

VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS, INC.

**HIGH ISLAND, TEXAS
AN INTRODUCTORY BIRDING TOUR
April 15 - April 19, 2005**

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The High Island Introductory tour offers more amazing birding variety in three days than probably any other short tour in North America. The High Island sanctuaries, which are areas of prime coastal migrant habitat now set aside from development, are certainly the best known feature of this very bird-rich region. But several other key habitat elements of the nearby area rival the sanctuary woods as phenomenal birding sites. These include Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge, which is comprised of a vast, fresh water marsh system plus many 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 then as prime stopping areas for many thousands of migratory sandpipers.

With such a wealth of birding opportunities, the trick is how to even try to do them justice in less than four days of overall birding time. Well, we gave it a very good effort. Songbird migration was a bit slow when the tour started, although this is all relative: the first day we had just over an hour to bird the sanctuaries, but managed wonderful views of such sought-after species as Worm-eating Warbler and Kentucky Warbler, and had excellent looks at Rose-breasted Grosbeak, both Scarlet and Summer Tanagers in numbers, Blue-headed Vireo, plus Veery and Wood Thrush. Not bad for a quick visit to the woods. By the end of the tour we had seen sixteen species of warblers, dozens of brilliant Scarlet Tanagers, a brilliant male Painted Bunting, showy Indigo Buntings and Blue Grosbeaks, and both Yellow-billed and Black-billed Cuckoos. And we were on a rarity run that has never been equaled for this short tour: a Great Kiskadee was a big surprise; a Groove-billed Ani was astonishing; and a King Eider was almost unprecedented for the state! We also saw several Glossy Ibises, always very hard to find here among the fairly common White-faced Ibises.

Driving along the road to High Island one morning, we had the great fortune to see an adult King Rail just off the road, and soon found the adult to be chaperoning a whole line of fuzzy, black King Rail chicks, perhaps six or eight in all. At Anahuac Refuge, Least Bitterns posed nicely just forty feet from our vans – at least five Least Bitterns in less than an hour. Purple Gallinules caught the morning light just perfectly, shading from purple to blue to iridescent green. The heronry at Smith Oaks sanctuary in High Island was full to overflowing with nesting herons, spoonbills, egrets, and cormorants. It was a special treat to watch dozens of intensely colorful Roseate Spoonbills at close range, both in flight and sitting on large stick nests, turning their eggs with their spatulate bill tips. A quick visit to the bayou country gave us a wonderful view of a male Prothonotary Warbler, a golden yellow songbird singing and singing against the black water of the bayou and the bright green of the bald cypress leaves. Another lasting image of a great, short tour.

ITINERARY

April 15: Afternoon pickup at Houston Intercontinental, then on to Winnie with a little birding enroute along farm roads. Late afternoon visits to Scout Woods and Hooks Woods in High Island. First of four nights in Winnie, Texas.

April 16: We drove east this morning and then south past Port Arthur to bird near the Intracoastal Canal, at Sabine Woods sanctuary, and along the Texas Pt. peninsula. After lunch in the little town of Sabine Pass, we returned to Winnie and then later in the afternoon drove south to visit Scout Woods and the Smith Oaks heronry.

April 17: Morning birding first took us south, where we stopped along the roadside of Hwy 124, and then southwest along the Bolivar Peninsula, with visits to Rollover Pass, the Port Bolivar area (where the King Eider was seen), and to Bolivar Flats. During lunch we birded overlooking the Intracoastal Canal from the Stingaree Restaurant. Afternoon birding at Scout Woods, Hooks Woods, and Smith Oaks.

April 18: A tour of Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge took up the morning. In the afternoon we returned to Sabine Woods.

April 19: Morning visits to Cragen Rd. and Taylor Bayou, before a final trip to the High Island sanctuaries. After loading up bags at the motel, drove west with a stop in Liberty for lunch before arriving at Houston Intercontinental Airport.

