

SPRING ON THE CENTRAL TEXAS COAST

April 19-24, 2009



(Photo: Roseate Spoonbill – Greg Lasley)

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It was an ugly, slow-moving storm that hit my home in East Texas on Saturday, dumping rain and lots of lightning, but I left for the Central Coast anyway. As I skirted Houston, the city seemed to be hiding under a black cloud filled with fiery flashes. Water choked the bayous, while to the southwest there was so much flooding I felt like I was driving through the sea. I finally reached Port Lavaca for the night and went to bed with dreams of a huge surge of downed migrants likely the next morning. To my disappointment, it didn't happen. While I had a pleasant day of birding, with nice weather as the storm moved out into the Gulf of Mexico, it seemed to be only shorebirds and a few swallows pushing through against the north wind. There were almost none of the colorful songbirds that make spring birding on the Texas coast so famous. Oh well.

I met the group that evening and decided that we would bird tiny Blucher Park on the edge of downtown Corpus Christi the next morning, thinking that at least a few migrants were bound to come in. Little did I know that the stage was now set for one of the biggest "fallouts" I have seen in 45 years of birding the Texas coast. As we neared the park at dawn on Monday, I realized that there were suspicious numbers of birds flying south to north over the city. My excitement level began to rise and my brain buzzed with the possibilities. A few minutes later we stepped out of the van and I immediately heard zip notes everywhere. Looking up, a flock of 20 male Indigo Buntings flew over us low, as a large flock of Franklin's Gulls kettled just above. The loud chatter of orioles in the nearby trees couldn't have been missed. A warbler zipped across the lane and disappeared into the thick trees. I looked up again and birds were simply pouring over, too many to count. Within minutes it was clear that huge numbers of migrants were streaming over the treetops and nearby buildings, and that we were perfectly positioned in the midst of a major fallout. The birds were incredibly restless and few lingered long enough for good looks, so we stepped to a nearby parking lot just to watch this phenomenon from a more open spot. Right in front of us, in perfect light, flocks of 5-20 Indigo Buntings and Baltimore Orioles flew past every few seconds, most of them colorful adult males. Every now and then a bright red tanager zipped along, or a male Rose-breasted Grosbeak, or a small flock of Eastern Kingbirds, or even a tiny warbler or vireo. Some briefly landed in the trees before quickly flying on, while others flew past us in all directions. We simply stood there and gawked in utter amazement for well over an hour as I kept a crude running tally in my head.

By 8:45 the flight was slowing down and we hit the park and nearby yards. Now many of the birds were feeding and bathing, moving more slowly. There was something to look at simply everywhere, and before noon we had tallied 17 species of warblers; 2 perched Chuck-will's-widows; 8 male Painted Buntings; a smattering of flycatchers, vireos, and thrushes; and a wide assortment of other migrants, almost all of them yielding great looks. I quickly added up my tally of the dominant migrants: 3,000+ Indigo Buntings, 1,115+ Baltimore Orioles, 140+ Orchard Orioles, and 55 Northern Waterthrushes! Numbers and words, however, do not adequately convey what we experienced. It was exhilarating, it was exhausting, and it happens only rarely in a lifetime. Apparently the storm and north wind caught these birds far out over the Gulf of Mexico and we witnessed a "delayed" fallout as they struggled to make landfall a day later. What a lucky start to our inaugural "Spring on the Central Texas Coast" tour!

We didn't waste the rest of our time in the region either; almost 200 species of birds were seen—and we still had time for some afternoon siestas. Shorebirds were present in variety and abundance, providing us with some great learning opportunities. Raptors were a frequent sight, and we had many looks at the lovely White-tailed Hawks and comical Crested Caracaras, among others. We were entertained by residents like Northern Bobwhite, Roseate Spoonbill, and Greater Roadrunner, and we found uncommon migrants like Fulvous Whistling-Duck, Cinnamon Teal, Least Grebe, Hudsonian Godwit, Cape May Warbler, Clay-colored Sparrow, and Yellow-headed Blackbird. A fabulous and unexpected trio of lingering Whooping Cranes was the icing on the cake!

