

HIGH ISLAND MIGRATION

APRIL 16 – 21, 2010

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HIGH ISLAND MIGRATION TOUR

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The upper Gulf coast of Texas in late April ranks as perhaps the best birding spot in the country that time of year. The relatively small area covered on our High Island Migration tour offers more amazing birding variety than just about any week of birding in North America. The High Island wooded sanctuaries are the best-known feature of the area, as hot spots of prime coastal migrant habitat now set aside from development. But our High Island tour is not just about the woods. Other natural features of the Upper Gulf Coast region rival the sanctuary woods as must-see birding sites, including 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 and nearby coastal sites, known for impressive shorebird and tern aggregations; and rice fields throughout the area, which when flooded temporarily during cultivation can host thousands of migrating sandpipers, plovers, and wading birds.

On the first morning of our tour, we set out with high hopes of an encounter with the endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker. We were not disappointed. As we first entered the pine woods where the woodpeckers were known to nest, a Red-cockaded Woodpecker called and was soon located. Very likely, it had just emerged from its nest hole in the cool of early morning. The rare woodpecker was soon a ready subject for viewing in the spotting scopes. At the same time, we had fine scope studies of glamorous Red-headed Woodpeckers and a pair of Brown-headed Nuthatches clinging to a trunk nearby. A fine start to our first day!

Soon we were working our way along rural roads, east toward our lodgings in Winnie and the High Island area. Not far from the Trinity River, we watched with great excitement a group of American Swallow-tailed Kites soaring over a nearby granary—an immediate tour highlight of graceful form and flight. This species was a very nice surprise, being quite scarce in the area. A few miles east, a roadside field hosted migrating Upland Sandpipers and Buff-breasted Sandpipers, both species that can be tough to pin down during migration.

After lunch and a break at our motel, we were on the way to a first visit to the High Island wooded sanctuaries, where we would enjoy our first views of trans-Gulf migrants. Here were Scarlet and Summer tanagers, Gray Catbirds, Orchard Orioles, and an assortment of warblers coming to a small pond in the High Island woods. It is with hopes of a nice variety of warblers that every High Island trip begins, and we were fortunate to see 25 species of warblers during this six-day tour—despite the fact that spring arrivals of birds from the Tropics were running a week or so later than normal.

The more than two dozen warblers we saw included Blue-winged Warblers—tiny, deep yellow warblers flitting out from the woods' shrubby understory, and singing Northern Parulas, at nest sites in the bayous and foraging in the migrant woods. Chestnut-sided Warblers just began to arrive the last days of the trip, and we had close views of a couple of males. Beautifully

ornamented Yellow-throated Warblers turned up as migrants in the coastal woods, and nesting in the same bayou area where we had the view of a lifetime of a male Swainson's Warbler as it sang in the open on a bare twig. Several male Cerulean Warblers were crowd pleasers, gleaning methodically overhead and showing tidy blue necklaces and stunning blue backs. American Redstarts flashed their bold orange and black patterns, and glowing-yellow Prothonotary Warblers sang in the bayous and stopped by as migrants. We came upon a wealth of Worm-eating Warblers, a somewhat secretive species that can sometimes be a challenge to find; we must have seen a couple dozen! Both Louisiana and Northern waterthrushes walked the edge of the same wooded pond—a very edifying comparison. And there were lots of migrant Kentucky Warblers, walking the forest leaf litter, and loads of tail-flashing Hooded Warblers.

Warblers are hard to beat, some of the finest gems of all North American birds. But we also enjoyed beavies of thrushes—Wood, Swainson's, and Gray-cheeked—hopping over the shady forest floor. There were neon-orange Baltimore Orioles, lots of chunky Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, and we had wonderful views of both Black-billed and Yellow-billed cuckoos. After some midday thundershowers, we found brushy edges full of Indigo Buntings and Blue Grosbeaks, and some early-arriving Dickcissels. We took time to admire several pairs of elegant Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, already nesting in the open country near High Island. Merlins showed nicely too, speedy predators also migrating north.

