

USA | Texas

Whooping Cranes & Rio Grande

2022

Thursday 17th - Sunday 27th February (11 days)
Small group tour with Chris Charlesworth



Altamira Oriole - one of many Mexican species whose range just creeps over the border into Texas © Chris Charlesworth

Limosa's winter birding tour to Texas begins with an easy boat trip to look for the endangered Whooping Cranes at Aransas, from where we swing south towards the border with Mexico to sample the avian riches of the famous Rio Grande Valley. As well as being wonderful wintering birding including numerous localised specialities not found elsewhere in North America, this Texas holiday also offers a flavour of birding from the USA's arid southwest. February is also an excellent month to look for Mexican vagrants with Clay-coloured Thrush, Tropical Parula, Golden-crowned Warbler and Rose-throated Becard amongst the species we have seen on previous Texas birding tours.

Highlights

- Boat trip to look for the rare Whooping Crane on its Aransas wintering grounds.
- A host of other species which are difficult or impossible to see elsewhere in North America.
- Least Grebe, White-tailed, Grey and Harris's Hawks, Plain Chachalaca, Green Kingfisher.
- Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Green Parakeet, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Tropical Parula.
- Green Jay, Great Kiskadee, Audubon's and Altamira Orioles, Olive Sparrow.
- Peak season for Mexican rarities along the Rio Grande.
- Up to 200 species of birds possible on this 11-day tour.
- Expertly led by Limosa's top-rated North America specialist, Chris Charlesworth.

What's Included?

- Limosa Tour Leader
- 9 nights accommodation in Texas, at comfortable hotels of good North American standard
- All main meals with drinking water provided during the day
- Minibus transport
- Morning boat trip at Aransas
- All excursions, entry fees, tour-based tips and taxes

Outline Itinerary

Day 1

Fly to Houston. We drive west to Rosenberg. Night Rosenberg

Day 2

Brazos Bend and Refugio. Night Rockport

Day 3

Morning boat trip at Aransas for Whooping Cranes. In the afternoon we head south via Tule Lake to the Rio Grande Valley. Harlingen (3 nights)

Days 4-5

We explore the coastal portion of the Lower Rio Grande Valley including Laguna Atascosa and South Padre Island

Days 6-7

We push west (inland) along the Rio Grande Valley visiting Sabal Palm Sanctuary and Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge. McAllen (2 nights)



The sight of our first Green Jay is bound to cause excitement
© Chris Charlesworth, Limosa

Day 8

Birding in Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park. Night in Rio Grande City

Day 9

Our final morning along the Rio Grande is spent at Salineño and Falcon Dam from where we loop back north to the coast. Night Rockport

Day 10

We visit Goose Island State Park and return to Houston. Overnight flight Houston-London

Day 11

Arrival London Heathrow

A note about the itinerary:

Please note that the itinerary we detail here is intended only as a guide to the places we will visit on our tour. No two years are ever quite alike on our winter tours to south Texas and our guide Chris Charlesworth may vary the itinerary locally to include places which offer the best birding at the time of our visit (some of which may not be mentioned in this Tour Info Pack).



Whooping Crane flies by on a misty early morning at Aransas, south Texas © Chris Charlesworth, Limosa

Tour Overview

Whilst much of North America may be covered beneath a blanket of snow in winter, those lucky enough to find themselves amidst the sub-tropical habitats of the famous Rio Grande Valley, deep in the south of Texas, are usually enjoying warmer and sunnier weather.

The old saying goes that everything in Texas is big and that certainly includes its list of birds! Like a corner of Mexico planted north of the border, this amazing region is home to a range of species that are found nowhere else in North America. Around 40 essentially Mexican species are regularly found along the Rio Grande Valley, where exotic residents awaiting our discovery include Plain Chachalaca, Neotropic Cormorant, Least Grebe, White-tailed, Grey and Harris's Hawks, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Green Jay, Great Kiskadee and the rare Audubon's Oriole. As a bonus, this corner of Texas also straddles the faunal divide between eastern and western North America, adding chances of species such as Cinnamon

Teal, Greater Roadrunner, Vermilion Flycatcher, CactusWren, Black-throated Sparrow and Pyrrhuloxia for a real taste of "western" North American birding.

