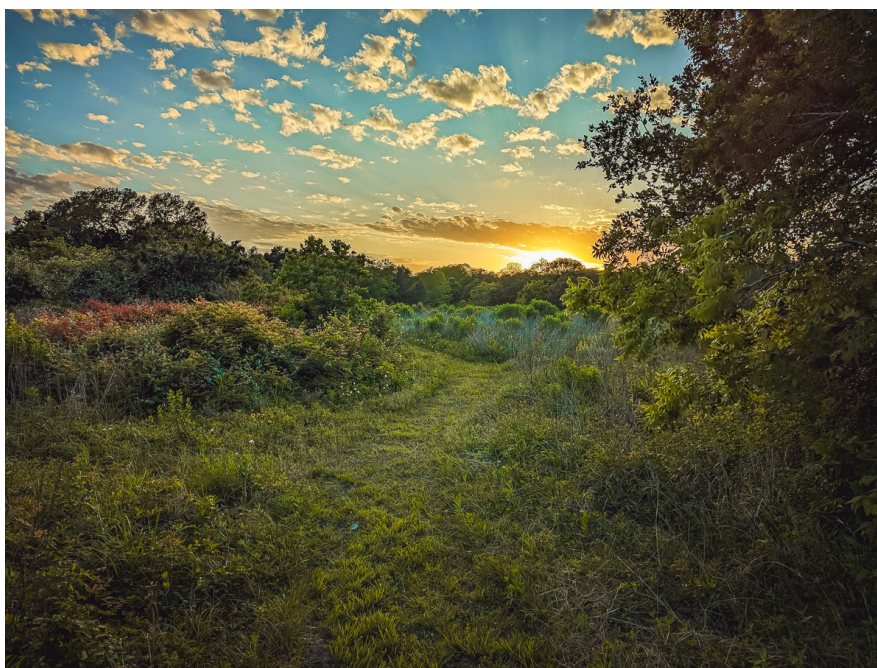




Texas Spring Migration & Hill Country Tour 2023

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Smith Oaks © Elise Everett

The 2023 Texas Coast & Hill Country birding tour showcased the spectacle of the spring movement of Gulf migrants, nesting and migrating waders and shorebirds and two of Texas' specialty birds: the rebounding Black-capped Vireo and the endangered Golden-cheeked Warbler. This memorable trip

highlighted the migratory hotspots of High Island, Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge, the extensive salt flats and marshes of the Bolivar Peninsula and northward to the beautifully unique Hill Country.



Bolivar Flats © Elise Everett

Day 1:

We began the tour with a nice Italian dinner close to our hotel. We were greeted by both Boat-tailed and Great-tailed Grackles in the parking lot, our first 'official' birds of the tour. The moment provided a good study of the two species, while a flyover White Ibis was a nice encounter as well.



White Ibis © Elise Everett

Day 2:



WG Jones State Forest © Elise Everett

We began our morning at W.G. Jones State Forest. We had a singing Summer Tanager greeting us upon exiting the van, while a flock of Brown-headed Nuthatches also made a brief appearance in the slash pine tree above us.



Summer Tanager © Elise Everett

The sound of Pine Warblers and Eastern Bluebirds lead us down the trails. We had great looks at the endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker working on its live tree cavity homestead.



Red-cockaded Woodpecker © Elise Everett

A flyover Mississippi Kite and countless flocks of Cedar Waxwings were also species of note.



