

Texas Spring Migration Trip Report 2022

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Spring Migration in Texas! 2022 This was Eagle-Eye Tours first spring visit to Texas to experience the incredible waves of migrating birds that touch down on the upper coast of the Gulf of Mexico and it did not disappoint! We tallied in 237 species of birds for the tour with some amazing numbers of shorebirds, warblers and tanagers, along with fantastic looks at notable species like Golden-cheeked Warbler, Tropical Parula, Painted Bunting, Barn Owl and Purple Gallinule! We spent the first two thirds of the tour at one location near the small village of High Island, about an hour east of Houston. Not a true island in the traditional sense, this forested village sits on a hummock of land rising a few feet above the miles of surrounding wetlands. To migrant birds coming in off the ocean (some of which have been in sustained flight for 10-15 hours having left the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico the night before!), this patch of green is an absolute magnet for birds needing to rest and refuel their journey northward. We started our birding in the pine forests north of Houston looking for the endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker here at the southwest end of its breeding range across the southern US. We quickly found a few cooperative Woodpeckers that showed well for the group along with several Brown-headed Nuthatches and Pine Warblers as well as our only Mississippi Kite of the trip.



Red-cockaded Woodpecker © Skye Haas

We then headed to grab some lunch, snagging an established exotic Egyptian Goose in the parking lot. Making our way to our home base hotel in Winnie, we encountered flooded rice fields full of

large flocks of shorebirds with notable goodies like Hudsonian Godwits, Whimbrel, White-rumped Sandpiper, Black-necked Stilts and the very elegant Buff-breasted Sandpipers. Finally arriving at High Island we started to bird the wooded preserves that dot the small coastal community of High Island. There was a modest amount of migrants present but a few were great stand-outs like a perched Chuck-will's Widow, and both rare for the region, a male Black-headed Grosbeak and a Tropical Kingbird!



Chuck-will's-widow © Skye Haas



© Skye Haas

The next few days we would repeatedly rotate through the various preserves owned by Houston Audubon enjoying daily deliveries of fresh migrants. Warbler season was getting ready to kick into high gear, and we still saw a diverse array of warblers with 27 species over our time along the coast. Great looks were had at species like Swainson's, Kentucky, Worm-eating, Cerulean, Audubon's Yellow-rumped, Mourning and Golden-winged Warblers, and nearly every flock had a couple striking Hooded Warblers among them.



Kentucky Warbler © Skye Haas

The Tanagers and Buntings were really plentiful with gobs of Summer Tanagers, Indigo Buntings and Blue Grosbeaks on multiple days along with regular sightings of Orchard Orioles, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks and Painted Buntings. Yellow-billed Cuckoos and Acadian Flycatchers were regularly detected, while Wood and Swainson's Thrushes lurked in the understory, and it seemed like every bush on High Island had a Gray Catbird in it.



Painted Bunting © Skye Haas



Yellow-billed Cuckoo © Skye Haas

A few notable sightings included a roosting Barn Owl in an oak tree, a pair of Red-breasted Nuthatches and we heard one evening a few plaintive whistles from a rare and quite uncooperative Dusky-capped Flycatcher.



Barn Owl © Skye Haas

In addition to all these colorful neotropical songbirds, we spent a bit of time birding the coasts and freshwater marshes in the area. At High Island there was a nesting rookery full of Great and Snowy Egrets, Tricolored Herons, Neotropical Cormorants and Anhingas as well as the beautifully odd looking Roseate Spoonbills all doing courtship displays, incubating eggs and tending nests full of young babies. An experience for all one's birding senses between the noise, smell and sights of such a place!



Great Egret © Skye Haas

One morning we traveled to a large freshwater marsh where we had in-our-face looks at glorious painted Purple Gallinules, Yellow-crowned Night-Herons and a very cooperative King Rail. Least Bitterns did occasion flybys and a few Fulvous Whistling Ducks were plucked out of the more plentiful Black-bellied Whistlers. Both White and White-faced Ibis were feeding close at hand and an interesting oddity with them was a hybrid White-faced X Glossy Ibis that gave a good study of a tricky ID.



Purple Gallinule © Skye Haas



King Rail © Skye Haas



Glossy x White-faced Ibis hybrid © Skye Haas

With High Island so close to the Gulf of Mexico, we had some great opportunities to search the salt marshes and sandy beaches for coast-loving birds. A dirt road that just petered out into the saltmarsh was full of displaying Seaside Sparrows , and we got a few looks at Clapper Rails here sneaking along the edges of the ditches as displaying Willets called overhead.



Seaside Sparrow © Skye Haas

Close by, a tidal flat frequently held huge flocks of Black Skimmers, both kinds of Pelicans, Laughing Gulls and nearly every species of tern in Texas. Within the tons of Royal, Forster's and Sandwich Terns present were Least, Common and Black Terns scattered among them. One of the first Franklin's Gulls of the spring was found and lingering winterers like Lesser Black-backed and Thayer's Gull were good birds for April. Beach shorebirds were present too; large flocks of American Avocets and a trio of rarities- Red Knot, Piping and Wilson's Plovers.



