

*VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS, INC.*

## **HIGH ISLAND MIGRATION TOUR**

**April 18 -25, 2007**

**Leaders: Bob Sundstrom and Sally Alhadeff**

**On the first morning of our 2007 High Island Migration 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 the subject of viewing in the spotting scopes. Not long after, we had fine scope studies of glamorous Red-headed Woodpeckers and huge Pileateds—and then a group of four or five more of the scarce and local Red-cockaded Woodpeckers. Brown-headed Nuthatches and Pine Warblers were seen nearby, and Wood Ducks perched on branches. A fine start to the 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 pulled over with great excitement to watch an American Swallow-tailed Kite soar low, right over the road—an immediate tour highlight of graceful form and flight. This species was a very nice surprise, being quite scarce in the area. Not long after, several small flocks of Mississippi Kites glided by. A few miles east, a roadside field hosted dozens of migrating shorebirds, among them a number of Buff-breasted Sandpipers foraging in close view.**

**After lunch and a break at our motel (where we would spend the next six nights), we were on the way to visit the High Island sanctuaries where we would enjoy our first views of trans-Gulf migrants. Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Summer Tanagers, Baltimore and Orchard orioles, and Gray Catbirds fed in the sanctuaries' mulberry trees. Wood Thrushes and Swainson's Thrushes hopped on the leaf litter, offering bits of their musical songs.**

**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 saw 27 species of warblers, including many of the highly sought species. A Swainson's Warbler, known as a tough-to-see skulker, sang at eye level in the open, as multiple pairs of binoculars locked onto its tawny form. A male Blackburnian Warbler, its' head a brilliant orange, foraged close overhead, inspiring grateful comments. The much hoped for Cerulean Warbler, a male, turned up in the oaks along a residential street in Port Bolivar. We saw multiple Yellow-throated Warblers, true gems of color and pattern, as well as a couple of Golden-winged Warblers, another much sought species. Dashing Magnolia Warblers showed off at eye level, Prothonotary Warblers sang in a cypress bayou, Hooded Warblers flashed their tail feathers, Ovenbirds strode the shady forest floor, and a Kentucky Warbler came to the Scout Woods drip for a bath.**

**One afternoon at High Island, we watched two different Black-billed Cuckoos—a scant visitor here—as they delicately removed tent caterpillars from their webbing. Yellow-billed Cuckoos were nearly a daily sight. Lush-hued Scarlet Tanagers were present in luxuriant quantities, often**

with a ripe mulberry in their bills. We picked out a couple of Philadelphia Vireos from the more common vireos for close examination, and had careful studies of Gray-cheeked Thrush and Veery. A couple of migrating Dickcissels perched up on roadside fences, as did pairs of elegant Scissor-tailed Flycatchers.

The group took part one morning in an organized rail walk at Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge. With dozens of birders forming a phalanx, we walked in unison across the Yellow Rail Prairie, and were lucky enough to see the bird for which the area is named. Three Yellow Rails flushed up and were seen well by the group. Some of the group were even luckier, as a couple of rare, tiny Black Rails flushed up, flying only a few feet before dropping back into the vegetation. A morning drive along the freshwater marsh in the refuge turned up spectacular views of miniature Least Bitterns and glistening Purple Gallinules, flocks of Fulvous Whistling-Ducks, and small groups of Gull-billed Terns—plus all the alligators one could hope to see.

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—stood on the sand of Bolivar Flats for comparison, as Least Terns clattered overhead. We scoped mixed roosts of Sandwich, Royal, Forster’s, and Common terns along the shoreline, as thousands of stunning American Avocets collected in the background. Hudsonian Godwits, Red Knots, White-rumped Sandpipers, and Wilson’s Phalaropes numbered among the 33 species of shorebirds seen on our tour. 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 with tiny pink chicks, 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 routinely lives up to its renowned reputation.

## **ITINERARY**

**April 18:** Arrival in Houston, get-acquainted dinner at the hotel.

**April 19:** Morning birding at Jones State Forest, then on toward Winnie via Conroe, Cut N' Shoot, Dayton, Liberty and Nome, birding briefly enroute with lunch in Liberty. After arriving at the motel in Winnie and a break, went on to Scout Woods and Hooks Sanctuary in High Island. We took a quick look at the Gulf of Mexico. Our first of six nights in Winnie.

**April 20:** Morning birding near Taylor Bayou and along Boondocks Rd., northeast of Winnie. Proceeded to Texas Pt., lunch in Sabine Pass, then on to Sabine Woods. After a break, a late afternoon visit to crawfish ponds a few miles west of Winnie.

