

# **HIGH ISLAND MIGRATION**

**APRIL 17 – 22, 2009**

**LEADER: BOB SUNDSTROM**

**COMPILED BY: BOB SUNDSTROM**

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**[bird list compiled by Bob Sundstrom]**

The Upper Gulf Coast of Texas in late April may just be the best birding spot in the country at that time of year. The relatively small area covered on our High Island Migration tour offers as much amazing birding variety as any week of birding in North America. The High Island wooded sanctuaries are the best known feature of this amazing spring birding spot, areas of prime coastal migrant habitat now set aside from development. But it's not just the woods. Other natural features of the Upper Gulf Coast region rival the sanctuary woods as must-see birding sites. These include Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge, a vast, freshwater marsh system set inside many more acres of grassland and brackish marsh (Anahuac is recovering gradually from the effects of Hurricane Ike in 2008). Bolivar Flats is known as one of the continent's most impressive coastal sites for shorebird and tern aggregations; and rice fields throughout the area, when flooded temporarily during cultivation, can host thousands of migrating sandpipers, plovers, and wading birds.

On the first morning of our 2009 High Island Migration tour we visited a pine sanctuary north of Houston, with the endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker topping the list of birds we hoped to find. We entered the woods just after sunrise, while it was still too dark to make out the blue of a nearby Eastern Bluebird. The loud calls of a pair of Red-headed Woodpeckers first grabbed our attention, and very soon we were watching them flying overhead and perching on a grand old nest snag. It wasn't long before a Red-cockaded Woodpecker called, and we tracked a pair to the higher reaches of the nearby pines, scoping them as they climbed and peeked out from the branches. Ultimately, we saw about half-a-dozen of the endangered birds, just leaving their night roosts to range widely through the woods. A few minutes more, and a pair of petite Brown-headed Nuthatches posed overhead, as did a Pine Warbler.

By lunchtime the same day we were within shouting distance of the High Island sanctuaries, with visions of warblers and tanagers and buntings. As usual, the trans-Gulf migrations delivered the birds. There were bushes full of Indigo Buntings, the same bushes sprouting orioles and Eastern Kingbirds. Two dozen Rose-breasted Grosbeaks were munching fruit in a couple of modest mulberry trees. And there were lots of warblers, 27 species by the time the tour ended. A male Chestnut-sided Warbler foraged through leaves at eye level—you could have just about touched it. Sky-blue male Cerulean Warblers worked the small branches of a live oak, above a flashing Magnolia Warbler. Kentucky Warblers and an Ovenbird, terrestrial by nature, strode purposefully across the leaf litter in search of food to fuel the next stage of migration. A dazed Yellow-breasted Chat, storm-tossed by recent rain showers, perched in the open. A male Blackpoll, then a male Bay-breasted Warbler, gleaned intently on low branches, while male Hooded Warblers flashed yellow and black. A Philadelphia Warbler foraged methodically along another oak branch, allowing diagnostic views as it examined each leaf for potential inch worms. Along bayous, in canebrakes, and in young pine plantations we found some warblers already nesting:

loud-voiced Swainson's Warblers, fancy Prothonotary and Yellow-throated warblers, and buzzing Prairie Warblers.

Each day the renowned coastal patches of woods revealed the reds and yellows of Scarlet and Summer tanagers, the orange and chestnut of Baltimore and Orchard orioles, and the many hues of male Painted Buntings. Wood Thrushes, Swainson's Thrushes, and an occasional Gray-cheeked Thrush hopped in the shade of the large trees.

The Bolivar Flats sanctuary of coastal beach and dunes, though damaged by September's Hurricane Ike, still showed us an amazing variety of shorebirds and terns. Piping and Semipalmated plovers strode side by side, and later a Wilson's Plover eyed us carefully. Red Knots and Sanderlings, Ruddy Turnstones and Dunlin all showed rich breeding colors. Terns clanked and growled overhead or stood together side by side on the sand for careful comparison: Sandwich Terns alongside Royal, Forster's, Common, Least, and Caspian, with a raft of Black Skimmers alongside as well.

We also scanned flooded fields inland from the coast for migrating shorebirds, and were rewarded with hundreds of birds, from White-rumped to Pectoral sandpipers. In drier fields we found Upland Sandpipers, a few of these almost standing on the road, and American Golden-Plovers. An agricultural pond was loaded with dowitchers and, among them, one Hudsonian Godwit. Deeper pockets of freshwater hosted a couple of Least Bitterns and scintillating Purple Gallinules. And the High Island heronry shone with brightly-feathered Roseate Spoonbills.

The group took part one morning in an organized rail walk at Anahuac Refuge. With a couple of dozen birders forming a phalanx, we walked in unison across the marsh, and to everyone's delight flushed Yellow Rails, Soras, and Virginia Rails—not to mention Sedge Wrens, Seaside Sparrows, and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows. The same day we came upon a pair of King Rails, one of many welcome surprises of this memorable tour. Just when it seemed like we had seen almost everything possible, a kettle of 100+ Mississippi Kites swirled in low over High Island—an unforgettable moment.