Falcon Point Ranch proved to be a great facility for us, with lovely rooms, great food, a most hospitable staff, and centrally located to a variety of birding areas, including right on the ranch. Our time went by all too quickly, but the memories will linger for a long time.

Bird List: some of our many highlights are **bolded**.

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck – common

Fulvous Whistling-Duck – nice study of a flock of 40 in the rice fields.

Gadwall

American Wigeon

Mottled Duck – widespread and reasonably common.

Blue-winged Teal

Cinnamon Teal – the least common of the lingering waterfowl seen.

Northern Shoveler

Northern Pintail

Redhead

Ring-necked Duck

Lesser Scaup

Ruddy Duck

Wild Turkey

Northern Bobwhite – long study of the intricate plumage of a lovely pair on the ranch.

Common Loon

Least Grebe – elusive pair in a marshy pond.

Pied-billed Grebe

American White Pelican

Brown Pelican

Neotropic Cormorant

Double-crested Cormorant

Anhinga

Least Bittern

Great Blue Heron

Great Egret

Snowy Egret

Little Blue Heron

Tricolored Heron

Reddish Egret – this region is a major nesting area for this uncommon species; we saw both color morphs and we watched them dancing and chasing around the flats.

Cattle Egret
 Green Heron
 Yellow-crowned Night-Heron
 White Ibis
 White-faced Ibis
Roseate Spoonbill – especially bright and beautiful in the early morning light.
 Black Vulture
 Turkey Vulture
 Osprey
Bald Eagle – a perched juvenile was approached by an adult high overhead; a rare breeder in this region.
 Northern Harrier
 Sharp-shinned Hawk
 Cooper's Hawk
 Red-shouldered Hawk
 Broad-winged Hawk
 Swainson's Hawk
White-tailed Hawk – many great looks at this beautiful raptor of the coastal savannah.
 Red-tailed Hawk
Crested Caracara – these comical birds were a frequent sight.
 Merlin
 Peregrine Falcon
 Clapper Rail
 Sora
Purple Gallinule – a brilliant surprise.
 Common Moorhen
 American Coot
Whooping Crane – we were incredibly lucky to see this lingering family group of 3 birds, in the marshes adjacent to Falcon Point Ranch.
 Black-bellied Plover
 American Golden-Plover
 Wilson's Plover
 Semipalmated Plover
 Killdeer
American Oystercatcher – great looks our final morning.
 Black-necked Stilt
 American Avocet
 Spotted Sandpiper
 Solitary Sandpiper
 Greater Yellowlegs
 Willet
 Lesser Yellowlegs
 Upland Sandpiper
 Whimbrel
 Long-billed Curlew
Hudsonian Godwit – 12 on our final visit to the ricefields.
 Marbled Godwit

Ruddy Turnstone
 Sanderling
 Semipalmated Sandpiper
 Western Sandpiper
 Least Sandpiper
 White-rumped Sandpiper
 Baird's Sandpiper
 Pectoral Sandpiper
 Dunlin
 Stilt Sandpiper
 Buff-breasted Sandpiper – a few distant birds in a marshy pasture.
 Short-billed Dowitcher
 Long-billed Dowitcher
 Wilson's Snipe
 Wilson's Phalarope
 Laughing Gull
Franklin's Gull – large flocks of migrants swirling low over Corpus Christi.
 Ring-billed Gull
 Herring Gull
 Least Tern
Gull-billed Tern – pairs in beautiful breeding plumage seen often and well.
 Caspian Tern
 Forster's Tern
 Royal Tern
 Sandwich Tern
Black Skimmer – nesting on the Rockport beach.
 Rock Pigeon
 Eurasian Collared-Dove
 White-winged Dove
 Mourning Dove
 Inca Dove
 Common Ground-Dove
 Yellow-billed Cuckoo
Greater Roadrunner – a bird carrying food was seen out in the open before it finally snuck into a
 dense thicket.
 Common Nighthawk
Chuck-will's-widow – great looks at a perched migrant in Rose Hill Cemetery.
 Chimney Swift
 Ruby-throated Hummingbird
 Black-chinned Hummingbird
 Belted Kingfisher
 Golden-fronted Woodpecker
 Red-bellied Woodpecker
 Ladder-backed Woodpecker
 Eastern Wood-Pewee
 Great Crested Flycatcher
 Western Kingbird – one low fly-over in the fallout in Corpus.

