



TEXAS: Upper Coast Migration

April 13-18, 2019

Tour leader: Josh Engel

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High Island is practically synonymous with spring migration. The small town on the Upper Texas Coast is home to Boy Scout Woods, one of the great migration hotspots in North America. But on this trip, it was overshadowed by some of the region's other migration hotspots, like Sabine Woods and Louisiana's Peveto Woods. Warblers were tough to come by, but we ended up with 21 species, getting excellent views of most, including **Swainson's, Kentucky, Worm-eating, Prairie, Blue-winged, Golden-winged, and Pine**. And although the region is best known for its passerine migration, the shorebirding was incredible on this trip, as rice paddies were being flooded as we arrived and shorebirds were quickly finding the bounty of food the flooded paddies offer. We ended with a remarkable **30 species of shorebirds**, including **Buff-breasted, Upland, and Stilt Sandpipers, Hudsonian Godwit, and Piping, Snowy, and American Golden Plover**. Other highlights included **Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Brown-headed Nuthatch, Clapper and King Rails, Yellow-billed and Black-billed Cuckoos, Seaside and Nelson's Sparrow**, and a great diversity of **herons, egrets, and terns**. This was a short trip to a part of the country with exceptional bird diversity during a dynamic part of the year, making for an exciting and fun tour.

Top 5 birds as voted by the group

1. **Swainson's Warbler**
2. **Painted Bunting (photo below)**
- 3 (tie). **Clapper Rail/Red-cockaded Woodpecker/Seaside Sparrow**



Day 1, April 13. Arrival in Houston, to Winnie.

The group assembled at the Houston airport and set out to immediately start birding. We arrived to Jones State Forest, in the suburbs north of Houston, with the sky looking ominous. The skies opened up and we sought shelter under a large overhand. The storm quickly passed, we stayed dry, and five minutes later we were looking at a Red-cockaded Woodpecker. Not bad! We continued our walk, finding Pine Warbler, Eastern Bluebird, more Red-cockaded Woodpeckers, Brown-headed Nuthatch, and Yellow-rumped Warbler.

It was time to head east (a lucky few spotted a Swallow-tailed Kite from the highway), but before reaching Winnie we took a slight detour to a wetland where two Whooping Cranes, from the re-introduced Louisiana population, had taken up a residence a couple of earlier. They were still there and showed wonderfully for us, while Bald Eagles sat nearby and a variety of waterbirds flew in and out of the wetlands. What a start to the trip.



One of the first birds we saw—after waiting out a brief rain storm--was this Red-cockaded Woodpecker. Photo by Josh Engel.

Day 2, April 14. High Island and Bolivar Peninsula.

With great anticipation, we started our way towards the coast. We took another brief detour to look for a recently reported Fork-tailed Flycatcher, but it seemed to have left. Fortunately the

detour was not without its benefits. We stopped to view a flock of Whimbrels in a field, and while we were stopped we spotted single Buff-breasted and Upland Sandpipers.

We made our way to High Island and started at Boy Scout Woods. The woods were quiet, so we switched tacks and went over the Smith Oaks. The woods were quiet there, too, but the heron rookery was super busy and we got wonderful views of Roseate Spoonbill, various herons and egrets, Common Moorhen, and flybys of Anhinga and Merlin. With not much migrant activity, we headed out to the Bolivar Peninsula. We grabbed lunch then headed to the shore for some birding. The wind was howling and the beach at Bolivar Flats was busy, but we managed to find many shorebirds, terns, and other coastal birds. We especially liked the Piping and Snowy Plovers and the breeding plumaged Red Knot, American Avocets, and variety of terns. Rollover Pass had an awesome number of birds, too, and great views of most of them. Here we had excellent looks at Royal, Sandwich, Least, Black, and Forster's Terns, a large flock of Franklin's Gulls, and many shorebirds.

We finished the day back at High Island. We had nice views of Swainson's Hawks and Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, but the woods were still quiet.



Mixed flock of terns and Black Skimmers at Rollover Pass. Photo by Josh Engel.

Day 3, April 15. Sabine Pass area and High Island.

