

HIGH ISLAND, TEXAS AN INTRODUCTORY BIRDING TOUR

APRIL 15 – 19, 2011

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Our High Island Introductory tour offers more amazing birding variety in a short span of days than probably any other short tour in North America. The High Island sanctuaries, areas of prime coastal migrant habitat now set aside from development, are the best known feature of this bird-rich region. Several other key habitat elements of this small area rival the sanctuary woods as phenomenal birding sites. These include Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge, a vast, fresh water marsh system bordered by grassland and brackish marsh; Bolivar Flats along the Gulf shore, one of the continent's key sites for shorebird and tern aggregations; and rice fields throughout the area, which when flooded temporarily in cultivation become great magnets for thousands of migratory sandpipers. Add to this a short drive to bayou and pine forest where a considerable diversity of birds are already nesting, and you have the setting for an amazing birding experience.

With such a wealth of birding opportunities, it's tricky to do them justice in less than four days of overall birding time. But we gave it a very good effort. Driving from the airport toward Winnie, we saw our first Upland Sandpipers standing tall in a pasture. By late afternoon we had arrived at one of the wooded preserves set aside in the little hamlet of High Island. (High Island is not an island, but it is high—about 30 feet higher than the surrounding coastal plain—which makes it perfect for stands of trees that are a beacon to trans-Gulf migrants.) We had barely passed the gate into the woods before we were looking at a male Blackburnian Warbler, a gem of fiery orange, followed almost immediately by an exquisite Cerulean Warbler. Black-throated Green Warblers were foraging at eye level, and a Blue-winged Warbler snuck in and out of a dense shrub. At the drip set up in the woods to offer birds a bathing opportunity, we quickly saw a male Painted Bunting. At this point, the birding seemed almost too easy.

We had arrived a day after north winds, which explained the number and variety of birds waiting for us in the woods. Although fewer migrants were seen in following days, we saw 23 species of warblers during this short tour. A Swainson's Warbler worked the leaf litter almost at our feet—too close to focus binoculars. Worm-eating and Kentucky warblers showed very nicely, and a Canada Warbler—always a laudable find at High Island—gave us the view of a lifetime as it foraged through branches almost in our faces.

At Anahuac refuge we took part in a large group rail walk and were rewarded with a fine look at the famously secretive Yellow Rail. King Rails, sometimes hard to see too, seemed to be around every bend of the refuge, standing at the marsh edge. Least Bitterns posed nicely just 40 feet from the van, and a Purple Gallinule caught the morning light perfectly, shading from purple to blue to iridescent green. On the drive to the refuge, showy Scissor-tailed Flycatchers perched on fence wires, flitting up to show salmon-pink underwings.

The heronry at Smith Oaks sanctuary in High Island was full to overflowing with nesting herons, spoonbills, egrets, and cormorants. Dozens of pairs of Roseate Spoonbills were nesting alongside

Tricolored Herons and Great and Snowy egrets, as pairs of Neotropic Cormorants grunted from nests higher up. Alligators swam by in the moat between viewers and waders.

The coastal tide flats and dunes of Bolivar Flats, just up the coast from Galveston, delivered a fantastic birding experience. Arriving on an incoming tide, we watched as thousands of shorebirds, terns, gulls, and wading birds loomed closer and closer. The tide brought shoulder to shoulder hundreds of lovely American Avocets, as well as American Oystercatchers, Marbled Godwits, Red Knots, and many other shorebirds. Terns of eight species, plus Black Skimmers, faced into the breeze, as if posing for scope views. Almost side by side were the continent's four small plovers: Snowy, Piping, Semipalmated, and Wilson's.

We drove along miles of rice fields, ready for cultivation. When flooded after seeding and the water is just the right depth, the shorebirding can be astounding. We found American Golden-Plovers, Buff-breasted Sandpipers, and Whimbrels by the hundreds, perhaps the thousands.

