



Blue Grosbeak

Texas

Migration Madness on the Gulf

Tour Leader: Eric Ripma

April 21-28, 2025

April 21 – Arrival in Houston

Throughout the day and the previous day, our group all arrived and gathered at the airport Hampton where we would be spending our first night. A fruiting mulberry on the hotel grounds provided some great entertainment throughout the afternoon. Orchard and Baltimore Orioles, Summer and Scarlet Tanagers, Indigo and Painted Buntings, and a Tennessee Warbler all stopped by for a meal! As there isn't much habitat around this area, it was a surprise to have so many migrants stopping by. A pair of Western Kingbirds also passed by, our only ones on the tour! After dinner, we were all ready to get some rest and start heading out of Houston for the great birding that coastal Texas has to offer.

April 22 – Sheldon Lake State Park, JJ Mayes Wildlife Trace, South Pear Orchard Road

After an early breakfast, we packed up and made a short drive to Sheldon Lake State Park. Our main target here, Limpkin, didn't take long to locate. Marc, one of the participants on the trip, spotted one on the way in and a short walk back, provided views for all. Over the next half hour, we would end up with some amazing views of several more! Other highlights included Common and Purple Gallinules, Roseate Spoonbill, and our first Prothonotary Warbler. A short walk in the main unit of the park was rather quiet, but we eventually tracked down a Sedge Wren for great, close views!



Yellow-crowned Night Heron

It had been a good early morning, but now it was time to head out of Houston. As we headed east, we made a stop at JJ Mayes Wildlife Trace. Our first target was Painted Bunting and as soon as we

arrived at the spot, we heard one singing. After a short wait, we had great looks at this stunning species. As we birded the marshes along the road, we picked up many of the expected marsh birds including our first Fulvous Whistling-Ducks. A little further along the road, we came across our only Bobolinks of the trip! It was about time for lunch, so we continued our drive east until we reached Winnie. As always, the food at Tia Juanitas, didn't disappoint. We spent the afternoon birding in the rice fields south of Winnie. We racked up 16 species of shorebirds including American Golden-Plover, Wilson's Phalarope, and Stilt and White-rumped Sandpipers. A flyby Crested Caracara gave us great looks as it flew right past us! A quick stop at Jocelyn Nungaray NWR for a restroom break brought us great looks at 4 Barn Owl chicks! We also had our only Lincoln's Sparrow and our first Rose-breasted Grosbeak on a short walk. However, it was time to leave and make our last drive of the day to Beaumont, where we would be staying for the next four nights. On the way out, we came across our first Upland Sandpipers and our only White-tailed Kite of the trip!



American Barn Owls

April 23 – Bolivar Flats Shorebird Sanctuary, Fort Travis Seashore Park, Tuna Road, Rollover Pass, Smith Oaks Sanctuary, Boy Scout Woods

Storms were moving in as we departed from our hotel and made our way to the Bolivar Peninsula. It looked like we would have just enough time to bird the shorebird sanctuary before the rain hit, so we quickly made our way to the tip of the peninsula. On the way in, we came across several young Clapper Rails and before long, an adult came into view. Once we arrived at the shorebird sanctuary, we took a walk along the Gulf. As usual, a large flock of American Avocets foraged just off the beach. It's always a blast to watch these birds as they chase their prey. We enjoyed many of the common shorebirds such as Sanderling, Ruddy Turnstone, and Willet and eventually had good views of Piping and Snowy Plovers. All in all, we were able to record 20 species of shorebirds. Terns

also provided excitement and we had good looks at the tiny Least Terns, lots of migrant Black and Common Terns, and plenty of Royal Terns. Watching a couple of Reddish Egrets as they danced around while foraging was also a highlight of our visit. The rain was approaching, so it was time to head back to our van. Within a couple of minutes the rain started and we were glad we were dry in the van! Since it was raining, we stopped by Fort Travis Seashore Park where we could bird from the van and enjoyed good looks at Black-bellied and American Golden-Plovers, lots of Short-billed Dowitchers, and a flyby Cave Swallow.

