

VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS, INC.

HIGH ISLAND MIGRATION TOUR

April 20 - April 27, 2005

Leaders: BOB SUNDSTROM & BRENNAN MULROONEY

The *2005 High Island Migration Tour* got off to an excellent start with a first morning of birding in the Piney Woods near Houston, where we had nice studies of five species of woodpeckers including a pair of endangered Red-cockaded Woodpeckers near a nest cavity, a beautiful pair of Red-headed Woodpeckers, plus Pileated, Red-bellied and Downy woodpeckers. At the same site, a Brown-headed Nuthatch posed at eye-level in a nearby tree, another new bird for many of the group. By mid-morning we were driving cross-country, stopping for five Upland Sandpipers in a cow pasture, before arriving at our lodgings in Winnie. Soon we were on the way to our first visit to the High Island sanctuaries. Stops at Scout Woods and Hooks Woods turned up the first migrant warblers of the tour, among them Kentucky, Hooded, and Black-throated Green warblers, part of a total that would reach a superb twenty-eight species of warblers by the final morning of the tour (among over 200 species of birds altogether).

A couple of days hence the weather helped deliver a treasure trove of warblers and other migrants. We watched in one patch of oaks near the coast as new birds seemed to be arriving every minute: a brilliant orange-faced male Blackburnian Warbler gleaning inch worms on a low branch, followed by one and then another gemlike male Cerulean Warbler, always one of the most sought-after species of the tour. A wholly unanticipated treat was a "Brewster's" Warbler, a Blue-winged X Golden-winged warbler hybrid that is only rarely seen here in migration. Our good luck with wood warblers held through the final morning, as we added Magnolia and Nashville warblers the final morning, while also getting some better views of the scarce Golden-winged Warbler and a wonderful study of a foraging Worm-eating Warbler – while an Ovenbird walked back and forth across the sidewalk in one of the High Island sanctuaries.

The tour produced too many highlights to adequately chronicle in a short piece. On a rail walk at Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge (on which Victor Emanuel and Barry Lyon also tromped) we saw an amazing *twelve* Yellow Rails! A short drive in the refuge after the rail walk turned up five Least Bitterns and a Purple Gallinule, all in the glistening light of very late afternoon. Nearby, a Crested Caracara walked slowly down one of the refuge dikes, as if on an evening stroll. The plentitude of shorebirds is another prime feature of the High Island area in spring. All four species of small plovers – Snowy, Piping, Semipalmated, and Wilson's – stood on the sand and Bolivar Flats for comparison, as Least Terns clattered overhead and Sandwich, Royal, Forster's and Common terns roosted nearby. The highlight of our time at Bolivar Flats and one of the top moments of the entire tour was a mid-air prey transfer from a male to a female Northern Harrier, a feat that none of us had before witnessed in this species. We watched in rapt fascination as the female flew under the male, which was carrying a rodent in his talons, and then spun upside down in the air as the male simultaneously dropped the prey toward her – and she caught it in mid-air!

Lots of other vivid images come to mind: A Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow that sat in the open at close range, long enough to examine every detail of its lovely orange and gray face. A persistent search for the skulking Swainson's Warbler, at last rewarded with eye-level studies of a singing male. A Bachman's Sparrow that sang for ten minutes on its low perch, oblivious of the several spotting scopes focused in on it. Male Painted Buntings, bathing in a small pool or hopping slowly down the trail in front of the group. Adult King Rails herding their small black chicks through the marsh. A lovely, perched Mississippi Kite. Brilliant Roseate Spoonbills sitting on large stick nests, surrounded by nesting Tricolored Herons, Great Egrets, Snowy Egrets, and a whole host of nesting waterbirds in the Smith Oaks heronry.

The High Island Migration tour is unsurpassed as a study in the riches of spring bird migration in North America, and the fact that it also includes some fine Cajun cookery and Gulf Coast seafood makes it all the more memorable.

ITINERARY

April 20: Arrival in Houston, get-acquainted dinner at the hotel.

April 21: Morning birding at Jones State Forest, then on toward Winnie via Conroe, Cut N' Shoot, Liberty and Nome, birding briefly enroute. After lunch in Winnie, went directly to Scout Woods and Hooks Woods in High Island. First of six nights in Winnie.

April 22: Morning birding near Taylor Bayou, at flooded rice fields along Hwy. 73 east of Winnie, near the Intracoastal Canal Bridge south of Port Arthur. Afternoon birding at Sabine Woods, Texas Pt., and again at Sabine Woods and "The Willows" to the west.

