

# **HIGH ISLAND MIGRATION**

**APRIL 20 – 25, 2011**

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## HIGH ISLAND MIGRATION TOUR

April 20-25, 2011

On the first morning of our 2011 High Island Migration tour, our group set out with high hopes of an encounter with the endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker. We first entered the pine woods where the woodpeckers were known to nest just before sunrise, and set our sights on several trees with evidence of use by Red-cockaded Woodpeckers. After a quiet vigil of 10 minutes or so, a woodpecker began to peek out from a nest hole in the cool of early morning. Within another 10 minutes there were several Red-cockaded Woodpeckers ranging up and down the trunks of nearby pines, ready subjects for viewing in the spotting scopes. Not long after, we had fine scope studies of glamorous Red-headed Woodpeckers and the first Pileated Woodpeckers of the trip. Brown-headed Nuthatches and Pine Warblers flitted nearby, and Wood Ducks flew through the trees. A fine start to the first day of our trip!

Soon we were working our way along rural roads, east toward our lodgings in Winnie and birding in the High Island area. As we drove through the town of Liberty, soaring birds caught our eyes—a group of Mississippi Kites were moving through, low over the big trees in a residential area. Farther east, several Upland Sandpipers posed in a pasture they shared with Brahma cattle.

After lunch and a break at our motel (where we would spend the next four nights), we were on the way to visit the High Island sanctuaries, where we would enjoy our first views of trans-Gulf migrants. The unusual weather this spring—many days of extremely strong winds from the southeast coupled with a prolonged drought—made the search for migrating songbirds more difficult than during a typical year. It is a testament to the richness of the birding in the High Island vicinity that we still put together an admirable list of birds, with an especially amazing showing of migrating shorebirds.

Over the following days of the tour we would revisit the coastal woods sanctuaries, as well as breeding areas a short drive north, in search of trans-Gulf migrants. Our patient searching paid rich dividends. We watched a male Swainson's Warbler—one of the most notorious skulkers—singing in the open from a series of perches, including a utility wire. A Blackburnian Warbler, perhaps the most brightly colored of all warblers, gleaned methodically through the leaves of an oak, as we followed it in our binoculars. Prothonotary Warblers, feathered in the deepest of yellows, sang from cypress knees. A male Painted Bunting sang from atop a bush, patiently waiting for all to view it in the spotting scope. A Kentucky Warbler walked calmly out into the open at the edge of a small pond, posing for all to see. Baltimore and Orchard orioles flocked to the tassels of pecan trees. An orange-faced Nelson's Sparrow perched in marsh grass not 15 feet from the group.

The High Island area is also one of the best in the country to see rails. A group walk through a marshy expanse at Anahuac refuge resulted in fine views of King Rail and the notoriously secretive Yellow Rail. Clapper Rails and Soras were surprisingly cooperative. Tiny Least Bitterns, a good find anywhere, posed at close range for long views and photos.

And we truly hit the jackpot with shorebirds. Between the coastal beach and dunes of Bolivar Flats and inland flooded rice fields, we had excellent views of 35 species of shorebirds. Hundreds of American Avocets in breeding plumage packed together at high tide, alongside Marbled Godwits and American Oystercatchers. Red Knots roosted shoulder to shoulder with Dunlin, Sanderlings, and Black-bellied Plovers. Almost side by side were the continent's four small plovers: Snowy, Piping, Semipalmated, and Wilson's. In the rice fields, when flooded for cultivation and the water is just the right depth, the shorebirding can be astounding. In one field alone there were American Golden-Plovers, Buff-breasted Sandpipers, Stilt Sandpipers, and 18 Hudsonian Godwits, plus 10 other species of shorebirds. Whimbrels strode the fields by the hundreds, and a few Wilson's Phalaropes spun in the shallow water. As we drove the open farm country to reach the flooded fields, we stopped to enjoy Dickcissels and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers perched on fence lines along the road, as well as a pair of Northern Crested Caracaras and a rare-for-the-area White-tailed Hawk.

As if this weren't enough, there is a very busy nesting area for wading birds in High Island, which can be viewed from a short distance. Dozens of pairs of Roseate Spoonbills nest alongside Tricolored Herons and Great and Snowy egrets, as pairs of Neotropic Cormorants grunt from their nests higher up. Alligators swim by in the moat between viewers and waders, while enormous softshell turtles bask on the bank. Here too, a pair of Purple Gallinules showed every hue of purple, blue, and green iridescence.

