



Sunrise Birding, LLC

TEXAS

April 14 – 20, 2011

TRIP REPORT



Leader: Frank Mantlik

HIGHLIGHTS: Either for rarity value, excellent views or simply a group favorite.

- Yellow Rail, King Rail
- Red-cockaded Woodpecker
- Bachman's Sparrow
- 29 species of warblers
- Prothonotary Warbler
- Swainson's Warbler
- Golden-cheeked Warbler
- Crested Caracara
- Mississippi, Swallow-tailed, and White-tailed Kites
- 31 species of shorebirds
- Flock of 1500 American Avocets
- Long-billed Curlew
- Nesting Barn and Great Horned Owls
- Bottle-nosed Dolphin
- River Otter
- Texas wildflowers
- Fabulous nesting rookeries



SUMMARY:

Our tour to the upper Texas coast and the east Texas woodlands was timed to witness the peak of spring migration of songbirds, hawks and shorebirds. These migrants are arriving from Mexico and Central & South America, with many stopping in the coastal vegetation after a long flight across the Gulf of Mexico. In addition, the nesting by many long-legged waders and terns is in full swing.

The tour began when Frank picked up John, Pauline, Freyda, and Joyce at their inn near Houston Airport, where Mike and Wanda were also collected. We visited a nearby county park for our first taste of Texas birds. While failing to locate a pair of staked-out Prothonotary Warblers, we did manage views of CAROLINA CHICKADEE, PINE WARBLER, NORTHERN PARULA, and male **SUMMER TANAGER**. Also Frank's hooting eventually resulted in a vocal reply by a BARRED OWL. An unidentified snake slithered across the trail ahead, was photographed, and identified post-tour as a COPPERHEAD (*Agkistrodon contortrix*).



Onward we drove to Jones State Forest, where our main target was an endangered species of woodpecker. While walking to the pine forest, we encountered several family groups of EASTERN BLUEBIRDS with just-fledged young hopping on the ground. Just after seeing our first brilliant male INDIGO BUNTING and 3 RED-HEADED WOODPECKERS chasing each other, we found our quarry – three **RED-COCKADED WOODPECKERS** near a nest tree. The evening brought hotel check-in, and getting acquainted over a great dinner at a hopping Texas steakhouse.

Day 2 - The next morning we returned to Jones SF, in a successful search for the pine-loving BROWN-HEADED NUTHATCH. Terrific views were also had of the Red-cockadededs, as well as of PILEATED WOODPECKERS, and loose flocks of 50+ MISSISSIPPI KITES migrating north just over the treetops. After a rest stop at the HQ, we walked a forest nature trail, which was quiet except for hearing our first (elusive) WHITE-EYED VIREO.





We then drove SE towards toward Winnie, our base site near the coast. Stops were made along the way near the Trinity River, where we spotted our first LITTLE BLUE HERONS and SOLITARY SANDPIPER. Also seen were dozens of nesting CLIFF SWALLOWS and ubiquitous PURPLE MARTINS, a LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE, **NEOTROPIC** and **DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANTS**, and fly-by AMERICAN WHITE PELICANS (3) and a FRANKLIN'S GULL. The friendly and informative Director of this Army Corps site came out and greeted us, explaining the facility and the area to us. Afterwards, we snagged a picnic lunch, which we ate at the nearby rookery. Here we had fabulous views of nesting ROSEATE SPOONBILLS, GREAT EGRETS, and ANHINGAS. Also seen were BLUE-WINGED TEAL, WOOD DUCK, WHITE IBIS, and our only SWALLOW-TAILED KITE of the trip – a rare and local breeder.

The afternoon was hot (85 F), but the wind was shifting out of the north, boding well for passerine migration near the coast. We high-tailed it to High Island.

After hotel check-in, and a brief stop to see 25+ UPLAND SANDPIPERS at a cow pasture, we birded until sunset at the famous

Houston Audubon Boy Scout Woods (BSW) sanctuary. The hunch paid off, as songbirds were numerous in the oaks, sycamores, and mulberries and tired, thirsty migrants came to the water drip to drink and bathe. What a show! Flocks of ORCHARD ORIOLES were joined by a few BALTIMORE ORIOLES, SUMMER TANAGER, BROWN THRASHER, PAINTED and INDIGO BUNTINGS, and a variety of colorful warblers including BLACKBURNIAN, YELLOW-THROATED, TENNESSEE, KENTUCKY, 3 HOODED, and numerous NORTHERN WATERTHRUSHES. Our first SWAINSON'S WARBLER, a skulking denizen of dense understory, came out from the thicket to bathe and forage in the open. We ended birding with splendid views of a pair of GREAT HORNED OWLS. A delicious southern dinner included shrimp gumbo, crawfish etouffee, catfish, and BBQ.