April 23: In the morning we birded at Smith Oaks, and then headed southwest along the Bolivar Peninsula with stops at Rollover Pass, Yacht Basin Rd., Ft. Travis State Park, and the Johnson house. After lunch at the Stingaree Restaurant and birding at the adjacent Intracoastal Canal, we birded Bolivar Flats, the Johnson House again, and Hooks Woods in High Is.

April 24: Morning birding at Hooks Woods and Scout Woods. After instructional session with Brennan and Peter, and late afternoon trip to Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge, including a rail walk on the Yellow Rail Prairie with a larger group of birders.

April 25: Morning birding took us out along Cragen Rd. and other back roads north of Hwy. 73, before continuing east and south past Port Arthur to stop at the Intracoastal Canal bridge and Sabine Woods. After lunch in Sabine Pass we visited Texas Pt. and Sabine Woods again, as serious rain set in.

April 26: Drove north via Nome and Kountze to bird the "piney woods" along Gore Store Rd. northwest of Silsbee; then 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 27: Morning birding at Scout Woods and Hooks Woods until mid-morning. Returned north through Winnie to pick up our luggage, then continued on to Houston Intercontinental Airport. Departures.

BIRDS:

LOONS

Common Loon – a distant loon at Bolivar Flats

GREBES

Pied-billed Grebe

PELICANS

American White Pelican

Brown Pelican – lots of small groups flying in formation

CORMORANTS

Double-crested Cormorant

Neotropic Cormorant – both species on nests at the heronry

DARTERS

Anhinga – seen best perched at the Smith Oaks heronry

BITTERN, HERONS, AND EGRETS

American Bittern – two good views of birds in flight

Least Bittern – terrific views on these miniature herons in late afternoon light at Anahuac

Great Blue Heron – an uncommon heron in this area

Great Egret – seen widely, including on nests at the heronry where some fluffed out their showy plumes

Snowy Egret – lots of nice views, including nesting pairs

Little Blue Heron – in full breeding shades of blue and purple

Tricolored Heron – with intensely blue bill at the heronry

Reddish Egret – foraging on the tidal flats at Rollover and Bolivar

Cattle Egret – widespread, also nesting at the heronry

Green Heron – a daily sight, with some great, close views

Black-crowned Night-Heron – also at the heronry

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron – seen daily, but best when scoped perched in a tree along Boondocks Road.

IBISES, SPOONBILLS, AND STORKS

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

White-faced Ibis

Roseate Spoonbill – amazingly detailed views at the heronry, some with chicks

NEW WORLD VULTURES

Black Vulture – lots of both vulture species

Turkey Vulture

WATERFOWL

Fulvous Whistling-Duck – seen mostly in flight at Anahuac

Black-bellied Whistling Duck – vividly marked ducks, also seen flying

Wood Duck

Mottled Duck

Blue-winged Teal

Northern Shoveler

Red-breasted Merganser – close look at a fancy drake near Texas Pt.

HAWKS AND ALLIES

American Swallow-tailed Kite – a quick view of a bird flying by the van

White-tailed Kite – good views of flying and perched kites; a local nester

Mississippi Kite – wonderful scope view along Boondocks Rd.; others in flight

Northern Harrier – Quite possibly the ultimate highlight of the tour was the mid-air prey transfer from a male to a female near Bolivar Flats. This rarely seen event was witnessed at close range from both vans.

Red-shouldered Hawk

Broad-winged Hawk

Swainson's Hawk – one very pale immature among the several seen flying or sitting

Red-tailed Hawk

FALCONS

Crested Caracara – several seen, including one walking down one of the Anahuac dikes

Peregrine Falcon – a couple seen in flight

GALLINACEOUS BIRDS

Northern Bobwhite – heard at Anahuac

RAILS AND ALLIES

Yellow Rail – One of the top highlights of the tour: we saw twelve (!) Yellow Rails altogether on the Anahuac rail walk, most of them a very close range.

Clapper Rail – nice views in the salt marsh along Yacht Basin Rd.