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 routinely lives up to its renowned reputation.

### **DAY BY DAY ITINERARY**

**April 20:** Arrival in Houston, dinner at the hotel. Night at Hampton Inn near airport.

**April 21:** Morning birding at Jones State Forest, then on toward Winnie via Conroe, Cut N' Shoot, Dayton, Liberty and Nome, birding briefly enroute. Stopped at Liberty Park in Liberty, and to look at shorebird ponds and roadside Upland Sandpipers north of Nome. After lunch in Winnie, checked flooded rice fields east of Winnie on Hwy. 73. Checked in at motel at 2 p.m., took a short break, then birded south to Scout Woods in High Island. First of four nights in Winnie.

**April 22:** Early morning trip to cypress bayou habitat of Taylor Bayou to look for breeding warblers, then on to Sabine Woods. Returned to Winnie for lunch, a break at motel. Mid-afternoon stopped at ponds along Hwy. 124, then to Scout Woods and Smith Oaks heronry. Second night in Winnie.

**April 23:** Departed early to take part in Anahuac rail walk. Next to Bolivar Flats, lunch at Stingaree in Crystal Bridge, more birding at Bob Rd. and Rollover Pass. Late afternoon birding for some at Scout Woods. Third night in Winnie.

**April 24:** Early departure to Gore Store Rd. habitats about an hour north of Winnie, birding bayous, Big Thicket forest, and edge of pine plantation. Lunch in Kountze, return to Winnie and

afternoon break, then birded along Fairview Rd. flooded rice fields. Final dinner at Al-T's, last night in Winnie.

**April 25:** Morning birding at Scout Woods, Smith Oaks, and Hooks Woods. Returned to motel to load up bags and lunch nearby. Direct to airport via I-10 for afternoon 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

#### **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

#### **ANHINGAS**

Anhinga – one perched along a bayou

#### **BITTERN, HERONS, AND EGRETS**

American Bittern – one flew up along the road north of the Intracoastal Canal

Least Bittern – Sally spotted one in a roadside ditch, close to where we studied another at close range a couple of days later. Superb study of this miniature wader.

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

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**

Mississippi Kite – we were fortunate to coincide with a flock of migrating kites in Liberty

Northern Harrier

Red-shouldered Hawk

Broad-winged Hawk

Swainson's Hawk

*White-tailed Hawk* – a rare breeder/visitor to this part of Texas

Red-tailed Hawk

### **FALCONS**

*Northern Crested Caracara* – a scarce breeder in recent years in this part of the state

### **RAILS AND ALLIES**

*Yellow Rail* – an amazing and close view of one flushed up on the group rail walk

Clapper Rail – stalking in along Bob Rd.

King Rail – one flushed right in front of us on the rail walk

Sora – great views in the roadside ditches

Purple Gallinule – a gorgeous pair at the Smith Oaks heronry

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

Long-billed Curlew – a single curlew at Bolivar

*Hudsonian Godwit* – good scope views on rice fields our last afternoon; at least 18 seen

Marbled Godwit – standing tall at Bolivar Flats and Rollover Pass

Ruddy Turnstone – most in full color

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

Sanderling

Semipalmated Sandpiper

Western Sandpiper

Least Sandpiper

White-rumped Sandpiper – scoped on the rice fields, a good find

Pectoral Sandpiper – good numbers on flooded fields

Dunlin

Stilt Sandpiper – great scope views of birds coming into breeding plumage

*Buff-breasted Sandpiper* – first a flock at a small roadside pond, then great scope views along Fairview Rd. among the thousands of shorebirds on flooded fields; always a good find

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

Long-billed Dowitcher

Wilson's Snipe

Wilson's Phalarope – a few on a flooded rice field

### **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 Rollover Pass

### **DOVES AND PIGEONS**

Rock Pigeon

Eurasian Collared-Dove – common now in the region

White-winged Dove

Mourning Dove

Inca Dove – tiny, scaly doves around High Is.

### **CUCKOOS AND ALLIES**

Yellow-billed Cuckoo – one in the shrubs near the Scout Woods drip

### **BARN OWLS AND TYPICAL OWLS**

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

Barred Owl – heard at Taylor Bayou

### **NIGHTJARS & ALLIES**

Common Nighthawk

### **SWIFTS**

Chimney Swift

### **HUMMINGBIRDS**

Ruby-throated Hummingbird

### **KINGFISHERS**

Belted Kingfisher – just one

### **WOODPECKERS**

Red-headed Woodpecker – beautiful, at their nest tree in Jones Forest

Red-bellied Woodpecker

Downy Woodpecker

Hairy Woodpecker – one along Gore Store Rd.

