

HIGH ISLAND MIGRATION

APRIL 18 - 25, 2008

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Our High Island Migration tour offers as much amazing birding variety as any week of any birding 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 very bird-rich region. But other facets of the Upper Gulf Coast region rival the sanctuary woods as phenomenal birding sites. These include Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge, a vast, freshwater marsh system set inside many more acres of grassland and brackish marsh; Bolivar Flats, one of the continent's most impressive coastal sites for shorebird and tern aggregations; and the spring rice fields throughout the area, which are flooded temporarily in the cultivation process and serve as prime stopover areas for thousands of migrating sandpipers.

The first morning of our 2008 High Island Migration tour took us to a pine forest preserve north of Houston in search of the endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker. We entered the woods just after sunrise, in the cool of the morning. Within a few minutes a Red-cockaded Woodpecker was heard calling. Soon we were watching half-a-dozen of the endangered birds, just leaving their night roosts. A few minutes more, and a trio of boldly-colored Red-headed Woodpeckers perched for scope views, followed quickly by a pair of huge Pileated Woodpeckers, which posed right above our heads. By now the forest had come fully alive with morning activity, as Brown-headed Nuthatches, Pine Warblers, and other birds flitted among the branches.

A memorable encounter with an endangered woodpecker is a great way to start a day of birding. But what most birders have foremost on their minds on a spring visit to the High Island area are visions of warblers - all kinds of warblers. And we weren't to be disappointed as 27 warbler species were seen by our group during the course of the tour. We watched for ten or more rapt minutes as a diminutive male Cerulean Warbler foraged methodically through the leaves of a huge live oak. Kentucky Warblers and Ovenbirds walked across the leaf litter, Hooded Warblers flitted like sparks of yellow and black, and American Redstarts hovered and flashed their tail feathers. One early evening at Smith Oaks it seemed to rain Black-throated Green Warblers. Dashing Magnolia Warblers showed off at eye level, and a male Canada Warbler—a scarce visitor here—showed itself in fine detail. Some warblers we found already on nesting territories: strong-singing Swainson's Warblers in the canebrakes, and sweet-singing Prothonotary and Yellow-throated warblers in the feathery leaves of bayou cypress trees.

Nearly every visit to these famed coastal patches of woods was rewarded with bright splashes of color: Scarlet and Summer tanagers plucking ripe mulberries alongside Rose-breasted Grosbeaks. Our first afternoon at High Island, a multi-hued Painted Bunting bathed in a shallow pond in the woods, as all pairs of binoculars turned its way. Yellow-billed Cuckoos glided in, most in search of tent caterpillars. A Philadelphia Vireo worked methodically through the leaves, revealing its yellow underparts and distinctive face pattern.

The Bolivar Flats sanctuary of coastal beach and dunes lived up to its stellar reputation. A petite Snowy Plover stood side by side with Piping and Semipalmated plovers, as a thousand or more burnished copper American Avocets strode in the background. Terns called raucously overhead or sat together on the beach—Sandwich Terns alongside Royal, Forster's, Least, and Caspian. Reddish Egrets danced in the shallows just off the beach, as they plucked prey from the warm water of the Gulf of Mexico.

Grassy and flooded fields inland from the coast provide havens for migrating sandpipers and plovers. We scoped Upland Sandpipers and American Golden-Plovers stalking among herds of Brahma cattle. Wet fields were a magnet for White-rumped, Pectoral, and other sandpipers on the way north from South America. Our final morning, a newly flooded complex of rice fields was crawling with Buff-breasted Sandpipers, as migrating Dickcissels called in the background.

Our group took part one morning in an organized rail walk at Anahuac Refuge. With dozens of birders forming a phalanx, we walked in unison across the Yellow Rail Prairie. Several Yellow Rails—a much-wanted sighting for many birders—flushed up, fluttering in plain view. Even luckier, we flushed up a couple of rare Black Rails, close enough to see the rusty brown highlights on the tiny bird's charcoal-gray back. A drive along the nearby freshwater marsh gave us terrific views of secretive Least Bitterns and Purple Gallinules, not to mention a goodly supply of alligators.

The High Island Migration tour remains hard to beat as a spectacle of spring bird migration in North America.

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. Lunch in Winnie, then drove nearby back roads, finding a few Upland Sandpipers and Purple Gallinules before a checking in at motel in Winnie and a break. Later afternoon, birded along the Hwy 124 ditches to High Island, than visited Scout Woods in High Island. This is the first of six nights in Winnie.

April 20: Morning birding at Sabine Woods and along Texas Pt., before lunch in Sabine Pass. Returned to Winnie for a break at the motel then drove south to Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge. After a road loop around Shoveler Pond we joined a coordinated "rail walk" on the Yellow Rail Prairie with a larger group of birders, followed by a stop at "The Willows" grove.