**April 21:** Early morning trip to Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge, including a rail walk on the Yellow Rail Prairie with a larger group of birders, followed by road loop around Shoveler Pond and stop at "The Willows" grove. After lunch at the Stingaree in Crystal beach, birded the Johnson home and Bolivar Flats. On way back north, stopped at Smith Oaks and the heronry there.

**April 22:** Revisited Sabine Woods in the morning, returning to Winnie for lunch and a break. Afternoon to Rollover Pass/Yacht Basin Rd., Scout Woods, and Smith Oaks in High Island.

**April 23:** Early morning departure north via Nome and Kountze to bird the "Pineywoods." Stopped alongside pine plantations and took a walk into the Turkey Creek unit of the Big Thicket National Preserve. Lunch at Mama Jack's in Kountze. After a break in Winnie, returned to Scout Woods and Smith Oaks in High Island.

**April 24:** Return visit to Anahuac Refuge, birding the Willows and around Shoveler Pond and out toward the rail prairie. After a stop at Scout Woods, had lunch in Crystal Beach, then birded the Johnson home, Port Bolivar oaks, and Smith Oaks.

**April 25:** Morning birding at Scout Woods and Smith Oaks until late-morning. Returned north through Winnie to pick up our luggage than continued on to Houston Intercontinental Airport for departures.

## **BIRD LIST**

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

### **WATERFOWL**

*Greater White-fronted Goose* – the one lingering at Anahuac late into spring was a surprise

*Snow Goose* – both dark and light morphs at Anahuac, usually north by this time

Black-bellied Whistling Duck – a few wild ones in and out of a duck fancier's pen

Fulvous Whistling-Duck – good views of these attractive waterfowl

Wood Duck

Mottled Duck – nesting at Anahuac and elsewhere

Blue-winged Teal – the abundant dabbler locally

Northern Shoveler

### **NEW WORLD QUAIL**

Northern Bobwhite – heard at Anahuac

### **GREBES**

Pied-billed Grebe

### **PELICANS**

American White Pelican – Tom saw a flock in flight

Brown Pelican – undulating flocks along the Gulf coastal beaches

### **CORMORANTS**

Double-crested Cormorant – a few immatures at the Smith Oaks heronry

Neotropic Cormorant – the common cormorant, nesting at Smith Oaks

### **ANHINGAS**

Anhinga – these snake-like birds were seen swimming, flying, and sunning

### **FRIGATEBIRDS**

Magnificent Frigatebird – one soared by the Stingaree restaurant

### **BITTERN, HERONS & EGRETS**

American Bittern – one in flight above the marshes along the highway north of High Island

Least Bittern – spectacular views of several of the petite herons at Anahuac refuge

Great Blue Heron

Great Egret – nearly ubiquitous, always elegant

Snowy Egret

Little Blue Heron

Tricolored Heron – intensely colorful small herons

Reddish Egret – dancing at Bolivar Flats

Cattle Egret

Green Heron

Black-crowned Night-Heron

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron – close views of these exquisitely plumed herons

### **IBISES, SPOONBILLS & STORKS**

White Ibis – flying flocks seemed to be a constant theme

White-faced Ibis - ditto

Roseate Spoonbill – many great views, including pairs and chicks at the heronry

## **NEW WORLD VULTURES**

Black Vulture – both vultures were seen widely throughout the tour  
Turkey Vulture

## **HAWKS & ALLIES**

*American Swallow-tailed Kite* – A very nice surprise and scarce for the area, one soared right over the road on our first day of birding, an immediate tour highlight of graceful form and flight.

White-tailed Kite – at several sites near the coast

Mississippi Kite – migrating groups seen on two different days

Northern Harrier

Cooper's Hawk

Red-shouldered Hawk

Broad-winged Hawk – soaring at several locations; an immature along Boondocks Rd. offered close views and photo opportunities

Swainson's Hawk

***White-tailed Hawk*** – another surprise for the region, an immature soaring over the Bolivar Peninsula

Red-tailed Hawk

## **FALCONS**

Northern Crested Caracara – nesting now in the area, we saw one at Anahuac

Peregrine Falcon – atop one of the very tall towers astride the Intracoastal Canal

## **RAILS & ALLIES**

*Yellow Rail* – three of these very hard to see birds were flushed up on the Anahuac rail walk

***Black Rail*** – heard and flushed on the rail walk, a tiny dark rail that stayed aloft for only a few feet

Clapper Rail – great views on the drive along Texas Point

Sora

Purple Gallinule – an amazingly iridescent bird, seen well on our second trip to Anahuac

Common Moorhen

American Coot

## **PLOVERS**

Black-bellied Plover – in all states of plumage

American Golden-Plover – a couple with a flock of Black-bellieds in a pasture

Snowy Plover – one at Bolivar Flats

Wilson's Plover – excellent views at Bolivar and Texas Pt.