Cedar Waxwing © Elise Everett

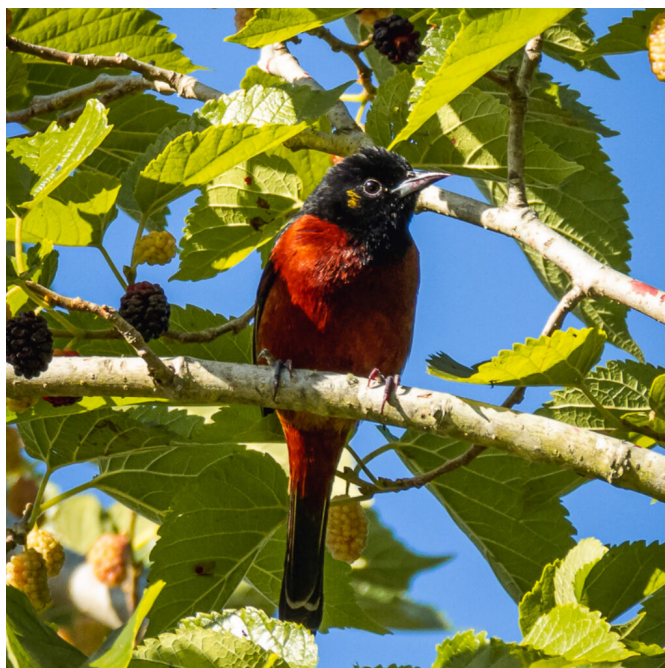
We set out for lunch and on the way added Egyptian goose to our trip list. We headed to Double Bayou Park for our birdie picnic where we were serenaded by Red-eyed Vireo and Pileated

Woodpecker song throughout our stay.

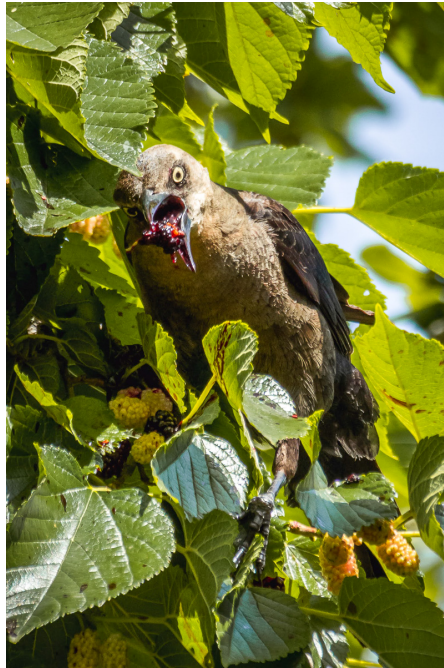


Red-eyed Vireo © Elise Everett

We packed up heading east for Winnie, picking up Swainson's Hawk, Crested Caracara and many shorebirds along the way through the rice fields of Anahuac. We finished our first full day of birding at the legendary Smith Oaks where the loaded Mulberry trees kept Orchard and Baltimore Orioles, Summer and Scarlet Tanagers and countless warblers busily feasting.



Orchard Oriole © Elise Everett



Great-tailed Grackle © Elise Everett

Day 3:

We started our morning at Tuna Road, a popular local spot for breeding Seaside Sparrows, White-tailed Kites and shorebirds galore. We parked the van and headed toward the water while being surrounded by Willets, Whimbrels and Eastern Meadowlarks along our walk. The sandy flats at the end of the road held Black-bellied plover, Dunlin and a lone Bonaparte's gull. We headed down the coast, where a surprise Fish Crow caught our eyes and ears. We reached the Bolivar Flats Shorebird Sanctuary and were delighted at both the diversity and numbers of these amazing migrants. Our walk to the point was filled with great looks at Least and Royal Terns, Sanderlings and Brown Pelicans.



Royal Tern © Elise Everett

The shifting masses of American Avocet really put migration into perspective for the group. We also found nesting Wilson's plovers nearby, along with Snowy and Piping Plovers. An American Bittern was briefly seen darting into the salt marsh on our walk back.



Birding at Bolivar © Elise Everett

After our restful picnic lunch, we headed to the Shoveler Pond Loop at Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge. The Fulvous Whistling-Ducks and Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks were out in high numbers, along with Black-necked Stilts and Short-billed Dowitchers.



Shorebirding at Anahuac © Elise Everett

Both Yellow-crowned and Black-crowned Night Heron's were seen skulking, a Least Bittern made a quick yet memorable appearance, and Purple Gallinules were at each turn.



Yellow-crowned Night-Heron © Elise Everett

On our way out, a Black Rail was calling from the Visitor Center pond which was an absolute treat! We finished the day with a great seafood dinner close to the hotel.