After lunch, the rain was still coming down, so again, we birded from the van. A quick stop on a side road produced some great looks at Seaside Sparrows! Next up, we stopped at Rollover Pass to look for American Oystercatchers. As soon as we pulled up, we spotted one on a nearby sandspit. It's always a delight to see this clown-like shorebird!



Seaside Sparrow

After Rollover, we headed to High Island in the hopes that the rain would ground many of the songbirds migrating over the Gulf. We started at Smith Oaks Sanctuary, where we could quickly tell that the songbirds had not arrived yet, but we did enjoy the spectacle of the rookery here! Hundreds of breeding Roseate Spoonbills, Tricolored Herons, Snowy and Great Egrets were an amazing sight! Next, we headed over to Boy Scout Woods to visit their gift shop and hope the songbirds would start arriving. We were successful on both accounts. Good shopping and songbirds started to arrive. We ended up with 11 species of warblers including a Cape May which is uncommon for this area. 4 species of thrushes, a couple of roosting Common Nighthawks, Orchard and Baltimore Orioles, and several other migrants rounded out our list. Eventually it was time to head back to Beaumont and hope that the next day would bring many more migrants!

April 24 – Sabine Woods, Cattail Marsh

After driving through all the oil refineries, we made a quick restroom stop and proceeded on to Sabine Woods. Even when this site is slow, it typically has some birds around. As we walked in, we could tell it wasn't full of birds, but with a little effort we started picking up many migrant songbirds. American Redstarts, Magnolia Warblers, and Black-throated Green Warblers all foraged high in the oaks while Ovenbirds and Kentucky Warblers made us work for good looks as they foraged on the ground. Eventually we spotted a female Cerulean Warbler and Golden-winged Warbler that had been keeping each other company throughout the morning. As we made our way through other parts of the woods, we kept adding birds. Prothonotary Warblers showed nicely while we had to be patient for good looks at a Gray-cheeked Thrush. Hooded Warblers flitted through the understory while Scissor-tailed Flycatchers and Eastern Kingbirds foraged in the open fields. After a snack break back at the van, we walked through a different area of the woods and picked up some more migrants. Good looks at a male Cerulean Warbler, watching a Kentucky and Worm-eating Warbler bathe, and our first Northern Parula and Philadelphia Vireo of the trip were among the highlights.



Kentucky Warbler

After lunch, we headed back to Beaumont for a well-deserved break before making our way to Cattail Marsh. We met with a park employee who drove us around this huge marsh complex. As usual, the number of Purple Gallinules was amazing. We saw more than 50 of this beautiful species. We also added our only Glossy Ibis of the trip, good looks at Least Bittern, and plenty of alligators!

March 25 – Angelina National Forest, Sandy Creek Park

We had an early departure on this morning, so we could make it to the piney woods while the breeding birds in the area were still active. Shortly after arriving, we had our first looks at Pine Warblers and before long a couple of Brown-headed Nuthatches came in! This is one of the specialties of the area, so we were all happy to have good views at this cute nuthatch species. The other specialties were more difficult for us. After running into a very unfriendly birder (which is luckily very rare with birders) and ruining his morning by birding in the same forest, we decided to move further down the road. It took some time, but we eventually heard a Bachman's Sparrow from the road and after a short walk, we had great scope views of this US endemic. A little further on, we heard a couple of Red-cockaded Woodpeckers nearby, but they wouldn't show themselves. This was the first time I hadn't seen this species at this location. It was disappointing, but at least we had some other great birds throughout the morning.



Bachman's Sparrow

After lunch in the nearby town of Jasper, we spent the afternoon birding around Sandy Creek Park. This park has many species of breeding songbirds that don't nest further south along the coast. So, it was nice to see our first Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, hear a couple of Yellow-throated Warblers, and have great looks at several Prothonotary Warblers. We started driving back to Beaumont by the middle of the afternoon, but on our way, we came across a Mississippi Kite. Once we found a good spot to pull all the way off the highway, we got out to watch. One kite turned into 18 and we also added a few Broad-winged Hawks.

