

HIGH ISLAND, TEXAS AN INTRODUCTORY BIRDING TOUR

APRIL 23 – 27, 2009

LEADER: BOB SUNDSTROM

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Our High Island Introductory tour offers more astounding variety in a few days of birding than probably any other short tour in North America. The High Island sanctuaries, which are areas of prime coastal migrant habitat now set aside from development, are certainly the best known feature of this very bird-rich region. But several other nearby natural elements rival the sanctuary woods as phenomenal birding sites. These include Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge, which includes a vast, freshwater marsh system plus many acres of grassland and brackish marsh; Bolivar Flats, one of the continent's most impressive coastal sites for shorebird and tern aggregations; and the spring rice fields throughout the area, which are flooded temporarily in the cultivation process and serve then as prime stopping areas for many thousands of migratory sandpipers.

With such a wealth of birding opportunities, it is tricky to even try to do them justice in about four days of overall birding time. But we gave it a very good effort. Even though songbird migration slowed down considerably after the first two days, we finished the tour seeing 20 species of warblers—a fine accomplishment. Blackpoll and Bay-breasted warblers came in for close views, as did a lovely male Cerulean Warbler—tiny and blue-backed with a narrow blue necklace. Chestnut-sided Warblers shared oak trees with Tennessee, Magnolia, Black-throated Green, and loads of Yellow warblers. A couple of drives took us to where other warblers were nesting. A Northern Parula, a Yellow-throated Warbler, and a Prothonotary Warbler shared the same half-acre of cypress bayou. A bit farther north, we watched singing Swainson's, Prairie, and Pine warblers, and a Yellow-breasted Chat atop the same small tree for several minutes.

One afternoon the wooded edge came alive with Indigo Buntings, 20 or more glinting among the low branches. In the same patch of woods, a flock of Dickcissels gave their raspy calls, leading us to a closer view of these recent arrivals from South America. A dozen Eastern Kingbirds chased through the treetops, just arrived from across the Gulf of Mexico. Each day we followed flashes of red to find Scarlet and Summer tanagers, more migrants just coming ashore. We found a glorious male Painted Bunting already singing on its breeding grounds.

The Bolivar Flats sanctuary of coastal beach and dunes, though storm-damaged by recent Hurricane Ike, still lived up to its stellar reputation. Piping, Wilson's, and Semipalmated plovers, copper-backed Dunlin, bright Ruddy Turnstones, a flight of American Avocets, and five species of terns shared the beach. At Rollover Pass, Reddish Egrets danced in the tidal shallows and a trio of American Oystercatchers were cause for celebration. Not far from there, we watched a Clapper Rail walking along the roadside—just before a second visit to the Stingaree, one of the Gulf Coast's great local seafood restaurants. Another drive took us along an extensive freshwater canal, where iridescent Purple Gallinules and Green Herons seemed to turn up every hundred yards.

En route to Sabine Pass one morning, we turned down an anonymous side road just to see what was there. Someone soon spotted a good-sized yellow bird which, on closer view and for sure after it gave its distinctive loud call, turned out to be a Couch's Kingbird. This species breeds in far south Texas, and is almost unheard of within sight of Louisiana where we were—a genuine rarity adding luster to an already admirable bird list.

DAY BY DAY ITINERARY

April 23: Afternoon departure from Houston Intercontinental Airport, east on Hwy. 1960. Birded enroute along farm roads north of Winnie. Afternoon visits to High Islands sanctuaries Scout Woods and Smith Oaks, including the heronry. First of three nights in Winnie.

April 24: Early morning trip to cypress bayou habitat of Taylor Bayou to look for breeding warblers, then on to Sabine Woods near Sabine Pass. Birded along an oil field road north of Sabine Pass, where we found a rare Couch's Kingbird. Lunch in Sabine Pass. Afternoon break back in Winnie, then birded along Canal Rd. south of Winnie, drove farm roads, and visited Bolivar Flats.

April 25: First thing in the morning, birded along the rural roads north of Winnie checking for flooded rice fields and shorebirds and in the area. Returned to High Island and Scout Woods, where birding was very slow, so drove series of farm roads north of Anahuac Island. After lunch at the Stingaree in Crystal Beach, birded Rollover Pass, Port Bolivar, and Bolivar Flats. Returned to the Smith Oaks heronry until about 7:30 p.m.

April 26: Morning birding at Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge and lunch in Anahuac. After a break at the motel, returned to Scout Woods and Smith Oaks.

April 27: Early morning departure north via Nome and Kountze to bird along Gore Store Road's young pine plantations, canebrakes, and bayous. Enroute to Humble, birded briefly at the city park in Liberty, then had lunch at Jose's in Dayton. Continued on to Houston Intercontinental Airport for departures.