At Anahuac Refuge, the freshwater marsh was showing signs of recovery from 2008's devastating Hurricane Ike, as a drive along the marsh turned up nice views of miniature Least Bitterns and glistening Purple Gallinules. King Rails, including a pair with chicks, offered superb views, as did the Clapper Rails of the salt marsh.

Shorebirds and seabirds are also big attractions of the High Island area in spring. All four species of small plovers—Snowy, Piping, Semipalmated, and Wilson's—posed nicely. We scoped mixed roosts of Least, Sandwich, Royal, Forster's, and Common terns along the shoreline, often alongside flocks of Black Skimmers. Hudsonian Godwits turned up a number of times in the rice fields and tidal areas, always a treat to find in migration. Herons, egrets, night-herons, ibises, and spoonbills were there to enjoy each day. A visit to a High Island heronry left its own lasting impression: brilliant Roseate Spoonbills, surrounded by extravagantly-plumaged Tricolored Herons, Great Egrets, and Snowy Egrets, all attending their nests.

Our High Island Migration tour remains one of the premier venues for watching spring bird migration in North America, making the most of a region that more than lives up to its storied reputation.

DAY BY DAY ITINERARY

April 16: Arrival in Houston, dinner at the hotel. Night at Doubletree near airport.

April 17: 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, a short break, then birded south toward Scout Woods and Smith Oaks (including the heronry) in High Island. Drove

slowly along the Hwy. 124 ditches enroute to dinner in Winnie, looking for rails. First of four nights in Winnie.

April 18: Early morning trip to cypress bayou habitat of Taylor Bayou to look for breeding warblers, where we briefly joined forces with John Dunn and his group. Then on to Sabine Pass for lunch, and all then afternoon at very birdy Sabine Woods. Dinner at Al-T's in Winnie.

April 19: After breakfast at the hotel, drove in search of shorebirds a few miles northwest of Winnie to flooded rice fields. Later followed a series of farm roads south to High Island (Hooks Woods briefly), then south along Bolivar Peninsula with birding stops at: Rollover Pass, brushy vacant lots in Port Bolivar, Loop 108, Bolivar Flats, and the Johnson House. Final birding stops of the day at Scout Woods and Smith Oaks.

April 20: First thing in the morning, birded along the rural roads north of Winnie checking for flooded rice fields and shorebirds in the area. Followed Cragen and LaBelle Rds. through farm country before driving south to Sabine Woods. Returned to Winnie for lunch, took a break, then mid-afternoon to Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge: Shoveler Pod, the Willows, Teal Slough. Final dinner at Al-T's.

April 21: Loaded up luggage after breakfast, then drove south to cover a series of birding spots along Bolivar Peninsula: Rollover Pass, Yacht Basin Rd., Frenchtown Rd. inlet near Port Bolivar, Fort Travis, Johnson House. After a quick stop at 1st St. in High Island, headed to Winnie for lunch then continued via Nome and Liberty. Brief stop at Liberty city park. Arrived Houston Intercontinental Airport about 2:30 p.m. Departures.

BIRD LIST

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

WATERFOWL

Fulvous Whistling-Duck – large, ochraceous ducks seen on freshwater ponds

Black-bellied Whistling Duck – a few on one roadside pond alongside Fulvous; other in flight

Wood Duck

Mottled Duck

Blue-winged Teal

Northern Shoveler – appropriately seen first at Shoveler Pond (Anahuac refuge)

Red-breasted Merganser

PELICANS

American White Pelican

Brown Pelican – lines of gliding pelicans were often in view along the Gulf shore

CORMORANTS

Double-crested Cormorant

Neotropic Cormorant – the common cormorant of the area

ANHINGAS

Anhinga – seen sunning and soaring

BITTERNS, HERONS, AND EGRETS

Least Bittern – lucky to find at Anahuac as the marsh recovers from Hurricane Ike