After flying into Houston, a visit to the wetlands of Brazos Bend State Park should guarantee an excellent start to our Texas birding. Little Blue Heron, Anhinga, Black-bellied Whistling Duck and a variety of wintering warblers are all likely here in February, before we follow the Gulf Coast west towards Rockport.

Next morning, we board our boat for the chance to get 'up close and personal' with one of North America's rarest and most spectacular birds, the magnificent Whooping Crane. Around 300 or so 'Whoopers', more than half the wild population, spend the winter months at Aransas. As well as the cranes, we will scan the marshes for herons, ducks, waders and other wetland birds. With close to 400 species recorded, Aransas boasts the second highest bird list of any park in the US!

We may even be lucky to enjoy a pod of Atlantic Bottle-nosed Dolphins bow-riding our boat.

From Aransas, we travel south to the Rio Grande Valley. Three nights at Harlingen will enable us to explore the southernmost Texas Gulf Coast at Laguna Atascosa and South Padre Island for wintering wildfowl and waders. Nearby, Sabal Palm Sanctuary lies close to the border with Mexico and is home to many Rio Grande specialities including Inca and White-tipped Doves, Buff-bellied Hummingbird and, who knows, perhaps even a surprise Mexican stray!

Moving west to McAllen, Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge will entertain us with the raucous calls of Plain Chachalacas as we seek other Rio Grande specialities such as Red-crowned Amazon, Long-billed Thrasher and Black-crested Titmouse. We will pay an evening visit to Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park to look for Common Pauraque and Eastern Screech Owl and check woodlands for the increasingly rare Hook-billed Kite plus possible Mexican strays.

Our journey along the valley continues west to Rio Grande City, looking as we go for the likes of Grey Hawk, Red-billed Pigeon, Tropical Parula, the dazzling Altamira Oriole and both Green and Ringed Kingfishers amongst a host of south Texas specialities.

We conclude our travels along the Rio Grande with a visit to the dry, thorn scrub habitat near Salineño. Greater Roadrunner, Curve-billed Thrasher, Verdin and Pyrrhuloxia are amongst the southwestern delights attracted to feeders here, while half oranges tempt wintering warblers and Audubon's Oriole, another essentially Mexican species, which come to sip juice from the fruit.

Our carefully planned itinerary allows time to visit the region's key reserves and to make the most of its exceptionally rich and varied birdlife.

And as we make our way back north to Houston, a visit to the excellent Goose Island State Park wraps up our South Texas birding.

Chris Charlesworth has led most of our tours "across the pond" for the past 20 years including our February 2018, 2019 and 2020 tours to south Texas and the Rio Grande. This 2022 trip will be his fifteen tour to Texas for Limosa and the "Lone Star State" is his favourite birding destination in all of North America.

Daily Itinerary

Day 1

FLY TO HOUSTON, TRANSFER TO ROSENBERG

Our winter birding tour to south Texas begins with a flight to Houston. Afternoon arrival in Houston, where Chris will be waiting to welcome us.

We head directly out of the city, westwards for about 50 miles to our first hotel at Rosenberg. *Night Rosenberg*

Day 2

BRAZOS BEND TO ROCKPORT

Our south Texas birding adventure starts in earnest today, with an easy drive to the excellent wetlands at Brazos Bend State Park. A network of trails and loops here are sure to have your head spinning with new birds. Tricoloured and Little Blue Herons, American Bittern and Anhinga can all be found, along with Black-bellied Whistling Duck and Red-shouldered Hawk. Over the water Belted Kingfishers perch and noisy, iridescent Boat-tailed and Great-tailed Grackles argue.

At this time of year, hundreds of Black and Turkey Vultures roost in the woodlands, where we might also encounter Pileated Woodpecker.

A February visit offers a plethora of small birds with Carolina Wren, various wintering warblers and the skulking Swamp Sparrow among species to watch out for and we also have a great opportunity to see American Alligator!