Red-cockaded Woodpecker – fine scope views of this endangered species, as birds emerged from their nest/roost holes after sunrise

Pileated Woodpecker

### **TYRANT FLYCATCHERS**

Eastern Wood-Pewee

Acadian Flycatcher – Dave coaxed one in for close views near Turkey Ck.

Great-crested Flycatcher

Eastern Kingbird

Scissor-tailed Flycatcher – truly beautiful, and perched openly along fence lines

### **SHRIKES**

Loggerhead Shrike

### **VIREOS**

White-eyed Vireo

Yellow-throated Vireo

Blue-headed Vireo

Red-eyed Vireo

### **CROWS AND JAYS**

Blue Jay

American Crow

Fish Crow – offering its distinctive call at Taylor Bayou

### **LARKS**

Horned Lark – in the Bolivar dunes

### **SWALLOWS AND MARTINS**

Purple Martin

Tree Swallow

Northern Rough-winged Swallow

Bank Swallow

Cliff Swallow

Barn Swallow

### **TITMICE**

Carolina Chickadee

Tufted Titmouse

### **NUTHATCHES**

Brown-headed Nuthatch – this southeastern specialty turned up at Jones Forest

### **WRENS**

Carolina Wren

Sedge Wren – the common wren flushed on the rail walk

### **KINGLETS**

Ruby-crowned Kinglet

### **OLD WORLD WARBLERS**

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher

### **THRUSHES**

Eastern Bluebird

Gray-cheeked Thrush – one at the very dry cypress stand at Scout Woods

Swainson's Thrush – singing, but staying in cover

Wood Thrush – ditto

American Robin – just one

### **MOCKINGBIRDS AND THRASHERS**

Gray Catbird – one of the most commonly seen migrants

Northern Mockingbird

Brown Thrasher

### **STARLINGS**

European Starling

### **WAXWINGS**

Cedar Waxwing

### **NEW WORLD WARBLERS**

Tennessee Warbler – nondescript, for a warbler

Northern Parula – a singing male showed nicely

Yellow Warbler

Blackburnian Warbler – in the oaks at Sabine Woods

Yellow-throated Warbler – nice views at a bayou along Gore Store Rd.

Pine Warbler

Prairie Warbler

Black-and-white Warbler

American Redstart  
Prothonotary Warbler – flashy males at Taylor Bayou  
Worm-eating Warbler – in the dense growth at Sabine Woods  
Swainson's Warbler – A spectacular view of a hard to see warbler, we worked hard on a singing male  
before Dave called one in that perched singing in the open and actually sang from a utility wire.  
Kentucky Warbler – one came in near the Scout Woods drip, posing nicely  
Common Yellowthroat  
Hooded Warbler – at Sabine Woods

### **SPARROWS**

Savannah Sparrow  
Nelson's Sparrow – fancy orange faced sparrow along Bob Rd.  
Seaside Sparrow – lots seen on the rail walk  
White-throated Sparrow  
White-crowned Sparrow

### **CARDINALS, BUNTINGS & ALLIES**

Summer Tanager  
Scarlet Tanager  
Northern Cardinal  
Rose-breasted Grosbeak  
Blue Grosbeak  
Indigo Bunting – males in scintillating color  
Painted Bunting – some nice views of males, including one singing not far from Taylor Bayou  
Dickcissel – first seen near one of the flooded rice fields, we enjoyed superb views along farm roads

### **BLACKBIRDS & ALLIES**

Red-winged Blackbird  
Eastern Meadowlark  
Common Grackle  
Boat-tailed Grackle  
Great-tailed Grackle  
Brown-headed Cowbird  
Orchard Oriole – ever present at Scout Woods  
Baltimore Oriole – some brilliant males in a pecan tree

### **OLD WORLD SPARROWS**

House Sparrow

### **MAMMALS, HERPS, AND OTHER ANIMALS**

Northern Raccoon  
Eastern Gray Squirrel  
Eastern Fox Squirrel  
Swamp Rabbit  
Smooth Softshell (turtle) – the huge, flat turtles at the heronry  
Common Snapping Turtle – eating mulberries near the drip  
Red-eared Slider (turtle)  
Green Anole  
American Alligator