

# TOS Field Trips - Abilene, Winter 2023

**NOTE:** Participants must meet their field trip group at the Abilene Mall on Ridgemoor Dr. 15 minutes prior to start time. Due to logistical complications, it is not possible for individuals to meet the group at any other location. Please plan accordingly. Also, there will be **entrance fees** at some locations. Exact amounts are being determined and will be communicated before you arrive. Please have small bills available as well as bringing your state parks pass.

NUMBER	FIELD TRIP AND DESCRIPTION	COUNTY	DIFFICULTY	DEPARTURE & HOTEL RETURN TIMES	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
1	<p><b>MITCHELL COUNTY:</b> Our first stop will be <b>Lake Colorado City State Park</b> where the habitat is notably arid and desert species are more common. Expect Pyrrhuloxia, Scaled Quail, Black-throated Sparrow, Cactus Wren, etc. The lake is also a great spot for waterfowl, wading birds, and gulls/terns. Rarities are a real possibility.</p> <p>We'll then make our way to <b>Maddin Prairie</b>. Owned and managed by the Native Prairies Association of Texas, Maddin Prairie boasts remnant and restored native prairie. Because of the focus on conservation, access is limited to special events and scientific research. The bird list is impressive and rarities like LeConte's Sparrow, Sprague's Pipit, and Short-eared Owl have been recorded. Expect a rich diversity of winter sparrows, as well as the potential for interesting riparian birds along the tributary of Champion Creek.</p> <p>After Maddin Prairie, we'll visit <b>Fisher Park</b> on Champions Creek Reservoir to look for waterfowl and wintering passerines in the habitat surrounding the lake.</p> <p>Finally, throughout the day as we travel from place to place, we'll stop in <b>towns and back roads</b> to build our county lists with birds like Sandhill Cranes, raptors, and possibly longspurs.</p> <p><i>Several miles of walking, the most demanding of which will be walking the prairie for grassland birds, from which anyone is free to abstain or take a break. Entry fee at the state park.</i></p>	MITCHELL	EASY TO MODERATE	6:15 a.m.–4:30 p.m.	X		
2	<p><b>TAYLOR COUNTY:</b> With over 250 species recorded, <b>Kirby Lake</b> is the top hotspot for the whole region. We'll look for waterfowl, gulls, and terns, and it's one of our best chances at uncommon species like Common Goldeneye and Common or Red-breasted Merganser. We'll explore the brushy habitat around the lake margins where winter passerines are numerous.</p> <p>From Kirby, we'll drive south to the <b>Rocking-A Ranch</b>, an 800 acre private ranch in the limestone mesas of the Callahan Divide. In this rich and rocky oak/juniper woodland we have our best chance of finding regional rarities such as Townsend's Solitaire and Western Bluebird, and local species such as Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Canyon Towhee, Bushtit, and Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay.</p> <p>Up next is a quick trip to the ponds of the <b>Hargesheimer Water Treatment Plant</b>. While ducks are always a possibility – and Taylor County is long overdue for its first record of Long-tailed Duck – our focus is the fab five of the marsh: Virginia Rail, Sora, Swamp Sparrow, Common Yellowthroat, and Marsh Wren.</p> <p>Kirby and the water treatment plant are easy. The private ranch will involve walking on uneven roads, including some elevation gain that may be tiring. Signed release forms will also be required to visit private property.</p>	TAYLOR	EASY TO MODERATE	7:15 a.m.–3:30 p.m.		X	