April 21: Early morning trip to Taylor Bayou, then returned to Anahuac NWR to check shorebirds. We had lunch in Anahuac than on to bird the Johnson home and Bolivar Flats. On the way back north, we stopped at Smith Oaks and the heronry there.

April 22: Early morning departure north via Nome and Kountze to bird the "Pineywoods." We stopped alongside young pine plantations, canebrakes, and bayous. Lunch at Mama Jack's in Kountze. After a break in Winnie, returned to Scout Woods and Smith Oaks in High Island.

April 23: Revisited Sabine Woods in the morning, returning to Winnie for lunch and a break. Afternoon birding along South Pear Orchard Rd., Anahuac NWR (Shoveler Pond, the Willows), Scout Woods and Smith Oaks in High Island.

April 24: First thing in the morning, checked flooded rice fields north of Winnie for shorebirds and drove South China Rd. Then headed to Bolivar Peninsula, birding Rollover Pass/Yacht Basin Road, the Johnson home, Port Bolivar, and then made a return visit to Bolivar Flats. We had lunch at Stingaree in Crystal Beach; late afternoon visit to Scout Woods.

April 25: Morning birding at flooded rice fields north of Winnie, then drove through Fannett to Taylor Bayou, then on to Scout Woods and Smith Oaks until late-morning. Returned north through Winnie to pick up our luggage. Enroute to Humble stopped for lunch and birding at the city park in Liberty, then 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

Black-bellied Whistling Duck – very distinctive large ducks with pink bills and dark bodies

Fulvous Whistling-Duck – tawny, handsome ducks seen along roadsides and at Anahuac

Wood Duck

Mottled Duck – in pairs, the one locally nesting duck

Blue-winged Teal – still quite a few on hand, yet to migrate north

Northern Shoveler

White-winged Scoter – two at Bolivar Flats, a scarce species on the Gulf

GREBES

Pied-billed Grebe

PELICANS

American White Pelican – distant roosts near Rollover Pass

Brown Pelican –flocks nearly always in view along the Gulf beaches

CORMORANTS

Double-crested Cormorant – a few immatures

Neotropic Cormorant – the common cormorant, many on nests at Smith Oaks heronry

ANHINGAS

Anhinga – seen aloft at various locations

BITTERNS, HERONS & EGRETS

Least Bittern – excellent views of a female, then a male, at Anahuac refuge

Great Blue Heron

Great Egret – ubiquitous, elegant, in all wet habitats

Snowy Egret – showing off their “golden slippers”

Little Blue Heron

Tricolored Heron – very slender blue-purple-gray herons

Reddish Egret – demonstrating their foraging dance, particularly at Bolivar Flats

Cattle Egret – in spiffy rusty-toned plumage

Green Heron – a daily yet still much appreciated sight, some just arriving off their trans-Gulf flight

Black-crowned Night-Heron – scoped in fine detail, close-up of the enormous red eyes

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron – studied carefully at several roadside stops

IBISES, SPOONBILLS & STORKS

White Ibis – flying flocks nearly always in the air, everywhere

White-faced Ibis – scoped in their iridescent luster

Roseate Spoonbill – intensely pink shoulders contrasting with orange tails; scope views of adult pairs with pale pink chicks, at the heronry

Wood Stork – Marilyn saw one in flight

NEW WORLD VULTURES

Black Vulture – both vultures were seen widely throughout the tour

Turkey Vulture

HAWKS & ALLIES

Bald Eagle – seen on the drive from Houston to Winnie the first morning, locally a scarce nester

White-tailed Kite – hovering along Bolivar Peninsula, as if on command

Mississippi Kite – we lucked into several feeding in the air over the Liberty city park

Northern Harrier – close views over the rice fields

Red-shouldered Hawk

Broad-winged Hawk – very brief views

Swainson's Hawk

Red-tailed Hawk

FALCONS

Northern Crested Caracara – once rare in the area, we saw them on four different days

Merlin – flying by

RAILS & ALLIES

Yellow Rail – good views of several flushing up on the Anahuac rail walk; Bob had an in-the-hand view

Black Rail – amazingly, three were flushed on the rail walk, a very luck sighting

Clapper Rail – great views on the drive along Texas Point and along Yacht Basin Rd.