Day 3 - After breakfast, flocks of migrating WHIMBRELS (300) flew over the motel lot. En route to High Island, we viewed a bayou where there were BLACK-NECKED STILTS, MOTTLED DUCKS, and BLACK-BELLIED and FULVOUS WHISTLING-



DUCKS. Patches of bright pink Missouri Primroses dotted the roadsides. This morning the BSW sanctuary was packed with eager birdwatchers. Volunteer leaders Scott, Nick, and Sam from Tropical Birding led the masses on the numerous trails. Luckily the northerly winds brought plentiful birds as well. Species seen included INCA DOVES, YELLOW-BILLED and BLACK-BILLED CUCKOOS, ROSE-BREADED GROSBEAKS, WHITE-CROWNED SPARROWS, and a variety of warblers including BLUE-WINGED, PALM, **BLACK-THROATED GREEN**, SWAINSON'S, and YELLOW-BREADED CHAT. John and Pauline photographed an EASTERN KINGBIRD and a WESTERN KINGBIRD on the same branch. The boardwalk trail to the

marsh produced a pair of CRESTED CARACARAS (copulating!), WHITE-TAILED KITE, RED-SHOULDERED HAWK, GREEN HERONS, COMMON MOORHEN, and our only WHITE-WINGED DOVE.

After a picnic lunch, we drove to the Gulf coast shoreline, flats, and marshes to Rollover Pass. We saw our first BROWN PELICANS, REDDISH EGRET, (endangered) PIPING PLOVERS, MARBLED GODWITS, and ROYAL, CASPIAN, FORSTER'S, and LEAST TERNS.

A late afternoon visit to the Smith Oak Woods (SOW) heron rookery was truly a treat. We enjoyed point-blank looks and sweet light for photography of the numerous nesting, courting, displaying spoonbills, herons, egrets, and cormorants, and our first **AMERICAN ALLIGATORS**.



Mexican food topped off the great day.

Day 4 - An early breakfast was followed by a short drive to Anahuac NWR for a special organized marsh walk for Yellow Rails. The leader, David Sarkozi, was late; but this allowed us time for great views of KING RAIL, SORA, LONG-BILLED DOWITCHER, and SWAMP SPARROW. During David's intro speech to the crowd, Frank spotted a RIVER OTTER crossing the road. The marsh walk involved a small army of 40 birders (and 10 more watching from the road) trudging shoulder-to-shoulder through the Spartina grass. During the third pass, we succeeded in flushing a **YELLOW RAIL**; Frank obtained the only photos of this difficult-to-see species as it flew past Jon Dunn's outstretched hand! Eureka! Other birds seen included 80 SEDGE WRENS, a few MARSH WRENS, and many SEASIDE SPARROWS. (Post-tour note: David reported that of the 10 walks he led this year, Yellow Rails were seen on only half of them. Lucky are we.)



We then drove the auto loop, with wonderful views of normally-shy **AMERICAN BITTERN**, LEAST BITTERN (9), CLAPPER/KING RAILS, and some large Alligators. A fun sit-down lunch was had at a High Island café, where the entertaining birder-waitress shared birding news and stories about Hurricane Ike of 2008. Despite southerly winds, the afternoon birding at BSW was fabulous. We "ticked" PEREGRINE FALCON, SWAINSON'S THRUSH, EASTERN TOWHEE, LOUISIANA WATERTHRUSH, OVENBIRD, more CHATS, and CERULEAN, CAPE MAY, PRAIRIE, PROTHONOTARY, CHESTNUT-SIDED, and WORM-EATING WARBLERS. Given the quality of the birds seen, this was perhaps the best day of the tour.

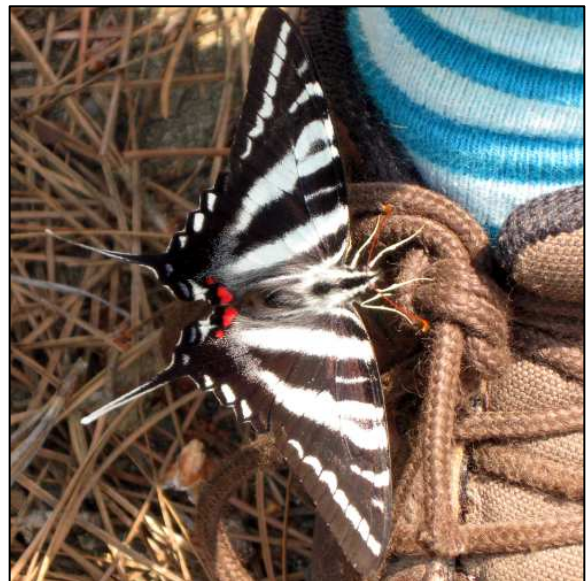


Day 5 - A day exploring the Bolivar peninsula brought warm (88 F), humid weather and thankfully a strong sea breeze. We began with scope views of a nesting BARN OWL along the entrance road to Bolivar Flats Preserve. Here we walked along the beach and dunes, resulting in great views of WILSON'S and SNOWY PLOVERS, GULL-BILLED, COMMON, and BLACK TERNS, HORNED LARK, and a lingering GREATER SCAUP. A lone LONG-BILLED CURLEW flew closely past us. At a nearby marshy pool, Frank spotted 3 PECTORAL and 2 STILT SANDPIPERS, and we had a side-by-side comparison of BOAT-TAILED and the abundant GREAT-TAILED GRACKLES. After a