We started the morning birding the saltmarsh near Sabine Pass. We very quickly found our first target bird, Seaside Sparrow, and many of them at that, getting great scope views of singing birds. This was soon followed by excellent views of Clapper Rail, which thanks to the low tide were feeding on the exposed mud at the edge of the reeds. We also got lucky with an incredible cooperative Nelson's Sparrow, which even sang from atop the reeds and posed for everyone to view in the scope. The area was just generally birdy, with many waders and shorebirds flying around, a Crested Caracara perched on a telephone pole, Boat-tailed Grackles showing nicely, and Marsh Wren occasionally emerging from the reeds.



Clapper Rails came out to the muddy marsh edges at low tide. Photo by Josh Engel.

From there we passed through the town of Sabine Pass, where a small group of American Golden Plovers were on the high school football field. We made it to Sabine Woods and set out wandering through the woods. It was quiet at first, but things picked up very nicely and we ended up getting outstanding looks at a good variety of migrants, including Worm-eating, Prothonotary, Kentucky, Hooded, Black-throated Blue, and Blue-winged Warbler; Scarlet, Summer, and even a Western Tanager; and both Yellow-billed and Black-billed Cuckoo. One participant even saw both cuckoos in one binocular view! A Dark-eyed Junco was also a big surprise for the location.

We eventually headed back into Port Arthur for lunch, then made our way back to High Island for an afternoon walk. The parking lot was the best area for migrants, with a flock of at least seven Blue Grosbeaks and a few Indigo Buntings showing very nicely. The rookery was again a highlight. We saw the amazing bright hormone-induced bare part colors of Great and Snowy Egret, the outrageous pink of Roseate Spoonbills, a White Ibis lurking in the vegetation, and a stunning pair of Purple Gallinules, their purple bodies glowing in the afternoon light.

Day 4, April 16. Big Thicket National Preserve and High Island.

We headed inland to start our morning in the Big Thicket, a wooded area north of Winnie. Our first stop was a nature trail, where we found woodland birds like Carolina Wren, Carolina Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, and heard Pileated Woodpecker. We were especially after Swainson's Warbler, the great skulker of thick southern forests, which we found surprisingly quickly and, even more surprisingly, had outstanding views of. We also found a small mixed flock which included a male Golden-winged Warbler, a migrant, and we saw breeding warblers including Hooded and Prothonotary.



This Swainson's Warbler was voted Bird of the Trip. Photo by Josh Engel.

After a stop at the visitors' center, we moved on to nearby Gore Store Rd. We got great views of Yellow-throated Warbler, after hearing them a few times elsewhere in the trip. Broad-winged Hawks were soaring overhead and eventually we made it to a pine plantation where we had tremendous views of Prairie Warbler. We also heard Yellow-breasted Chat here, but it wouldn't show itself.

After lunch we headed back towards Winnie, intending to stop at some flooded fields that we had noticed on the way north. We found a few good places to view the fields, which were absolutely full of shorebirds and ibis. Thousands of Long-billed Dowitchers were joined by a group of Hudsonian Godwits, numerous Stilt Sandpipers, and a few dapper breeding plumaged Western Sandpipers. We enjoyed comparing both Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Pectoral Sandpiper, and many others.

After a rest back at the hotel, we returned to the coast for another visit to Rollover Pass. As usual, it was full of terns, shorebirds, and gulls. We picked out a Lesser Black-backed Gull among the gulls and terns and found the complete suite of the area's terns, including many Black Terns in various states of molt. It was a real spectacle, the many hundreds of terns packed onto a sandbar at high tide.

Day 5, April 17. Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge and Peveto Woods.

We hadn't yet visited one of the Texas Coast's great birding spots, Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge. On our way there, we were happy to find a rice field being flooded, which birds had already discovered. Shorebirds were abundant and we got to reinforce some of what we had learned looking at flocks of shorebirds the day before. We made it to Anahuac and checked the area around the visitors' center, where most in the group were lucky enough to see a King Rail walk across the path. We made our way around Shoveler Pond, which was as full of birds as it usually is, including many Fulvous Whistling-Ducks, Purple Gallinule, a Glossy Ibis mixed in with the White-faced, and many shorebirds and ducks. Our last stop in Anahuac was the small Jackson Prairie Woodlot, where migrants were few but we were happily surprised to find a Great Kiskadee.