King Rail – seen by John and Marilyn at Anahuac's Shoveler Pond; heard repeatedly at Anahuac

Sora – close looks on our second visit to Anahuac

Purple Gallinule – an amazingly iridescent bird, on our second trip around Anahuac's Shoveler Pond

Common Moorhen – common indeed

American Coot

PLOVERS

Black-bellied Plover – in all states of plumage, some truly spectacular

American Golden-Plover – on a dry ploughed field at Anahuac

Snowy Plover – one at Bolivar Flats

Wilson's Plover – excellent views at Bolivar

Semipalmated Plover

Piping Plover – in side-by-side comparison with Semipalmated, Snowy, and Wilson's plovers

Killdeer

SANDPIPERS & ALLIES

Black-necked Stilt – love those wonderfully long pink legs

American Avocet – huge concentration at Bolivar Flats made for a lovely scope composition

Spotted Sandpiper

Solitary Sandpiper

Greater Yellowlegs

Willet – both the Eastern and Western subspecies

Lesser Yellowlegs

Whimbrel
Long-billed Curlew
Hudsonian Godwit – good scope views of this much hoped for migrant
Marbled Godwit – the tawny, finely checked godwits of the coastal beachfront
Ruddy Turnstone – on the beach in bright breeding plumage
Red Knot – good numbers along the beach, some in coppery breeding plumage
Sanderling – ubiquitous on the beaches, some also with the orange glow of breeding color
Semipalmated Sandpiper – in close comparison with Westerns
Western Sandpiper
Least Sandpiper
White-rumped Sandpiper – a few at the flooded rice fields north of Winnie
Pectoral Sandpiper - ditto
Dunlin
Stilt Sandpiper – scoped at Anahuac and elsewhere
Buff-breasted Sandpiper – we hit the jackpot the final morning, on flooded fields northeast of Winnie
Short-billed Dowitcher
Long-billed Dowitcher
Wilson’s Phalarope – terrific views of very colorful males

GULLS, TERNS & SKIMMERS

Laughing Gull – abundant in the region
Ring-billed Gull – assorted immatures along the coast
Herring Gull - ditto
Least Tern –miniature terns calling sharply up and down the coastal beaches
Gull-billed Tern – flying over the *Spartina* and dunes at Bolivar Flats
Caspian Tern – the large, blood-red-billed tern
Black Tern – good views along the Intracoastal Canal, especially behind the barges and boats
Common Tern – showing a characteristic dark carpal bar when sitting
Forster’s Tern – local breeders in full silvery plumage
Royal Tern – carrot-orange bills and ripping voices
Sandwich Tern – with yellow-tipped, slender black bills and bushy crests

DOVES & PIGEONS

Rock Pigeon
Eurasian Collared-Dove – common throughout the area of the tour
White-winged Dove – seen first in Nome at bird feeders
Mourning Dove
Inca Dove – also seen first in Nome

CUCKOOS & ALLIES

Yellow-billed Cuckoo – nice views in each of the migrant woods tracts

BARN OWLS & TYPICAL OWLS

Barred Owl – a pair on Taylor Bayou put in a much-appreciated appearance

NIGHTJARS & ALLIES

Common Nighthawk – flying and on a day roost

SWIFTS

Chimney Swift – around towns

HUMMINGBIRDS

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

KINGFISHERS

Belted Kingfisher – just a couple

WOODPECKERS

Red-headed Woodpecker – admired at length at Jones State Forest

Red-bellied Woodpecker – very good views of them with mulberries in the High Island woods

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker – a couple of lingering migrants

Downy Woodpecker

Red-cockaded Woodpecker – excellent studies of this endangered species the first morning

Pileated Woodpecker – perched almost overhead at Jones Forest; again near Taylor Bayou

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS

Eastern Wood-Pewee – seen and heard

Acadian Flycatcher – the final morning near Taylor Bayou

Great-crested Flycatcher – the big, yellow-breasted flycatcher at Sabine Woods

Eastern Kingbird - widespread

Scissor-tailed Flycatcher – pairs widespread; a truly beautiful bird

SHRIKES

Loggerhead Shrike – common along roadsides

VIREOS

White-eyed Vireo – a nesting pair at Scout Woods offered exceptional views; we were fortunate to see them building the nest in its very early stages, then sitting on the completed nest perhaps two days later

Yellow-throated Vireo – nice views of birds close overhead

Warbling Vireo – singing, never seen well

Philadelphia Vireo – superb views of every detail of a few migrating “Phillies” at Smith Oaks

Red-eyed Vireo – a regular in the woods

CROWS & JAYS

Blue Jay – nesting pairs sneaking back and forth through the trees

American Crow

Fish Crow – seen and heard near Taylor Bayou

SWALLOWS & MARTINS

Purple Martin

Tree Swallow

Northern Rough-winged Swallow

Bank Swallow

Cliff Swallow

Barn Swallow

TITMICE

Carolina Chickadee – seen very well in the pine woods

Tufted Titmouse - ditto

NUTHATCHES

Brown-headed Nuthatch – looking straight down at the group at Jones Forest; a southeastern specialty