A visit to a nearby bayou was rewarded with great views of lustrous yellow Prothonotary Warblers, as well as a singing Yellow-throated Warbler and Northern Parula—three more warbler jewels. Yellow-crowned Night-Herons and Little Blue Herons posed amid the black water of the bayou and the bright green of the bald cypress leaves, as spoonbills flew overhead. Another lasting image of a great, short tour.

DAY BY DAY ITINERARY

April 15: Afternoon departure from Houston Intercontinental Airport, east on Hwy. 1960. Birded enroute along farm roads north of Winnie. Afternoon visits to High Islands sanctuaries Scout Woods and Smith Oaks, including the heronry. First of four nights in Winnie.

April 16: Early morning trip to cypress bayou habitat of Taylor Bayou to look for breeding warblers, then on to Sabine Woods near Sabine Pass, before lunch at a deli in hurricane-ravaged Sabine Pass. Birded along Texas Pt. road as far as navigable, then returned to motel for an afternoon break. Later afternoon birded along Canal Rd. and Fairview Rd. south of Winnie, then Scout Woods. Dinner and second night in Winnie.

April 17: First thing in the morning, headed to Anahuac refuge for group rail walk, then drove around Shoveler Pond at the refuge. After lunch at the Stingaree in Crystal Beach, birded Bolivar Flats on incoming tide until late afternoon. Returned to the Scout Woods, then back to Winnie for dinner and third night.

April 18: Morning birding along farm roads north of Winnie, then along Fairview Rd. and FR-1941. After lunch in Winnie, birded Hook's Wood's and briefly at Scout and Smith. Returned to hotel for afternoon break, then late afternoon to Scout Woods and Smith Oaks heronry. Dinner in Winnie, fourth night in Winnie.

April 19: Morning to Sabine Woods, with stop at flooded rice fields along Hwy. 73. After lunch in Winnie, departed via I-10 to Houston Intercontinental Airport for departures.

BIRD LIST

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

WATERFOWL

Black-bellied Whistling Duck – nice views of these huge, handsome ducks with pink bills

Fulvous Whistling-Duck – beautiful tawny ducks on fresh water ponds

Wood Duck

Mottled Duck – shy pairs at many locations

Blue-winged Teal

Northern Shoveler

[Northern Pintail – distant scope view of what turned out to be a decoy]

NEW WORLD QUAIL

Northern Bobwhite – heard whistling from the Anahuac visitor center area

GREBES

Pied-billed Grebe

PELICANS

Brown Pelican – repeated flights of pelicans along the Gulf shore

CORMORANTS

Neotropic Cormorant – scoped on their nesting sites at High Island

Double-crested Cormorant – a few immatures

BITTERN, HERONS, AND EGRETS

Least Bittern – wonderful views of these mini-herons at Anahuac, as they perched to hunt just above the level of the water

Great Blue Heron

Great Egret – on nests, some with chicks; adults showing mint green lores

Snowy Egret – ruffling their many plumes at the heronry

Little Blue Heron – first seen near nest sites along Taylor Bayou

Tricolored Heron – also in finest breeding color of intense blue on the face and bill

Reddish Egret – dancing on the tide flats

Cattle Egret – pretty fancy in breeding color, with purple-pink base of bill

Green Heron – close views along the roadside

Black-crowned Night-Heron

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron

IBISES, SPOONBILLS, AND STORKS

White Ibis

White-faced Ibis

Roseate Spoonbill – showing off orange tails at the heronry

NEW WORLD VULTURES

Black Vulture

Turkey Vulture

HAWKS AND ALLIES

Northern Harrier – quite a few flying low over the great open spaces along farm roads

Broad-winged Hawk

Swainson's Hawk – soaring migrants at several locations

White-tailed Hawk – we scoped an immature perched in a tree as another soared nearby; a rare visitor or breeder in this part of Texas