3	<p><b>TAYLOR COUNTY:</b> With over 250 species recorded, <b>Kirby Lake</b> is the top hotspot for the whole region. We'll look for waterfowl, gulls, and terns, and it's one of our best chances at uncommon species like Common Goldeneye and Common or Red-breasted Merganser. We'll explore the brushy habitat around the lake margins where winter passerines are numerous.</p> <p>Up next is a quick trip to the ponds of the <b>Hargesheimer Water Treatment Plant</b>. While ducks are always a possibility – and Taylor County is long overdue for its first record of Long-tailed Duck – our focus is the fab five of the marsh: Virginia Rail, Sora, Swamp Sparrow, Common Yellowthroat, and Marsh Wren.</p> <p>On to <b>County Road 131</b> where a large stand of oaks attracts wintering songbirds, and Red-bellied Woodpecker is often found. If time permits we may stop at a field on private property where Sprague's Pipits are often found.</p> <p>All birding will be done with short walks from the car.</p>	TAYLOR	EASY	7:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.			X
4	<p><b>Taylor County</b> - For this special trip, we will visit the <b>Brown Ranch</b>, a 3,200-acre private ranch in northern Taylor County. Target species include winter sparrows (including Lark Bunting and Black-throated Sparrow), raptors (Prairie Falcon and Merlin have been seen before and we're just waiting for a Golden Eagle to show up on the ranch one day), and the star of the show if they're around, Green-tailed Towhee – the only semi-reliable spot in the county for this species. If it's a good winter and they're here, the ranch is an excellent place to find Mountain Bluebird. Rock Wren and Canyon Towhee are also possible. The ranch also has several ponds (good for waterfowl) with wetlands around the margins.</p> <p><b>Important note:</b> <i>Visiting the Brown Ranch will require a vehicle with a little higher clearance and a willingness to drive on rougher roads. Pickups, SUVs, and Subarus should be fine. The road conditions will be evaluated shortly before the trip and this location may be canceled or substituted for another, if necessary.</i></p> <p>The private ranch will involve walking on uneven roads. Signed release forms will also required to visit private property.</p>	TAYLOR	MODERATE	7:00 am – 12:00 pm			X
5	<p><b>TAYLOR COUNTY:</b> We'll start the day with a visit to the ponds of the <b>Hargesheimer Water Treatment Plant</b> where we expect to find a variety of ducks and the “fab five” of the marsh – Virginia Rail, Sora, Swamp Sparrow, Common Yellowthroat, and Marsh Wren.</p> <p>Next we'll visit the main section of the <b>Abilene State Park</b>, featuring some of the best riparian woodland in Taylor County with tall cottonwood trees and trails that follow Elm Creek. Species that are common in the Eastern US – which are by and large scarce in our region – can be found here. Birds like White-throated Sparrow, Winter Wren, Brown Creeper, Brown Thrasher, and more. Winter rarities in past years have included Rusty Blackbird, Purple Finch, and Pine Warbler.</p> <p>On Friday and Saturday, after the lake, we'll cruise <b>Mountain Pass Rd</b>, an empty region of western Taylor County. Targets include Bushtit, both Western and Mountain Bluebird, Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay, Canyon Towhee, and raptors.</p> <p>There will be short walks on trails at the state park, and scanning the lake with scopes. Mountain Pass Rd will be done from the car, with short walks after pulling over.</p>	TAYLOR	EASY	7:00 a.m.-3:00 p.m.	X	X	X Until noon

6	<p><b>TAYLOR COUNTY OWLING:</b> Do you love standing in the cold as night falls for the thrilling ecstasy of seeing – or the crushing defeat of missing – owls? A <b>600-acre CRP grassland</b> on private property is one of the only known places in Taylor County with Short-eared Owls in the winter. Barn Owls also frequently come out to hunt the grasslands, and Great Horned Owls sometimes appear on distant telephone poles.</p> <p>Unlike other field trips, this trip can accommodate up to 40 people since we'll just be spaced out along the edge of a very large field. <b>CARPPOOLING IS A MUST to keep the number of vehicles to 10 or fewer.</b></p> <p><i>This trip is subject to cancelation if the owls are not present or reliable this winter.</i></p>	TAYLOR	EASY	5:00 P.M.-6:30 P.M.	X		
7	<p><b>JONES, SHACKELFORD AND CALLAHAN COUNTIES:</b> Basically Abilene but in a whole 'nother county lies <b>Lake Fort Phantom</b>. We'll start at Seabee Park along the lake and then work our way to the north side where the dam produces deeper water. Expect lots of water birds and if we're lucky, more uncommon fowl such as Common Goldeneye, Common Merganser, Common Loon, or Western Grebe. A rare gull could turn up.</p> <p>Next is the nearby <b>Abilene Water Treatment Plant</b> where a series of shallower ponds holds a different mix of ducks including Ruddy Ducks. The "fab five" of the marsh can also be found at this location: Virginia Rail, Sora, Swamp Sparrow, Common Yellowthroat, and Marsh Wren. On a good day, the number of waterfowl has been estimated to be in the thousands.</p> <p>We'll close out the day by birding <b>county roads</b> in Shackelford and Callahan Counties. We should be able to find a good diversity of winter sparrows and we can check for bluebirds, raptors, and agricultural riff-raff like longspurs and Horned Larks. This should give a nice assortment of winter species to birders working on the Century Club.</p> <p>Most of the walks will be short and there will be lots of time working with scopes to scan bodies of water. We might do a little more walking at the water treatment plant, depending on what birds we're looking for.</p>	JONES, SHACKELFORD, CALLAHAN	EASY TO MODERATE	7:00a.m.-2:00 p.m.	X	X	
8	<p><b>HASKELL AND KNOX COUNTIES:</b> Judging from the species totals in eBird, <b>Lake Stamford</b>, a large lake in Haskell County, is vastly under-birded. That is to say, the lower species totals compared to other large lakes reveals a serious lack of birding. Your trip will contribute to our knowledge of the region and no doubt yield an assortment of waterfowl and wintering passerines. Maybe you'll even find a new county record!</p> <p>After Lake Stamford, we'll visit the small town of <b>O'Brien</b> and surrounding county roads in northern Haskell County in search of geese, which strangely seem to become more common here and then mysteriously become scarce as they trickle further south. We'll also stop for winter sparrows and hope to run into species like longspurs and Horned Larks that favor agricultural areas.</p> <p>We'll then make our way to <b>Lake Benjamin and Truscott Brine Lake</b> in Knox County, time permitting, where we'll look for waterfowl and grebes, along with the usual grassland and agricultural birds. A Prairie Falcon or Ferruginous Hawk wouldn't be out of the question. Knox County is also vastly underbirded so there's a real potential to find a first county record.</p> <p>Lots of birding will be done with scopes and the walking distances will generally be short. There may be entry fees at some facilities.</p>	HASKELL AND KNOX	EASY	6:30 a.m.-4:00 p.m.		X	