April 26 – Rice Fields, Smith Oaks Sanctuary, Long Beach Road, Peveto Woods

We still had several species we were missing at this point, so we decided to head back out to the rice

fields in search of a few. As we slowly drove a back road we heard our first Northern Bobwhites, but they wouldn't show themselves. Not long after, we spotted a perched raptor. A young White-tailed Hawk! This is an uncommon species in the area, so it was nice to have great looks at it. The morning would end up turning into a raptor show. We saw another White-tailed Hawk, many Swainson's Hawks including two pairs building nests, Red-tailed Hawk, and Crested Caracaras. We also came across a couple of breeding pairs of Painted Buntings. These birds are always a crowd favorite with their colorful plumage! By the late morning, we headed back to Smith Oaks Sanctuary at High Island. The numbers of migrants were relatively low, but there was some decent diversity. Great looks at a Blackpoll Warbler was the highlight.



Painted Bunting

After lunch, we headed east to Louisiana to make a couple of birding stops along the coast before checking into our hotel where we would be spending the next couple nights. Our first stop along Long Beach Road brought us great views of a roosting Common Nighthawk, several tern species including Sandwich, and several shorebird species. Next, we stopped by Peveto Woods. This site is similar to Sabine Woods, but usually much less visited. On our drive in, we came across a very curious Sora that walked right up to our van! As was the theme of our trip, the diversity was decent, but numbers were low. Good views of a Veery were our first of the trip and an Ovenbird cooperated for some good looks. After heading up to town and checking into our hotel, we enjoyed a Cajun dinner at a nearby restaurant. We had a lot of great food throughout this tour!

April 27 – Corbina Road, Rutherford Beach, Broussard Beach, Holly Beach, Peveto Woods

We still hadn't seen a King Rail up to this point in the tour, so that was our first order of business.

We didn't have luck at our first stop, but we did have great views of a Blue Grosbeak, two Great Horned Owls, and several White-crowned Sparrows. After adding our first Wood Ducks among many other species someone mentioned King Rail. A second later, there one was! We were able to watch it walking along a ditch before it turned and disappeared into the grass.



Cave Swallow

A little further down the road, we came upon a colony of Cave Swallows. We had only seen one very briefly, so to watch many at close range was a great experience. We still hadn't seen a Wilson's Plover during the trip, so we headed south to the coast to catch up with this species that nests along the Gulf Coast. Our first stop, Rutherford Beach, failed to produce a Wilson's Plover, but we did have great looks at a Gull-billed Tern. The next stop, Broussard Beach, brought us what we were looking for. Great views of a male Wilson's Plover followed by a female that eventually made her way to her nest and started incubating!

After lunch in Cameron, we took the ferry across the Calcasieu River where we saw some dolphins, made some stops along Holly Beach where we added Caspian Terns and Lesser Scaup, and made our way back to Peveto Woods. Throughout the afternoon, we spent a good amount of time watching the main drip and had good looks at many species. Our only Blue-winged Warbler visited, Summer and Scarlet Tanagers, Indigo and Painted Buntings, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, and many Orchard Orioles kept us entertained. It was a great way to end our tour along the Gulf Coast!

April 28 – Departure from Houston

This morning, we had a slightly later wake up call, had breakfast, and packed up the van to drive back to the Houston airport. Birding wasn't planned, but you never know when a bird might find

you. Along our way back, a Swallow-tailed Kite made a quick pass over the highway. We continued making the rest of our drive back to the airport, so everyone would have plenty of time to catch their departing flights!

All in all, we recorded 206 species, saw lots of other wildlife including a Speckled Kingsnake and a Cottonmouth (at a safe distance), and enjoyed some great local food! A big thank you to our group this year that helped make this such an enjoyable trip this year!



Swainson's Hawk



Purple Gallinule