

Pete Dunne



Bentsen—a park with showers ... and two views looking south

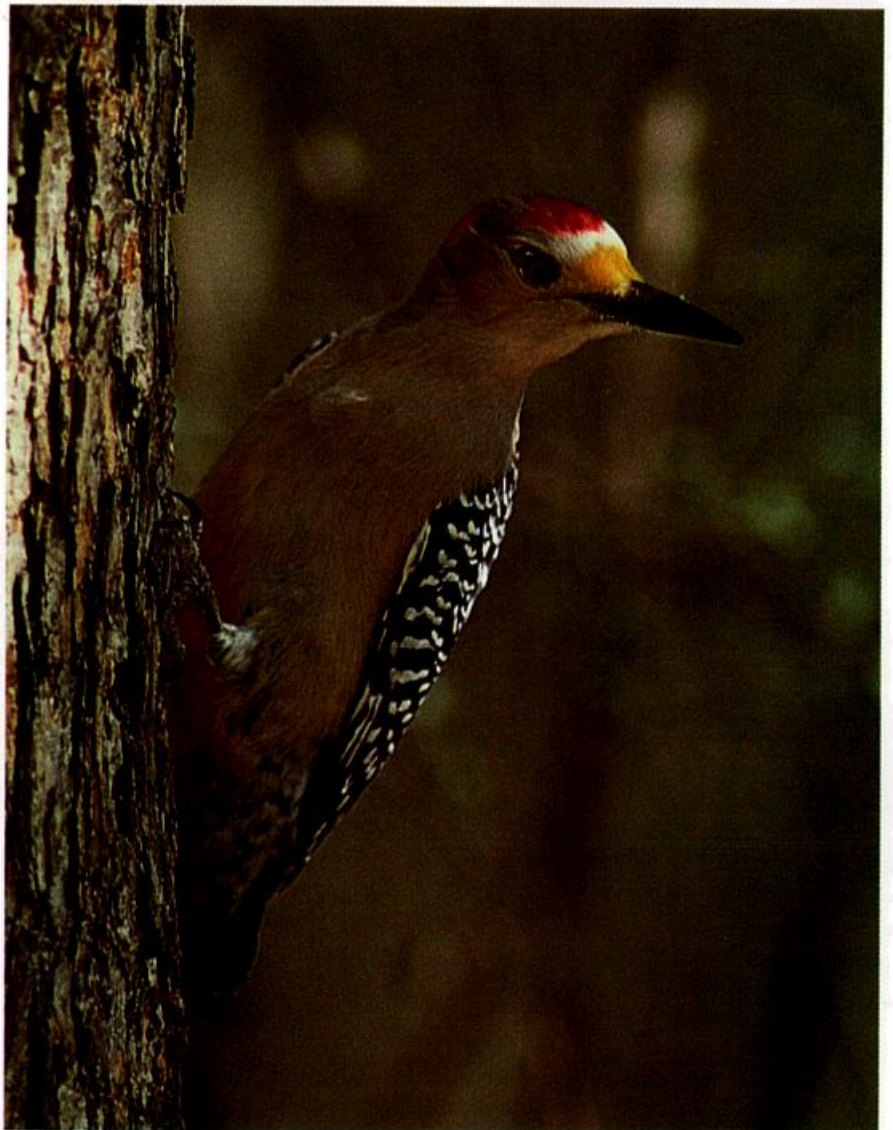
AROUND MISSION, TEXAS THE land is flat and fertile, good for onions and RV parks. Park Road 2062 lines out as straight as a Texan's spoken word for two and one-half miles. The oasis that rises out of the agricultural land is Bentsen State Park—"The best birding spot in the Lower Valley," sayeth Jim Lane. Amen.

Just before the trees close in around you, you cross an earthen dike. Ostensibly, the fortification was built to protect the land from the ravages of the Rio Grande. But its workaday purpose is the protection of 587 riparian acres from human endeavor.