From there, we returned to Winnie for lunch, then decided to take a different tack for the afternoon, ditching Texas for a visit to neighboring Louisiana. Peveto Woods is a migrant trap right on the Gulf, similar to High Island. But unlike High Island over the last few days, it was full of birds! As soon as we stepped out of the car we noticed the activity, with Summer Tanager, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and Baltimore and Orchard Oriole right there. A short ways into the woods we found mulberry trees and honey locusts that were full of birds. Too many Orchard Orioles, Baltimore Orioles, and Summer and Scarlet Tanagers vied for our attention. But they lost out to Painted Bunting! We watched male and female buntings eat and sleep in the mulberry, their beaks messy with unripe fruit. A Yellow-breasted Chat only showed for some, but our first Tennessee Warbler of the trip was more cooperative. A few of us went down to the beach where some scoters had been reported over the last few days, and we found a mixed group of Black and Surf Scoters, including an adult male Black. Those who stayed in the woods were treated to a whole flock of Blue Grosbeaks.

A coastal woodlot alive with migrants was the perfect way to end the trip.

BIRD LIST. 192 species (including 6 heard only and one leader only). Taxonomy follows the Clements/eBird Checklist, 2018 update. Former or alternate English names are in parentheses. (H) = heard only; (L) = tour leader only. The global IUCN red list status is listed for threatened and near-threatened species: CR=Critically Endangered, EN=Endangered, VU=Vulnerable, NT=Near-threatened.

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck	<i>Dendrocygna autumnalis</i>
Fulvous Whistling-Duck	<i>Dendrocygna bicolor</i>
Blue-winged Teal	<i>Spatula discors</i>
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>
Mottled Duck	<i>Anas fulvigula</i>
Lesser Scaup	<i>Aythya affinis</i>
Surf Scoter	<i>Melanitta perspicillata</i>
Black Scoter (NT)	<i>Melanitta americana</i>
Pied-billed Grebe	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>
Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
Eurasian Collared-Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
White-winged Dove	<i>Zenaida asiatica</i>
Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>
Yellow-billed Cuckoo	<i>Coccyzus americanus</i>
Black-billed Cuckoo	<i>Coccyzus erythrophthalmus</i>
Chimney Swift (VU)	<i>Chaetura pelagica</i>
Ruby-throated Hummingbird	<i>Archilochus colubris</i>
Buff-bellied Hummingbird	<i>Amazilia yucatanensis</i>
King Rail (NT)	<i>Rallus elegans</i>
Clapper Rail	<i>Rallus crepitans</i>
Sora (H)	<i>Porzana carolina</i>
Common Gallinule	<i>Gallinula galeata</i>
American Coot	<i>Fulica americana</i>
Purple Gallinule	<i>Porphyrio martinica</i>
Whooping Crane (EN)	<i>Grus americana</i>
Black-necked Stilt	<i>Himantopus mexicanus</i>
American Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra americana</i>
Black-bellied Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
American Golden-Plover	<i>Pluvialis dominica</i>
Snowy Plover (NT)	<i>Charadrius nivosus</i>
Wilson's Plover (L)	<i>Charadrius wilsonia</i>
Semipalmated Plover	<i>Charadrius semipalmatus</i>
Piping Plover (NT)	<i>Charadrius melodus</i>