9	<p><b>COKE COUNTY:</b> At <b>Oak Creek Reservoir</b>, just outside the Taylor County line in Coke County, we'll scan the lake for waterfowl and hope for a rare gull. One of our main targets here is Carolina Chickadee, a species that seems to become harder to find outside the oak woodlands of far northeast Coke County.</p> <p>From there we'll carry on to <b>EV Spence Reservoir</b>. This large body of water in an arid county seems to be the most reliable spot for Western Grebe and, when lucky, Clark's Grebe too. The margins of the lake have lately proven to be reliable for Green-tailed Towhee. Expect a high species diversity of both water birds and passerines around the lake, as well as a real potential to find a rarity at this under-birded hotspot.</p> <p>Next up, we'll cruise the <b>Sanco and Silver Loops</b>, two county roads that traverse arid scrub habitat. Here the potential for desert species is high including Black-throated Sparrow, Scaled Quail, Cactus Wren, Vermilion Flycatcher, Brewer's Sparrow, and more. Rufous-crowned Sparrow and Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay are also possible.</p> <p>All the birding will be done with short walks from the car. There may be entry fees at some facilities.</p>	COKE EASY	6:45 a.m.-4:00 p.m.	X		
10	<p><b>RUNNELS COUNTY:</b> One of the region's best hotspots is <b>Lake Ballinger</b>. Its mixture of freshwater, large deciduous forest and arid mesquite scrub yield a high level of species diversity. The lake is often covered in ducks and geese more than at other hotspots in the region. The woods attract "eastern" species like Winter Wren, Brown Thrasher, Fox Sparrow and more. It's not uncommon to get more than 50 species in a morning of birding around the lake.</p> <p>At <b>Ballinger City Park</b>, we'll look for wintering woodland birds that we might have missed at the lake. The park seems to be especially good for woodpeckers and sapsuckers, and one winter, an obvious hybrid Downy/Ladder-backed Woodpecker was photographed, one of only three hybrids ever recorded in eBird. Fox Sparrows are also often found in the vegetation along Elm Creek.</p> <p>On the way back on Friday and Saturday, we'll stop along <b>county roads</b> where Horned Larks and all three of the region's longspurs have been sighted – Chestnut-collared, Thick-billed, and Lapland – as well as recent sightings of Mountain Plover.</p> <p>We'll be scanning lakes and fields with scopes and any walking will be limited to short trips from the car. There may be entry fees at some facilities.</p>	RUNNELS EASY	6:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m.	X	X	X Until noon
11	<p><b>COLEMAN AND CONCHO COUNTIES:</b> We'll begin our day at <b>Coleman City Park</b> with its large trees where "eastern" forest species are possible including Brown Creeper, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Red-breasted Nuthatch, and more.</p> <p>Our next destination is the real star of the day. Lying along the Colorado River between Coleman and Concho Counties is the region's largest body of water, <b>O.H. Ivie Reservoir</b>. Visiting this destination is a natural way to visit two counties in the same day. Ivie has produced a number of rarities including a Eurasian Wigeon, Glaucous Gull, Pacific Loon, and Western Grebe. The previous winter a Chestnut-sided Warbler was found in a mixed flock along the shore, and shockingly, a Gray Vireo turned up in December. If more birders visited, the lake would probably have the highest species count for the entire region.</p> <p>We'll be scanning lakes with scopes and walking will be limited to short distances along the lake and brief trips from the car. There may be entry fees at some facilities.</p>	COLEMAN & CONCHO EASY	6:15 a.m.-4:00 p.m.	X	X	