Red-tailed Hawk

FALCONS

Northern Crested Caracara – one of four species of falcons we saw on the same day, including the next three species

American Kestrel – unusual this late in spring

Merlin – went hurtling by right in the little town of High Island

Peregrine Falcon – sitting in field near migrating shorebirds

RAILS AND ALLIES

Yellow Rail – a good view of this very hard to see bird on the group rail walk

Clapper Rail – nice views along the Texas Pt. road through brackish marsh

King Rail – with great luck, we saw several in roadside ditches both near the Intracoastal Canal and at Anahuac refuge

Sora – one walked very close at Anahuac

Purple Gallinule – stunningly iridescent blues, greens, and purples

Common Moorhen

American Coot

PLOVERS

Black-bellied Plover – some in pretty fancy plumage

American Golden-Plover – scoped in several flooded rice fields

Snowy Plover – nice scope views at Bolivar Flats of this and the following three plovers

Wilson's Plover

Semipalmated Plover

Piping Plover

Killdeer

SANDPIPERS AND ALLIES

American Oystercatcher – a couple at Bolivar Flats posed for scope study

Black-necked Stilt – nesting in many wet areas

American Avocet – hundreds of breeding plumage avocets at Bolivar Flats

Spotted Sandpiper

Solitary Sandpiper

Greater Yellowlegs – a few still coming through as migrants

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 – always lucky to see, there were a few in pastures north of Winnie

Whimbrel – hundreds on the rice fields

Marbled Godwit – standing tall at Bolivar Flats

Ruddy Turnstone – most in full color

Red Knot – a few at Bolivar, among the thousands of birds

Sanderling

Semipalmated Sandpiper

Western Sandpiper

Least Sandpiper

Pectoral Sandpiper

Dunlin

Stilt Sandpiper

Buff-breasted Sandpiper – a lucky find the last morning in a recently flooded field

Short-billed Dowitcher – both dowitchers in distinctive breeding plumages, and some calling

Long-billed Dowitcher

Wilson's Snipe – a very confiding snipe at the visitor center pond at Anahuac

GULLS, TERNS, AND SKIMMERS

Laughing Gull

Ring-billed Gull

Herring Gull

Least Tern – hundreds of these noisy, tiny terns at Bolivar Flats, where they nest

Gull-billed Tern – good views of this peculiar tern in flight

Caspian Tern

Black Tern – some nearly in the full black and silver of breeding

Common Tern

Forster's Tern

Royal Tern

Sandwich Tern – showing slender black bills with yellow tip

Black Skimmer – a flock roosting at Bolivar Flats

DOVES AND PIGEONS

Rock Pigeon

Eurasian Collared-Dove

White-winged Dove

Mourning Dove

Inca Dove – tiny, scaly doves around High Is.

CUCKOOS AND ALLIES

Yellow-billed Cuckoo – good, if quick, view at Sabine Woods

BARN OWLS AND TYPICAL OWLS

Great Horned Owl – a downy owlet at a Hooks Woods nest site

NIGHTJARS & ALLIES

Common Nighthawk

SWIFTS

Chimney Swift

HUMMINGBIRDS

Ruby-throated Hummingbird

WOODPECKERS

Red-bellied Woodpecker

Downy Woodpecker

Pileated Woodpecker

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS

Eastern Wood-Pewee – one at Sabine Woods

Great-crested Flycatcher

Western Kingbird – seen briefly at Scout Woods, atop a mulberry tree

Eastern Kingbird

Scissor-tailed Flycatcher – lots of fine views of this breathtaking flycatcher

SHRIKES

Loggerhead Shrike – at a variety of locations along the farm roads, perched on wires