King Rail – several great views of a hard to see species, including adults with chicks Sora

Purple Gallinule – in absolutely stunning light at Anahuac NWR

Common Moorhen

PLOVERS

Black-bellied Plover

American Golden-Plover – scoped in the rice fields

Snowy Plover – great comparison of all four smaller plovers at Bolivar Flats

Wilson's Plover

Semipalmated Plover

Piping Plover

Killdeer – widespread, daily

SANDPIPERS AND ALLIES

Black-necked Stilt – noisy nesting pairs

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 – nice views of five in a pasture the first full day

Whimbrel – one field held more than a thousand the first day

Long-billed Curlew – just one, most already nesting further north

Marbled Godwit

Ruddy Turnstone

Red Knot – after a bit of searching, we scoped half a dozen at Bolivar

Sanderling

Semipalmated Sandpiper

Western Sandpiper

Least Sandpiper

White-rumped Sandpiper

Pectoral Sandpiper – dozens in flooded fields

Dunlin –in the process of molting into their black belly feathers

Stilt Sandpiper – scoped at Anahuac, among dowitchers
Buff-breasted Sandpiper – good scope views of this sought after sandpiper
Short-billed Dowitcher – along the coast
Long-billed Dowitcher – on inland flooded rice fields
Wilson’s Phalarope – a few at Anahuac, feeding in the wake of Blue-winged Teal

JAEGERS, GULLS, TERNS, AND SKIMMERS

Laughing Gull – the common gull
Franklin’s Gull – we were fortunate to see a late migrant, with a nice pink breast
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Gull-billed Tern – a few of these silvery, blunt billed terns
Caspian Tern
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
Least Tern – nesting above the tide line at Bolivar
Black Tern – in the wake of barges on the Intracoastal Canal
Black Skimmer – wonderful studies of their odd flight shape

DOVES AND PIGEONS

Rock Pigeon
Eurasian Collared-Dove – now a common nester in the area of the tour
White-winged Dove – nesting at Sabine Pass
Mourning Dove
Inca Dove

CUCKOOS AND ALLIES

Black-billed Cuckoo – glimpsed by a couple people on the final morning
Yellow-billed Cuckoo – excellent views at the various woods sanctuaries
Greater Roadrunner – heard along Gore Store Rd. in the Piney Woods

BARN OWLS AND TYPICAL OWLS

Barn Owl – Nice views of one flying during the day, and an amazing study of a nesting site’s ossuary.
Peter gave an instructive analysis of their pellet contents.
Barred Owl – heard along Taylor Bayou

NIGHTJARS

Common Nighthawk – seen flying and on a day roost

SWIFTS

Chimney Swift

HUMMINGBIRDS

Ruby-throated Hummingbird – seen daily, as lots of migrants were coming through

WOODPECKERS

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker – Jan saw one at Hooks Woods, which quickly hid itself
Red-headed Woodpecker – wonderful views the first morning
Red-bellied Woodpecker – one of the five species of woodpeckers seen the first morning
Downy Woodpecker – nesting in the sanctuaries
Red-cockaded Woodpecker – very good views of a pair around a nest cavity; an endangered species
of the pine woods
Pileated Woodpecker – some excellent views, including three together near Taylor Bayou

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS

Eastern Wood-Pewee – a migrant seen or heard daily

Acadian Flycatcher – good views of migrants in the sanctuaries; others heard on territory

Great-crested Flycatcher

Western Kingbird – not to be expected, Roberta spotted one near Crystal Beach

Eastern Kingbird

Scissor-tailed Flycatcher – these beauties were seen daily

SHRIKES

Loggerhead Shrike – a common nester on the coastal plain

VIREOS

White-eyed Vireo – seen best while we waited for a Swainson's Warbler to sit in the open

Blue-headed Vireo

Yellow-throated Vireo

Warbling Vireo

Philadelphia Vireo – good views of this hoped for migrant

Red-eyed Vireo – another migrant seen daily in the woods

JAYS, CROWS, AND RAVENS

Blue Jay

American Crow

Fish Crow

LARKS

Horned Lark – great looks at a pair on the dune edge at Bolivar Flats

SWALLOWS AND MARTINS

Purple Martin

Tree Swallow

Northern Rough-winged Swallow

Bank Swallow – lots of migrants coming through near the coast

Cliff Swallow

Cave Swallow – a scarce and local nester locally, we watched a pair zip in and out under the
Intracoastal Bridge

Barn Swallow

TITMICE

Carolina Chickadee

Tufted Titmouse

NUTHATCHES

Brown-headed Nuthatch – an amazingly close view of one at eye level in Jones State Forest

