

HIGH ISLAND TEXAS

APRIL 13-17, 2008

**LEADERS: BRENNAN MULROONEY
AND DAVID WOLF**

COMPILED BY: BRENNAN MULROONEY

**VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS, INC.
2525 WALLINGWOOD DRIVE, SUITE 1003
AUSTIN, TX 78746
WWW.VENTBIRD.COM**

HIGH ISLAND, TEXAS
April 13-17, 2008

Leaders: Brennan Mulrooney and David Wolf

High Island, Texas is legendary among North American birders, and with good reason. There are few other destinations that can offer such diversity and exciting birding in a relatively small area. The woodland preserves in High Island and nearby Sabine Pass offer tremendous birding for migrant landbirds; the mudflats of the Bolivar Peninsula, along with the flooded farm fields near Winnie, can hold an amazing diversity of shorebirds; and the wading bird colony at Smith Oaks is one of the great spectacles in North American birding. Further afield, the piney woods of East Texas hold a host of breeding birds that are easily accessed and add a little spice to any trip to the Upper Texas Coast.

Even though we didn't experience a-true fallout, or even have any really favorable weather for good songbird migration, we still managed to see 17 warbler species in a single day, and had 20 species for the trip. Some of our songbird highlights were a warbler flock that held Blue-winged, Golden-winged, and Worm-eating; a mulberry tree with male Baltimore Oriole, Summer Tanager, Scarlet Tanager, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak; Kentucky Warbler and Worm-eating Warbler coming out into great light to drink and bathe; and Hooded Warblers hopping along on the boardwalk right in front of us. Swarms of swallows included all those regularly occurring in eastern North America, with great eye level looks at Cave Swallow.

The great thing about birding the Upper Texas Coast in spring is that even if the woods aren't full of warblers, there is still so much great birding that can be done. For example, the day after we saw 17 warbler species we birded the flooded fields near Winnie and the impoundments of Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge and were able to tally 27 species of shorebirds in a single day; we saw a total of 31 on this trip. In addition to all those shorebirds that day, we had great looks at Least Bitterns and Purple Gallinules clinging to and creeping through the cattails. This shorebird "big day" was also an amazing day for rails, with King, Clapper, Virginia, and Sora all making it to the tally sheet.

Our last day at High Island held a special treat, a visit to the wading bird rookery at Smith Oaks. This rookery probably provides the best opportunity for North American birders to experience the sights and sounds of a diverse wading bird nesting colony. Not only is there a great diversity of nesting birds—six species nesting in close proximity—but they are also incredibly close to the lucky observers who can only sit and gape in awe of the wonderful spectacle unfolding right in front of them. Great Egrets had large chicks already and we watched as they competed for food from their dotting parents. Tricolored Herons displayed and worked on their nests. Snowy Egrets looked like they had stuck their toes in sockets, as their breeding plumes stuck straight out in a gaudy exhibition of their breeding readiness. But the Roseate Spoonbills were, perhaps, the highlight. It's easy to steal the show when you're bright pink. Often this scarce species is only seen far off, feeding in expansive marshes, but here they are point-blank, less than 100 feet away and in their full breeding colors. We could see each black striation in their improbable spatulate bills, the intensity of their ruby-red eyes, the deep magenta of their carpal bars, and the tangerine color of their tails. We

watched as breeding adults chased younger loitering birds, perhaps trying to steal a covert mating. We saw adults exchanging sticks, working on their nest construction, and saw several nests being incubated. It was an unforgettable experience.

To cap off an already fantastic trip, we spent our last morning seeing some of the breeding birds that nest just inland from where we had been looking for migrants. Up in the piney woods we were able to locate many of the common breeders like Carolina Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, Eastern Bluebird, and Prairie, Pine, and Yellow-throated warblers, but the highlight had to be Swainson's Warbler. This species is somewhat of a ghost in migration, and even when singing on territory can be very difficult to observe. We were fortunate to have lengthy close-up looks from the road, as this stealthy denizen of the dense undergrowth belted out his song right in front of us. It was a triumphant finish to a most enjoyable tour.

ITINERARY:

April 13: After picking up most of the group at the airport in Houston, we made our way to Winnie via I-10. Once checked in we headed straight for High Island visiting Scout Woods and Smith Oaks. Dinner at the world famous Al-T's.

April 14: We started the day in High Island at Houston Audubon's Smith Oaks Sanctuary. The birding was so good we stayed there all morning. After lunch and a short break we headed east to Sabine Woods, a sanctuary of the Texas Ornithological Society. Dinner in Port Arthur.