## **DAY BY DAY ITINERARY**

**April 17:** Arrival in Houston, dinner at the hotel.

**April 18:** Morning birding at Jones State Forest, then on toward Winnie via Conroe, Cut N' Shoot, Dayton, Liberty and Nome, birding briefly enroute. Lunch in Winnie, then birded Scout Woods in High Island. Heavy rain showers sent us back to Winnie by late afternoon. First of four nights in Winnie.

**April 19:** Early morning we joined a coordinated "rail walk" at Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge, then birded around Shoveler Pond at the refuge. After lunch in Crystal Beach at the Stingaree, birded along the Bolivar Peninsula, including at Bolivar Flats. On way back north, stopped at Smith Oaks in High Island, where lots of migrant songbirds were arriving, and paid a visit to the busy heronry.

**April 20:** Early morning trip to cypress bayou habitat of Taylor Bayou to look for breeding warblers, then on to Sabine Woods near Sabine Pass. Afternoon break back in Winnie, then returned to Scout Woods in High Island.

**April 21:** First thing in the morning, birded along the rural roads north of Winnie checking for flooded rice fields and shorebirds and in the area. Mid-morning to High Island craft store and Scout Woods, then drove series of farm roads north of High Island. After lunch in Winnie and a break, birded along Canal Rd. and then returned to the Smith Oaks heronry.

**April 22:** Early morning departure north via Nome and Kountze to bird along Gore Store Road's young pine plantations, canebrakes, and bayous. Enroute to Humble stopped for lunch in Liberty and birded briefly at the city park in Liberty, before continuing on to Houston Intercontinental Airport. 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

Wood Duck – flying through the forest at several locations

Mottled Duck – in pairs, the one locally nesting duck

Blue-winged Teal

### **NEW WORLD QUAILS**

Northern Bobwhite – a male crowed from inside a tall shrub in the farm country north of Winnie

### **GREBES**

Pied-billed Grebe

### **PELICANS**

American White Pelican – distant roosts near Rollover Pass

Brown Pelican – flocks frequently in view along the Gulf beaches

### **CORMORANTS**

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

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

### **ANHINGAS**

Anhinga

### **BITTERN, HERONS & EGRETS**

American Bittern – seen flying during the rail walk at Anahuac refuge

Least Bittern – two at the small ponds behind Scout Woods

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, scoped at an inland pond

Tricolored Heron – we had some very close views of these elegant, slender, blue-purple-gray herons

Reddish Egret – seen best at a small land-locked pond near the rail walk site

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

Green Heron – increasingly prevalent through the tour as trans-Gulf migrants arrived

Black-crowned Night-Heron

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron – great views of these bug-eyed herons near the roadside

## **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**

Osprey

Mississippi Kite – more than a hundred formed a low “kettle” over High Island

Northern Harrier – flying over the fields north of Winnie

Sharp-shinned Hawk – one soaring the final morning

Cooper’s Hawk – also seen the last day

Red-shouldered Hawk – close views of a handsome, calling adult at the Liberty park

Broad-winged Hawk

Swainson’s Hawk

Red-tailed Hawk

## **FALCONS**

Northern Crested Caracara – seen best along the farm roads north of Anahuac Refuge

Merlin – single birds on three successive days

## **RAILS & ALLIES**

*Yellow Rail* – good views of at least six flushing up on the Anahuac rail walk

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

King Rail – often hard to find, we had close views of a pair at Anahuac

Virginia Rail – flushed on the rail walk

Sora – also seen on the Anahuac rail walk

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

Common Moorhen

American Coot – just one for the entire tour

## **PLOVERS**

Black-bellied Plover – in all states of plumage, some truly spectacular

American Golden-Plover – on a dry field at Anahuac

Wilson’s Plover – excellent views of breeding pairs at Bolivar

Semipalmated Plover

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

Killdeer – ubiquitous along the country roads

## **SANDPIPERS & ALLIES**

Black-necked Stilt – lots of breeding pairs

Spotted Sandpiper

Solitary Sandpiper

Greater Yellowlegs

Willet – both the Eastern and Western subspecies

Lesser Yellowlegs

Upland Sandpiper – amazing views and surprising numbers of such a sought-after species

Whimbrel

Hudsonian Godwit – scarce; we scoped one on a large freshwater agricultural pond north of Anahuac

Ruddy Turnstone – on the beach in bright breeding plumage

Red Knot – good numbers along the beach, some in coppery 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

*Baird's Sandpiper* – one at a shallow pool of water on the Bolivar Flats beach

Pectoral Sandpiper – one flooded field held hundreds of Pectorals

Dunlin – in various stages of adding black belly feathers

Long-billed Dowitcher – large numbers of migrants on freshwater ponds

Wilson's Snipe – flying up from the roadside

### **GULLS, TERNS & SKIMMERS**

Laughing Gull

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

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

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

Common Tern – showing a characteristic dark carpal bar when sitting

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 – a large flock was roosting at Bolivar Flats

### **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 – some very good views of what is often a secretive species

### **NIGHTJARS & ALLIES**

Common Nighthawk

### **SWIFTS**

Chimney Swift – around towns

### **HUMMINGBIRDS**

Ruby-throated Hummingbird – the only regular hummingbird of the region

### **KINGFISHERS**

Belted Kingfisher – just a few

### **WOODPECKERS**

Red-headed Woodpecker – wonderful views of a vocal pair at Jones State Forest

Red-bellied Woodpecker – at Jones Forest and along Gore Store Rd.

