Swainson’s Warbler

Texas and Louisiana
Migration Madness on the Gulf

Tour Leaders: Eric Ripma and Frank Stetler
April 21-27, 2024
April 21 – Sheldon Lake State Park, JJ Mayes Wildlife Trace, Smith Oaks Sanctuary

After the arrival of our group the previous day, we left the hotel early to start driving east towards Beaumont. On the way, we stopped at Sheldon Lake State Park to look for the long-staying Limpkins that have become regular at this location. There was a lot of heron and egret activity when we arrived which included good looks at Yellow-crowned Night Heron and Roseate Spoonbills. We had been hearing Limpkins throughout the morning without any views when another birder stopped to tell us they had just seen one by the main road. It didn't take long after that and we had great views of several Limpkins! After enjoying the Limpkins, several people in the group had nice looks at Prothonotary Warbler and our first Eastern Kingbird. It was a great first stop!

From Sheldon Lake we continued on our way towards Beaumont. Our next stop was at JJ Mayes Wildlife Trace. This park, while located well off the coast, provided our first taste of migration! As soon as we got out of our vehicles, an American Redstart greeted us with its cheery song. After a short time birding, we had tallied 9 species of warblers including a female Cerulean! We also had good looks at Northern Parula and Chestnut-sided and Black-throated Green Warblers. One of our main targets here, the colorful Painted Bunting, eventually showed itself to our whole group.

After lunch in Winnie, we headed south to Smith Oaks Sanctuary located in High Island. The numbers of migrants were lower than expected, but the diversity was quite high! A roosting Chuck-will's-widow was a nice surprise and the only one of our tour.
We ended up seeing 12 species of warblers alongside several vireo species, both tanagers, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and several Yellow-billed Cuckoos. Many egrets and herons and several raptors including a Mississippi Kite, Broad-winged Hawks, and Swainson’s Hawks rounded out our afternoon. The weather was shaping up for another good migration day along the coast the following day so, we were all excited to head to Sabine Woods the next day.

**April 22 – Sabine Woods**

Our entire day was spent birding at Sabine Woods with a brief break for lunch around midday. Many migrants were in, and we enjoyed great looks at birds throughout the property. It started off well with our only Black-billed Cuckoo of the trip. Before lunch we had racked up 21 species of warblers, Summer and Scarlet Tanagers, Orchard and Baltimore Orioles, 4 species of thrushes and vireos, and several flycatchers. After lunch, we had a similar species list, but everyone had much better views of many of the species. We spent plenty of time at one of the drips and enjoyed great views of a Golden-winged Warbler, Blue Grosbeak, Orchard Orioles, Painted Bunting, and many more! We also added a Prairie Warbler which is a rather rare species along the coast at this time of year. It was a great day to be at Sabine Woods and our best migration day for our entire tour!
April 23 – Bolivar Flats Shorebird Sanctuary, Fort Travis Seashore Park, Tuna Road, Rollover Pass

On this morning, we headed down to the Bolivar Peninsula to spend the day looking for a number of waterbirds. We started off on Retillion Road where we had our first looks at Reddish Egrets, White-tailed Kites, and Merlin. Once we reached the beach, we added many shorebird species including a Piping Plover! We spent a couple of hours birding at the shorebird sanctuary and added many more species. Piping, Wilson’s, and Snowy Plovers all provided nice views. Our only Marbled Godwits fed nearby, and we had good looks at many species of terns including Least, Gull-billed, Caspian, Black, Common, Sandwich, and Royal. On our way back to the car, we saw a very distant and our only Magnificent Frigatebird.

Our next stop was at Fort Travis Seashore Park where our main target was Cave Swallow. While always in flight, we had nice views and comparisons of Cave Swallows with the more common Cliff Swallows. Our only Cooper’s Hawk of the trip was also a nice pick-up!