Day 4:



The Scene at Boy Scout Woods © Elise Everett

Day four had a soggy start, with rain and high winds for most of the morning. We made the most of it and started our birding day at Sabine Woods, a Live Oak forested migrant trap outside of Port Arthur. We had stunning looks at Prothonotary Warbler, Orchard Oriole, and both Northern and Louisiana Waterthrush. Painted Buntings, Blue Grosbeaks and Common Yellowthroats were active in the wildflower meadows, along with many other warbler species in the surrounding trees. After lunch, we headed to High Island for a day of exploring the paths and ponds. Our first stop was Boy Scout Woods where Wood Thrush and Swainson's Thrush worked the drip.



Wood Thrush © Elise Everett

We moved along to Smith Oaks sanctuary, where migration was in full swing. Black-billed Cuckoo, Kentucky Warbler, Black-headed Grosbeak, Hooded Warbler and multiple singing Tennessee Warblers were a true delight as we worked the dirt paths along the shores.



Black-billed Cuckoo © Elise Everett

The hands-down highlight was our encounter with a very comfortable Least Bittern which allowed us into its whole world. We spent a good amount of time with it, studying its movements and fishing skills.



Least Bittern © Elise Everett

After a picnic dinner, we went for a sunset walk where the meadow came to life with Tanagers, Grosbeaks and Orioles all coming to feed. Once the Common Nighthawks took flight we decided to head back and call it a fantastic day.



Smith Oaks Sanctuary © Elise Everett

Day 5:



Northern Parula © Elise Everett

We started at Hooks Woods Sanctuary, where we had in-your-face looks at Northern Parula, Yellow-breasted Chat and Baltimore Orioles. We moseyed around Second Street adding Bronzed Cowbird, Ruby-throated Hummingbird and Savanna Sparrow to the list. We scoped the wetlands at the dead end and encountered Sora, Common Gallinule, Marbled Godwit and over a dozen Roseate Spoonbills foraging in the wet fields.



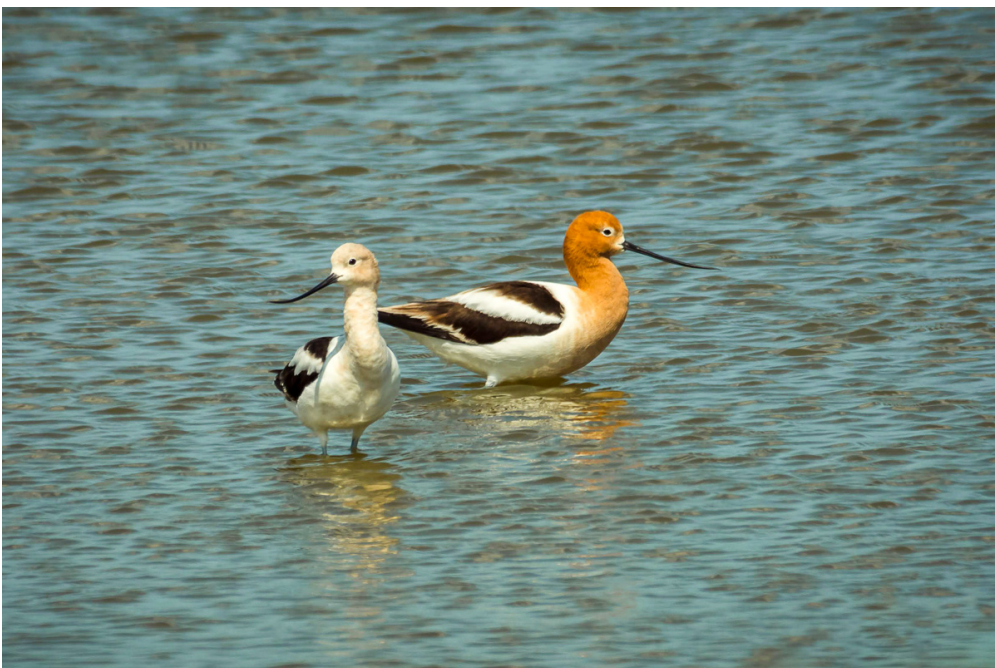
Common Gallinule © Elise Everett

We took a short drive to Rollover Pass which provided a stunning study of Tern species. Here we had the trip's only Black Terns, but also had Sandwich, Least, Royal, Forster's Terns and the unforgettable Black Skimmer.



