

# Sierra Squawker



## BIRDING THE LOWER RIO GRANDE VALLEY

by  
Carol Rosalind

While planning this trip I had to decide whether to plant myself in South Padre or one of the other Texas barrier islands knowing that 150 species in a day is possible; or should I see the birds in the varied Texas habitats? Both are remarkable experiences and I chose the Rio Grande Valley where there are a series of National Wildlife Refuges, State Parks, World Birding Centers, hot spots and Private Reserves.

Carol Rosalind is an active CSAS birder and is often co-leader of GCSD field trips. This is her account of a fabulous birding trip this year in Texas illustrated with her own photos.

The South Padre Island Birding Center provides a series of long boardwalks out into Laguna Madre Bay traveling through coastal habitats; freshwater ponds, island scrub brush, brackish and saltwater marshes. I encountered 50 species in those few hours, **Summer Tanager**, Baltimore Oriole, Tri-colored Heron, Clapper Rail, Neotropic Cormorant, Tropical Kingbird, Yellow-throated Vireo to name a few. Also, alligators protecting their young.



*Summer Tanager*

The Jewel of the NWR is Laguna Atascosa, across the Laguna Madre Bay from South Padre. The habitats vary significantly with just a few feet of elevation change - coastal prairie, freshwater wetlands and saltwater bays, providing an outstanding variety of birds. I was thrilled to see the Roseate Spoonbill and the reintroduced endangered Aplomado Falcon as my target birds there. Cruising above were the **Crested Caracara** and Black Vulture, scouting for kills. The feeding station at the Visitor Center attracted the **Green Jay**, Chacalaca, Northern Cardinal, White-wing and Common Ground-Doves.



*Green Jay*

The Rio Grande River banks near Brownsville are a tropical paradise with birds to match. The joy of bird song in dense canopy of old growth sabal palms and spanish moss, was jungle-like. Looking at a low mesquite branch I spotted a **Lesser Nighthawk**, and then flushed a juvenile Gray Hawk at Sabal Palm Sanctuary.

### UPCOMING 2016 PUBLIC PROGRAMS

September 21, 2016: Sarah Stock, "Raptors in Yosemite"

November 17, 2016: Clancy McConnell. Twice our scholarship recipient - graduating in June. TBD

October 19, 2016: Nancy Muleady-Mecham, "Inside Birds: Avian Structure and Function"

December 17, 2016: Sonora CBC

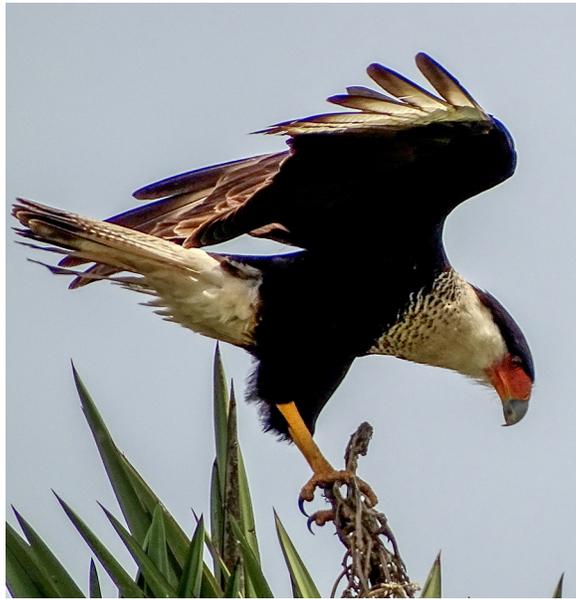
December XX, 2016: Groveland CBC

January 1, 2017: Calaveras CBC

As I traveled up the Rio Grande Valley to the Weslaco area more and birds piled up on my list. I did miss the Blue Grosbeak; it was a rainy day, and the birds did not come out, but the singing of the Curved-bill Thrasher cheered things up. When I arrived at Resaca, the gate had blown open and the park was closed but I didn't know and so happily entered. An hour later I was discovered by a worker, who told me I was locked in but he arranged to meet me at end of the day - so I had the whole of the State Park to myself. Seeing a 10 foot Bull Snake kept me on the well-traveled trails! The park was alive with butterflies and Altamira Orioles. Several White-tailed Hawks were circling. That day I scored, seeing a Carolina Wren, Green Kingfisher, White Ibis, Stilt Sandpiper, Inca Dove, and Clay-colored Thrush, and ran into the Green Parakeets.



