

VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS, INC.

HIGH ISLAND MIGRATION

April 19-26, 2006

Leaders: Bob Sundstrom and David Wolf

Our 2006 High Island Migration tour started with a bang: a first morning of birding in the pine forest near Houston delivered wonderful studies of endangered Red-cockaded Woodpeckers near a nest cavity, as well as fine views of a pair of beautiful Red-headed Woodpeckers and a noisy flock of Brown-headed Nuthatches—not to mention a migrant Canada Warbler. All were new birds for many of the group.

As we headed east toward the High Island area and our lodgings in Winnie, we made a few stops. While scoping a gorgeous pair of Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, a Dickcissel popped up just behind us on a fence line. A sod farm attracted a flock of Buff-breasted Sandpipers, which foraged and preened right near the roadway. Soon we were on the way to our first visit to the High Island sanctuaries, to enjoy our first views of trans-Gulf migrants. Scarlet and Summer tanagers fed in the mulberry trees alongside Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Eastern Kingbirds, and a Yellow-billed Cuckoo. The first migrant warblers of the tour showed up at a water drip—the first of what would total 28 species of warblers by the final morning of our tour (among over 200 species of birds altogether).

On two occasions during our week of birding, weather conditions helped deliver strong surges of migrant songbirds to the coastal woods. We watched warblers literally drop into the treetops, at the end of their northward journey across the Gulf of Mexico from the Yucatan—first, a richly-colored male Bay-breasted Warbler, working the branches near a Black-and-white. Soon someone spotted a female Cerulean Warbler. “It’s just to the left of the Black-throated Green!” were the directions. A neon-orange male Blackburnian Warbler worked the higher branches as it seemed to rain Tennessee Warblers. Then the whole group became fixed upon getting a view of the Golden-winged Warbler that every few minutes worked its way out into the open. If only it were as easy to see as the Blue-winged Warbler nearby, or the flashy American Redstart that constantly fluttered up and down.

This eight-day tour packed in so many highlights because the upper coast of Texas in late April is a veritable banquet of birding possibilities. On a visit to Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge we were treated to point-blank roadside views of both American and Least bitterns, as well as iridescent Purple Gallinules, whose feathers seemed to transmit every shade of green, blue, and purple. At a patch of willows on the refuge, a Kentucky Warbler walked completely in the open on a dead branch lying in a small pond—a remarkable sight for such a secretive warbler. During an exciting two hours in the cypress bayou country near our lodging, we watched singing male warblers of three fine species one after another: a much acclaimed Swainson’s Warbler, followed by a canary-yellow Prothonotary, and then a lovely Yellow-throated Warbler—and these three just after scope views of a singing male Painted Bunting. A pair of Barred Owls sat in the nearby trees, duetting in loud hooted sequences.

Shorebirds and seabirds rate very high, too, as an attraction of the High Island area in spring. All four species of small plovers—Snowy, Piping, Semipalmated, and Wilson’s—stood on the sand at Bolivar Flats for comparison, as Least Terns clattered overhead. Sandwich, Royal, Forster’s, and Black terns sat together along the shoreline for comparison, as thousands of sandpipers (including a few early migrant Red Knots) foraged nearby. Many other images come to mind: a White-tailed Kite hovering and then kiting to the ground, capturing a small rodent—which it then dispatched and ate while perched atop a fence post not far from the group watching intently from the vans. At another spot, several Nelson’s Sharp-tailed Sparrows perched at close range on one side of the road, gem-like sparrows with orange and gray faces. On the other side of the road, two Clapper Rails foraged, preened, and chased one another in a shallow tidal estuary. A morning roadside stop turned up a handsome King Rail, standing out in the open in a shallow ditch. And a trip to the High Island heronry left its own lasting impression: brilliant Roseate Spoonbills sitting on large stick nests, surrounded by nesting Tricolored Herons, Great Egrets, Snowy Egrets, and Neotropic Cormorants.

The High Island Migration tour offers one of the premier venues for watching spring bird migration in North America, always living up to its storied reputation.

ITINERARY

April 19: Arrival in Houston, get-acquainted dinner at the hotel.

April 20: Morning birding at Jones State Forest, then on toward Winnie via Conroe, Cut N’ Shoot, Dayton, Liberty and Nome, birding briefly enroute. After lunch in Winnie, went directly to Scout Woods in High Island. First of six nights in Winnie.

