

Texas Trip Report

My dad and my brother, Alex, had been planning a trip to Texas for birding since the beginning of this year. According to them, visiting High Island in April was a pilgrimage for birders. Migration was going to be bringing many new birds in and they thought fallout might happen, which is when the birds are so exhausted after their journey, they have to rest at the first land they find. And that land just so happens to be High Island. I didn't care much about migration or fallout, but I decided to tag along and see what mammals I could find. The whole trip wouldn't just be to High Island, we'd also planned visits to Austin and Big Bend National Park. My main mammals goals for the trip were: Swamp Rabbit, Nine-banded Armadillo, Merriam's Kangaroo Rat, Kit Fox, and Black-tailed Prairie Dog.

High Island:

High Island is much more birdy than it is mammalian. High Island itself consists of three separate bird sanctuaries, called Smith Oaks, Boy Scout Woods, and Hooks Woods. Out of all three, Hooks Woods was the most disappointing. My dad and Alex saw one **Swamp Rabbit** there on the last day in High Island but otherwise there was nothing. Both Boy Scout Woods and Smith Oaks had some more mammal activity. I saw many **Swamp Rabbits** at Smith Oaks and I'd have probably seen more at Hooks if we spent more time at that location. Birding was primarily focused on Smith Oaks and Boy Scout. I also saw several **Eastern Gray Squirrels** at Smith Oaks and one **Eastern Cottontail**. There were also a few **Eastern Gray Squirrels** within Hooks. The highlight was surprisingly a bird. In Smith Oaks, we saw Chuck-Will's-Widow. This is undoubtedly one of the coolest birds I've ever seen and has unlocked a new interest within me for nightbirds. We also saw a Common Nighthawk outside of Boy Scout Woods and I was enamored with this bird as well.



Chuck-Will's-Widow, courtesy of Alexander Linton



Eastern Gray Squirrel, courtesy of Paul Linton



Swamp Rabbit, courtesy of Paul Linton



Common Nighthawk, courtesy of Paul Linton

Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge:

We visited Anahuac a few times during our time at High Island. I was hoping there would be more mammal activity here but alas no. While we saw many alligators, which were the biggest alligators I've ever seen, and some cute turtles, there was next to nothing mammalian. We did notice some sort of small animal, possibly a rodent, rustling around in thick vegetation but it was impossible to see. We did see this very cool lizard though, apparently called a Green Anole.



Green Anole, courtesy of Paul Linton

Austin:

Part of the reason for going to Austin was for birds but another part was seeing the bats. Thousands of **Mexican Free-tailed Bats** roost under Congress Bridge and there are many bat watching excursions to watch them fly out each evening. I was extremely excited about this portion of the trip, as I have grown to become a big fan of bats but had yet to see any until this

trip. We went out on a boat to watch the bats which included a little tour of the river and some education about the history of Austin, which was actually quite interesting. The bats were the highlight, and we attempted to get photos, although this was an extremely difficult task.



Mexican Free-tailed Bats, courtesy of Paul Linton

Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge:

This location is near Austin, so we headed out one morning to explore. We had to walk everywhere in this refuge, and I must say it was extremely pretty. We were looking for two lifer birds for my dad and Alex which meant I was a little more interested in their birding than usual. They have very few lifers left in the US, so I knew the birds we were looking for were quite difficult. Mammals were unfortunately sparse, and I didn't see anything while we walked around. However, my brother scared some sort of rodent out of its skin while walking off the trail and according to him, it jumped off the ground in fright before speeding away.

South Llano State Park:

Once again, another primarily birdy location. We were told by the rangers that armadillos are fairly common in the park which got me rather excited. The weather was overcast on this day, so I was hoping that the armadillos might be out and about later than normal. We didn't see any armadillos, but I got a rather entertaining look at a few **Eastern Fox Squirrels** at some bird feeders. They were very active, and one was entertaining himself by chasing the other squirrels in a one-sided game of tag. So even though we saw no armadillos, the squirrels were so much fun I was still pleased.



Eastern Fox Squirrel, courtesy of Alexander Linton

Marathon:

While researching birding hotspots, my dad discovered a **Black-tailed Prairie Dog** town near the town of Marathon. This was on the way to Big Bend and was also a good location for Burrowing Owl, one of the funniest owl species in existence. Seriously, look up a picture of a Burrowing Owl and you'll just laugh and laugh at how ridiculous they are. Anyway, we stopped and started scanning for the **Prairie Dogs**. We saw some **Pronghorn** in the distance, which were a lifer for me. We ended up seeing a ton of **Black-tailed Prairie Dogs** and with how many burrows there were, we figured this town must be humungous. I absolutely loved these little critters, and they were a highlight of the trip.