*Lesser Nighthawk*



*Crested Caracara*

I birded the 10 days without a birding guide, but it is easy to find a great guide for a charge of \$200 per day. If you stay at the Alamo Inn, you will be met by birders ready to set you up. I was fortunate to meet up with two great birders, who did me great service. One was Benton Basham, the first birder to go over 700 birds in a Big Year, and one of the top U.S. birders for 30 years. His advice to me was pretty simple when I started to leave a sighting: "Girl, sit your butt down, you do not leave a sighting that is popping." He was right of course, as a Hooded Warbler, Water thrush, Cerulean, Yellow-throated and a **Black & White Warbler** dropped in.

The other excellent birders Dan Jones and Dr. Volpe took me to the Volpe Ranch in Zapata, Texas. It was everything you can imagine a Texas Ranch to be, complete with a snake curled up on the front veranda and oil derrick setting up to drill. We saw mating Vermilion Flycatchers, White-collared Seed-eater, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Verdin, Cactus Wren, Brown-crested Flycatcher alongside an Ash-throated Flycatcher.



*Black & White Warbler*



*Yellow-breasted Chat*

We flushed a Barn Owl, and Scaled Quail. And my favorite bird of the trip was the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher; though you see them in most rural locations, it's always a happy sighting. Then, walking along the river we spotted a **Yellow-breasted Chat**.

I drove back to Corpus Christi on the day of my flight home, arriving at Blucher Park in Corpus very early. There ahead of me was an Audubon group. I rushed to join them, and in 10 minutes had 8 warblers, a Chuck-will's widow, Gray Catbird and the bird that I have always missed, the Rose-breasted Grosbeak. It was quite a parting. Next year, I will be waiting in South Padre with Benton for the Warblers to drop in.

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## BARN OWLS IN NEST BOX - UPDATE

Sandi & John Turner still have the honor of hosting a young family of Barn Owls - although the youngsters will soon have to depart to find their own territories and mates. Here they are fast approaching full adulthood.



*Photo by John Turner*

## SIGHTINGS & BEHAVIORS

Jun 2

I wanted to report sighting a female [Hairy Woodpecker](#) going after beetles on one of our diseased pines (we could use a swarm of woodpeckers!). I haven't seen a Hairy here before, but this is a very positive id.

Also, just for fun I'm forwarding you a picture of "our" baby [Squawkers](#). I finally persuaded them not to nest in my barn, so they decided to set up housekeeping in a manzanita just below our patio. (June 21: so far 3 are thriving).

**Jane Escola, near Forest Meadows, elev. 3,690 ft.**

June 21

This is the first time I have seen [Bullocks Orioles](#) here. It was interesting to read in one of my books about their behavior, that they sometimes overwinter, seeking nourishment from, of all things, hummingbird feeders. Well, one of these surely tried to use my one hummingbird feeder. The beak, of course, was a bit too large for success.

**Jane Escola, near Forest Meadows, elev. 3,690 ft.**



*Steller's Jay fledglings - Jane Escola*

July 18

I stopped by the Rock River Road pond hoping to see [Lesser Nighthawks](#) there, as reported a couple times recently. I failed in that regard, but was surprised to see a [White-faced Ibis](#), though it had been reported on Ebird a few days earlier. I was scanning the pond for waterbirds when it flew across my view, then I followed it as it flew around the pond a few times, finally settling on the near shore. Most of the time, it was impossible to see as it worked along the shoreline, but eventually I got a couple of photos. It made another circuit around the pond later landing on the west end and was easier to view.

Around 8:05 pm, a group of 10 [American White Pelicans](#) flew in from the east. There was also a brief flyover of a [Bald Eagle](#) and then two [Great Blue Herons](#) came in just before dusk. I was at the pond from 7:20 to 8:30.

**John Harris, Oakdale**

July 27

Around 6:45pm on Wed evening we saw a white bird on the water at the far end of Pinecrest Lake. (It hasn't been very birdy this summer on the Lake -- no ducks or gulls.) The bird looked quite white from a distance but was not large enough to be a gull.