12	<p><b>NOLAN COUNTY:</b> This trip will explore the hotspots and backroads of Nolan County, to the west of Abilene. We'll start our day at <b>Lake Sweetwater</b>, the largest body of water in this arid county. Not only is the lake good for waterfowl, loons, and grebes, it has large forest with classic eastern species and marsh around its edges that sometimes hold Virginia Rail and Sora.</p> <p>After the lake, we'll make our way to the 1,900+ acre <b>Hoskins Family Ranch</b> where a regenerative beef operation is utilized to maintain and improve rangeland habitat for the benefit of birds and other grassland dependent wildlife. The ranch is working towards a bird-friendly land certification through the Audubon Conservation Ranching initiative. We will bird along <b>Hoodoo Draw</b> searching for sparrows and raptors while checking in at springs, seeps, and wooded areas for resident and wintering passerines. Field trip attendees will have the opportunity to learn about regenerative agriculture from the owners and guide while enjoying a rare opportunity to bird on private working lands.</p> <p>If there's time left at the end of the day, we'll explore <b>county roads</b> in search of all three bluebirds, winter sparrows, and "hill country" species like Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay in the mesas. While scarce, Townsend's Solitaire is always a possibility in this habitat.</p> <p>Our time will be spent scoping bodies of water and short walks anticipated along county roads.</p>	NOLAN	MODERATE	6:45 a.m.-3:00 p.m.	X	X	
13	<p><b>CALLAHAN COUNTY:</b> Our first stop in this county to the east of Abilene is <b>Clyde Lake</b>. In addition to boasting a large list of waterfowl, the scrub habitat around the lake has often produced Vermilion Flycatcher and Curve-billed Thrasher.</p> <p>A short drive farther east, <b>T &amp; P Lake</b> is more forested around the edges. Expect waterfowl and a different mix of woodland species like Downy Woodpecker, Hermit Thrush, and White-throated and Fox Sparrows.</p> <p>If time allows, we'll explore a hidden gem known as <b>Spring Gap Road</b>. If you were transported here, you might swear you were in the Hill Country and indeed, there are breeding species like Black-capped Vireo and Black-and-white Warblers in the summer. During this time of year, you'll look for Western Bluebirds, Townsend's Solitaire, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Bushtit, and more. It's a beautiful place that's barely had its potential scratched as a birding hotspot.</p> <p>Time will be spent scoping bodies of water with short walks anticipated along county roads. There may be entry fees at some facilities.</p>	CALLAHAN	EASY	7:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m.			X

14	<p><b>FISHER COUNTY CENTURY CLUB:</b> Are you disappointed by the list of field trips above with their promises of good birding and high species diversity? Do you feel like we've been holding out on you, the hardcore <b>Century Club</b> birder craving something a little more off the beaten path? Do you love driving long distances only to learn that the pond you're visiting is actually devoid of all bird life? Then we have just the trip for you, led by the very best. Welcome to the Wild, Wild West of Fisher County.</p> <p>The thing that makes Fisher County so difficult is that much of the county is agricultural fields planted in cotton. Even the agricultural scraps aren't much good for wildlife. But over the last decade, a series of intrepid birders from Abilene and beyond have scoured the county in search of birds. This has led to knowledge of which little ponds are likely to turn up ducks, which county roads have amazing canyons and vistas that get into the mesas, and which landowners have granted access to their slice of Fisher County heaven.</p> <p>While we can't promise huge bird lists, we can promise a very strong start (or finish) to your goal of finding 100 species in this county, one of the most challenging in the region. We'll target waterfowl, winter sparrows, "eastern" forest birds, "hill country" birds like Rock Wren, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, and bluebirds, and any rarities we can find along the way.</p> <p>After enduring Fisher County, we'll drive back to Abilene through Jones County where, time allowing, we'll make quick stops at <b>Lake Hamlin and Anson Lake</b>. Ducks and wintering species are always present and some of the wooded habitats around the lakes are likely to yield more "eastern" species like White-throated Sparrow that are hard to find in Jones County.</p> <p>More time will be spent walking than on some other trips. There will also be longer periods of time driving between birding locations.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>FISHER &amp; JONES</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>MODERATE</b></p>	6:45 a.m.-4:00 p.m.	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
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