April 15: We spent the morning at Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge, than headed down the Bolivar Peninsula to check Rollover Pass and Yacht Basin Rd. The afternoon was spent at Scout Woods.

April 16: This morning had us heading once again down the Bolivar Peninsula with birding at Rollover Pass and Bolivar Flats. After lunch at the Stingaree we returned to High Island and spent the afternoon at Smith Oaks, highlighted by a visit to the waterbird rookery.

April 17: On this, our final morning, we headed north to the piney woods looking for some of the East Texas breeding species that we had missed on the coast. On the way we checked the shorebird fields near Nome. After some great birding in the Turkey Creek unit of the Big Thicket we hit Mama Jack's buffet/gift shop in Kountze before returning to Houston for flights home.

KEY

ANWR: Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge

BSW: Houston Audubon's Boy Scout Woods Sanctuary in High Island

SO: Houston Audubon's Smith Oaks Sanctuary in High Island (the rookery is here)

SW: Texas Ornithological Society's Sabine Woods Sanctuary near Sabine Pass

RP: Rollover Pass on the Bolivar Peninsula

BF: Bolivar Flats

BP: Bolivar Peninsula

Note: Species appearing in underlined print are birds of special note that are either rare, local specialties, or are otherwise generally hard to find.

BIRDLIST

The taxonomic order and nomenclature follows American Ornithologist Union Check-list of North American Birds, 7th edition (including 47th supplement).

WATERFOWL

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck (*Dendrocygna autumnalis*) – we saw many in flight, but a flock on the ground along to the road to High Is. was quite nice

Fulvous Whistling-Duck (*Dendrocygna bicolor*) – ANWR

Mottled Duck (*Anas fulvigula*) – seen best at ANWR

Blue-winged Teal (*Anas discors*) – the most common duck on the tour

Northern Shoveler (*Anas clypeata*) - ANWR

Green-winged Teal (*Anas crecca*) - ANWR

Redhead (*Aythya americana*) - one at ANWR

Lesser Scaup (*Aythya affinis*) - a couple in the surf at BF

Surf Scoter (*Melanitta perspicillata*) - two with one of the following at BF were quite unexpected

White-winged Scoter (*Melanitta fusca*)

GREBES

Pied-billed Grebe (*Podilymbus podiceps*) - a few seen in freshwater ponds

Eared Grebe (*Podiceps nigricollis*) - a couple in breeding plumage at ANWR

PELICANS

American White Pelican (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*) - RO, BF

Brown Pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis*) – common along the seashore

CORMORANTS

Neotropic Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax brasilianus*) – seen daily, on nests at SO

Double-crested Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax auritus*) – a common wintering species on the upper Texas coast, we saw several that were still hanging around.

ANHINGAS

Anhinga (*Anhinga anhinga*) - SO and on the road to High Island.

HERONS, EGRETS, & BITTERNS

Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*) – fantastic looks at ANWR

Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) – seen most days

Great Egret (*Ardea alba*) – seen daily, we had fantastic looks at birds in high breeding condition, incubating eggs and attending scraggly chicks at SO

Snowy Egret (*Egretta thula*) – a few showing the orange facial skin and feet of high breeding condition at SO

Little Blue Heron (*Egretta caerulea*) – seen most days, some showing neon blue facial skin indicating breeding condition

Tricolored Heron (*Egretta tricolor*) – same as above

Reddish Egret (*Egretta rufescens*) – RO and BF

Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) – common in drier grassy habitat

Green Heron (*Butorides virescens*) – great looks at ANWR and SO

Black-crowned Night-Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) – several at SO

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron (*Nyctanassa violacea*) – several good looks including one on a wire

IBISES & SPOONBILLS

White Ibis (*Eudocimus albus*) – we saw white adults and brown-and-white immatures

White-faced Ibis (*Plegadis chihi*) – best at ANWR

Roseate Spoonbill (*Platalea ajaja*) – Probably the coolest bird in North America (but then I might be biased). We had spectacular looks at SO where we saw birds courting and chasing immature birds that were too close to their nests.

NEW WORLD VULTURES

Black Vulture (*Coragyps atratus*) – Common throughout.

Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*) – Common throughout.