Great Blue Heron

Great Egret

Snowy Egret

Little Blue Heron – its deep blue and purple tones showed best at Taylor Bayou

Tricolored Heron – fancy medium-sized herons stalking briskly through the shallows

Reddish Egret – a couple a Rollover Pass, flashing their wings open as they ran

Cattle Egret

Green Heron – very close views of this small, richly hued heron at Sabine Woods

Black-crowned Night-Heron – several in flight

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron – on bayous and wet roadsides

IBISES, SPOONBILLS, AND STORKS

White Ibis – tight flocks of hundreds flew over the rice fields north of Winnie

White-faced Ibis – mostly seen in flight as large skeins on the move to feeding places

Roseate Spoonbill – adults with intense rosy shoulders and tangerine tails

NEW WORLD VULTURES

Black Vulture

Turkey Vulture

HAWKS AND ALLIES

Osprey

American Swallow-tailed Kite – seen in Dayton the first and last days of the tour; lucky to see this elegant raptor species at the western edge of its typical nesting and migratory range

White-tailed Kite – several on Bolivar Peninsula, one kiting for a long period

Northern Harrier

Red-shouldered Hawk

Broad-winged Hawk – a point blank view of a Broad-winged Hawk that perched over the group as we were stalking a Swainson's Warbler

Swainson's Hawk

Red-tailed Hawk

FALCONS

Northern Crested Caracara – a couple of quick views near the vast farm and rice fields

American Kestrel – one the first morning in Scout Woods

Merlin – at least six seen during the trip, likely following the small birds migrating north

RAILS AND ALLIES

Clapper Rail – terrific views of Clapper's in the *Spartina* marsh

King Rail – nearly always a tough bird to see on the tour, we saw multiple King Rails including a pair with small black chicks; seen along Hwy. 124 at two spots, and at Anahuac

Sora

Purple Gallinule – a few just arrived migrants at Anahuac

Common Moorhen

American Coot

PLOVERS

Black-bellied Plover – in all stages of plumage change, some with full black bellies already

American Golden-Plover – we were fortunate to see ten or so in the rice fields north of Winnie

Snowy Plover – very confiding Snowies at Rollover Pass

Wilson's Plover – also at Rollover Pass

Semipalmated Plover – flocks in ploughed fields

Piping Plover – a few at Bolivar Flats

Killdeer

SANDPIPERS AND ALLIES

American Oystercatcher – two different pairs near Rollover Pass, often a hard bird to find here

Black-necked Stilt – lots of noisy breeding pairs in roadside shallows

Spotted Sandpiper – a single bird at Anahuac refuge
Solitary Sandpiper – seen regularly in small wet spots, such as the Sabine Woods pond
Greater Yellowlegs – alongside much more numerous migrating Lessers
Willet – two forms: the paler migratory subspecies *inornatus* that breeds in the West, and the darker resident form *semipalmatus* already nesting and calling loudly along the Gulf Coast
Lesser Yellowlegs – one of the most numerous shorebird migrants seen
Upland Sandpiper – we had good views of small flocks north of Winnie, early in the tour
Whimbrel – hundreds and hundreds flying over the flooded rice fields north of Winnie
Long-billed Curlew – a huge sandpiper with an outlandish bill; just one at Rollover Pass, likely a non-breeding immature staying along the Gulf Coast through the year
Hudsonian Godwit – nearly always a tough bird to find, we saw small flocks on two different rice fields and at Rollover Pass, altogether about 50 of these dark-bellied godwits
Marbled Godwit – at Rollover Pass
Ruddy Turnstone – some in impeccable rufous-black-white breeding colors
Red Knot – a single beautifully plumaged bird near Port Bolivar, viewed a close range
Sanderling – the common sandpiper along the Gulf edge
Semipalmated Sandpiper – good views near the Johnson house
Least Sandpiper
Pectoral Sandpiper – just one, oddly, as its usually a common migrant; perhaps most still to the south
Dunlin
Stilt Sandpiper – a few in striking breeding plumage
Buff-breasted Sandpiper – we lucked out with this much sought after species, finding small flocks in a pasture the first day and then hundreds of others on flooded rice fields
Short-billed Dowitcher
Long-billed Dowitcher