West along the dike, about one quarter of a mile as pickup trucks gauge things, there is a dust-colored station wagon and a slight wisp of a figure, her binoculars trained on the sky. It's too far to see the hand-printed sign propped in the windshield or to read its proud boast: "Official Hidalgo Hawk Watch."

But even if you do chance to see the distant figure, it's too hot in March to support much curiosity and the besides, you've already missed the turn-off. In the process of filing for a campsite and picking Texas park service brains for whatever information they can offer about recent bird sightings, the figure on the dike is temporarily forgotten.

The Rio Grande Valley of Texas, known universally as "The Valley," was put on earth to give birders something to do between the Christmas



Golden-fronted Woodpecker. Photograph/Linda Dunne.



Green Jay. Photograph/Linda Dunne.

Bird Counts and spring migration. In this regard the Valley is like Australia and Kenya but it has one compelling advantage: it is affordable. Everything else about the place—food, culture, language, and wildlife seem far, far away.

If like me, you fall within the narrow band of the human spectrum that keep track of the birds they see in North America, the Valley offers yet another inducement. In the eyes of the American Birding Association, maintainers of birdwatching's rules and regulations, the birds in Bentsen are "countable." Mind you, they're only countable by the width of the Rio Grande River—a mere geographic whisker. But as long as you (and the bird) are sitting on the Texas side, that's considered in bounds by the ABA refs.

The heart of Bentsen is the RV park—a circular drive surrounded by riparian woodland. Every morning, beginning at dawn, scores of birders beat a surreptitious path around the circle.

Many in the morning promenade are drawn from the ranks of RV owners—couples staying on for a week or two, savoring, at leisure, Green Jays, Altamira Orioles, and Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, birds that turn up at Minnesota feeders so infrequently that "never" seems optimistic. Others are day-trippers—hit-and-run birders on tight time specs; easily recognized by their drive-all-night faces and the powdered sugar around their mouths.

They also betray themselves by not-so-subtle inquiries like: "Where do the

Hook-billed Kites hang out?"

The distribution of birders along the RV park is anything but random. A tight and intensive knot is usually clustered around Trailer Site 9, where the Clay-colored Robin was seen eleven days running (as a matter of fact, until just yesterday) or around the restrooms where the Northern Beardless Tyrannulet was singing (in fact, shortly after you left to try to find the *still* mythical Tropical Parula).

But these are the everyday birders and the everyday prizes of Bentsen. More elusive Mexican waifs like Blue Buntings and Crimson-collared Grosbeaks are sure to double the crowd and make the park look like an airport rental return lot.

There are rumors of birds even more prized than these, rumors founded on glimpses and disembodied calls. Although rumors know no geographic limits, I should tell you that there is magic in Bentsen State Park. This magic is such that often enough, rumors take on flesh and feathers and the breath of life. It might be that a rumor at Bentsen is worth ten times what it is anywhere else. How much is that worth? Oh, about the cost of a round-trip coach airfare and an Alamo rental.

If you search the groups long enough you're sure to find the faces of Red and Louise Gambell, winter Texans (as the natives call them) who have donned the mantle of hosts to Bentsen's visiting birders. You'd have to search long and hard before coming up with two other people as generous and friendly as the Gambells, and why

would you try? If you want to know something about birding in Bentsen, North America calls Red and Louise. What's the price. Friendship and shared interest, the coin of tribute in birding's realm.

There are many North American birders who have Red's sage wisdom or Louise's keen ears to thank for their life tyrannulet, Rose-throated Becard, or . . .

"Hook-billed Kite? Rio Grande Hiking Trail. Take the right fork early in the morning."

"We did that last evening. No luck."

"Try it in the morning. Scan the trees on either side. They're in there."

And they *are* in there. The sedentary raptors are just damnably difficult to find in the mesquite maze. The secret formula for success is luck and time. If you have lots of time, you can save your luck for tougher birds. If time is in short supply, you better hope your stars are properly aligned or, you'd better hope for a guide.