April 21: Morning birding along Hwy. 124 roadside ditches, preceding an epic thunderstorm. On to Bolivar Peninsula (Rollover Pass, Fort Travis State Park, Johnson House) and lunch at Stingaree on the Intracoastal Canal in Crystal Beach. Afternoon birding at Hooks Woods and Smith Oaks, with a major movement of migrants underway.

April 22: 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 in Winnie and a break, departed to Sabine Woods for late afternoon birding and dinner in Sabine Pass.

April 23: Morning birding near Taylor Bayou, northeast of Winnie. Later morning to Bolivar Peninsula, including Rollover Pass, Yacht Basin Rd., lunch at the Outrigger, then walked out onto Bolivar Flats. Late afternoon loop through Port Bolivar before returning to Winnie.

April 24: Early morning departure north via Nome and Kountze to bird the "Pineywoods." Several stops west of Kountze, before driving further north to Angelina National Forest in search of Bachman’s Sparrow. After lunch in Colmesneil and a break at the motel, birded south to the Smith Oaks heronry and adjacent woods for migrants.

April 25: Returned in morning to Cragen Road/Taylor Bayou area, then continued east and south to Sabine Woods, with lunch in Sabine Pass. After a break in Winnie, birded south to the East Bay Unit of Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge, then to Scout Woods.

April 26: Morning birding at Hooks Woods and Smith Woods until mid-morning. Returned north through Winnie to pick up our luggage, then continued on to Houston Intercontinental Airport. Departures.

BIRD LIST:

PELICANS

American White Pelican – just one, soaring over Rollover Pass area

Brown Pelican – undulating flights of “pterodactyls” all along the coast

CORMORANTS

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

Neotropic Cormorant – the common cormorant here; breeding adults adorned with rims of white feathers round the base of the bill

DARTERS

Anhinga – soaring and perched with wings out swept

FRIGATEBIRDS

Magnificent Frigatebird – distant soarers along the coast

BITTERNS, HERONS, AND EGRETS

American Bittern – posing like a stiff sheaf of reeds

Least Bittern – superb views at Anahuac of these mini-herons

Great Blue Heron – scarce locally

Great Egret – stately and elegant in their breeding plumes

Snowy Egret – slightly crested, with yellow feet

Little Blue Heron – most often seen flying over in small groups

Tricolored Heron – all of its colors in exquisite detail at the heronry

Reddish Egret – dancing at Bolivar Flats

Cattle Egret – very fancy in breeding plumage, with purple-red lores and lots of rusty highlights on their white plumage

Green Heron

Black-crowned Night-Heron – perched for scope views at the heronry

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron – seen best along Taylor Bayou

IBISES, SPOONBILLS, AND STORKS

White Ibis – flapping by with black wing-tips and red bills

White-faced Ibis

Roseate Spoonbill – views at the heronry were wonderful: orange tails, painted faces, rosy feathers, and tiny nestlings

NEW WORLD VULTURES

Black Vulture

Turkey Vulture

WATERFOWL

Fulvous Whistling-Duck – small flocks at Anahuac

Black-bellied Whistling Duck – very flashy red bills and white wing patches

Wood Duck

Mottled Duck

Blue-winged Teal

Gadwall – a female along Hwy. 124

HAWKS AND ALLIES

Osprey – just a few during the tour

White-tailed Kite – We watched a kite hover, kite to the ground, and capture a small rodent. As we pulled the vans closer, we watched the kite tear up its prey, swallowing it in small bites, before flying off again.

A wonderful study of a handsome bird of prey.

Mississippi Kite – a flock of seven over the Pineywoods

Northern Harrier

Cooper's Hawk

Red-shouldered Hawk

Broad-winged Hawk

Swainson's Hawk

Red-tailed Hawk

FALCONS

Northern Crested Caracara – one perched atop a utility pole for careful scope scrutiny

Merlin – flying near a Peregrine Falcon

Peregrine Falcon – one flew along the Bolivar Peninsula, before perching atop a tall tower

GALLINACEOUS BIRDS

Northern Bobwhite - heard

RAILS AND ALLIES

Clapper Rail – Six were seen on one day, some right next to the roadway in the tidal ditches. Most entertaining was one chasing another through the *Spartina* and open patches along the road to Bolivar Flats.