After lunch we spent some time on Tuna Road. We saw many Seaside Sparrows and eventually had great looks at several individuals. We ended the day at Rollover Pass where we had to work hard for our only American Oystercatchers of the trip.
April 24 – Angelina National Forest and Cattail Marsh

While the piney woods north of Beaumont aren’t all that diverse, it does provide habitat for several specialized species. As soon as we arrived this morning, we heard a Brown-headed Nuthatch and eventually had great looks at this cute nuthatch. Next up was a Bachman’s Sparrow which we listened to for a long while, but unfortunately could never get a glimpse of. A restroom break was a productive birding stop and we had our best looks at Mississippi Kite for the trip. Red-cockaded Woodpeckers were playing hard-to-get so we continued further down the road to look for Swainson’s Warblers. It didn’t take long before we heard one and it wasn’t long after that when we spotted it. This hard-to-find species didn’t make it easy, but we eventually had long views as it sang from a slightly exposed branch! Our luck had improved since the early morning and just slightly further down the road we had a Greater Roadrunner! We were almost out of time in the piney woods and we still hadn’t seen a Red-cockaded Woodpecker. We decided to spend 10 more minutes back at our first stop. As soon as we got out, we heard one, and then it came flying into a closer tree. It allowed for some nice views before it continued on its way!

After lunch we headed back to Beaumont to visit Cattail Marsh. We met John, who works for Beaumont and he took us on the dike roads around the marsh. As usual at this location, the birding was great! We started off with great views of several Soras, many Purple and Common Gallinules, a good number of Least Bitterns, our first American Bittern, and several species of ducks. Once we arrived at one of the units with shorebird...
habitat we added many new species. We had great views of Wilson’s Phalaropes and Stilt, Baird’s, White-rumped, Pectoral, Western, and Semipalmated Sandpipers! It was a great way to end another day in this birdy region.

April 25 - Rice Fields, Anahuac NWR, Louisiana Welcome Center

It was time to make a short drive east to Lake Charles, Louisiana where we would be staying for the next couple of nights. But, before we headed that way, we spent the morning birding around the Anahuac area. We spotted our first Upland Sandpipers in one of the first fields we were driving past. And a little way down the road we had even better views at more Upland Sandpipers.

When we arrived at Anahuac NWR, we had great views of a couple of Dickcissels. After a restroom break, we birded around the auto loop and added several species. Our first American Wigeon, Green-winged Teal, and Glossy Ibis were nice additions. We also had many more looks at Least Bitterns. Towards the end of the loop, Frank spotted a King Rail and eventually it came out into the open for all to see! Near the exit of the refuge, we also spotted a pair of Bronzed Cowbirds. It was fun watching the male puff up and display for the female.

After lunch, we made our drive over to Lake Charles. Our first bird in Louisiana was a Pileated Woodpecker flying across the interstate. The Louisiana Welcome Center also had several species including an Osprey and an Anhinga. We were all ready to get out birding the next day and see what Louisiana would offer our group!
Upland Sandpiper

Crested Caracara
April 26 - Blue Goose Trail, Peveto Woods, Holly Beach, Willow Island, Cameron Prairie NWR

The winds had kicked up overnight and continued throughout this day, but we were still able to see a number of good birds. On our way to the coast, we had a Common Loon floating in the marsh just off the highway. Our first stop at Blue Goose Trail was windy, but we did hear our first Clapper Rails of the trip, saw several Seaside Sparrows, and several Orchard Orioles. There weren’t many passerine migrants at Peveto Woods, but we were still able to see a roosting Common Nighthawk (thanks to some other birders who pointed it out!), heard a Great Kiskadee, and briefly saw a Painted Bunting. We made several stops along the coast on our way to Cameron where we saw a variety of coastal species.

After lunch in Cameron, we drove over to Willow Island. A birder leaving the site let us know where some Bobolinks had been hanging out. It didn’t take too long before Frank spotted them, and we all had nice scope views. Our next stop at Rutherford Beach provided even closer views of a single Bobolink and several Least Bitterns. Unfortunately, it was so windy it was hard to bird along the beach, so we headed inland. Our last stop was at Cameron Prairie NWR. We had brief views of another American Bittern, great looks at a Yellow-crowned Night Heron, and many more Purple Gallinules.

We ended the tour with 216 species recorded: a record for this tour! We also enjoyed lots of other wildlife throughout the tour including many wildflowers, butterflies, alligators, and much more! It was a great group of birders and naturalists which made for a great tour for all of us, including us guides (Eric and Frank)!