Downy Woodpecker – heard

*Red-cockaded Woodpecker* – excellent studies of this endangered species the first morning

Pileated Woodpecker – heard

### **TYRANT FLYCATCHERS**

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

Acadian Flycatcher – migrants arriving in numbers at Sabine Woods

Great-crested Flycatcher – at least one migrant seen

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

## **VIREOS**

White-eyed Vireo – seen repeatedly in the migrant woods patches, where this species nests

Yellow-throated Vireo – excellent views of arriving migrants foraging close overhead

Warbling Vireo – one at Sabine Woods

Philadelphia Vireo – at Smith Oaks, superb views of every detail of one arriving migrant

Red-eyed Vireo – once we saw a first one, they turned up everywhere

## **CROWS & JAYS**

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

American Crow

Fish Crow – seen and heard near Taylor Bayou

## **SWALLOWS & MARTINS**

Purple Martin

Tree Swallow

Northern Rough-winged Swallow

Bank Swallow

Cliff Swallow – nesting on the side of the Intracoastal Bridge by the hundreds

Barn Swallow

## **TITMICE**

Carolina Chickadee – seen at Jones State Forest

Tufted Titmouse – heard in the wooded zone north of Winnie

## **NUTHATCHES**

Brown-headed Nuthatch – a Southeastern U.S. specialty, close views at Jones Forest

## **WRENS**

Carolina Wren – nesting in the High Island woods, where heard repeatedly

House Wren – heard at Jones Forest and elsewhere

Sedge Wren – seen repeatedly during the rail walk

Marsh Wren – singing from the phragmites at Anahuac NWR

## **OLD WORLD WARBLERS**

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher – a wave of migrants came through Smith Oaks

## **THRUSHES**

Eastern Bluebird – the first bird seen the first morning, just at sunrise

Veery – skulking at Sabine Woods

Gray-cheeked Thrush – close view of one under the mulberries at Scout Woods

Swainson's Thrush – seen widely, some singing softly

Wood Thrush – the larger, ochre-colored thrush

American Robin – one the first morning enroute

## **MOCKINGBIRDS & THRASHERS**

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

Northern Mockingbird

Brown Thrasher – surprisingly scarce, we saw one at Scout Woods

## **STARLINGS**

European Starling

## **NEW WORLD WARBLERS**

Blue-winged Warbler – one male was seen well at Sabine Woods

Tennessee Warbler – drab enough to be mysterious; sometimes the most common migrant

Nashville Warbler – one at Scout Woods on a very birdy day

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

Yellow Warbler

Chestnut-sided Warbler – very close views!  
Magnolia Warbler – a beautiful warbler, at Sabine Pass  
Yellow-rumped Warbler  
Black-throated Green Warbler – nice views of several as migrants streamed in  
Blackburnian Warbler – a terrific view of a male at close range near the Smith Oaks heronry  
Yellow-throated Warbler – singing at one its nesting bayous  
Pine Warbler – seen the first morning north of Houston  
Prairie Warbler – singing in the young pine plantations north of Kountze  
Bay-breasted Warbler – a nice view of a colorful male  
Blackpoll Warbler – several males, one at eye level near the heronry  
Cerulean Warbler – we studied several sky blue males at Sabine Woods  
Black-and-white Warbler – working the limbs and trunks of many trees  
American Redstart – a female, flashing yellow instead of orange  
Prothonotary Warbler – this golden yellow warbler posed nicely along Taylor Bayou  
Worm-eating Warbler – a couple at Sabine Woods  
Swainson's Warbler – one foraging, another singing and darting across the road  
Ovenbird – seen well as it walked along the edge of a boardwalk  
Northern Waterthrush  
Kentucky Warbler – walking on the ground, sometimes hopping up a foot or so  
Common Yellowthroat  
Hooded Warbler – some great views of several flitting males  
Yellow-breasted Chat – near the Scout Woods grandstand on the first afternoon

#### **TANAGERS**

Summer Tanager – many wonderful views of both tanager species

Scarlet Tanager

#### **SPARROWS**

Savannah Sparrow

Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow – perched in small bush in the Anahuac marsh, after the rail walk

Seaside Sparrow – seen best on the rail walk

Swamp Sparrow – also seen on the rail walk

White-throated Sparrow – at Jones Forest and at a feeder along Gore Store Rd.

#### **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 – bushes and trees full of buntings

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 first day of the tour

#### **OLD WORLD SPARROWS**

House Sparrow

## **MAMMALS and HERPS**

White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*)

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

Green Anole (*Anolis carolinensis*)

American Alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*)

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