VIREOS

White-eyed Vireo

Blue-headed Vireo – in the trees at Scout Woods

Warbling Vireo – several migrants in the woods

Red-eyed Vireo

CROWS AND JAYS

Blue Jay

American Crow

LARKS

Horned Lark – in the Bolivar dunes

SWALLOWS AND MARTINS

Purple Martin

Tree Swallow

Northern Rough-winged Swallow

Cliff Swallow

Barn Swallow

TITMICE

Carolina Chickadee

Tufted Titmouse

WRENS

Carolina Wren – at last a good look at one of these fine singers the final morning at Sabine Woods

House Wren

Sedge Wren – this and the following wren were seen on the rail walk

Marsh Wren

KINGLETS

Ruby-crowned Kinglet

OLD WORLD WARBLERS

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher

THRUSHES

Eastern Bluebird – a pair in a residential yard near Taylor Bayou

Swainson's Thrush – great view of one at the Scout Woods drip

Wood Thrush – heard

MOCKINGBIRDS AND THRASHERS

Gray Catbird – one of the most reliable migrants, there were 7 at the drip at one point

Northern Mockingbird

Brown Thrasher

STARLINGS

European Starling

NEW WORLD WARBLERS

Blue-winged Warbler – several of these bright yellow skulkers, plus a female at the drip

Tennessee Warbler – the most prevalent migrant warbler seen

Nashville Warbler – a female at the drip

Northern Parula – a singing male at Taylor Bayou

Yellow Warbler

Chestnut-sided Warbler

Black-throated Green Warbler – excellent looks, very confiding at Scout Woods

Blackburnian Warbler – one of the first birds we saw the first afternoon at Scout Woods was a gorgeous and cooperative male Blackburnian, one of the most striking of all warblers

Yellow-throated Warbler – a cooperative male at Taylor Bayou

Palm Warbler – a late holdout at Sabine Woods; most have gone north by mid-April

Cerulean Warbler – a male this first afternoon at Scout

Black-and-white Warbler

American Redstart – flashy males

Prothonotary Warbler – great views of males on the cypress knees at Taylor Bayou

Worm-eating Warbler – several cooperative birds at Sabine Woods

Swainson's Warbler – How close can you get to a warbler? The one on the leaf litter at Scout Woods posed about 4 feet off the trail. One at Taylor Bayou too.

Ovenbird – a new warbler for the list the final morning at Sabine Woods

Northern Waterthrush – every day at the Scout drip
Kentucky Warbler – at the drip and along the trails
Common Yellowthroat
Hooded Warbler – quite a few one day at Sabine Woods
Canada Warbler – Perhaps the best warbler sighting of the trip, a male at Sabine Woods was very
confiding over a ten minute span of watching it forage almost overhead.
Yellow-breasted Chat

SPARROWS

Eastern Towhee
Savannah Sparrow
Seaside Sparrow
Swamp Sparrow
White-throated Sparrow
White-crowned Sparrow

CARDINALS, BUNTINGS & ALLIES

Summer Tanager – small numbers of both tanager species, fewer than most springs
Scarlet Tanager
Western Tanager – Mahlon saw one at High Island; an annual rarity
Northern Cardinal
Rose-breasted Grosbeak
Blue Grosbeak – a few at Sabine Woods on the final morning
Indigo Bunting – many great views of brilliant males
Painted Bunting – surprisingly plentiful, including males bathing at the drip

BLACKBIRDS & ALLIES

Red-winged Blackbird
Eastern Meadowlark
Common Grackle
Boat-tailed Grackle
Great-tailed Grackle
Brown-headed Cowbird
Orchard Oriole
Baltimore Oriole

OLD WORLD SPARROWS

House Sparrow

MAMMALS, HERPS, AND OTHER ANIMALS

River Otter – crossed the road during the orientation talk for the rail walk
Eastern Gray Squirrel
American Alligator
Swamp Rabbit
Common Snapping Turtle – eating mulberries near the drip
Red-eared Slider (turtle)
Green Anole
Gulf Coast Ribbon Snake – we stopped for one on Fairview Rd., and ended up seeing White-tailed
Hawks at the same spot