beachside picnic, we walked out North Jetty to scope the many birds on Bolivar Flats. These included 1500 AMERICAN AVOCETS. A stop at the ferry landing to search for a Long-tailed Duck was unsuccessful, but we witnessed a BOTTLE-NOSED DOLPHIN leap clear out of the bay. Returning towards High Is., a stop at Bob's Road was very productive. We were treated to terrific views of a variety of shorebirds and terns including a pair of SANDWICH TERNS, and brief views of WESTERN and WHITE-RUMPED SANDPIPERS. Rollover Pass was loaded with pelicans, terns, and gulls involved in a feeding frenzy, as well as a close flock of resting BLACK SKIMMERS.

Day 6 – We drove north to the East Texas woodlands in search of uncommon nesting species. At The Big Thicket visitor center, we found CEDAR WAXWINGS, WOOD THRUSH, and BROAD-WINGED HAWK. Then our plans to bird the Turkey Creek area were thwarted when an uncontrolled 7000-acre wildfire resulted in closed roads and trails, but not before finding singing SWAINSON'S WARBLERS on territory. We traveled farther north to Angelina National Forest, in search of the local and uncommon BACHMAN'S SPARROW. With Mike's sharp ears and Wanda's keen eyes, we secured great views of one perched low in a bush under its pine woods habitat. Also seen here were a WILD TURKEY and a spectacular ZEBRA SWALLOWTAIL butterfly that had a liking for Pauline's shoes. The upbeat group tried to continue their good luck by buying some Texas lottery tickets. Before returning to Winnie, we explored the beautiful habitats



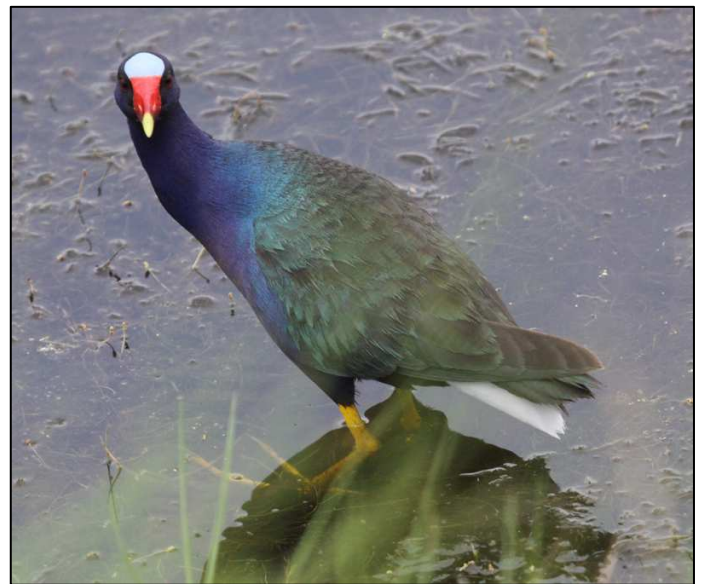
of Martin Dies State Park; rewards included adult BALD EAGLE, YELLOW-THROATED VIREO, a pair of PROTHONOTARY WARBLERS in their swampy nesting habitat, a click beetle, and a variety of dragonflies.

During the usual after-dinner review of the day's sightings, Joyce won a beautiful bird t-shirt, by having the closest guess of our trip list of 201 species.

Day 7 - After breakfast and checkout, the group enjoyed its last morning of birding by revisiting a few favorite sites before returning to Houston. The Upland Sandpiper field also had nearby Texas Long-horned Cattle. High Island (BSW) had many fewer birders and birds, compared to the weekend, but we managed a few additions. After some group photos, we made one last visit to the SOW Rookery, where a frigatebird was present the day before. No luck, but Mike found the rarest bird of the trip – a GOLDEN-CHEEKED WARBLER – in a thicket. He was sure of the ID, as he saw and heard it well. The last verified report of this species in the area was in 1977. Unfortunately, our group was unable to relocate it.

Then another visit to Anahuac produced a lone dark SNOW GOOSE (= Blue Goose), 4 perched YELLOW-CROWNED NIGHT-HERONS, another SCISSOR-TAILED FLYCATCHER, SWAINSON'S HAWK, and 2 brilliant PURPLE GALLINULES.

We returned to the airport by 3pm, in time for flights. Farewells and hugs concluded the tour. The trip total was **208 bird species**. The weather had been perfect, and the tour was terrific, with wonderful participants, great birds (variety and numbers), and some fine photo opportunities. Thanks to all, but especially Mike for aiding bird-finding with his keen ears and eyes.



Thank you all! And hope to see you again on another SUNRISE BIRDING Tour!

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