As we moved closer in our fishing boat, we put the motor in neutral and drifted toward the bird which swam closer to us, at one point coming to within about 10-15 feet. It was clearly a non-breeding phalarope by size, shape, and swimming behavior, and turned out to be a [Red-necked Phalarope](#). It was the first phalarope we've seen at Pinecrest in the 33 years we've been coming here. At least it wasn't an aluminum can which is what my husband thought it might be when he first spotted it!

**Ellen Reintjes, Pinecrest**

July 30

A single Osprey has been a fairly constant sighting at White Pines Lake recently. Also sighted has been a Spotted Sandpiper at two locations, Meadowmont pond and White Pines Lake. Of course, knowing whether or not it is the same bird is impossible.....

John Sutake, Arnold

**CSAS AUGUST/SEPTEMBER FIELD TRIPS**

**Aug. 3 & Sept. 7 - GCSD**

The first Wednesday of the month Bird Walk at the Groveland Community Services property at 18966 Ferretti Road, Groveland, will be led by Jeanne Ridgley.

On the July 6 Bird Walk 34 species were seen or heard. Highlights included a Ruddy Duck family on the large pond and a House Wren which had not been seen here since Sept of 2014.

Meet the group in the GCSD parking lot at **7am** in **Aug** and **8am** in **Sept**. Bring binoculars and a birding field guide if you have one. Rain will cancel the trip (we can hope....). The walk will last about two-three hours.

**Jeanne at 962-7598**

**NEW MELONES OSPREY COUNT - JUNE 11**

CSAS members Ron & Barbara McDow, John Sutake and yours truly spent a delightful morning on New Melones reservoir participating in the annual Osprey Count. Our boat was one of four and our trip took us some way up the Stanislaus River but, given the low water level, we didn't get too far past the bridge over Parrotts Ferry Road. In all we saw 35 Ospreys - 17 adults, 5 immature, 3 nestlings and 10 fledglings.

**Barry Boulton**

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**FIELD TRIPS WITH STANISLAUS AUDUBON**

(Reprinted from The Valley Habitat)

**August 21, September 18 - San Joaquin River NWR**

The Refuge near Modesto is huge and offers the most diverse habitats in the area, including mixed species transitional areas, riparian forest, oak woodlands, grassland, and seasonal wetlands.

Trip leader, Ralph Baker (sharks\_hockey\_maniac@yahoo.com), chooses the particular habitats to visit each month based on conditions and season. Meet at the Stanislaus County Library (1500 I Street, Modesto) at 7:15 am. Return to library mid-afternoon.

**September 3 - Modesto's Thousand Oaks Park**

The Park offers excellent birding, and close to where many of us live. We'll take a leisurely morning stroll, looking particularly for fall migrants. You will probably be surprised at what fantastic birds you can find in almost your own backyard that you never knew existed. A good way to break into the hobby, although experienced birders like this trip as well. Trip leader, David Froba, (209) 521--7265, froba@comcast.net.

Meet at the Stanislaus County Library parking lot (1500 I Street, Modesto) at 7:00 am. We will return to the library a little after noon.

**September 17 - San Luis Reservoir area.**

This Merced county area has wooded areas that form migrant traps for songbirds. The birds migrate south hugging the east side of the Coast Range, flying mostly over dry grasslands. When they see these rare wooded areas, they often drop out of the sky to feed. We'll be there to watch and listen.

Trip leader, John Harris, (209) 848--1518, johnh@mills.edu. Meet at the Stanislaus Library parking lot at 1500 I Street at 7:00 am. Return to library mid afternoon.

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**Central Sierra Audubon Society - CSAS**

Chapter of the National Audubon Society  
P.O. Box 3047, Sonora, CA 95370

**General Meetings:** Third Wednesday at 7pm (except July and August), in the Tuolumne Public Library on Greenley Road, Sonora.

**Board Meetings:** Third Wednesday at 3pm (Sept. - May) at the Blood Bank Conference Room behind Rite Aid on Greenley Road, Sonora.

**Membership of National Audubon & CSAS**

If you are not already a member, we would be honored to have you join us. You can join as a full member of National Audubon Society which includes dues for CSAS membership or, alternately, you may join as a local member of CSAS in which case you will receive the monthly Squawker newsletter and be privy to all other CSAS activities.

An application form is on the front page of the CSAS website at

[www.centralsierraudubon.org/join-us/](http://www.centralsierraudubon.org/join-us/)

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