Killdeer	<i>Charadrius vociferus</i>
Upland Sandpiper	<i>Bartramia longicauda</i>
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>
Long-billed Curlew	<i>Numenius americanus</i>
Hudsonian Godwit	<i>Limosa haemastica</i>
Marbled Godwit	<i>Limosa fedoa</i>
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>
Red Knot (NT)	<i>Calidris canutus</i>
Stilt Sandpiper	<i>Calidris himantopus</i>
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
Least Sandpiper	<i>Calidris minutilla</i>
Buff-breasted Sandpiper (NT)	<i>Calidris subruficollis</i>
Pectoral Sandpiper	<i>Calidris melanotos</i>
Semipalmated Sandpiper (NT)	<i>Calidris pusilla</i>
Western Sandpiper	<i>Calidris mauri</i>
Long-billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus scolopaceus</i>
Wilson's Snipe	<i>Gallinago delicata</i>
Solitary Sandpiper	<i>Tringa solitaria</i>
Greater Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa melanoleuca</i>
Willet	<i>Tringa semipalmata</i>
Lesser Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa flavipes</i>
Bonaparte's Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus philadelphia</i>
Laughing Gull	<i>Leucophaeus atricilla</i>
Franklin's Gull	<i>Leucophaeus pipixcan</i>
Ring-billed Gull	<i>Larus delawarensis</i>
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
Least Tern	<i>Sternula antillarum</i>
Gull-billed Tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>
Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>
Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>
Forster's Tern	<i>Sterna forsteri</i>
Royal Tern	<i>Thalasseus maximus</i>
Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>
Black Skimmer	<i>Rynchops niger</i>
Neotropic Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax brasilianus</i>
American White Pelican	<i>Pelecanus erythrorhynchos</i>
Brown Pelican	<i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>

Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>
Snowy Egret	<i>Egretta thula</i>
Little Blue Heron	<i>Egretta caerulea</i>
Tricolored Heron	<i>Egretta tricolor</i>
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>
Green Heron	<i>Butorides virescens</i>
Black-crowned Night-Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>
Yellow-crowned Night-Heron	<i>Nyctanassa violacea</i>
White Ibis	<i>Eudocimus albus</i>
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>
White-faced Ibis	<i>Plegadis chihi</i>
Roseate Spoonbill	<i>Platalea ajaja</i>
Black Vulture	<i>Coragyps atratus</i>
Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>
Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>
White-tailed Kite	<i>Elanus leucurus</i>
Swallow-tailed Kite	<i>Elanoides forficatus</i>
Northern Harrier	<i>Circus hudsonius</i>
Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>
Red-shouldered Hawk	<i>Buteo lineatus</i>
Broad-winged Hawk	<i>Buteo platypterus</i>
Swainson's Hawk	<i>Buteo swainsoni</i>
Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>
Belted Kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle alcyon</i>
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	<i>Sphyrapicus varius</i>
Red-bellied Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes carolinus</i>
Downy Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates pubescens</i>
Red-cockaded Woodpecker (NT)	<i>Dryobates borealis</i>
Pileated Woodpecker (H)	<i>Dryocopus pileatus</i>
Crested Caracara	<i>Caracara cheriway</i>
American Kestrel	<i>Falco sparverius</i>
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>
Acadian Flycatcher (H)	<i>Empidonax virescens</i>
Great Crested Flycatcher	<i>Myiarchus crinitus</i>
Great Kiskadee	<i>Pitangus sulphuratus</i>
Western Kingbird	<i>Tyrannus verticalis</i>
Eastern Kingbird	<i>Tyrannus tyrannus</i>
Scissor-tailed Flycatcher	<i>Tyrannus forficatus</i>
Loggerhead Shrike (NT)	<i>Lanius ludovicianus</i>