King Rail – We were fortunate to see this freshwater rail twice, and right next to the road.

Sora

Purple Gallinule – its iridescent feathers seemed to cover every shade of green, blue, and purple

Common Moorhen

American Coot

PLOVERS

Black-bellied Plover – some nearly in full breeding glory

Snowy Plover – side-by-side with Piping Plovers, a textbook-like comparison

Wilson's Plover – wary pairs nesting along Bolivar Flats

Semipalmated Plover

Piping Plover – scores of this nearly endangered species

Killdeer

SANDPIPERS AND ALLIES

American Oystercatcher

Black-necked Stilt

American Avocet – sweeping the shallows with their bills near Rollover Pass

Greater Yellowlegs – a few, in their barred breeding patterning

Lesser Yellowlegs – one of the most prevalent migrant shorebirds here

Solitary Sandpiper

Willet - nice comparisons of the smaller and darker resident nesting *semipalmatus* Willets with the paler wintering *inornatus* which breed in the interior West

Spotted Sandpiper

Upland Sandpiper – the best view was a single bird very close to the road in a pasture on the Bolivar Peninsula

Whimbrel – with long decurved bills and bold head stripes

Long-billed Curlew

Marbled Godwit – a few probing the flats

Ruddy Turnstone – most in full ruddiness
Red Knot – thankfully, a few early migrants at Bolivar
Sanderling
Semipalmated Sandpiper
Western Sandpiper
Least Sandpiper
White-rumped Sandpiper – a few seen well, including white rumps as they flew
Pectoral Sandpiper
Dunlin
Buff-breasted Sandpiper – lucky we were to find twenty or so near the road our first day
Short-billed Dowitcher
Long-billed Dowitcher

JAEGERS, GULLS, TERNS, AND SKIMMERS

Laughing Gull
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Gull-billed Tern – seen especially well flying back and forth along the Bolivar shoreline
Royal Tern – raucous squawks and dagger-like orange bills
Sandwich Tern – distinctive with their slender black bills with yellow tips
Common Tern
Forster's Tern
Least Tern – the smallest of the many tern species we saw
Black Tern – very striking small terns, with black bodies and gray wings
Black Skimmer – unmistakable

DOVES AND PIGEONS

Rock Pigeon
Eurasian Collared-Dove – an ever-increasing newcomer to the area
White-winged Dove – just a few near High Island
Mourning Dove
Inca Dove

CUCKOOS AND ALLIES

Yellow-billed Cuckoo – several excellent views of a very sneaky species

BARN OWLS AND TYPICAL OWLS

Barn Owl – owlets in the near darkness of the old Smith Oaks armory
Barred Owl – hooting and flying in for a close view of the group

NIGHTJARS

Common Nighthawk

SWIFTS

Chimney Swift

HUMMINGBIRDS

Ruby-throated Hummingbird

KINGFISHERS

Belted Kingfisher

WOODPECKERS

Red-headed Woodpecker – much acclaimed as a beautiful and strikingly patterned bird

Red-bellied Woodpecker

Downy Woodpecker

Red-cockaded Woodpecker – persistence got us excellent studies of a pair the first morning; an endangered species

Northern Flicker – Cruce saw one at the woods

Pileated Woodpecker

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS

Eastern Wood-Pewee

Acadian Flycatcher – coming in for close views at Taylor Bayou

Great-crested Flycatcher – seen at last the final morning

Eastern Kingbird

Scissor-tailed Flycatcher – no bird on the tour was more of an aesthetic treat

Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher – very rare on the Upper Coast, one was seen at Sabine Woods

SHRIKES

Loggerhead Shrike

VIREOS

White-eyed Vireo – we saw all the likely vireo species in the course of the tour

Blue-headed Vireo – an uncommon migrant in the area

Yellow-throated Vireo

Warbling Vireo

Philadelphia Vireo – seen late in the tour during a good wave of migrant arrivals

Red-eyed Vireo

JAYS, CROWS, AND RAVENS

Blue Jay

American Crow

Fish Crow

LARKS

Horned Lark

SWALLOWS AND MARTINS

Purple Martin

Tree Swallow

Northern Rough-winged Swallow

Bank Swallow

Cliff Swallow

Cave Swallow – good, close, diagnostic views of a few nesting under the Intracoastal bridge