Eastern Kingbird
 Scissor-tailed Flycatcher
 Loggerhead Shrike
 White-eyed Vireo
 Blue-headed Vireo
 Warbling Vireo
 Red-eyed Vireo
 American Crow
 Horned Lark
 Purple Martin
 Northern Rough-winged Swallow
 Bank Swallow
 Northern Rough-winged Swallow
 Cliff Swallow
Cave Swallow – gathering mud for their nests, but fast-moving.
 Barn Swallow
 Tufted Titmouse
 Carolina Wren
Sedge Wren – we had to stomp one out of the coastal *Spartina* grass.
 Marsh Wren
 Blue-gray Gnatcatcher
 Eastern Bluebird
 Gray-cheeked Thrush – quick study of one.
 Swainson's Thrush
 Wood Thrush – beautiful closeup looks.
 Gray Catbird
 Northern Mockingbird
Long-billed Thrasher – nice study of one quietly foraging in Blucher Park; a true South Texas specialty, restricted to the Tamaulipan biotic province.
 Curve-billed Thrasher
 European Starling
 Blue-winged Warbler – leader only; glimpsed by group.
 Tennessee Warbler
 Nashville Warbler
 Northern Parula
 Yellow Warbler
 Chestnut-sided Warbler
Cape May Warbler – nice look at an immature male in the oaks at Falcon Point; always one of the rarest warblers on the Texas coast.
 Yellow-rumped Warbler
 Black-throated Green Warbler
 Black-and-white Warbler
 American Redstart
Worm-eating Warbler – great looks at this uncommon skulker.
 Ovenbird
Northern Waterthrush – the dominant warbler in the fallout, with 55+ tallied.
 Kentucky Warbler

Mourning Warbler – nice study of a very early male.

Common Yellowthroat

Hooded Warbler

Yellow-breasted Chat

Summer Tanager

Scarlet Tanager

Eastern Towhee – a rare and unexpected surprise in the fallout in Blucher Park.

Chipping Sparrow

Clay-colored Sparrow – one at a Falcon Point Ranch feeding station.

Savannah Sparrow

Grasshopper Sparrow

Seaside Sparrow – mostly heard only; glimpsed.

Lincoln's Sparrow

Swamp Sparrow – heard only

White-crowned Sparrow

Northern Cardinal

Rose-breasted Grosbeak

Blue Grosbeak

Indigo Bunting – the most abundant species in the big fallout in Corpus Christi; my crude estimate was 3000+ for the morning!

Painted Bunting – a brilliant favorite, seen many times.

Dickcissel

Red-winged Blackbird

Eastern Meadowlark

Yellow-headed Blackbird – one bright male amidst a flock of other blackbirds.

Common Grackle

Boat-tailed Grackle

Great-tailed Grackle

Bronzed Cowbird

Brown-headed Cowbird

Orchard Oriole – the third commonest migrant in the fallout, with 140+ tallied.

Baltimore Oriole – the second commonest migrant in the fallout in Corpus Christi; our count for the day was 1115+, almost entirely males.

House Sparrow

TOTAL: 198 species

Native Mammal List:

Virginia Opossum

Nine-banded Armadillo

Eastern Cottontail

Fox Squirrel

White-tailed Deer

Exotics: seen on our afternoon “game drive” on Falcon Point Ranch.

Wild Boar (feral hog)
Blackbuck
Eland
Wildebeest
Sika Deer
Spotted (Axis) Deer

Amphibian & Reptile List:

Bullfrog
Alligator
Red-eared Slider
Softshell Turtle
Western Diamond-backed Rattlesnake
Yellow-bellied Water Snake

Butterflies:

Pipevine Swallowtail – Blucher Park
Giant Swallowtail – Blucher Park
Florida White – widespread in open areas
Orange Sulphur – Cayo de Oso
Large Orange Sulphur – Cayo de Oso
Little Yellow – Magic Ridge
Variegated Fritillary – Magic Ridge
American Lady – Tejano Wetlands
Common Buckeye – Magic Ridge
Monarch – Magic Ridge