White-eyed Vireo	<i>Vireo griseus</i>
Yellow-throated Vireo (H)	<i>Vireo flavifrons</i>
Blue-headed Vireo	<i>Vireo solitarius</i>
Red-eyed Vireo	<i>Vireo olivaceus</i>
Blue Jay	<i>Cyanocitta cristata</i>
American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>
Northern Rough-winged Swallow	<i>Stelgidopteryx serripennis</i>
Purple Martin	<i>Progne subis</i>
Tree Swallow	<i>Tachycineta bicolor</i>
Bank Swallow	<i>Riparia riparia</i>
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
Cliff Swallow	<i>Petrochelidon pyrrhonota</i>
Carolina Chickadee	<i>Poecile carolinensis</i>
Tufted Titmouse	<i>Baeolophus bicolor</i>
Brown-headed Nuthatch	<i>Sitta pusilla</i>
House Wren	<i>Troglodytes aedon</i>
Sedge Wren (H)	<i>Cistothorus platensis</i>
Marsh Wren (H)	<i>Cistothorus palustris</i>
Carolina Wren	<i>Thryothorus ludovicianus</i>
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	<i>Polioptila caerulea</i>
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	<i>Regulus calendula</i>
Eastern Bluebird	<i>Sialia sialis</i>
Swainson's Thrush	<i>Catharus ustulatus</i>
Hermit Thrush	<i>Catharus guttatus</i>
Wood Thrush (NT)	<i>Hylocichla mustelina</i>
Gray Catbird	<i>Dumetella carolinensis</i>
Brown Thrasher	<i>Toxostoma rufum</i>
Northern Mockingbird	<i>Mimus polyglottos</i>
European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
Cedar Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla cedrorum</i>
Pine Siskin	<i>Spinus pinus</i>
Dark-eyed Junco	<i>Junco hyemalis</i>
White-crowned Sparrow	<i>Zonotrichia leucophrys</i>
White-throated Sparrow	<i>Zonotrichia albicollis</i>
Seaside Sparrow	<i>Ammospiza maritima</i>
Nelson's Sparrow	<i>Ammospiza nelsoni</i>
Savannah Sparrow	<i>Passerculus sandwichensis</i>
Lincoln's Sparrow	<i>Melospiza lincolnii</i>
Swamp Sparrow	<i>Melospiza georgiana</i>
Yellow-breasted Chat	<i>Icteria virens</i>

Eastern Meadowlark (NT)	<i>Sturnella magna</i>
Orchard Oriole	<i>Icterus spurius</i>
Baltimore Oriole	<i>Icterus galbula</i>
Red-winged Blackbird	<i>Agelaius phoeniceus</i>
Brown-headed Cowbird	<i>Molothrus ater</i>
Common Grackle (NT)	<i>Quiscalus quiscula</i>
Boat-tailed Grackle	<i>Quiscalus major</i>
Great-tailed Grackle	<i>Quiscalus mexicanus</i>
Worm-eating Warbler	<i>Helmitheros vermivorum</i>
Northern Waterthrush	<i>Parkesia noveboracensis</i>
Golden-winged Warbler (NT)	<i>Vermivora chrysoptera</i>
Blue-winged Warbler	<i>Vermivora cyanoptera</i>
Black-and-white Warbler	<i>Mniotilta varia</i>
Prothonotary Warbler	<i>Protonotaria citrea</i>
Swainson's Warbler	<i>Limnothlypis swainsonii</i>
Tennessee Warbler	<i>Oreothlypis peregrina</i>
Orange-crowned Warbler	<i>Oreothlypis celata</i>
Kentucky Warbler	<i>Geothlypis formosa</i>
Common Yellowthroat	<i>Geothlypis trichas</i>
Hooded Warbler	<i>Setophaga citrina</i>
American Redstart	<i>Setophaga ruticilla</i>
Northern Parula (H)	<i>Setophaga americana</i>
Yellow Warbler	<i>Setophaga petechia</i>
Black-throated Blue Warbler	<i>Setophaga caerulescens</i>
Palm Warbler	<i>Setophaga palmarum</i>
Pine Warbler	<i>Setophaga pinus</i>
Yellow-rumped (Myrtle) Warbler	<i>Setophaga coronata</i>
Yellow-throated Warbler	<i>Setophaga dominica</i>
Prairie Warbler	<i>Setophaga discolor</i>
Summer Tanager	<i>Piranga rubra</i>
Scarlet Tanager	<i>Piranga olivacea</i>
Western Tanager	<i>Piranga ludoviciana</i>
Northern Cardinal	<i>Cardinalis cardinalis</i>
Rose-breasted Grosbeak	<i>Pheucticus ludovicianus</i>
Blue Grosbeak	<i>Passerina caerulea</i>
Indigo Bunting	<i>Passerina cyanea</i>
Painted Bunting	<i>Passerina ciris</i>
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>



Migrant shorebirds were abundant during the trip. This is a flock of mostly Long-billed Dowitchers. Photo by Josh Engel.



Mulberry trees are very attractive to fruit-eating birds, like Scarlet Tanager. Photo by Josh Engel.