After a bird-filled morning at Brazos Bend, we swing south towards Rockport, where we spend the night but not before enjoying some further birding along the way this afternoon. We will keep our options open but, depending on what's about at the time, we may visit Lion's/Shelly Park in Refugio. This small city park regularly attracts loose flocks of warblers in winter with possibilities including Pine and Wilson's Warblers, along with Blue-headed Vireo and Ruby-crowned Kinglet. Parties of wintering sparrows can include Chipping and Lincoln's and there is always a good number of Northern Cardinals here. In recent years, this park has become a well-trodden path for Texan birders, with many great rarities turning up: Greater Pewee, Flame-coloured Tanager and Golden-crowned Warbler are among the vagrants we have been lucky enough to see here over the years!

From Refugio, it is a 45-minute drive to our next hotel, in Rockport, where we will enjoy a delicious dinner this evening at an establishment right on the shoreline. *Night Rockport*

Day 3

ARANSAS BOAT TRIP & TULE LAKE, SOUTH TO HARLINGEN

This morning, we will take a boat trip to the back bays and estuaries of the famous Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. The Aransas bird list is the second largest in the US national wildlife refuge system, with almost 400 species recorded.

The reserve is also home to more than half of the wild wintering population of one of the rarest birds in the world, the Whooping Crane. This is North America's tallest bird, and they migrate here from their breeding grounds in northern Alberta. There are currently just over 300 Whooping Cranes in the Aransas flock.

As we cruise beside the marsh and shore, there will be many other waterbirds to enjoy. Roseate Spoonbill, Hooded Merganser, Great Northern Diver (or Common Loon as they are known here), American Oystercatcher, Willet, Long-billed Curlew, Forster's Tern and Black Skimmer all spend the winter here, whilst squadrons of Brown Pelicans glide silently overhead and excitable Reddish Egrets charge madly through the shallows in frantic pursuit of fry. The Seaside Sparrow is found exclusively in saltmarsh grasses and is another bird we shall be keeping our eyes open for this morning.

After our boat tour of Aransas has concluded, we will drive south towards Kingsville. Sunset Lake lies on the north side of Corpus Christi Bay where (if the tide is right) the sandy flats can hold the rare and declining Snowy Plover. Other shorebirds, herons and egrets can be found too and there are Great Northern Divers to watch for in the bay. Tule Lake, on the northern edge of Corpus Christi, has a viewing 'overlook' from where we are likely to see Redhead, Canvasback and Bufflehead, along with Black-necked Stilt. To the south, the habitat changes and the final part of our journey could well produce scrub grassland species such as an immaculate White-tailed Hawk or perhaps a superb Scissor-tailed Flycatcher perched beside the road.

Evening arrival at our hotel in Harlingen, in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, where we stay for the next three nights. *Night Harlingen*

Days 4 & 5**THE LOWER RIO GRANDE: LAGUNA ATASCOSA & SOUTH PADRE ISLAND**

Our first taste of birding along the Rio Grande Valley begins on the Gulf of Mexico, with a visit to the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. This large reserve encompasses many different habitats, from beaches, lakes and ponds to scrubby forest and desert plains and, as a result, the bird life is varied and abundant.

Feeders around the park headquarters attract Green Jay, Black-crested Titmouse and Golden-fronted Woodpecker and winter brings large numbers of ducks and geese to Laguna Atascosa, with chances of Ross's, Snow, White-fronted, Cackling and Canada Geese, as well as huge numbers of Redheads. Indeed, up to 80% of the North American population can be found here!

White-faced Ibis, American White Pelican, Sandhill Crane, Piping Plover, Marbled Godwit, Western, Least and Stilt Sandpipers, Loggerhead Shrike and both Vesper and Savannah Sparrows are also possible at this season.

A short way to the east, South Padre Island is another great spot for shorebirds, plus rails, terns and gulls and we should find Reddish Egret, Wilson's Plover and Black Skimmer, as well as having chances for Sora plus Clapper, King and Virginia Rails.

In fact, this corner of North America is home to an astonishing variety of birds, including a good number of species that are found nowhere else in the US. Birds of prey can be numerous, with Aplomado and Peregrine Falcons, White-tailed Hawk, Zone-tailed Hawk, Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks, Harris's Hawk, the rakish White-tailed Kite and good numbers of Crested Caracara to watch out for.