HAWKS, EAGLES, & KITES

White-tailed Kite (*Elanus leucurus*) - fantastic views on the BP

Mississippi Kite (*Ictinia mississippiensis*) - north of Kountze

Northern Harrier (*Circus cyanea*) – both males and females seen on the BP

Broad-winged Hawk (*Buteo platypterus*) - migrants seen overhead at several locations

Swainson's Hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*) – same as above

Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) – only a couple including one very pale immature

FALCONS & CARACARAS

Crested Caracara (*Caracara cheriway*) - We saw this handsome and distinctive cousin of the falcons a couple of times on the BP, this species seems to be expanding its range.

Merlin (*Falco columbarius*) – we got a quick look at the “brown streak” on day 3

Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) - we saw a couple of these impressive raptors

RAILS & COOTS

Clapper Rail (*Rallus longirostris*) – great looks along Yacht Basin Rd

King Rail (*Rallus elegans*) – great looks at a pair along the road to ANWR

Virginia Rail (*Rallus limicola*) - one flushed on our rail walk at ANWR

Sora (*Porzana carolina*) - great looks at ANWR

Purple Gallinule (*Porphyrio martinica*) – two seen well along the road at ANWR

Common Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*) – seen most days in freshwater habitat

American Coot (*Fulica Americana*) – strangely scarce

PLOVERS & LAPWINGS

Black-bellied Plover (*Pluvialis squatarola*) – fairly common along the shore, several starting to show the black bellies of breeding plumage

American Golden-Plover (*Pluvialis dominica*) - we saw several in wet fields around Winnie, all still in basic plumage.

Snowy Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*) – we were able to find a few of these dapper little plovers on the BF; dry sand back, non-orange legs

Wilson's Plover (*Charadrius wilsonia*) – breeders at BF, their huge bills help to set them apart; wet sand back, non-orange legs

Semipalmated Plover (*Charadrius semipalmatus*) – several at BF; wet sand backs, orange legs

Piping Plover (*Charadrius melodus*) – BF is one of the most important wintering areas for this endangered species, we saw several there; dry sand back, orange legs.

Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*) – seen daily

OYSTERCATCHERS

American Oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*) – a rather distant look at RP

STILTS & AVOCETS

Black-necked Stilt (*Himantopus mexicanus*) – small numbers of these distinctive birds were scattered about, maybe seen best at ANWR

American Avocet (*Recurvirostra Americana*) – large flock at BF

SANDPIPERS & ALLIES

Spotted Sandpiper (*Actitis macularius*)

Greater Yellowlegs (*Tringa melanoleuca*) – bill 1.5-2X head length, two-toned, and upcurved

Willet (*Tringa semipalmata*) – we saw the heavily marked “Eastern Willet” that breeds on the Texas Coast, and the larger, grayer “Western Willet” that winters there and will be off to its breeding grounds in the interior west soon.

Lesser Yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*) – bill 1-1.5X head, all black, thin and straight

Upland Sandpiper (*Bartramia longicauda*) – we finally found one of these odd “grasspipers” in a grassy field with some Black-bellied Plovers on BP

Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*) – we saw many migrating flocks on the wing, and had some good looks at RP and BF

Long-billed Curlew (*Numenius americanus*) - one very distant bird on BP

Marbled Godwit (*Limosa fedoa*) – we found a few on BP

Ruddy Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*) – lots of great looks at these distinctive brightly marked shorebirds

Sanderling (*Calidris alba*) – many seen on the BP, still mostly in winter plumage

Semipalmated Sandpiper (*Calidris pusilla*) - we found a few in fresh breeding plumage mixed in with the redder, longer billed...

Western Sandpiper (*Calidris mauri*) – their reddish crowns and long tapered bills helped us to separate them from the semis

Least Sandpiper (*Calidris minutilla*) – slightly smaller and browner than the others

White-rumped Sandpiper (*Calidris fuscicollis*) - we picked out one early arriving individual from a flock of peeps on BP

Baird's Sandpiper (*Calidris bairdii*) - we had some great views in the wet fields near Winnie, their very long wings aid them on their amazingly long migration

Pectoral Sandpiper (*Calidris melanotos*) - common in the fields near Winnie

Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*) – some were getting the distinctive black belly patch of breeding plumage

Stilt Sandpiper (*Calidris himantopus*) – we managed to find at least one ANWR

Short-billed Dowitcher (*Limnodromus griseus*) – voice is the best way to ID the dowitchers, but by looking at a combination of plumage characters, molt timing, shape and habitat choice we were able ID most of these guys

Long-billed Dowitcher (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*) – all the birds we saw in the flooded fields near were this species.