Red and Louise pooled their considerable talents for my wife and me one evening. But our luck was only enough to buy one fast and prejudicial glimpse of "the damned kite." One of us saw it; one of us didn't. And as any member of a birding dyad can tell you, a less than universal sighting is much worse than no sighting at all.

By midmorning at Bentsen, the birding crowd has thinned. The RV contingent has gone down to the Rio Grande Hiking Trail to try their luck (again) for "the" Hook-billed Kite. The day-trippers have surrendered to the tyranny of their schedule and headed out, for Brown Jays, and Muscovy Ducks, White-collared Seed-eaters, and Falcon Dam.

As they leave the circle of trees, they pass the lone figure, standing on the dike; standing, somehow, apart from the Bentsen birding scene. Her name is Gladys Schumacher Donohue.

Even a gifted writer, which I am not, would be hard put to describe this slight and serious "lady." ("In Texas," Gladys advises, "women are 'ladies.'") "Unconventional" is the best I can do manage. But whatever else Gladys Schumacher Donohue might be, she is beyond any hope of redemption a hawk watcher. While others chase hope, rumors, life birds and, sometimes, their tails in Bentsen's thickets, Gladys keeps her eyes pegged to the sky.



Flock of Anhingas over Bentsen. Photograph/Pete Dunne.

Somewhere, just over the horizon, North America's Broad-winged Hawks were boiling up over Mexico on their way to northern forests. Every spring and every fall since 1971, Gladys has been doing her best to stand right in their path—virtually a one person welcoming committee for migrating raptors.

"What do you do when you aren't watching hawks?" I asked.

"I'm writing a novel," she deadpanned. Actually, Gladys, a University of Massachusetts graduate with a degree in field biology, has written a tidy swarm of as yet unpublished novels, children's books, nonfiction, poems, articles, and papers—most of the latter dealing with hawks.

"Have you seen my guide to hawks," she inquired.

Diving into a station wagon that looks like a cross between a bomb shelter and the Library at Alexandria, natural history's Kilgore Trout, emerged with a pale blue booklet entitled: *Hawks Over the Rio*, subtitled *Flight Identification of North American Raptors*.

As co-author to another guide to hawk identification, I was prepared to

be magnanimous. I wasn't prepared for what I saw and my astonishment undoubtedly showed. The staple-bound assemblage of overhead views showed a keen awareness of the subtleties of plumage and shape. Sure, there were things to quibble about. But this little cottage-press publication was eminently useful, the highest tribute any field guide can claim.

As Red and Louise Gambell observed: "Gladys hasn't gotten enough credit for what she's done down here." Staring at the utilitarian booklet whose publication antedated my own guide by a year, I could do nothing but agree.

"How many copies of this do you have?" I asked.

"It's out of print," she said. "I've given them out to my hawk-watchers," she explained, and I wasn't sure whether to be disappointed or grateful.

We were too early for the big Broad-winged push. I knew this. But not so early that a day hawk watching on North America's southern flank wasn't without rewards. The day produced several hundred migrating Turkey Vultures, Swainson's Hawks, a

smattering of Broad-wingeds, and several impressive kettles of Anhingas, and sundry other migrants.

The day also produced five different opportunities to study the local threesome of Hook-billed Kites as they moved back and forth along the edge of the woods. The broad-handed birds were close enough for us to count the bars in their breasts.

"They go by several times a day," Gladys observed in a matter-of-fact manner. "I tell people, but they aren't patient enough."

It was 5:30. I'd missed lunch, I was thirsty and the hawk flight was winding down. I offered my thanks and begged my leave.

"Wait till the hour's up and I'll drive you back to your site," Gladys offered.

I thanked her, but declined, opting instead to ape birding tradition and bird my way back. You never know what you might turn up in Bentsen.

According to Gladys' field sheet, I only missed the Aplomado Falcon by fifteen minutes.

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