If time permits, we may also visit the Hugh Ramsey Nature Park along the banks of the Arroyo Colorado River, home to Altamira Oriole, a stunning mixture of black and orange from Mexico. *Two nights Harlingen*

Days 6 & 7**SABAL PALM SANCTUARY, BROWNSVILLE & SANTA ANA**

With its majestic towering palms and jungle-like subtropical habitat, Sabal Palm Sanctuary is one of the best birding locations in North America.

We will wander the trails and linger beside feeders around the visitor centre, hoping to unearth gems such as Hooded Oriole and Tropical Parula (though the latter is a rare and declining winter visitor here, several of our recent groups have been lucky). Sabal Palms is also a great spot to see the localised Buff-bellied Hummingbird, with its forked rufous tail and decurved red bill. Ringed and Green Kingfishers can be present along the river, Olive Sparrow is regularly present, and a nice selection of wintering warblers is also likely, with Orange-crowned, Black-throated Grey and Black-throated Green Warblers all possible. Sabal Palms is also one of the best places in South Texas to look for Mexican vagrants, such as the Clay-coloured Thrush seen on our 2018 and 2020 tours.



Olive Sparrow, Texas 2019 tour © Chris Charlesworth, Limosa

In the afternoon, we may try our luck with some urban specialities. While the origins of both the Green Parakeets and Red-crowned Amazons we will be looking for here cannot be known for sure, the latter is endemic to northeast Mexico. The more widely distributed Green Parakeet occurs from Mexico south to Nicaragua, and it is likely that at least some of the birds present in the Lower Rio Grande are naturally occurring vagrants from Mexico.

We then head west along the Rio Grande Valley to McAllen, where we spend the next two nights, though perhaps not before making a quick stop near the little town of Weslaco, where the Estero Llano Grande State Park and Frontera Audubon Sanctuary are blessed with luxuriant sub-tropical vegetation and feeders that attract a fine variety of resident and wintering Rio Grande Valley birds. The occasional Mexican rarity turns up here too, with a male Rose-throated Becard being a super find on our February 2017 visit!

Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge is one of North America's most famous and productive birding sites. Miles of trails through thorn-scrub woods, fields, ponds and marshes attract most of the birds it is possible to see in Southern Texas! Dazzling Altamira Orioles, the adult birds brilliant orange and black, build their huge nests of moss in the taller trees. Green Jays, bedecked in their unbelievable costume of green, black, yellow and blue, visit feeders near the refuge's headquarters, along with the peculiar Plain Chachalaca. Ponds along the trails can hold Harris's Hawk plus a variety of ducks and shorebirds, whilst the Hook-billed Kite, an increasingly rare bird nowadays in riparian woodlands along the Rio Grande Valley, is still very occasionally spotted cruising over the canopy on its broad, paddle-shaped wings.

In winter, grassy fields at Anzalduous County Park may conceal the elusive Sprague's Pipit, and both Eastern and Western Meadowlarks occur, making this a great spot to learn how to distinguish these two very similar looking species. As we work our way through the park, we should pick up Inca Dove, Golden-fronted Woodpecker and the eye-catching Vermilion Flycatcher.

In the evening we plan to make an (optional) excursion to the Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park in search of Eastern Screech Owl and Common Pauraque, the latter a neotropical nightjar reaching the northernmost limit of its range here. *Two nights McAllen*

Day 8

BENTSEN-RIO GRANDE TO SALINEÑO

Slightly further west than Santa Ana, but with different habitat, is the Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park. Amongst more local specialities we hope to track down, feeding flocks here may hold Blue-headed Vireo, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Blue-grey Gnatcatcher, Hermit Thrush and an assortment of wintering warblers, including the 'nuthatch-like' Black-and-white Warbler and tiny Northern Parula. Bentsen is considered by many to be the best winter birding spot in the Rio Grande Valley and it is another great place to unearth unexpected Mexican vagrants, such as Clay-coloured Thrush and Blue Bunting.