WRENS

Carolina Wren

Sedge Wren – seen as they flushed repeatedly on the rail walk

Marsh Wren

KINGLETS AND GNATCATCHERS

Ruby-crowned Kinglet – one laggard migrant still at Sabine Woods

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher

THRUSHES

Eastern Bluebird – seen at several spots within the forested zone

Veery – nice views of this cinnamon toned thrush

Gray-cheeked Thrush – diagnostic views in comparison with Swainson's Thrush

Swainson's Thrush

Wood Thrush – one feed unconcernedly right next to the boardwalk at Hooks Woods

American Robin – we had to look for them to get this species on the list

MOCKINGBIRDS AND THRASHERS

Gray Catbird – became a most familiar sight at all the woods sanctuaries

Northern Mockingbird

Brown Thrasher

WAXWINGS

Cedar Waxwing

STARLINGS

European Starling

WOOD WARBLERS

Blue-winged Warbler – lots of views of singing migrant males

Golden-winged Warbler – always a treat, we saw males in two locations

“Brewster's” Warbler – a hybrid of the two previous species, this is a rare sighting here

Tennessee Warbler – this nondescript warbler was very much a daily sight

Nashville Warbler – a last morning addition, a late migrating female at Hooks Woods

Northern Parula – our best view was of a singing male along the road to Taylor Bayou

Yellow Warbler

Chestnut-sided Warbler – great looks at this low canopy forager

Magnolia Warbler – another last morning addition to our warbler compilation

Black-throated Green Warbler – seen most days in the sanctuaries, often at close range

Blackburnian Warbler – gemlike; we had the great fortune to see a bunch of these

Yellow-throated Warbler – a male on territory offered great views

Pine Warbler – common in the Piney Woods

Prairie Warbler – a singing male in a young pine plantation came right to the road

Bay-breasted Warbler – finally a couple males in the last few days of the tour

Blackpoll Warbler

Cerulean Warbler – multiple males; one of the most sought for birds here each spring

Black-and-white Warbler – nuthatching its way along trunks and branches

American Redstart – nice views of flashy males

Prothonotary Warbler – in your face views of this golden bird at Taylor Bayou

Worm-eating Warbler – after skimpy views on several days, a Worm-eating Warbler foraged in the open at an easy distance for all to enjoy (Hooks Woods)

Swainson's Warbler – this species made us work, but we finally got very good views of a singing male in the canebrake habitat along Gore Store Rd.

Ovenbird – bobbing happily along the sidewalk at Hooks Woods

Northern Waterthrush – many views

Kentucky Warbler – hopping along atop the leaf litter

Common Yellowthroat

Hooded Warbler – recorded daily, we had some memorable views, including a male bathing

Wilson's Warbler – a male at the drip at Sabine Woods; an uncommon migrant here

Yellow-breasted Chat

TANAGERS

Summer Tanager – both tanagers were seen every day of the tour!!

Scarlet Tanager

SPARROWS

Eastern Towhee

Bachman's Sparrow – a very accommodating singing male capped an exciting morning of birding in the Piney Woods

Chipping Sparrow – seen by a few

Savannah Sparrow

Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow – A tour highlight was the gorgeous orange faced sparrow at Rollover Pass that sat in the open for several minutes, even allowing scope views.

Seaside Sparrow – scoped along the Texas Pt. salt marsh

Lincoln's Sparrow

White-throated Sparrow

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 some terrific looks at fancy males

Dickcissel – also a much hoped for species, we had very nice views of a small flock along the farm road out to Anahuac NWR

BLACKBIRDS AND ALLIES

Red-winged Blackbird

Eastern Meadowlark

Yellow-headed Blackbird – quite uncommon, we saw three different males

Brewer's Blackbird – very odd at this season, we saw two females in a rice field

Great-tailed Grackle – the grackle trio were plentiful

Boat-tailed Grackle

Common Grackle

Brown-headed Cowbird

Orchard Oriole – both oriole species were seen daily throughout the tour

Baltimore Oriole

OLD WORLD WEAVERS

House Sparrow

MAMMALS, HERPS, AND OTHER ANIMALS

Eastern Gray Squirrel

Hispid Cotton Rat

Swamp Rabbit

Nine-banded Armadillo

Bullfrog

Pig Frog

Blanchard Cricket Frog

Red-eared Slider (turtle)

Green Anole

Gulf Coast Ribbon Snake

Broad-banded Watersnake

American Alligator