JAEGERS, GULLS, TERNS, AND SKIMMERS

Laughing Gull
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Gull-billed Tern – seen at two places, flying over small freshwater ponds
Black Tern – in various states of white turning to black plumage
Common Tern
Forster’s Tern – the most prevalent smallish tern, nesting locally
Royal Tern – the handsome large terns with impressive orange bills
Sandwich Tern – pairs at Rollover, showing the fine black bill with yellow just at the very tip
Black Skimmer – roosting and skimming at Rollover Pass

DOVES AND PIGEONS

Rock Pigeon
Eurasian Collared-Dove – now very widespread and common in the area of the tour
White-winged Dove
Mourning Dove
Inca Dove – the tiny doves along the High Island residential streets

CUCKOOS AND ALLIES

Black-billed Cuckoo – exceptional views of an uncommon migrant, seen best at Sabine Woods where its black bill and dull underside of tail showed nicely as it came down to the edge of the pond
Yellow-billed Cuckoo – seen well, including its yellow bill and mirror spots on the underside of the tail

TYPICAL OWLS

Barred Owl – a very cooperative pair called and flew in close at Taylor Bayou

NIGHTJARS & ALLIES

Common Nighthawk – roosting on a branch during the day

SWIFTS

Chimney Swift

HUMMINGBIRDS

Ruby-throated Hummingbird

KINGFISHERS

Belted Kingfisher

WOODPECKERS

Red-headed Woodpecker – a gorgeous woodpecker, seen at Jones State Forest and Taylor Bayou

Red-bellied Woodpecker

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker – the prevalence of this species was another sign that northward migration was later this year than usual

Downy Woodpecker

Red-cockaded Woodpecker – at least three seen the first morning as they departed their roost trees; an endangered species whose mature pine forest requirements are counter to forestry and residential development pressures

Pileated Woodpecker – heard at two locations, but staying out of view

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS

Eastern Wood-Pewee – seen and heard at close range as migrants, especially at Sabine Woods

Great-crested Flycatcher – one perched on a bare twig at the Johnson House

Western Kingbird – rare in the area, there were two at Port Bolivar along Frenchtown Rd.

Eastern Kingbird – nesting pairs and migrants were seen wide

Scissor-tailed Flycatcher – we stopped to admire several pairs of these lovely birds with salmon-pink flanks and underwings and long, delicate tail feathers

SHRIKES

Loggerhead Shrike – widespread along farm roads

VIREOS

White-eyed Vireo – singing and skulking through every patch of woods

Yellow-throated Vireo – quite a few of these chunky vireos in the migrant woods

Blue-headed Vireo – singing and posing at Sabine Woods and elsewhere

Warbling Vireo – a single bird at Anahuac

Red-eyed Vireo – probably the most abundant songbird migrant we encountered

CROWS AND JAYS

Blue Jay

American Crow

Fish Crow – giving its diagnostic call near Taylor Bayou

SWALLOWS AND MARTINS

Purple Martin

Tree Swallow

Northern Rough-winged Swallow

Bank Swallow

Cliff Swallow – hundreds nest-building under the Intracoastal Bridge just north of High Island

Barn Swallow

TITMICE

Carolina Chickadee

Tufted Titmouse

NUTHATCHES

Brown-headed Nuthatch – tiny nuthatches the first morning at Jones Forest

WRENS

Carolina Wren – its beautiful song was heard more often than the bird was actually espied

House Wren – one singing at Sabine Woods

Sedge Wren – close views of a couple at Anahuac, in the mostly dry brushy flats

Marsh Wren – singing in the bulrushes all through Anahuac and elsewhere

KINGLETS

Ruby-crowned Kinglet – quite a few still on hand, evidence of a delayed northward migration

OLD WORLD WARBLERS

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher – ditto

THRUSHES

Eastern Bluebird – along farm roads with shade trees

Veery – scarce, despite that fact that many migrant thrushes were around during the tour