BIRD LIST

[names in *italics* are rare or unusual; ***bold italics*** are exceptionally rare or unusual]

WATERFOWL

Black-bellied Whistling Duck – spectacular large ducks with pink bills and dark bodies

Fulvous Whistling-Duck

Wood Duck

Mottled Duck – in pairs, the one locally nesting duck, great views along the road into Bolivar beach

Northern Shoveler – a single pair that hadn't yet flown north

Blue-winged Teal

NEW WORLD QUAILS

Northern Bobwhite – we heard a crowing male

GREBES

Pied-billed Grebe

PELICANS

Brown Pelican – flocks frequently in view along the Gulf beaches

CORMORANTS

Neotropic Cormorant – the cormorant seen commonly through much of the area of the tour

Double-crested Cormorant – a few at the heronry in High Island

ANHINGAS

Anhinga

BITTERNES, HERONS & EGRETS

Great Blue Heron – locally uncommon

Great Egret – ubiquitous, elegant, in all wet habitats

Snowy Egret – showing off their “golden slippers”

Little Blue Heron – seen mostly in flight

Tricolored Heron – some excellent views of these elegant, slender, blue-purple-gray herons

Reddish Egret – performing while foraging on the tide flats at Rollover Pass

Cattle Egret – in fancy rusty-toned plumage of the breeding period

Green Heron – lots of recent trans-Gulf migrants on hand; fine views along Canal Rd.

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron – wonderful views of them on nests near the Intracoastal Canal

IBISES, SPOONBILLS & STORKS

White Ibis – flying flocks nearly everywhere

White-faced Ibis – nearly always seen in flight;

Roseate Spoonbill – close views at the heronry of their red-pink shoulders and pale orange tails

NEW WORLD VULTURES

Black Vulture – both vultures were seen widely throughout the tour

Turkey Vulture

HAWKS & ALLIES

Mississippi Kite – four the last day flying near Liberty City Park

Northern Harrier – flying over the fields north of Winnie

Red-shouldered Hawk – a calling adult at the Liberty park

Broad-winged Hawk – great scope view of an adult on a snag south of the town of Anahuac

Swainson’s Hawk

Red-tailed Hawk

FALCONS

Northern Crested Caracara – at least two were seen along the rural roads

RAILS & ALLIES

Clapper Rail – great views on the drive along Yacht Basin Rd. near Rollover Pass

Sora – heard

Purple Gallinule – fine views of these multi-hued rallids among the water hyacinths along Canal Road

Common Moorhen

PLOVERS

Black-bellied Plover – in some in truly spectacular plumage

American Golden-Plover – one still in basic plumage

Wilson’s Plover – excellent views of this large billed plover at the end of the road in Anahuac refuge

Semipalmated Plover – the darker backed small plover with one neck ring

Piping Plover – in side-by-side comparison with Semipalmated Plovers

Killdeer – ubiquitous along the country roads; a nest with three eggs at one of our rural gravel pullouts

OYSTERCATCHERS

American Oystercatcher – we were fortunate to see 3 of these scarce, local nesters

AVOCETS & STILTS

Black-necked Stilt – lots of breeding pairs

American Avocet – a small flock flying along Bolivar Flats, and a huge flock way out along the jetty

SANDPIPERS & ALLIES

Spotted Sandpiper

Solitary Sandpiper

Greater Yellowlegs

Willet – both the Eastern and Western subspecies

Lesser Yellowlegs

Upland Sandpiper – amazing views of a much sought-after species

Whimbrel – standing in the fields or flying over, with long decurved bills

Hudsonian Godwit – we scoped one of these hard to find large sandpipers

Ruddy Turnstone – on the beach in bright breeding plumage

Sanderling – ubiquitous on the beaches, some also with the orange glow of breeding color

Semipalmated Sandpiper – in close comparison with Western and Least sandpipers

Western Sandpiper

Least Sandpiper

White-rumped Sandpiper – a few at the flooded rice fields north of Winnie

Pectoral Sandpiper

Dunlin – in various stages of adding black belly feathers

Long-billed Dowitcher – on freshwater ponds

GULLS, TERNS & SKIMMERS

Laughing Gull – the ubiquitous hooded gull of the region

Ring-billed Gull – assorted immatures along the coast

Herring Gull

Least Tern – miniature terns calling sharply up and down the coastal beaches

Gull-billed Tern – flying over Anahuac refuge, we saw as many as ten of these uncommon terns

Caspian Tern – the large, blood-red-billed tern

Black Tern – good views along the Intracoastal Canal, especially behind the barges and boats

Forster's Tern – local breeders in full silvery plumage

Royal Tern – carrot-orange bills and ripping voices

Sandwich Tern – with yellow-tipped, slender black bills and bushy crests

Black Skimmer – at Rollover Pass

DOVES & PIGEONS

Rock Pigeon

Eurasian Collared-Dove – common throughout the area of the tour

White-winged Dove – one at Scout Woods

Mourning Dove

Inca Dove – a few around High Island

CUCKOOS & ALLIES

Yellow-billed Cuckoo – seen almost daily; very good views of what is often a secretive species

NIGHTJARS & ALLIES

Common Nighthawk – one sitting on a dirt road offered great scope views

SWIFTS

Chimney Swift – around towns

HUMMINGBIRDS

Ruby-throated Hummingbird

KINGFISHERS

Belted Kingfisher – one at the Smith Oaks pond

WOODPECKERS

Red-bellied Woodpecker – along Gore Store Rd.