Semipalmated Plover

Piping Plover – only one seen, but very well

Killdeer

## **SANDPIPERS & ALLIES**

American Oystercatcher – a pair on a likely nest site along the Intracoastal Canal

Black-necked Stilt – amazingly long legs and poodle-like barking calls

American Avocet – perhaps as many as 2000 at Bolivar Flats!

Spotted Sandpiper

Solitary Sandpiper – in a roadside ditch

Greater Yellowlegs

Willet – both the Eastern and Western subspecies

Lesser Yellowlegs

Whimbrel

Long-billed Curlew

Hudsonian Godwit – lucky to see, we scoped several at Anahuac

Marbled Godwit – the godwits of the coastal beachfront  
Ruddy Turnstone – on the beach and in the pastures too  
Red Knot – still molting toward breeding plumage  
Sanderling – ubiquitous on the beaches  
Semipalmated Sandpiper  
Western Sandpiper  
Least Sandpiper  
White-rumped Sandpiper – a few at the wet, muddy field at Anahuac  
Pectoral Sandpiper  
Dunlin  
Stilt Sandpiper – scoped at Anahuac  
Buff-breasted Sandpiper – a fortunate sighting our first day, in a roadside field  
Short-billed Dowitcher  
Long-billed Dowitcher  
Wilson's Phalarope

### **GULLS, TERNS & SKIMMERS**

Laughing Gull – the abundant gull of the area  
Ring-billed Gull – assorted immatures along the coast  
Herring Gull - ditto  
Least Tern – we saw these miniature terns frequently along the beaches  
Gull-billed Tern – seen best at Anahuac, both adults and immatures  
Caspian Tern – the largest of the terns on hand  
Black Tern – fairly numerous right along the Intracoastal Canal behind the barges and boats  
Common Tern  
Forster's Tern – local breeders in full silvery plumage  
Royal Tern  
Sandwich Tern – with yellow-tipped, slender black bills  
Black Skimmer – a close view along Frenchtown Rd. in Port Bolivar

### **DOVES & PIGEONS**

Rock Pigeon  
Eurasian Collared-Dove – now widespread in the area of the tour  
White-winged Dove – just a couple, at their eastern extent currently  
Mourning Dove  
Inca Dove – reliably pecking along the Scout Woods parking lot

### **CUCKOOS & ALLIES**

Black-billed Cuckoo – very good luck to see two of these scarce and shy migrants (Smith Oaks)  
Yellow-billed Cuckoo – nice views in each of the migrant woods tracts

### **BARN OWLS & TYPICAL OWLS**

Barred Owl – a raucous pair along Taylor Bayou

### **NIGHTJARS & ALLIES**

Common Nighthawk – seen several places on day roosts

### **SWIFTS**

Chimney Swift

### **HUMMINGBIRDS**

Ruby-throated Hummingbird – the only regular hummingbird of the region

## **KINGFISHERS**

Belted Kingfisher

## **WOODPECKERS**

Red-headed Woodpecker – terrific studies at Jones State Forest

Red-bellied Woodpecker – seen and heard widely

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker – two different individuals seen, lingering migrants

Downy Woodpecker – feeding young at a nest cavity along the Sabine Woods boardwalk

Red-cockaded Woodpecker – very nice views of this endangered species the first morning

Pileated Woodpecker – at Jones Forest and near Taylor Bayou

## **TYRANT FLYCATCHERS**

Eastern Wood-Pewee – seen and heard

Acadian Flycatcher – as close as view as one could ask for at a Gore Store Rd. bayou

Great-crested Flycatcher – foraging at eye level at Sabine Woods

Eastern Kingbird - widespread

Scissor-tailed Flycatcher – one of the loveliest birds of the trip

## **SHRIKES**

Loggerhead Shrike

## **VIREOS**

White-eyed Vireo – very good, close views of this skulking passerine

Yellow-throated Vireo – nice views of birds close overhead

Warbling Vireo – a few early in the tour

Philadelphia Vireo – impeccable studies at close range at Smith Oaks

Red-eyed Vireo – one of the most prevalent migrants in the woods

## **CROWS & JAYS**

Blue Jay

American Crow

Fish Crow – seen and heard near Taylor Bayou

## **LARKS**

Horned Lark – a skittish pair along Bolivar Flats

## **SWALLOWS & MARTINS**

Purple Martin

Tree Swallow – by the thousands along the road to Sabine Pass

Northern Rough-winged Swallow

Bank Swallow

Cliff Swallow – under bridges primarily

Barn Swallow

## **TITMICE**

Carolina Chickadee – seen very well in the pine woods

Tufted Titmouse - ditto

## **NUTHATCHES**

Brown-headed Nuthatch – noisy and fairly confiding at Jones State Forest; a southeastern specialty

