



Texas Spring Migration Trip Report 2025

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The 2025 Eagle Eye Tours run through Texas for spring migration was one of my favorites yet! We recorded 244 species including 31 species of shorebird and 27 species of warbler! Some of our highlights included Limpkin, Magnificent Frigatebird, Snowy Plover, Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Clay-colored Thrush, Black-capped Vireo, Lazuli Bunting, Tropical Parula, and Swainson's and Golden-cheeked Warblers! Our group was a fantastic one, full of enthusiastic birders who were always game for more adventure. We started the tour in Houston, first going to the pine woods north of the city where we tracked down our target of a Red-cockaded Woodpecker in record time! Along with this endangered species, we quickly picked up Red-headed Woodpecker, Carolina Chickadee and Brown-headed Nuthatch as well. This efficiency with our effort allowed us to really get some extra birding in before setting out to the coast and we stopped at a cypress swamp where we had some close encounters with a few Limpkins. Normally thought of as a Florida bird in the US, this species seems to be colonizing east Texas with multiple birds breeding in the state. This was our first time getting this species on this tour since I started running it, but I suspect it will not be the last! We then headed out to the coast where we would stay in the town of Winnie for the next several nights allowing us close access to High Island, the Bolivar Peninsula, Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge and the Big Thicket. Another feature of Winnie are the extensive farmed rice fields surrounding the town. We started to explore them as we drove in and were immediately greeted by one of the most impressive Whimbrel flocks I've ever seen here! Over 800 birds in one field. Equally impressive was 116 Buff-breasted Sandpipers. The same field held over a dozen American Golden Plovers and hundreds of Lesser Yellowlegs. We would work these fields for the next few days, turning up goodies like Wilson's Phalaropes, Dunlin and White-rumped Sandpipers. One field had an impressive flock of 500 Pectoral Sandpipers and 300 Black-bellied Plovers. These fields were the best I had seen in several springs! We had other interesting species we turned up were Northern Bobwhite, White-faced Ibis and Gull-billed Terns. Lots of Swainson's Hawks were present as well, giving lots of great photo ops.



Swainson's Hawk © Skye Haas

Part of what produces such high species totals on these tours is the diversity of habitats we visit within a short distance of each other. Miles of saltmarsh were easily accessible and we dipped into the spartina grassy expanses and tidal mud pools where we found breeding specialties like Clapper Rail, Eastern Willet and Seaside Sparrows by the dozens. Migrants like Black Terns and Nelson's Sparrows also preferred these coastal marshes. While watching our Nelson's Sparrows we were treated to a Magnificent Frigatebird sailing right overhead! It would be in these saltmarshes that we could get good studies of Boat-billed Grackles, sister taxa to the "parking lot" generalists of Great-tailed Grackles we could find easily in most other habitats.



Clapper Rail © Skye Haas

Another type of marsh we visited was at Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge with miles of cattail and reed marshes. Here we found our only Fulvous Whistling Ducks and a few of us got a glimpse at a Least Bittern. The shallow water mudflats were full of Black-necked Stilts, Long-billed Dowitchers and Stilt Sandpipers and from the reeds sang a multitude of Marsh Wrens while we sneaked looks at Soras creeping their way through the cattails. At the entrance gate of the refuge, tucked up under the roof of a picnic shelter was a trio of baby Barn Owls!



Baby Barn Owls © Skye Haas

Of course the crown jewel here is the migrant trap of the wooded village of High Island. Here several sanctuaries have been created to protect vital stopover habitat for the thousands of neotropical migrants that rest here as they migrate north in the spring. Right from the get go, we were enjoying flocks of Orchard Orioles and Indigo Buntings at our first High Island stop. Here we even had a female Lazuli Bunting, a pretty rare bird for the upper Texas coast!



Indigo Bunting © Skye Haas

Our first full day here on the coast wasn't dripping with migrants but we quickly clued into the best way to rack up a good day was to check out the water drips maintained at the sanctuaries. One could see a dozen species of warblers at the drip even if the woods felt on the slow side and we were treated to excellent looks at Worm-eating, Blue-winged and Kentucky Warblers, Northern Parula and Ovenbirds. Summer Tanagers dropped in as did Blue-headed and Red-eyed Vireos while Swainson's Thrushes lurked in the underbrush. From there we went on to the massive heron nesting colony here. Hundreds of Great Egrets, Snowy Egrets, Tricolored Herons, Neotropical Cormorants and Roseate Spoonbills have constructed a colony on the north end of the island. The sounds (and smells!) of a breeding colony is quite the experience! Birds displaying all their exaggerated plumes, grunting and gurgling, some still constructing nests while others were already tending to tiny nestlings. Here at the colony we encountered the striking Purple Gallinule, one of the flashiest members of the rail family. It was such an entertaining place to witness, we passed through the colony several times over the next few days.