Sandwich Tern © Skye Haas



Reddish Egret and American Avocet © Skye Haas



Wilson's Plover © Skye Haas

However, as fulfilling of a time we had at High Island, there is a second act for this tour to be had! After our extensive visit in the Winnie area, we pack up the vans and then transit out to central Texas, in a region known as the Hill County. Not a short drive, we saddled up and set out across the State. As we left the coastal plain, we snagged our only pair of White-tailed Kites. Lots of Red-tailed Hawks and Swainson's Hawks kept us company as we drove, and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers were dotted along fence wires as we passed by. We got in to our cozy cabins at the rural Neal's Lodges grateful for a comfy place to fall into our beds so that we could explore scenic and rugged land.



The Hill Country is more arid region, with steep juniper laden hills with cypress-lined river canyons cutting the landscape. Ecologically speaking, the Hill Country located on the Edward's Plateau is quite the confluence of habitat types- eastern deciduous forests in the wetter canyons, gnarly juniper woodland ridges and surprisingly tall rocky cliffs, and to the southwest, extensive mesquite plains as the Edward's Plateau gives way to the scrubby tangles of the Chihuahuan Desert. This brings a wonderful cluster of birds to the hill country- Louisiana Waterthrushs and Carolina Chickadees from the east; Green Jays and Olive Sparrow up from Mexico, and from the Trans-Pecos birds like Ash-throated Flycatchers and Pyrrhuloxias. All these species would be enjoyed the next couple of days as we searched for some of the more notable birds that breed here. When we woke the next morning for breakfast at the Lodge, we were delighted to discover where we were staying was a wonderfully birdy spot along the Rio Frio. We had Western Kingbirds and Vermilion Flycatchers dashing about and Yellow-throated Warblers singing along the river. A bird feeding station netted us a few new birds right away like Black-chinned Hummingbird and Lazuli Bunting and right outside the dining hall was a Tropical Parula!



Yellow-throated Warbler © Skye Haas



Tropical Parula © Skye Haas

We then headed out to go explore the edge of the desert canyons. Over the course of the morning we saw Hooded Orioles, Golden-fronted Woodpeckers and Green Jays as well as large flocks of sparrows, mostly made up of Clay-colored and Lark Sparrows. Eastern migrants were moving out here as well with lots of Summer Tanagers, Painted Buntings and Orchard Orioles present.



Hooded Warbler © Skye Haas



Summer Tanager © Skye Haas

We finished the day by visiting the Frio Bat Caves, which is one of the great animal spectacles of the world! Ten to twelve million Mexican Free-tailed Bats come out of this old mining cave at dusk with the ferocity of a tornado! It takes over an hour or more for the cave to empty of bats for the evening. As the bats began to leave the mines, diurnal Cave Swallows return to their underground roost; a delightful pairing of two co-existing species! For the bats, not all avian life is as accepting as the swallows. As the bats leave the cave, hungry Red-tailed and Harris's Hawks dived through the cloud of bats merely having to outstretch their talons to snag their prey!



Cave Swallow © Skye Haas

For our final day of birding, we headed up to a secret jewel of Texas- Lost Maples State Natural Area. An incredibly lush canyon compared to most of the rest of the region, multiple year-round flowing streams help create and maintain a mature forest that is indeed full of maple trees, a species not otherwise often found as one is approaching the Mexican border. Along the way to Lost Maples we first had a mission to complete- finding the critically endangered Black-capped Vireo. These smartly marked birds are quite the skulkers and we heard several long before we could finally get the group decent looks at a couple vireos. We heard our other target bird for the day the moment we arrived to Lost Maples. Another critically endangered bird, is the striking Golden-cheeked Warbler, which only nests here in the Hill Country of Texas. We started hearing them high above on the steep slopes of the canyons as we paid our entrance fees to the park, but getting a look proved to be difficult. We began a hike up a beautiful canyon trail, being treated to yet another set of new birds for the tour, birds like Hutton's Vireo, Scott's Oriole, White-tipped Dove and Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay. Every so often another Golden-crowned Warbler would start singing away up the hill but were being remarkably devilish in showing themselves! I had never struggled so much before to get a group on this bird, but eventually one gave enough pause high up in the maples that we all finally got some acceptable views of the bird. Hot, a little tired but satisfied we started back down the canyon. This is when that 11th hour miracle occurred. As we walked along, I heard the buzzy song of a Tropical Parula close by; in fact it was materializing low in a bush right in front of us! I had never had such good looks at this species before! Everyone just started to snap some photos when suddenly the Parula was suddenly chased away and replaced by a singing male Golden-cheeked Warbler right in front of us! The bird just absolutely performed for us and made for a thunderous crescendo to the inaugural Spring Migration Tour!



Golden-cheeked Warbler © Skye Haas