BIRDS

GREBES

Pied-billed Grebe – at Anahuac NWR and Smith Oaks

PELICANS

American White Pelican

Brown Pelican – lots of small groups flying in formation

CORMORANTS

Double-crested Cormorant

Neotropic Cormorant – both species scoped on their Smith Oaks nests

DARTERS

Anhinga – wonderful scope views at Smith Oaks heronry

BITTERN, HERONS, AND EGRETS

American Bittern – seen in flight at Anahuac

Least Bittern – superb views of this beautiful, tiny heron relatives

Great Blue Heron

Great Egret – in their finest lace-like plumes at the heronry

Snowy Egret – in every detail at the heronry

Little Blue Heron

Tricolored Heron

Reddish Egret – wading the coastal tide flats

Cattle Egret – sporting rusty highlights of breeding plumage

Green Heron – terrific views at Anahuac

Black-crowned Night-Heron - ditto

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron

IBISES, SPOONBILLS, AND STORKS

White Ibis – a regular sight, both adults and brown immatures

Glossy Ibis – very uncommon locally among White-faced Ibis, we saw two or possibly three together near Port Bolivar

White-faced Ibis – the widespread dark ibis of the tour

Roseate Spoonbill – in all its intense rosiness at the Smith Oaks heronry

NEW WORLD VULTURES

Black Vulture

Turkey Vulture

WATERFOWL

Fulvous Whistling-Duck – lovely ducks, seen well near Port Bolivar

Black-bellied Whistling Duck

Mottled Duck

Blue-winged Teal

Northern Shoveler

Lesser Scaup

King Eider – an almost unheard of rarity in Texas, we had long, leisurely views of an immature male roosting on the Port Bolivar rock wall

Red-breasted Merganser

HAWKS AND ALLIES

White-tailed Kite – a very brief view

Northern Harrier – a male performed its looping courtship flight

Cooper's Hawk – seen best at Scout Woods, where an immature flew right overhead

Red-shouldered Hawk

Swainson's Hawk

FALCONS

Crested Caracara – flying over Smith Oaks heronry, quite a surprise!

Merlin – right next to the van in the Texas Pt. salt cedars!

RAILS AND ALLIES

Clapper Rail – excellent views of this salt and brackish marsh species

King Rail – the adult with tiny black chicks was a tour highlight

Sora – walking around in the open at Anahuac's "Willows" pond

Purple Gallinule – a scintillating member of the rail family

Common Moorhen

American Coot

PLOVERS

Black-bellied Plover

American Golden-Plover – scoped in the rice fields

Wilson's Plover – close views of this and the next two plover species at Bolivar Flats

Semipalmated Plover

Piping Plover

Killdeer

SANDPIPERS AND ALLIES

Black-necked Stilt – noisy nesting pairs

American Avocet

Greater Yellowlegs – in the same flooded fields as Lesser Yellowlegs

Lesser Yellowlegs – among the most abundant migrating shorebirds seen

Solitary Sandpiper – roadside views

Willet – both the darker nesting form and the migratory Western form

Spotted Sandpiper
Upland Sandpiper – walking in pastures with Brahma cattle
Whimbrel
Marbled Godwit
Ruddy Turnstone – some now in very ruddy plumage
Red Knot
Sanderling
Semipalmated Sandpiper
Western Sandpiper
Least Sandpiper
Pectoral Sandpiper – dozens in fields near the end of the tour
Dunlin
Stilt Sandpiper
Buff-breasted Sandpiper
Short-billed Dowitcher
Long-billed Dowitcher
Wilson's Snipe
Wilson's Phalarope

JAEGERS, GULLS, TERNS, AND SKIMMERS

Laughing Gull – the common gull of the area of the tour
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Gull-billed Tern – excellent views of a number of these silver-winged, black billed terns
Caspian Tern – a very few
Royal Tern – the common big tern with the long, orange bill
Sandwich Tern – nice views of their black bills with pale tips
Common Tern
Forster's Tern – sporting very long outer tail feathers
Least Tern – noisily and busily engaged at Bolivar Flats
Black Tern – behind the barges near the Stingaree Restaurant
Black Skimmer – hundreds at Rollover Pass

DOVES AND PIGEONS

Rock Pigeon
Eurasian Collared-Dove – now very well established in the coastal area of the tour
Mourning Dove
Inca Dove

CUCKOOS AND ALLIES

Black-billed Cuckoo – we were very fortunate to see the far less common migratory cuckoo
Yellow-billed Cuckoo – very nice views in the sanctuaries
Groove-billed Ani – The one we saw at Scout Woods represents a species that is extraordinarily rare in the High Island area and even very local in southernmost Texas.