Barn Swallow

TITMICE

Carolina Chickadee

Tufted Titmouse

NUTHATCHES

Brown-headed Nuthatch – a Southeastern specialty, seen well at Jones and Angelina Forests

WRENS

Carolina Wren
Sedge Wren – singing in a bare shrub at Anahuac
Marsh Wren

KINGLETS AND GNATCATCHERS

Ruby-crowned Kinglet – flitting in the Smith Oaks woods
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher

THRUSHES

Eastern Bluebird
Veery – a cinnamon-toned thrush, seen well at Sabine Woods
Gray-cheeked Thrush – very good, diagnostic views on more than one occasion
Swainson's Thrush
Wood Thrush – migrants showing up later in the tour
American Robin – Dave's quest bird; we managed to see a couple

MOCKINGBIRDS AND THRASHERS

Gray Catbird – the phrase “just another catbird” was heard often during the tour
Northern Mockingbird
Brown Thrasher

PIPITS

American Pipit – with Buff-breasted Sandpipers on a sod farm

WAXWINGS

Cedar Waxwing – flocks flying over in Colmesneil

STARLINGS

European Starling

WOOD WARBLERS

Blue-winged Warbler – several seen, tiny yellow warblers with a dark eye-line
Golden-winged Warbler – much sought, but hard to get a long look at
Tennessee Warbler – outnumbered all other warbler species
Nashville Warbler
Northern Parula – singing in the bayou country
Yellow Warbler
Chestnut-sided Warbler – great, close-up views
Magnolia Warbler – another species seen best late in the tour
Yellow-rumped Warbler – a few Myrtle types
Black-throated Green Warbler – numerous males, often very confiding
Blackburnian Warbler – highly sought after, with blazing orange faces
Yellow-throated Warbler – a male came in and sang at Taylor Bayou
Pine Warbler
Prairie Warbler – very close views of a singing male in a pine plantation
Bay-breasted Warbler – first seen at Smith Oaks during a strong migration event
Blackpoll Warbler
Cerulean Warbler – mostly females in metallic green tones
Black-and-white Warbler
American Redstart – flashy males
Prothonotary Warbler – the stunning Taylor Bayou male was a star of the tour

Swainson's Warbler – great views of an often hard to see skulker
Ovenbird – walking the leaf litter at Scout Woods
Northern Waterthrush
Kentucky Warbler – point blank views at the dry pond at the Anahuac “Willows”
Common Yellowthroat
Hooded Warbler – a flashy male posed in the shady understory of Sabine Woods
Canada Warbler – the first morning at Jones Forest; lucky to see
Yellow-breasted Chat

TANAGERS

Summer Tanager – many fine views of both tanager species
Scarlet Tanager

SPARROWS

Bachman's Sparrow – after a very long drive, we were fortunate to get a nice view of this Southeastern specialty
Savannah Sparrow
Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow – a gem of a sparrow, with much orange on its upper half
Seaside Sparrow – scoped in fine detail
Swamp Sparrow
White-throated Sparrow

GROSBEAKS, BUNTINGS, AND ALLIES

Northern Cardinal
Rose-breasted Grosbeak – seemed to enjoy the mulberries very much
Blue Grosbeak
Indigo Bunting – scintillating males
Painted Bunting – excellent views at nesting sites and in the migrant woods
Dickcissel – we were fortunate to see this open country species a number of times

BLACKBIRDS AND ALLIES

Red-winged Blackbird
Eastern Meadowlark
Great-tailed Grackle – good views of the grackle species trio
Boat-tailed Grackle
Common Grackle
Brown-headed Cowbird
Orchard Oriole – sitting nicely in the open all around Anahuac
Baltimore Oriole – neon-orange males in the tree tops

OLD WORLD WEAVERS

House Sparrow

MAMMALS, HERPS, AND OTHER ANIMALS

Coyote – a bit of a surprise, one along Hwy. 124 south of Stowell

Eastern Gray Squirrel

Eastern Fox Squirrel

Swamp Rabbit

Bullfrog

Blanchard Cricket Frog

Red-eared Slider (turtle)

Green Anole

American Alligator – basking and swimming (and one walking across the road) at Anahuac

Fiddler Crab

Ghost Crab