From Bentsen we continue upriver, following the Rio Grande towards Salineño and Chapeno. Here, campers put out feeders to attract the local birds and Greater Roadrunner and Long-billed Thrasher should both be present and specialities to watch for include Grey Hawk and the black and yellow Audubon's Oriole. *Night Rio Grande City*

Day 9**SALINEÑO, CHAPENO & FALCON DAM, AND RETURN TO ROCKPORT**

This morning we enjoy some final birding along the Rio Grande Valley, with another opportunity to explore the arid border country around Salineño and Chapeno. The likes of Greater Roadrunner, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Verdin and Long-billed Thrasher provide a further taste of 'western' US birding and in the thorn-scrub habitat of Falcon State Park we should encounter the red-crested and cardinal-like Pyrrhuloxia, the 'outsize' Cactus Wren and Curve-billed Thrasher, along with numerous 'dry country' sparrows.

After lunch, reluctantly, we must turn our backs on the Rio Grande and start the journey back north towards Houston. We will take the direct route this time, looping inland to see a different side of the state, watching out for the handsome White-tailed Hawk over the fields. We break our return journey to Houston with an overnight stop back on the coast at Rockport. *Night Rockport*

Day 10**RETURN TO HOUSTON, FLY LONDON**

Our flight home departs Houston in the evening so before we leave the unforgettable Texas Coast we will have time to enjoy one more terrific location: Goose Island State Park. A variety of habitats are found within the borders of the park, including saltmarsh where Clapper Rails call and chunky Seaside Sparrows perform their display flights. We might also spot a distant Whooping Crane or two in the shallow bays from Goose Island Park. Grey Catbird, Cedar Waxwing, Blue-grey Gnatcatcher and American Robin are among the wintering passerines found in the oak trees that also cover a good portion of the park.

In the afternoon we travel back to Houston, where we bid farewell to Chris and check-in for our overnight flight back to the UK.

Day 11**ARRIVAL IN UK**

Lunchtime arrival in the UK, where our winter birding tour to south Texas concludes.

Trip Information

Group Size Max 7 participants and 1 leader

Birds 180-200 species

What To Expect While Texas is a fantastic destination for birding, especially in winter, it is also very BIG, almost three times the size of the UK! Although our itinerary focuses on one relatively small corner of the 'Lone Star State', please note that a few long drives (150-200 miles over good roads) are necessary on some days to get to and from our ultimate destination, the bird-rich Rio Grande Valley that forms the border with Mexico. Having said that, main roads are good and we will enjoy some great birding stops along the way.

We will be out early most days, including our morning boat trip at Aransas, which usually departs between 7.30 and 9.30am (according to local conditions). We endeavour to do most of the longer drives in the afternoon, when birding is generally quieter, especially on warm days.

Accommodation 9 nights accommodation in Texas, in comfortable US-style hotels of good North American standard. All rooms have private facilities.

Meals All main meals are *included* in our tour price, commencing with dinner in Texas on Day 1 and concluding with lunch there on Day 10. Food is good, varied and plentiful. Breakfasts are usually buffet-style at the hotels. Lunches will usually be picnics though we sometimes visit a local restaurant or diner. As is the norm in the USA, evening meals will often be taken at a local restaurant since many North American hotels lack their own in-house restaurant facilities. [Our tour price also includes the expected 15-20% gratuity for all meals in North America.]

Walking Easy. Short walks over predominantly flat terrain. Sturdy walking shoes should suffice.

Weather In February, daytime temperatures at Harlingen (in the Rio Grande Valley) typically range from 11-23C (52-73F) and rainfall for the month is low (just 43mm). Winter days in south Texas are *usually* quite warm with plenty of sunshine but it can feel cool with a sea breeze blowing along the coast.

Weather note! Notwithstanding the above, you should also come prepared for the possibility of a cold front moving through, when daytime temperatures can drop sharply into the low 40s (5-9C) and on exceptional occasions falling to around freezing. We strongly recommend you pack rainwear plus a warm fleece or sweater, hat and gloves and hope that they won't be needed!

Ground Transport By air-conditioned minibus.