Wilson's Phalarope (*Phalaropus tricolor*) - we found a few at ANWR

GULLS & TERNS

Laughing Gull (*Larus atricilla*) - This is the common and characteristic summer time gull of the Texas coast. Most were looking quite sharp with their black hoods and reddish bills.

Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*) - many around RP

Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*) - immatures around RP and several adults at BF

Least Tern (*Sternula antillarum*) - great looks at RP

Gull-billed Tern (*Gelochelidon nilotica*) - displaying their distinctive feeding behavior over dry or flooded inland fields

Caspian Tern (*Hydroprogne caspia*) - the largest tern in the world, we found a few distant birds on a pond on BP

Black Tern (*Chlidonias niger*) - several seen around the Stingaree

Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*) - we picked out several on BP, often in direct comparison with the paler...

Forster's Tern (*Sterna forsteri*) - many around RP and the Stingaree

Royal Tern (*Thalasseus maxima*) - the most common of the terns on the upper Texas coast, their size and carrot orange bills are distinctive

Sandwich Tern (*Thalasseus sandvicensis*) - their black bills were dipped in mustard

Black Skimmer (*Rynchops niger*) - good looks sitting and in flight at RP

PIGEONS & DOVES

Rock Pigeon (*Columba livia*) – seen daily

Eurasian Collared-Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*) - seen daily, this introduced species is rapidly colonizing the southern and western US

Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*) – Seen daily

Inca Dove (*Columbina inca*) – common in High Island and local on the BP

Common Ground-Dove (*Columbina passerina*) - not usually seen on this tour, we had one fly-by on the BP

BARN OWLS

Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) - seen by a few at SO

TYPICAL OWLS

Barred Owl (*Strix varia*) – heard only in the piney woods

SWIFTS

Chimney Swift (*Chaetura pelagica*) – these flying cigars were seen almost daily

HUMMINGBIRDS

Ruby-throated Hummingbird (*Archilocus colubris*)

KINGFISHERS

Belted Kingfisher (*Ceryle alcyon*) - a few seen here and there

WOODPECKERS

Red-bellied Woodpecker (*Melanerpes carolinus*) – only a few along the coast, more common inland

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus varius*) - we had great looks at BSW

Downy Woodpecker (*Picoides pubescens*) – seen or heard most days

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS

Great-crested Flycatcher (*Myiarchus crinitus*)

Eastern Kingbird (*Tyrannus tyrannus*) – seen almost daily

Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus forficatus*) – best looks on the BP

SHRIKES

Loggerhead Shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*) – seen almost daily

VIREOS

White-eyed Vireo (*Vireo griseus*) – seen and heard well, it is one of the most persistent singers in the southeast

Yellow-throated Vireo (*Vireo flavifrons*) – SW

Blue-headed Vireo (*Vireo solitarius*) - several good looks

Warbling Vireo (*Vireo gilvus*) – just a brief looks at SW

Red-eyed Vireo (*Vireo olivaceus*) – fairly common migrant on the coast and a common breeder inland

CROWS & JAYS

Blue Jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*) – common throughout

American Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) – common inland

Fish Crow (*Corvus ossifragus*) - seen near Sabine Pass and in Winnie

SWALLOWS

Purple Martin (*Progne subis*) – seen daily; larger than the swallows with more measured wing beats

Tree Swallow (*Tachycineta bicolor*) – their bright white underparts were distinctive

Northern Rough-winged Swallow (*Stelgidopteryx serripennis*) – only a few seen, brown above with dusky throats and lazy flight

Bank Swallow (*Riparia riparia*) fairly common, a small swallow with a dark chest band

Cliff Swallow (*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*) – a buffy-rumped swallow with a dark head

Cave Swallow (*Petrochelidon fulva*) - great looks at a colony under a low bridge, this is the eastern edge of this birds range, though it is expanding

Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) – common, seen daily

CHICKADEES & TITMICE

Carolina Chickadee (*Poecile carolinensis*) – a couple at SO and several inland

Tufted Titmouse (*Baeolophus bicolor*) – seen well on our last morning

WRENS

Carolina Wren (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*) – mostly heard, but seen by some at BSW

Sedge Wren (*Cistothorus platensis*) - great looks from the van at ANWR

Marsh Wren (*Cistothorus palustris*) – seen well in a roadside ditch near Winnie

KINGLETS

Ruby-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus calendula*) – we saw several in the High Is and SW

OLD WORLD WARBLERS

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (*Polioptila caerulea*) - we saw a few of these tiny balls of fluff

THRUSHES

Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*) - we saw a pair north of Kountze