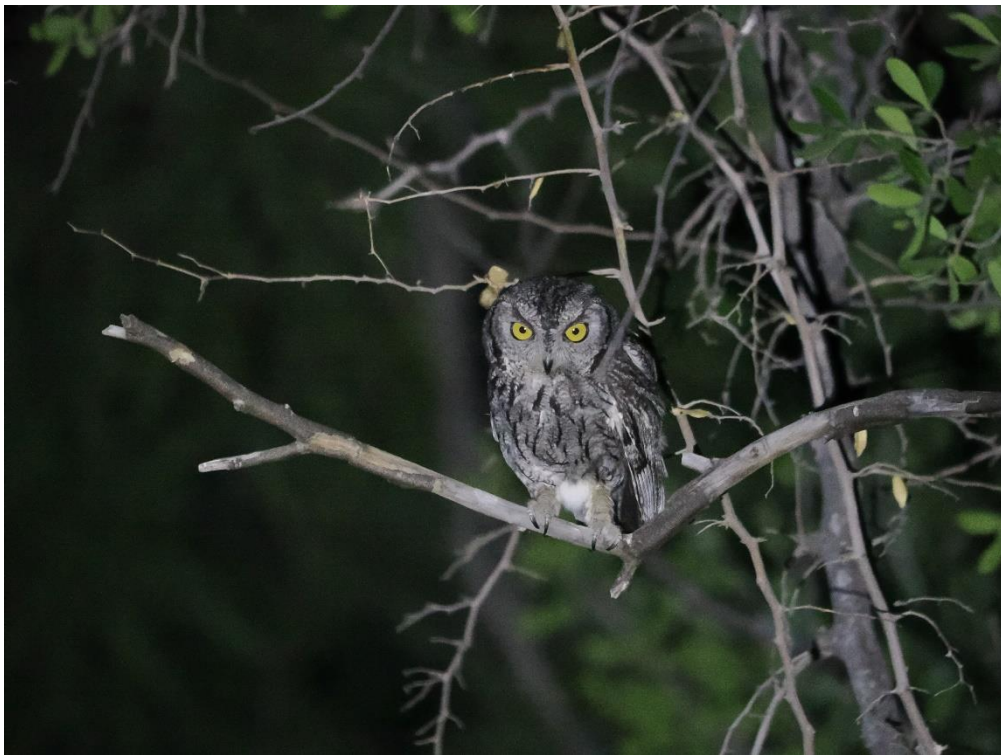
Black-tailed Prairie Dog, courtesy of Alexander Linton

Big Bend National Park:

This for me was the most exciting part of the trip. I was really interested in the mammals here on our first night drive, and the mammals did not disappoint. We saw two **Merriam's Kangaroo Rats**, including one that stayed next to the road and hopped around, providing excellent views. We saw countless more small rodents in our time here sprinting across the road, but we unfortunately couldn't ID them. Our night drives also produced some **Mule Deer**. We saw a **Gray Fox** jumping around on a hill on an early morning drive, and while driving along Chisos Basin Road at night we saw three more which provided good views. We stopped at a location good for Elf Owls and saw both Western Screech Owl and Elf Owl here. These were both awesome owls and new species for me. Aside from owls, Alex lucked upon some huge rodents dashing along the ground near him, but they were gone as soon as I got there. I'm beginning to suspect that he has some sort of rodent luck. We also came upon some **Barbary Sheep** while driving, which was pretty unexpected because while invasive they are supposed to be rare in the park.



Elf Owl, courtesy of Paul Linton



Western Screech Owl, courtesy of Paul Linton



Barbary Sheep, courtesy of Paul Linton

We also ended up on a hike affectionately named by birders the Colima Death March. While my dad and Alex soared up the hill in search of the elusive Colima Warbler, a lifer for them, I trudged up while experiencing what can only be described as a descent into madness. We started hiking around seven in the morning and only finished by three that afternoon. The depths of my suffering cannot be described. The mammals we saw provided some consolation. There were some **White-tailed Deer** at the bottom of the hike, and I did see a **Rock Squirrel** on the way up while my dad and Alex saw a **Rock Squirrel** further along which was of the Texas subspecies. Another birder told us he'd seen a **Black Bear** earlier that day on the hike and we came across some scat that was likely to have been **Ringtail's**.



Rock Squirrel, courtesy of Paul Linton

Once we were done with that hike, I needed plenty of rest and relaxation, and so they headed out to bird some more while I enjoyed our air-conditioned cabin. While they were out, they made a sneaky crossing into Mexico (aka stepping over a stream on the border) and saw some **Collared Peccaries**. We also saw hundreds of bats flying around throughout our time in the park, but we couldn't ID them. My dad saw a **Spotted Ground Squirrel** dash across the road on one of our drives which I managed to miss. Luckily, as we drove along the highway north of the park on our journey to the San Antonio Airport, we saw a **Spotted Ground Squirrel** sprint across the road, and I was happy to add it to my life list. We also saw several Lesser Nighthawks while in the park along with a Common-Poor-Will, which I mention because they are both cool nightbirds.



Lesser Nighthawk, courtesy of Paul Linton



Common-Poor-Will, courtesy of Paul Linton

Overall, I really enjoyed this trip. We saw a total of 15 mammal species, and I got seven lifers. Both my dad and Alex were extremely happy too and they got a few lifers as well. Texas seems to be a decent mammal location, particularly Big Bend, which could yield quite a lot of rodents. I missed both Kit Fox and Nine-banded Armadillo, but I was very happy to have seen all my other target species. Merriam's Kangaroo Rat was my favorite mammal of the trip though, as it was exceedingly adorable. Thanks for reading and hope this helps you if you ever plan to visit Texas. 😊