Black Skimmer © Elise Everett

American White Pelicans were out on a distant island, along with Great and Snowy Egrets, Great Blue Herons and Brown Pelicans. We had fantastic looks at foraging Ruddy Turnstones, American Avocets and Long-billed Dowitchers.

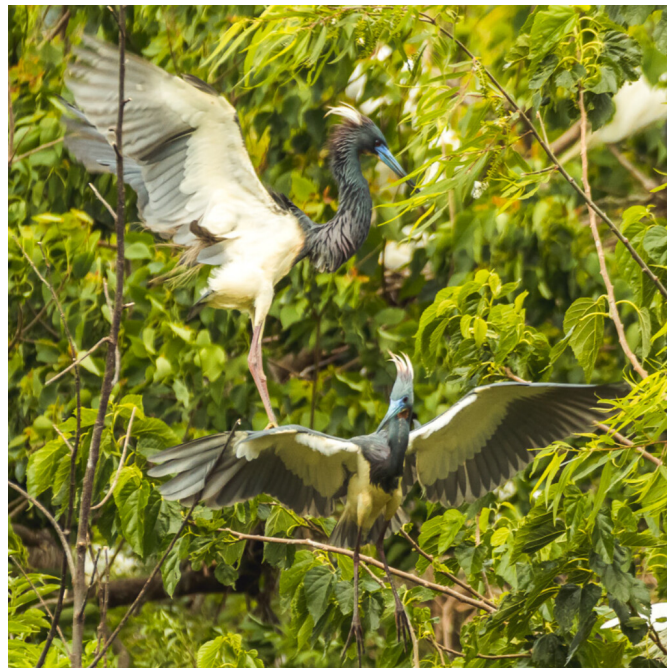


American Avocets © Elise Everett

We broke for lunch and then headed to the rookery at Smith Oaks Sanctuary. The Tri-colored Herons and Roseate Spoonbills were busy building their nests, and we all had unbelievable looks into their social lives.



Roseate Spoonbill © Elise Everett



Tri-colored Herons © Elise Everett

We walked the Grackle Pond Loop, where the Night Herons roost, and had fantastic views of Eastern

Wood Pewee, Hooded Warbler, Indigo Bunting and Golden-winged Warbler.



Eastern Wood-Pewee © Elise Everett

It was hard to leave Smith Oaks, for the migrants really heated up in the evening. Blackburnian, Northern Parula, and the all-star migrant Blackpoll, among many other species, were working the high canopy along the boardwalk.



Blackpoll Warbler © Elise Everett

Day 6:



Cattle with Egrets © Elise Everett

We left Winnie early, heading northwest to the Hill Country. Along the way we had a fantastic kettle of Broad-winged, Swainson's and a surprise Zone-tailed Hawk mixed in with Turkey Vultures at our rest area stop. A male Orange-crowned Warbler and our first Carolina Chickadees of the tour greeted us as well.



Scissor-tailed Flycatcher © Elise Everett

At our lunch spot, a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher put on a show for us flycatching amongst the telephone wires in the parking lot. We kept rolling on to Neal's lodges, where we would be staying the next two nights (and birding as well!). The area around the lodges, feeding stations included, are great for many species of birds. Brown-crested and Ash-throated flycatchers, Yellow-throated Vireo and Hooded Orioles all singing and flitting through the treetops. Olive Sparrow and Verdin hung lower, along with Black-throated Sparrows and Common Ground Doves. We dined at Neal's Dining Room and enjoyed both the food on our plates and the Black-chinned Hummingbirds in the windows.



Black-chinned Hummingbird © Elise Everett

Day 7:



Neal's © Elise Everett

We started out our first full Hill country morning birding the feeding station close to our rooms at Neal's. Chuck-will's-widows sang in the distance, Vermilion Flycatchers fed voraciously while Summer Tanagers endlessly chased one another. We had breakfast and upon exiting the dining room, we were greeted with both the song and sight of a Tropical Parula, belting its buzzy song from the mid canopy of a sycamore tree. We were able to all get great looks and bathe in this beautiful rarity's song.



Tropical Parula © Elise Everett

Next we headed to Cook's Slough Nature Park where Wood Ducks, Northern Shovelers and Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks dabbled in the ponds. A Greater Roadrunner bolted over the road as our tour's only Franklin's Gull floated above us.



