this bird at Santa Ana on our last trip to the Valley, we gave up and resigned ourselves that this was one bird we would not see. The next morning at our camp at Bentsen Park, we were up at the break of day to start our day's birding, and what was sitting in a tree above our tent? A Black-headed Oriole. Later in the day we saw a Buff-bellied Hummingbird in the same tree.

The Hooded Oriole may be seen at any of these places. The Orchard Oriole is also present in small numbers. Mockingbirds, Cardinals, Curve-billed Thrashers, Cactus Wrens, and in winter Pyrrhuloxias, are found everywhere.

The Elf Owl nests in a utility pole just across the road from the old trailer parking area at Bentsen Park. Pauragues are very common. They can be seen and heard every night in the summer. In the winter they can be found by walking along the park roads just after dark and looking for their eye-shine with a flashlight. The eyes look like glowing embers in the darkness. Several species of owls may also be seen at night.

Another point of interest at Bentsen Park during the winter is the large vulture roost. This is on the dirt road from the camping area to the river. It is on the left of the road about one-half mile after leaving the pavement.

In addition to the interesting birds are a variety of animals, a few of which reach their northern limits in the Rio Grande Valley. Some of the species seen from time to time are the Opossum, Armadillo, Eastern Cottontail, Raccoon, Striped Skunk, Coyote and the Bobcat. Tropical species infrequently seen are the Mexican Ground Squirrel, Longtailed Weasel, Ocelot, Jaguarundi Cat, Resaca Rice Rat, and the Mexican Pocket Mouse. Also of interest are the many varieties of colorful butterflies and other insects to be found here.

If one has more time to spend in this part of the country, a visit to the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge several miles to the northeast is worth a visit. A variety of water, marsh, and other birds not present in the Valley are to be found here. Among them are the Caracara, White-tailed Hawk, Fulvous Tree Duck, White Ibis, Avocet, Black-necked Stilt, Olivaceous Cormorant, and many others. The Varied Bunting and Cassin's Sparrow are present on the World War II Gunnery Range which is part of the Refuge.

Returning home, stop at Aransas for the Roseate Spoonbill in Summer and the Whooping Crane in Winter.

If you are passing nearby Anahuac Refuge on the Upper Texas Gulf Coast is worth a stop.
