

SPRING ON THE CENTRAL TEXAS COAST

April 18-23, 2010



(Photo: Roseate Spoonbill – Greg Lasley)

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For birders there is simply nowhere else like the Texas coast in April. This is the peak of spring migration and the sense of bird movement is everywhere, as countless numbers of migrants pour northward through the region. The diversity of birds on the move can be stunning, from raptors, shorebirds, and large waterbirds to warblers and many other passerines. Some days they are more numerous and visible than others, but there is always something happening. The best days are those during and following stormy weather, as the last cool fronts of the season move through the region. On these occasions “fallouts” may occur, as birds of a wide variety fight the rain and unfavorable headwinds and magically appear in favored groves of trees, marshes, and other concentration spots. These are the days that Texas birders long for.

Our 2010 Central Texas Coast tour was lucky enough to start off with a major fallout. The previous two days had been stormy and unsettled, with locally heavy rain, but by dawn on April 19 the wind had shifted to the north and the skies were partially clear—the perfect setup. We headed to tiny Blucher Park, on the edge of downtown Corpus Christi, and hadn’t been out of the van for more than a few minutes before we knew that a large number of birds were on the move. The “zip notes” of passerines filled the air and soon we were spotting them as they passed low over the trees and buildings. Right in front of us, in perfect light, flocks of 5–20 Indigo Buntings and Orchard 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 kingbird, or even a tiny warbler or vireo. Some briefly landed in the trees, while others flew past us in all directions. We simply stood there and gawked in utter amazement for almost two hours as I kept a rough tally of the numbers seen.

By mid-morning 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 by noon we had tallied 18 species of warblers, a Chuck-will’s-widow, and a smattering of flycatchers, vireos, thrushes, and other migrants, almost all of them yielding good looks. At lunch I quickly added up my tally of the dominant species: 525+ Indigo Buntings, 225 Orchard Orioles, 50+ Baltimore Orioles, 30 Swainson’s Thrushes, and 25 Summer Tanagers! We continued to find birds throughout the day as we worked our way northward to Falcon Point Ranch, including 2 rare Swallow-tailed Kites, and swallows filling the air as far as the eye could see at every stop. Numbers and words, however, do not adequately convey what we experienced. It was exhilarating, it was exhausting, and it doesn’t happen often.

Though the numbers and variety of migrants would not be as high in the following days, we found a wonderful variety of shorebirds and other special Texas coast waterbirds. Raptors were a frequent sight and we had many looks at the lovely White-tailed Hawks and comical Crested Caracaras. This region has a definite South Texas element, and we had great looks at Least Grebe, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Great Kiskadee, Couch’s Kingbird, and Long-billed Thrasher. 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

Gadwall

Mottled Duck – widespread and reasonably common.

Blue-winged Teal

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

Northern Shoveler

Northern Pintail

Redhead

Ruddy Duck

Northern Bobwhite

Common Loon

Least Grebe – nesting pair in a small marshy pond.

Pied-billed Grebe

American White Pelican

Brown Pelican

Neotropic Cormorant

Anhinga

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

Black-crowned Night-Heron

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron

White Ibis

White-faced Ibis

Roseate Spoonbill

Black Vulture

Turkey Vulture

Osprey

Swallow-tailed Kite – two in one day; a rare migrant in Texas.

Mississippi Kite

Northern Harrier

Sharp-shinned 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 – heard only
King Rail – heard only
Sora – heard only
Purple Gallinule
Common Moorhen
American Coot
Black-bellied Plover
American Golden-Plover
Snowy Plover
Wilson’s Plover
Semipalmated Plover
Piping 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
Long-billed Curlew
Marbled Godwit
Ruddy Turnstone
Sanderling
Semipalmated Sandpiper
Western Sandpiper
Least Sandpiper
Baird's Sandpiper
Pectoral Sandpiper
Dunlin
Stilt Sandpiper
Buff-breasted Sandpiper
Short-billed Dowitcher
Long-billed Dowitcher
Wilson’s Snipe
Wilson’s Phalarope
Laughing Gull
Franklin’s Gull
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Least Tern
Gull-billed Tern – birds 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

Yellow-billed Cuckoo – glimpsed in flight.

Greater Roadrunner

Barred Owl

Common Nighthawk

Chuck-will's-widow – great looks at a perched migrant only 20 ft. away; incredible camouflage.

Chimney Swift

Buff-bellied Hummingbird

Ruby-throated Hummingbird

Black-chinned Hummingbird

Belted Kingfisher

Golden-fronted Woodpecker

Red-bellied Woodpecker

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker

Ladder-backed Woodpecker – heard only

Pileated Woodpecker

Eastern Wood-Pewee

Acadian Flycatcher

Great Crested Flycatcher

Great Kiskadee

Couch's Kingbird

Western Kingbird

Eastern Kingbird

Scissor-tailed Flycatcher

Loggerhead Shrike

White-eyed Vireo

Yellow-throated Vireo

Blue-headed Vireo

Warbling Vireo

Red-eyed Vireo

Blue Jay

American Crow

Purple Martin

Tree Swallow

Northern Rough-winged Swallow

Bank Swallow

Cliff Swallow

Cave Swallow – gathering mud for their nests, but fast-moving.

Barn Swallow

Carolina Chickadee

Tufted Titmouse

Carolina Wren – heard only

House Wren – heard only

Sedge Wren – heard only

Marsh Wren – heard only

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher

Veery

Swainson's Thrush

Wood Thrush

Gray Catbird

Northern Mockingbird

Brown Thrasher

Long-billed Thrasher – nice studies in Blucher Park; a true South Texas specialty, restricted to the Tamaulipan biotic province.

European Starling

Cedar Waxwing – leader only

Blue-winged Warbler

Tennessee Warbler

Orange-crowned Warbler

Nashville Warbler

Northern Parula

Yellow Warbler

Chestnut-sided Warbler

Yellow-rumped Warbler

Black-throated Green Warbler

Blackburnian Warbler – leader only (as it flew past).

Yellow-throated Warbler

Palm Warbler

Black-and-white Warbler

American Redstart

Worm-eating Warbler – great looks at this normally uncommon skulker.

Ovenbird

Northern Waterthrush

Kentucky Warbler

Common Yellowthroat

Hooded Warbler

Wilson's Warbler

Canada Warbler

Yellow-breasted Chat

Summer Tanager

Scarlet Tanager

Chipping Sparrow

Clay-colored Sparrow

Lark Sparrow

Savannah Sparrow

Grasshopper Sparrow

Seaside Sparrow

Lincoln's Sparrow

White-throated Sparrow

Northern Cardinal

Rose-breasted Grosbeak

Blue Grosbeak

Indigo Bunting – the most abundant species in the big fallout in Corpus Christi; my estimate was 525 for the morning!

Painted Bunting

Dickcissel – leader only

Red-winged Blackbird

Eastern Meadowlark

Western Meadowlark

Yellow-headed Blackbird

Common Grackle

Boat-tailed Grackle

Great-tailed Grackle

Bronzed Cowbird

Brown-headed Cowbird

Orchard Oriole – the second commonest migrant in the fallout, with 225+ tallied.

Baltimore Oriole

House Sparrow

TOTAL: 205 species (including several heard only and three leader only).

Native Mammal List:

Swamp Rabbit

Fox Squirrel

White-tailed Deer

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

Common Zebra

Blackbuck

Eland

Wildebeest

Scimitar-horned Oryx

Spotted (Axis) Deer

Feral Pig

Amphibian & Reptile List:

Bullfrog - heard

Alligator

Ornate Box Turtle

Red-eared Slider

Mud Turtle

“ribbon snake”