Cook's Slough © Elise Everett

The back brushy corners of the ponds were great for Bell's Vireo, Clay-colored and Lark Sparrow and Black-crested Titmice.



Black-crested Titmouse © Elise Everett

We had quite the Oriole encounter as well, with Baltimore, Orchard, Hooded and Bullock's all giving us great looks.



Hooded Oriole © Elise Everett

The entry and exit road is great for perched flycatchers, and Scissor-tailed, Western, Eastern and Couch's Kingbirds were all present. We birded during our lunch back at Neal's Lodges, with Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, Canyon Wren, Eastern and Say's Phoebes and many Black-chinned Hummingbirds singing, perching and chasing their rivals through the grounds.



Golden-fronted Woodpecker © Elise Everett

After our dinner at the Dining Room, we headed to the Concan Frio Bat Cave for the jaw-dropping spectacle of up to twelve million Mexican Free-tail Bats funneling out of their roost.



Mexican Free-tail Bats © Elise Everett

Hundreds of Cave Swallows also share the cave, and were seen cycling into their nightly dens. Other birds take notice as well, with many different species taking note of the thick clouds of insects the bats were enjoying, including the bats themselves. We had brief views of a Harris's Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk and Crested Caracara all trying their luck at snatching one of the rapid flying mammals. A Lesser Nighthawk was seen foraging just above the distant treeline, while Black-throated Sparrows and Northern Bobwhites called in the canyons below us. We had an early start the following morning, so we said 'Good Night' to the cave and headed back to Neal's.

Day 8:

We started our final full day of birding at Neal's Lodges, birding the grounds of the cabins, the feeders and the Dining Room area. Being able to study Yellow-throated Warblers, Ladder-backed Woodpeckers and the resident Barn Swallows so closely is one of the great features of our stays at Neal's.



Barn Swallow © Elise Everett

We headed out to the rolling hills toward Lost Maples State Natural Area. Along the way, we had success with hearing and seeing the elusive Black-capped Vireo. No longer federally endangered, this beautiful, spastic vireo of the scrubby hill sides seemed to be widespread in the areas we stopped to listen. Multiple birds were heard or seen at each stop, which was uplifting news to the group. Right before we headed out, a male Painted Bunting perched up across the road and began to sing away.



Painted Bunting © Elise Everett

We arrived at Lost Maples SNA at nine o'clock, and were met with the song of Inca Dove, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher and Lincoln's Sparrow.



Inca Dove © Elise Everett

We first parked near the feeding station and took in point-blank views of Lesser Goldfinch, Bewick's Wren and Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay.



Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay © Elise Everett

The photo blind here is a great way to get that intimate shot of any of the wide variety of birds that

come in.



Lost Maples © Elise Everett

We set out on the East-West Trail, and within steps we had Louisiana Waterthrush singing along the river while Black-and-white Warblers and a Scott's Oriole sang in the riverside maples.



Black-and-white Warbler © Elise Everett

We were about one-eighth of a mile down the trail when a Greater Roadrunner flew right over our heads! We eventually reached a section of thicker maple and sycamore trees when lo-and-behold,

the endangered Golden-cheeked Warblers started to sing and chase all through the canopy. One individual came swooping down and landed right above our heads, eventually working its way to eye-level viewing.



Golden-cheeked Warbler © Elise Everett

It was a wonderful experience for the group, and on the hike out we encountered Hutton's Vireo, White-eyed Vireo and Lesser Goldfinch, all dangling above the trail, foraging and singing.



White-tipped Dove © Elise Everett

We had our picnic at the photo blind, which gave us an unbelievable study of White-tipped and Inca Doves, Indigo and Painted Buntings, and even Golden-cheeked Warblers! One was coming in frequently, gathering various dove feathers to use as nest lining.



Golden-cheeked Warbler with feather for nest lining © Elise Everett

The tour ending on that note felt so natural, so we all spent some more time at the feeders and eventually left for San Antonio. We all enjoyed a fabulous farewell dinner, sharing a toast and tales of the past week's amazing birding. What a fantastic group of birds and people!



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