Swainson's Thrush (*Catharus ustulatus*) – several good looks at SW

Wood Thrush (*Hylocichla mustelina*) - good looks at SW and heard in the piney woods

MOCKINGBIRDS & THRASHERS

Gray Catbird (*Dumetella carolinensis*) – common at BSW

Northern Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*) – seen daily

Brown Thrasher (*Toxostoma rufum*) – good looks at BSW

STARLINGS

European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – seen daily

WAXWINGS

Cedar Waxwing (*Bombycilla cedrorum*) - a flock in flight near Kountze

WOOD WARBLERS

Blue-winged Warbler (*Vermivora pinus*) – best at SO

Golden-winged Warbler (*Vermivora chrysoptera*) - we had to work to get everybody on it at SO, but it was worth it for this increasingly uncommon bird.

Tennessee Warbler (*Vermivora chrysoptera*) – best at SO

Orange-crowned Warbler (*Vermivora celata*) - one lingering late

Northern Parula (*Parula americana*) – several at most woods

Yellow-rumped Warbler (*Dendroica coronata*) - the northern most wintering warbler, we saw a few that were still on their way north

Black-throated Green-Warbler (*Dendroica virens*) – many good looks at this sharp bird

Yellow-throated Warbler (*Dendroica dominica*) - seen on territory in the Big Thicket

Pine Warbler (*Dendroica pinus*) – same as above

Prairie Warbler (*Dendroica discolor*) - a migrant at SO was unexpected, also seen in a pine plantation north of Kountze

Palm Warbler (*Dendroica palmarum*) - an early migrant we only saw it on day 2

Black-and-white Warbler (*Mniotilta varia*) – good looks at males and females of this distinctive warbler that acts like a nuthatch

Prothonotary Warbler (*Protonotaria citrea*) – seen best at SO

Worm-eating Warbler (*Helmitheros vermivorum*) – this subtle, furtive bird was elusive, but finally seen by everybody

Swainson's Warbler (*Limnithlypis swainsonii*) – we had great looks at a singing male on the breeding grounds, this was at the top of a lot of want lists.

Northern Waterthrush (*Seiurus noveboracensis*) – a few at the pond in SW

Kentucky Warbler (*Oporornis formosus*) – great views near the boardwalk at SW

Common Yellowthroat (*Geothlypis trichas*) – seen or heard most days

Hooded Warbler (*Wilsonia citrina*) – several good looks at scattered locations

Yellow-breasted Chat (*Icteria virens*) – frustratingly heard only at the pine plantation north of Kountze

TANAGERS

Summer Tanager (*Piranga rubra*) – males and females, most days

Scarlet Tanager (*Piranga olivacea*) – many stunning males, only a few females

(Western Tanager) (*Piranga ludoviciana*) - leader only at BSW

SPARROWS & ALLIES

Chipping Sparrow (*Spizella passerina*) - north of Kountze

Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*) – several scattered

Seaside Sparrow (*Ammodramus maritimus*) – we kicked up a few at ANWR

Swamp Sparrow (*Melospiza georgiana*) – same as above

White-throated Sparrow (*Zonotrichia albicollis*) – seen best at SW

SALTATORS, CARDINALS & ALLIES

Northern Cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) – seen daily

Rose-breasted Grosbeak (*Pheucticus ludovicianus*) – great looks at males in the mulberry trees at BSW

Blue Grosbeak (*Passerina caerulea*) - best from the van in High Is.

Indigo Bunting (*Passerina cyanea*) – repeated views of stunning males

BLACKBIRDS, ORIOLES & ALLIES

Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) – common throughout

Eastern Meadowlark (*Sturnella magna*) – seen most days

Common Grackle (*Quiscalus quiscula*) – mostly seen inland; short tail

Boat-tailed Grackle (*Quiscalus major*) – common around the marshes; dark eyes

Great-tailed Grackle (*Quiscalus mexicanus*) – common in parking lots; yellow eyes

Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*) – seen most days

Orchard Oriole (*Icterus spurius*) – several handsome males seen

Baltimore Oriole (*Icterus galbula*) – several spectacular orange and black males

OLD WORLD SPARROWS

House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) – Common in cities and towns throughout

OTHER CRITTERS:

MAMMALS

Swamp Rabbit (*Sylvilagus aquaticus*)

Eastern Gray Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*)

REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS

American Alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*) several at ANWR

Garter Snake (*Thamnophis* sp.)

Rat Snake (*Elaphe* sp.)

Red-eared Slider (*Trachemys scripta*)

American Green Tree Frog (*Hyla cinerea*)