NIGHTJARS

Common Nighthawk – flying and perched

SWIFTS

Chimney Swift

HUMMINGBIRDS

Ruby-throated Hummingbird – a push of migrant the last two days of the tour

KINGFISHERS

Belted Kingfisher – just one; north of Sabine Pass

WOODPECKERS

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker – a few in the sanctuary woods

Red-bellied Woodpecker – a surprising new addition to Smith Oaks

Downy Woodpecker – nesting at Sabine Woods

Pileated Woodpecker

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS

Eastern Wood-Pewee – migrants seen the last morning of the tour

Acadian Flycatcher – heard at Taylor Bayou

Eastern Kingbird

Scissor-tailed Flycatcher – a truly lovely roadside bird

Great Kiskadee – very rare in the area, we saw one along Cragen Rd. west of Taylor Bayou

SHRIKES

Loggerhead Shrike

VIREOS

White-eyed Vireo – mostly heard

Blue-headed Vireo – an unforgettable view the first afternoon, as one sat perched a few yards from the group, perhaps ready to roost for the evening

Yellow-throated Vireo – at Taylor Bayou

Red-eyed Vireo – a plentiful migrant in the sanctuaries

JAYS, CROWS, AND RAVENS

Blue Jay

American Crow

Fish Crow

SWALLOWS AND MARTINS

Purple Martin

Tree Swallow

Northern Rough-winged Swallow

Cliff Swallow

Cave Swallow – good views of a pair under the Intracoastal bridge

Barn Swallow

TITMICE

Carolina Chickadee – seen nicely at Taylor Bayou

Tufted Titmouse - heard

WRENS

Carolina Wren

Sedge Wren – mostly heard

Marsh Wren – at Anahuac, in the phragmites

KINGLETS AND GNATCATCHERS

Ruby-crowned Kinglet – a lingering wintering bird at Sabine Woods

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher

THRUSHES

Eastern Bluebird – along Cragen Rd., scoped on the utility wires

Veery – nice views of this cinnamon toned thrush

Swainson's Thrush

Wood Thrush – excellent views of this heavily spotted, ochre-backed thrush

MOCKINGBIRDS AND THRASHERS

Gray Catbird – a very familiar sight in the woods sanctuaries

Northern Mockingbird

Brown Thrasher

WAXWINGS

Cedar Waxwing

STARLINGS

European Starling

WOOD WARBLERS

Blue-winged Warbler – nice views of a male

Tennessee Warbler – among the most prevalent warbler in the sanctuaries

Northern Parula – great scope views of a male singing on its territory

Yellow Warbler

Chestnut-sided Warbler – among the migrants that arrived on May 18

Yellow-rumped Warbler

Pine Warbler – a male along Cragen Rd.

Palm Warbler – spectacular looks at one in the Anahuac “Willows”

Black-and-white Warbler

Prothonotary Warbler – brilliant views of a golden yellow warbler; Taylor Bayou

Worm-eating Warbler – terrific views of a sometimes retiring species

Northern Waterthrush

Kentucky Warbler – nice views the very first afternoon of the tour

Common Yellowthroat

Hooded Warbler – a fancy male, seen very well

Yellow-breasted Chat

TANAGERS

Summer Tanager – hard to believe these were easy to see every day

Scarlet Tanager - ditto

SPARROWS

Eastern Towhee – in the Sabine Woods underbrush

Savannah Sparrow

Seaside Sparrow – close spotting scope studies along the Texas Pt. road

Lincoln’s Sparrow

Swamp Sparrow

White-throated Sparrow – singing away at Sabine Woods

GROSBEAKS, BUNTINGS, AND ALLIES

Northern Cardinal – singing its wide variety of tunes

Rose-breasted Grosbeak – a daily sight, often munching mulberries

Blue Grosbeak – some dazzling males

Indigo Bunting – also dazzling

Painted Bunting – a much wanted subject, we got a close look at a fancy male

BLACKBIRDS AND ALLIES

Red-winged Blackbird

Eastern Meadowlark

Great-tailed Grackle – the grackle trio of species were well represented

Boat-tailed Grackle

Common Grackle

Brown-headed Cowbird

Orchard Oriole – the chestnut and black males were readily seen

Baltimore Oriole – began arriving the final two days of the tour

OLD WORLD WEAVERS

House Sparrow

MAMMALS, HERPS, AND OTHER ANIMALS

Eastern Gray Squirrel

Virginia Opossum – a live one, and during the day!

Swamp Rabbit

Muskrat

Red-eared Slider (turtle)

Chicken Turtle

Green Anole

Gulf Coast Ribbon Snake

Broad-banded Watersnake

American Alligator – plentiful at Anahuac