## **WRENS**

Carolina Wren – one of the most musical songs of the trip  
Sedge Wren – at the Yellow Rail Prairie  
Marsh Wren – singing everywhere from the phragmites

## **KINGLETS**

Ruby-crowned Kinglet – a few lingering winterers

## **OLD WORLD WARBLERS**

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher

## **THRUSHES**

Eastern Bluebird  
Veery – nice view of this cinnamon-toned thrush at the Smith Oaks mulberries  
Gray-cheeked Thrush – ditto for this nondescript *Catharus* thrush  
Swainson's Thrush – seen widely, some singing  
Wood Thrush – the upright, ochre colored thrush  
American Robin – heard only, in Nome, Texas

## **MOCKINGBIRDS & THRASHERS**

Gray Catbird – many migrants piling through the woods  
Northern Mockingbird  
Brown Thrasher

## **STARLINGS**

European Starling

## **WAXWINGS**

Cedar Waxwing – a few migrating flocks in flight

## **NEW WORLD WARBLERS**

Blue-winged Warbler – this tiny, yellow warbler was seen on two occasions  
Golden-winged Warbler – a real treat, one of the most sought after warbler sightings  
Tennessee Warbler – the most prevalent of the migrant warblers of the tour  
Nashville Warbler  
Northern Parula – singing in the Spanish moss covered trees  
Yellow Warbler – one day there were four in the same small tree  
Chestnut-sided Warbler – at last seen by everyone  
Magnolia Warbler – one of the real beauties of the warbler tribe  
*Black-throated Blue Warbler* – very scarce this far west, a male briefly at Sabine Woods  
Yellow-rumped Warbler – lingering Myrtles  
Black-throated Green Warbler – handsome and confiding, we saw quite a few  
Blackburnian Warbler – one of the real gems of the New World Warblers, one foraged just a few meters overhead offering breathtaking looks of its neon orange face  
Yellow-throated Warbler – another gem  
Pine Warbler  
Prairie Warbler – singing in the young pine plantations north of Kountze  
Bay-breasted Warbler – a couple of these striking warblers  
Cerulean Warbler – much hoped-for, Sally spotted a male in Port Bolivar  
Black-and-white Warbler – working the limbs and trunks of many trees  
American Redstart – after much effort to see the first one, we saw a bunch  
Prothonotary Warbler – superb views of this golden yellow warbler

Worm-eating Warbler – seen by some, hiding in the vines  
Swainson's Warbler – a very good view of an infamously skulking species  
Ovenbird – walking across the leaf litter of Smith Oaks  
Northern Waterthrush  
Kentucky Warbler – one took a bath at the Scout Woods drip  
Common Yellowthroat  
Hooded Warbler – flashing white tail feathers  
Yellow-breasted Chat – perched up and singing its guttural notes

### **TANAGERS**

Summer Tanager – seen daily  
Scarlet Tanager – undoubtedly the reddest birds of the trip, super views

### **SPARROWS**

Eastern Towhee  
Savannah Sparrow  
Seaside Sparrow – seen best on the rail walk  
White-throated Sparrow

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

Northern Cardinal  
Rose-breasted Grosbeak – seen daily, often munching mulberries  
Blue Grosbeak – quite a few seen, always striking  
Indigo Bunting – these little jewels seemed to be everywhere  
Painted Bunting – wonderful views of multi-hued males and pretty, green females  
Dickcissel – a couple seen along roadsides late in the trip

### **BLACKBIRDS & ALLIES**

Red-winged Blackbird  
Eastern Meadowlark  
Great-tailed Grackle – its unearthly voice was a frequent feature of the tour  
Boat-tailed Grackle – numerous in the wide open marshes  
Common Grackle  
Brown-headed Cowbird  
Orchard Oriole – one of the most prevalent migrants; local nesters too  
Baltimore Oriole – many wonderful views of this richly orange species

### **OLD WORLD SPARROWS**

House Sparrow

## **MAMMALS and HERPS**

Eastern Gray Squirrel

Eastern Fox Squirrel

Hispid Cotton Rat – spotted by Paul

Swamp Rabbit – as big as house cats

Bullfrog

Blanchard Cricket Frog

Red-eared Slider (turtle)

Ground Skink

Green Anole

Speckled Kingsnake

Water Moccasin/Cottonmouth – a small one coiled in the middle of a dirt road

American Alligator – in all sizes, including some behemoths at Smith Oaks heronry

Eastern Toad