Gray-cheeked Thrush – good views of this and Swainson's Thrush in a variety of conditions

Swainson's Thrush

Wood Thrush – lots of these chunky orange-brown thrushes, some in very open spots

American Robin – a very few, first seen on 1st St. in High Island

MOCKINGBIRDS AND THRASHERS

Gray Catbird

Northern Mockingbird

Brown Thrasher

STARLINGS

European Starling

WAXWINGS

Cedar Waxwing – flocks in the tree tops during the first days of the trip

NEW WORLD WARBLERS

Blue-winged Warbler – several of these tiny, deep yellow warblers turned up in the shrubby understory

Tennessee Warbler – the most prevalent warbler of the trip

Orange-crowned Warbler – quite a few still on hand, a bird normally farther north by mid-April

Northern Parula – singing in the bayous and foraging in the migrant woods

Yellow Warbler

Chestnut-sided Warbler – a couple of males in the final days of the trip

Yellow-rumped Warbler – quite a few still on hand, a bird normally farther north by mid-April

Black-throated Green Warbler

Yellow-throated Warbler – seen both in nesting habitat and as near-coast migrants

Pine Warbler – singing in the Jones Forest pines

Palm Warbler – another late hanger on, one at Sabine Woods

Blackpoll Warbler

Cerulean Warbler – several blue males with tidy blue necklaces, always a tour favorite

Black-and-white Warbler

American Redstart – a number of flashy males

Prothonotary Warbler – first seen in bayou nesting country

Worm-eating Warbler – surprisingly numerous, we must have hit their main migration on the nose

Swainson's Warbler – a very cooperative singing male at Taylor Bayou; and a migrant at Sabine Woods

Ovenbird – viewed well walking across the leaf litter – tame enough to follow in a spotting scope

Northern Waterthrush – a very edifying comparison of waterthrush species at Sabine Woods

Louisiana Waterthrush

Kentucky Warbler – like the Worm-eating, we seem to have hit a peak of their migratory passage

Common Yellowthroat

Hooded Warbler – lots of colorful Hoodeds, males and females, flashing their tail feathers

Yellow-breasted Chat

TANAGERS

Summer Tanager – wonderful studies daily of both tanagers

Scarlet Tanager

SPARROWS

Savannah Sparrow

Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow – one flew in for very close views, then hopped under Bob's van
Seaside Sparrow – singing in the *Spartina* at very close range (Texas Pt. road)

Lincoln's Sparrow

Swamp Sparrow

White-throated Sparrow

Dark-eyed Junco – a laggard “snowbird,” a first for the tour since normally they are long gone northward

CARDINALS, BUNTINGS & ALLIES

Northern Cardinal

Rose-breasted Grosbeak – many fine views of berry-breasted males and brown-streaked females

Blue Grosbeak – flushing up from the grassy paths at Sabine Woods and elsewhere

Indigo Bunting – our timing was ideal for the “bunting express”, as we saw hundreds of Indigos

Painted Bunting – with a little patience on our part, we turned up a singing male that posed for admiring eyes in the spotting scopes for as long as we wanted to watch

Dickcissel – a few seen along farm roads and near the woods

BLACKBIRDS & ALLIES

Red-winged Blackbird

Eastern Meadowlark – singing along most farm roads

Yellow-headed Blackbird – two first-year males in Anahuac appeared to be recent migrants

Great-tailed Grackle – nice comparisons of all three grackle species

Boat-tailed Grackle

Common Grackle

Brown-headed Cowbird

Orchard Oriole – chestnut and black males and yellow-green females seen daily

Baltimore Oriole – a welcome flash of vivid orange in the tree tops

OLD WORLD SPARROWS

House Sparrow

MAMMALS and HERPS

Northern Raccoon (*Procyon lotor*)

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 Brad rescued from the roadway

American Alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*)

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

Broad-banded Water Snake (*Nerodia fasciata confluens*)