WRENS

Carolina Wren – nesting in the High Island woods

Sedge Wren – called in for a good view in the brushy edge of a pine plantation

Marsh Wren – singing from the phragmites, right alongside the van at Anahuac NWR

OLD WORLD WARBLERS

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher

THRUSHES

Eastern Bluebird

Veery – several near the Smith Oaks mulberries

Gray-cheeked Thrush – very nice views at Sabine Woods

Swainson's Thrush – seen widely, some singing

Wood Thrush – the upright, ochre colored thrush

American Robin – seen by some of the group the last morning enroute to Humble

MOCKINGBIRDS & THRASHERS

Gray Catbird – one of the migrant regulars in the woods

Northern Mockingbird

Brown Thrasher – surprisingly scarce, we saw one at Sabine Woods

STARLINGS

European Starling

WAXWINGS

Cedar Waxwing

NEW WORLD WARBLERS

Blue-winged Warbler – the tiny, yellow warbler was seen on several occasions, often very close

Golden-winged Warbler – John saw the elusive one at Sabine Woods

Tennessee Warbler

Northern Parula – a number seen, tiny with yellow breasts and mossy green backs

Yellow Warbler

Chestnut-sided Warbler – on at least three days

Magnolia Warbler – a beautiful warbler, we saw several males

Black-throated Green Warbler – late one day at Smith Oaks, it seemed to rain Black-throated Greens

Blackburnian Warbler – only one seen during the tour

Yellow-throated Warbler – singing at one its nesting bayous

Pine Warbler – fine views the first morning north of Houston

Prairie Warbler – singing in the young pine plantations north of Kountze

Bay-breasted Warbler – a couple of these striking warblers

Blackpoll Warbler – several males and at least one female

Cerulean Warbler – we studied a male at Sabine Woods for a long time

Black-and-white Warbler – working the limbs and trunks of many trees

American Redstart – fine views of flashy males

Prothonotary Warbler – this golden yellow warbler was one of the tour highlights

Worm-eating Warbler – seen briefly

Swainson's Warbler – singing and flitting on its breeding territory

Ovenbird – seen walking the ground at several spots

Northern Waterthrush – very confiding along pond edges at Scout and Sabine

Kentucky Warbler – we watched one repeatedly hop upward from the ground, fluttering

Common Yellowthroat – already nesting at places like Sabine Woods

Hooded Warbler – great views, beginning the first day
Canada Warbler – superb views of a male at Scout Woods, an infrequently seen warbler here
Yellow-breasted Chat – perched up and singing its guttural notes

TANAGERS

Summer Tanager – seen nearly every day
Scarlet Tanager – many wonderful views

SPARROWS

Chipping Sparrow
Savannah Sparrow
Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow – an orange-headed sparrow, perched in the *Spartina* near Port Bolivar
Seaside Sparrow – seen best on the rail walk
Swamp Sparrow
White-throated Sparrow – heard singing
White-crowned Sparrow – one at the Johnson house

CARDINALS, BUNTINGS & ALLIES

Northern Cardinal – daily, including a nesting pair at Scout Woods' "Cathedral"
Rose-breasted Grosbeak – males with mulberry stains permanently pictured on their breasts
Blue Grosbeak
Indigo Bunting
Painted Bunting – wonderful views of a brilliant male the first day at Scout Woods
Dickcissel – great views of this yellow-breasted migrant right along the roadside

BLACKBIRDS & ALLIES

Red-winged Blackbird
Eastern Meadowlark
Great-tailed Grackle
Boat-tailed Grackle – the big grackle of the marshes
Common Grackle
Brown-headed Cowbird
Orchard Oriole – chestnut and black males, and yellow females
Baltimore Oriole – often the most colorful bird in the tree tops

OLD WORLD SPARROWS

House Sparrow

MAMMALS and HERPS

Striped Skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*)

Longhorn Cattle

White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*)

Eastern Gray Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*)

Swamp Rabbit (*Sylvilagus aquaticus*)

Hispid Cotton Rat (*Sigmodon hispidus*)

Red-eared Slider (*Trachemys scripta elegans*)

Pallid Spiny Soft-shelled Turtle (*Apalone spinifera pallida*) – at Smith Oaks heronry

(Southern) Copperhead (*Agkistrodon contortrix contortrix*)– a miniature beauty at Sabine Woods

(Gulf Coast) Ribbon Snake (*Thamnophis proximus orarius*)

Yellow-bellied Water Snake (*Nerodia erythrogaster*)

Green Anole (*Anolis carolinensis*)

American Alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*)

Bullfrog (*Rana catesbeiana*)

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

American Green Tree Frog (*Hyla cinerea*) – in the women's restroom at Scout Woods

Gafftopsail Catfish (*Bagre marinus*)

Fiddler Crab (*Uca pugnax*)

Love Bugs (*Plecia nearctica*) – swarms of mating bugs were a true Texas treat