

2021 Trip to Texas

When the pandemic was over — remember those days? — we planned a number of birding trips to make up for the lost time. After the trips to [Hawaii](#) and [Arizona](#), we had a bit of a lull, which we spent mostly in Purple Haze, returning to San Francisco for doctor's and dentist's appointments. We had planned a final trip to Texas in October and November, and persevered despite the raging Delta variant.

What the hell! YOLO as they say in netspeak.

The plan was to spend a few days in Houston for our 55th Rice reunion first. We planned to visit friends and family there, then go on to Austin for more of the same. Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (VENT) was celebrating 45 years with 5 days of birding in the Rio Grande Valley in November. A slight gap of 1 week would be spent in “getting to McAllen.”

We had planned to arrive in time to visit Jim's Aunt Carol, who had moved to hospice care recently. Unfortunately, she died the night before we left. That complicated several plans, as Jim's sister, Flo, is the executor for Carol's estate, which included plans for selling the house she lived in and finding an apartment for Carol's long-term companion, Roger. We'll skip the details. Use your imagination.

Carol has requested no funeral service, so we held a remembrance for the family at Flo's condo.

Most of our Rice classmates decided against attending the reunion, but our friends the Cloudmans (Jenny and Terry) came. They also planned to attend the VENT celebration, but decided to go home for the interim. That left plenty of time for visiting our Houston friends. We had dinner at the Briar Club with Ann and Bob Arnett, and Tish and Horst Paul.

We spent some time visiting [Rice 360](#), a worldwide effort to invent medical equipment suitable for *resource-challenged* countries. We had seen one of the major products, a neo-natal incubator that costs a fraction of those used in the USA, when we visited Malawi before the pandemic for our *last* international journey. (So far!)

The dinner Rice had arranged for more mature alums was interesting. We were the youngest people there, naturally, but there weren't many of us.



Monarch Butterfly

On November 2, we headed for Austin, taking a long route, stopping first at the Houston Botanical Garden, a work in progress. At least we saw a Monarch Butterfly, but few birds.

Then we drove to Brazos Bend SP for some serious birding. We weren't disappointed, but have few photos to show. The draw was a Limpkin, a species we have never seen in Texas. It proved to be too difficult to track down.

Then we drove to Austin, where we took a quick loop around the sewage ponds at Hornsby Bend.

Then, we went to Sharon and Brian Moore's house near Lake Travis to spend a few days with them. We spent some time visiting the Austin area, which changed dramatically since we left, especially the downtown. We passed by our old street and took photos of our old houses.



1905 Big Canyon



6100 Bend of the River



6101 Bend of the River

All these show evidence of spiffing up consistent with the increased value of the property. If Zillow can be believed they are worth at least twice as much as when we sold them. The last one, the largest by far, is now worth about three times what we sold it for.

We toured downtown Austin with the Moore's and were blown away by how much it has changed. High-rise towers dominate the skyline, especially Google's new office in Austin. The new public library downtown is fabulous, everything you'd like in a library. We ate at some of our old favorites, especially Kerbey Lane café, where we had breakfast in three different locations.

We had a chance to visit some of Linda's Nurse and Doctor friends and saw our former foster daughter, Rosalind, in her new home in San Marcos, south of Austin.

Then we headed south to San Antonio to see our birding friends Lorna and Dodge Engleman. They were in the midst of a major remodeling project, like so many pandemic-bound homeowners who suddenly spent so much time at home that they realized it needed a brush up. It's going to be great when finished.

The next morning, we met them at the Medina River Natural Area, on the outskirts of the city. We arrived early enough to misidentify some species before they got there to set us straight. We spent several hours there before heading to a restaurant with lots of outdoor seating, [Down on Grayson](#), near the old Pearl Brewery. Had some great sandwiches and brews as part of a small crowd of mid-afternoon diners. After that, we visited their home to see the work in progress before heading back to our motel on the Riverwalk.

We concentrated on birds, but the Natural Area was also a good spot for bugs, including two separate species of *Neoscona* spiders, in case you wondered about Jim's *nom de net*. Left to right, *Neoscona arabesca*, *Neoscona crucifera*, and Queen Butterfly. [The spiders are confusing.](#)



One of the most interesting events of the trip was [The Tale of Hester the Cat](#), which we documented separately.

After a brief visit back to Austin to deal with Hester, we proceeded south to the Rockport/Fulton area on the Texas coast. We had dinner with our former foster-son, Stanley (aka Bubba), Rosalind's brother. We went birding at the Port Aransas Birding Center and some other locations on Mustang Island before lunching with Bubba's family, Stacy and her daughter, Jade.

Linda likes to photograph birds preening. Here are some examples, American White Pelican, Great Egret, and White Ibises, all seen at the Port Aransas Birding Center, which we used to know as the sewage ponds in Port A.



Then, it was on the McAllen and the celebration of VENT's 45th Anniversary. For people like us, who travel the world seeking birds and other interesting wildlife, it's hard to overestimate the impact VENT has had. Victor, in my mind at least, *invented* the ecotourism industry. If you are worried about biodiversity, then ecotourism is part of the answer by providing the local inhabitants with a source of income. We have seen the impact this can have during our travels, for example at the [Napo Wildlife Center](#).

We hadn't visited the Valley, as it's known in birder speech, in years, and found it changed quite a bit. The introduction of Interstate Highway 2 made some travel easier. It will be better when it is finished. The hotel, which was described to us as "the only hotel in McAllen to stay at," was up to the usual VENT standards despite the pandemic restrictions.

Of course, the main attraction of the Valley is the birds, particularly those from farther south who stray across the border into the USA. There were several these in the area, and we managed to see some of them. A [Ferruginous Pygmy Owl](#) on the [King Ranch](#) cleaned up a *half bird*, one seen by one of us but not the other. We have seen this species often, but Linda had never seen it in Texas, etc. It is quite common south of the border. Someone managed to get a photo, but Jim didn't even try.

We also saw a [Fork-tailed Flycatcher](#) that stayed around long enough for everyone present to get a look, in a field with a number of [Scissor-tailed Flycatchers](#). Again, we failed to get a good photo.

Besides the King Ranch, we went on field trips to [Bentsen State Park](#), [Estero Llano Grande SP](#), and the [South Padre Island Birding Center](#).

We did manage a few photos, such as this one of a Least Grebe showing its bright yellow eye.



Least Grebe



Blue Spiny Lizard

We also saw some interesting reptiles, such as this magnificent Blue Spiny Lizard on a wall at Bentsen SP. And a great look at an [Altamira Oriole](#), for which Bentsen SP is famous.



Altamira Oriole

Besides the birding, we had a chance to meet up with some birding friends from years past. Besides the Cloudmans, we also met Tim Havens again. He and Jim were at Kinkaid 60 years ago(!), but hadn't met for years until another recent VENT gathering.

[We have an album of photos from this trip on the web site.](#)