

Former president enjoys birding trip to Brownsville

Carter calls Valley 'superb' place to watch birds

By MEL HUFF

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April 10, 2004 — Jimmy Carter is not only a former president, architect of the Camp David Accord, Nobel Prize winner and founder and chairman of the Carter Center. He is also a birder.

He and his wife, Rosalynn, spent nearly four days birding in the Rio Grande Valley this week. They had come specifically for that purpose.



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“It is superb,” Carter said, noting, “I could have gone anywhere in the world to watch birds.” The Carters have birded in 25 countries, including Nepal, Japan, the Philippines, China, and recently Bolivia. “There is no other part of the United States of America that I know (where local officials have) devoted more effort ... to preserving areas for bird life and welcoming tourists who come here just for birding than the Lower Rio Grande Valley,” Carter said. “This is something that is paying rich dividends in this area for attracting tourism and birders like me.”

Carter said he and Rosalynn, who co-chairs the board of the Carter Center, started keeping a bird list in 1988 when they climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro in Africa. They have added to it as they have visited countries around the world in connection with their work at the Carter Center, an international human rights organization. They arrived in the Rio Grande Valley with a life list of about 1,100 birds and saw 55 more species here for the first time. In all, the Carters saw 130 species in less than four days, an experience the president called “remarkable,” given that the area extends no more than 60 miles.

Early Thursday morning the Carters went to the Sabal Palm Audubon Sanctuary hoping to see a short-tail hawk, which has built a nest in a tree on the American side of the Rio Grande. They saw the nest but no hawk. “We were very disappointed,” he said.

“Then, all of a sudden, here came the hawk from the Mexican side, across the Rio Grande with nesting material in its bill. It circled around and then it went back and landed in a tree. We got a chance to see it flying and a beautiful picture of it,” Carter said.

This is the first attempted nesting of a short tail hawk in the state.

Other highlights of the trip included an aplomado falcon, once extirpated in the United States, and a muscovy duck – extremely rare in the wild.

Extirpated animals have vanished from a certain region but are not extinct worldwide.

Carter said he might write an article about his trip to the Valley for a leading birding journal.

Brad McKinney, who co-guided with Steve LaBuda the leg of the trip to Laguna Atascosa and South Padre Island, said, “We showed them six life birds at Laguna Atascosa in six hours. (Carter)’s really into it!

“This is the first birding president, as far as I know,” McKinney added. “(The Carters are) outdoorsmen and conservationists. He had his field guide and target list. There was nothing fake about it.”

Recalling Carter’s work with the Carter Center and Habitat for Humanity, McKinney said, “It was great to have one thing I could do to enhance his trip!”

Lee Zieger, the president of the Rio Grande Delta Audubon Society, said he got a call in November asking him to arrange the trip for the Carters. He assumes he was tapped because of his connection to the Brownsville Audubon chapter and because he puts together the Brownsville International Birding Festival.

“I wouldn’t have been here except for Lee,” Carter said.