Downy Woodpecker – heard

Pileated Woodpecker – heard

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS

Eastern Wood-Pewee – several arriving migrants were seen and heard

Great-crested Flycatcher – heard

Couch's Kingbird – the rare bird of the tour, we saw and heard one north of Sabine Pass; normally a breeding bird of southernmost Texas

Eastern Kingbird – widespread, already paired and nesting

Scissor-tailed Flycatcher – pairs widespread; a lovely bird we stopped to enjoy on several occasions

SHRIKES

Loggerhead Shrike – common along roadsides, we saw a pair in Port Bolivar attending their nest

VIREOS

White-eyed Vireo – seen well the last morning

Yellow-throated Vireo

Philadelphia Vireo – at Smith Oaks

Red-eyed Vireo – seen each day in the woods

CROWS & JAYS

Blue Jay – nesting pairs sneaking back and forth through the trees

American Crow

SWALLOWS & MARTINS

Purple Martin

Tree Swallow

Cliff Swallow – collecting mud for nest under the Intracoastal Bridge by the hundreds

Barn Swallow

TITMICE

Carolina Chickadee – seen at Taylor Bayou and the final morning

Tufted Titmouse

WRENS

Carolina Wren – nesting in the Scout Woods, where we watched on singing

Sedge Wren

Marsh Wren

OLD WORLD WARBLERS

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher

THRUSHES

Eastern Bluebird – a few seen north of Winnie

Swainson's Thrush

Wood Thrush – heard

American Robin – one near the town of Anahuac

MOCKINGBIRDS & THRASHERS

Gray Catbird – one of the true regulars in the migrant woods

Northern Mockingbird

Brown Thrasher – surprisingly scarce

STARLINGS

European Starling

WAXWINGS

Cedar Waxwing – a large flock feeding close to the ground on the final morning

NEW WORLD WARBLERS

Tennessee Warbler – drab enough to be confused with vireos

Northern Parula – seen nicely at Taylor Bayou, singing where it was nesting

Yellow Warbler – one of the most commonly seen warblers of the tour

Chestnut-sided Warbler – nice view of a male

Magnolia Warbler – a beautiful warbler, one at Smith Oaks
Black-throated Green Warbler – we saw this migrant nearly every day, some very close at hand
Yellow-throated Warbler – singing at one its nesting bayous
Pine Warbler – seen the final morning in the pines north of Kountze
Prairie Warbler – singing in the young pine plantations north of Kountze
Bay-breasted Warbler – a nice view of at last two handsome males
Blackpoll Warbler – several males, one at eye level
Cerulean Warbler – the one male we found was much appreciated; a threatened species
Black-and-white Warbler – working the limbs and trunks of many trees
American Redstart – finally a flashy male to add to a few yellow females
Prothonotary Warbler – this golden yellow warbler posed nicely along Taylor Bayou
Swainson’s Warbler – an incredible view of this notorious skulker, singing at the roadside
Northern Waterthrush
Common Yellowthroat
Hooded Warbler – some great views of several flitting males
Yellow-breasted Chat – terrific scope views of one singing atop a small tree in the young pine plantation

TANAGERS

Summer Tanager – many wonderful views of both tanager species
Scarlet Tanager

SPARROWS

Eastern Towhee
Savannah Sparrow
Grasshopper Sparrow – one seen on the road while we perused the farm fields north of Winnie
Seaside Sparrow – scoped atop a small bush in the marsh
Swamp Sparrow

CARDINALS, BUNTINGS & ALLIES

Northern Cardinal – many good looks at this local nester
Rose-breasted Grosbeak – males with mulberry stains permanently pictured on their breasts
Blue Grosbeak
Indigo Bunting – flashy, scintillating blue – and seen every day!
Painted Bunting – scope views of a brilliant singing male near Taylor Bayou

BLACKBIRDS & ALLIES

Red-winged Blackbird
Eastern Meadowlark
Great-tailed Grackle
Boat-tailed Grackle – the big grackle of the marshes
Common Grackle
Brown-headed Cowbird
Orchard Oriole – chestnut and black males, and yellow females
Baltimore Oriole – flashy orange males seen all but the final day of the tour

OLD WORLD SPARROWS

House Sparrow

MAMMALS and HERPS

Northern Raccoon (*Procyon lotor*)
Eastern Gray Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*)
Swamp Rabbit (*Sylvilagus aquaticus*)
Red-eared Slider (*Trachemys scripta elegans*)
Eastern Mud Turtle (*Kinosternon subrubrum*) – the small turtles that we found crossing the back roads

American Alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*)
Blanchard's Cricket Frog (*Acris crepitans blanchardi*) - heard