Boat Trip Our tour price includes a morning boat trip to look for Whooping Cranes at Aransas NWR. The boat has enclosed seating in the event, the weather is unsuitable for birding on deck. We will be sailing in the sheltered waters of the bay

which is reasonably protected so conditions should be quite smooth (you are unlikely to require precautions against motion sickness).

Pack a jacket and a sweater or fleece to combat possible cool sea breezes as we travel along.

Flights

Due to the pandemic, it is proving extremely difficult to predict future flight prices and schedules, especially when a trip is scheduled for beyond the period when flights can be booked. As a result, we have taken the decision to price our holidays as excluding all international flights.

To keep the process as simple as possible for our clients, however, we are now working closely with a dedicated agent at Travel Counsellors who will be able to advise you on which flights we are recommending for each holiday and he will be able to book these for you.

Insects Chiggers, ticks and mosquitoes are found throughout South Texas and, even in winter, are likely to be present along some trails so a little insect repellent can be useful. There is no malaria risk.

Photos Good to excellent opportunities for photographing birds and other wildlife.



Ladder-backed Woodpecker © Chris Charlesworth

Tour Cost

2022 (11 days):

Land only cost: £2795

Single supplement: £695

Deposit: £500

Cost includes:

- Limosa Tour Leader
- 9 nights hotel accommodation in Texas
- All main meals (with drinking water provided)
- All excursions, entry fees, tour-based tips (including gratuities at meals) and taxes
- Minibus transport
- Boat trip at Aransas
- Checklist of birds for the tour.

Cost excludes:

International flights, insurance, ESTA (cUS\$14), airport snack/meals, drinks and other items of a personal nature.

About Your Guide

Chris Charlesworth Canadian Chris began birding at the age of ten, with a passion for birds that has remained with him and ultimately inspired him to guide birding tours. He lives in British Columbia (Canada) and has travelled extensively throughout his native North America. Since earning his “Limosa wings” in the early 2000s, he has led most of our tours across the pond, including those to Arizona, Texas, California, Washington State, Oregon, Ontario (Point Pelee), the Canadian Rockies, Alberta and British Columbia. Chris is excellent company and has developed a strong following among Limosa travellers over the years. He derives great pleasure from sharing his experience on tour and his knowledge of North America’s birds and their calls is right out of the top drawer.

With a little coaxing, he may even be persuaded to demonstrate his repertoire of North American ‘owl imitations’ which is rumoured to be quite entertaining! Chris is a veteran of numerous visits to Texas and rates the Texas Coast as his favourite birding destination in all North America. Our February 2022 tour will be his 15th visit to Texas for Limosa.

What You Say...

“Chris has excellent people skills and is inclusive of all members of the group, whatever their birding skills. Brilliant identification skills, too. We would definitely travel with Chris again... We are confident that “Limosa” knows what it is doing and does it to a very high standard.

Reliable and efficient, and pleasant too! Thank you for a great holiday.”

L&AP, Texas Coast tour

“Excellent tour, fantastic and colourful birds, great hotels, great food and best of all an excellent leader in Chris.”

KE, Texas Rio Grande tour

“Chris is first class!”

SD, Texas Rio Grande tour

“Excellent trip, full of birds without being overwhelming.”

CS, Texas Rio Grande tour

How To Enquire

Due to the considerable uncertainty created by the pandemic, Limosa Holidays are not currently accepting bookings for any trips, however, you are welcome to contact us either by email or phone to register your interest in any of our holidays.

Whilst some tour companies may be willing to take a deposit from you and say a trip is a “confirmed departure”, our approach is going to be to wait a little longer as we consider this both honest and realistic.

Once we are confident that the trip can run, we will be in touch to confirm your place and ask for a deposit.

We do encourage you to register your interest as we are expecting considerable demand, once the consensus is that it is safe to travel again.

Any Questions

Please do not hesitate to contact us by email or phone. Our office is generally open from 09:30-17:30 but you are welcome to contact us outside these times too. We are happy to take calls in the evening and at weekends but if no one is available the call will go to our answerphone.

Thank you for your interest in our tours. We do hope that you will be able to join us once the pandemic is over and we look forward to hearing from you.



Whooping Crane at Aransas should be one of the major highlights of our winter Texas tour.

© Chris Charlesworth