Purple Gallinule © Skye Haas

The next morning was to be pretty windy on the coast, so I decided we would head inland a ways up into the Big Thicket; a long-leaf pine forest with a gnarly tangle of an understory. This is a good area for breeding songbirds, including a few hard to get species as migrants on the coast. In particular, we were hunting for Swainson's Warblers, and much to our pleasure, it did not take too long to track one down! With a bit of patience, we even all got some good looks at this reclusive warbler! Here we also got some great birds like Acadian Flycatcher, Yellow-throated Vireo, Yellow-breasted Chat and my first Prairie Warbler in Texas in several years! After lunch, we then returned to the coast and we went to Sabine Woods, a fantastic preserve on the coast near the Louisiana border. This patch of woods can be excellent for migrants coming in off the ocean and we certainly did well in our afternoon here. Numerous Orchard Oriole, Indigo Buntings, Great Crested Flycatchers as well as a few Blue Grosbeaks were all seen well, and we logged in 12 species of warblers on the trails including a great side-by-side study of Northern and Louisiana Waterthrushes and a significant fallout of Hooded and Prothonotary Warblers which were everywhere!



Blue Grosbeak © Skye Haas

For our next morning, we started out on the Bolivar Shorebird Reserve; a massive coastal marsh and shoreline that is host to tens of thousands of migrating shorebirds, terns, gulls and other waterbirds. On the drive in we stopped to look at a close Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, our only Long-billed Curlew of the trip and were treated to the amazing look of a close Clapper Rail catching crabs! We then headed out to the beaches and exposed mudflats to marvel at the sheer numbers of birds. Taking the prize of the most numerous species was a flock of over 500 American Avocets! Among them were numerous Marbled Godwits, Willets, Ruddy Turnstones, Sanderlings. Plover diversity was fantastic with Black-bellied, Semipalmated, Wilson's, Piping and Snowy Plovers all giving great looks. Everywhere you looked there were terns, from the tiny Least and Black Terns, to the medium-sized Common, Forster's, Sandwich & Gull-billed Terns up to the gull-sized Royal. A decent sized flock of gulls held a few Lesser Black-backed Gulls with them.



Yellow-crowned Night-Heron © Skye Haas

The next day it was time for us to make our transit away from the marshy forested coastlines and head southwest into the Hill Country of Texas, an ecological transition zone of the eastern American forests, with the Mexican thorn-scrub and western Chihuahuan Deserts. It's a bit of a drive, but still we wanted one more helping of coastal migration so we headed back to High Island for a few more hours where we picked up a few more species of warblers as well as had some excellent looks at Yellow-billed Cuckoos. We then got going on our long car ride, where hawks like Red-tailed, Red-shouldered and Swainson's lined the roadways and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers started to be called out as we drove further westward. We finally arrived at our lodge along the beautiful Rio Frio for the next few nights, a wonderful set of cabins with an old camp dining hall for meals. The grounds here were exceptionally birdy and after settling in, we wandered about, picking up several new species like Black-chinned Hummingbirds, Clay-colored Sparrows, Vermilion Flycatchers, Canyon Wrens and right outside the dining hall at breakfast the next morning, a very vocal Tropical Parula!



Tropical Parula © Skye Haas



Scissor-tailed Flycatcher © Skye Haas

For our first morning here, we headed to Cook's Slough, a series of ponds in a mesquite woodland near Ulvade. We had several thornscrub species here like Painted Buntings, Great Kiskadees, Brown-crested Flycatchers and Long-billed Thrasher. A stop by the Ulvade Fish Hatchery yielded us migrant Bullock's Orioles and our only Couch's Kingbird's of the trip.



Painted Bunting © Skye Haas



Brown-crested Flycatcher © Skye Haas

We then moved up to Chalk Bluff, a large park along a river with a huge cliff looming over it. This proved to be an excellent spot to bird and have picnic lunch and we spent several hours of birding here. We had great looks at a lot of new species like Black-throated Sparrows, Hooded Orioles, and Golden-fronted Woodpeckers. Of note was a pair of birds that ended up being a male Tropical Parula female hybrid Tropical x Northern Parula! But the rarities didn't stop there either! We had Green

Jay, Audubon's Oriole and a pair of Clay-colored Thrushes; the first time this tropical robin had ever been seen in this park! We finished up the day going to the Rio Frio Bat Caves- truly one of the great animal spectacles of North America. Every evening in the right season, 12 million Mexican Free-tailed Bats come pouring out of a cave. It is simply a mind-bending sight. Made even more thrilling were the Swainson's and Harris's Hawks that kept plowing through the tornado of bats to snag a meal. As the sun set, the diurnal Cave Swallows returned to the caves before the bats emerged, and we had a great look at a Canyon Wren as we waited for the bats. Afterwards, we did a little bit of evening road cruising for night birds and had a few singing Chuck-wills-widows.



Mexican Free-tailed Bats © Skye Haas



Swainson's Hawk hunting bats © Skye Haas

For our final morning of birding we started out at Garner State Park. Here we had flocks of Lark Sparrows, nesting Eastern Bluebirds, more Painted Buntings and a great look at a singing Cassin's Sparrow. Heading further along, we stopped on the juniper clade ridges that make up the Hill Country to seek out the hyperactive, yet shy Black-capped Vireo. It took some time and a few attempts but eventually everyone got a look at this smart-looking species. While we were watching one of the vireos, a Golden-cheeked Warbler made an appearance and gave us an extended look at this handsome beast!



Black-capped Vireo © Skye Haas



Golden-cheeked Warbler © Skye Haas

We then pressed on to Lost Maples State Park. A wooded gem tucked away in fertile canyon, this place is chock-full of great birds set among some fantastic scenery. It's easy to forget you're in Texas at times! We heard some more Golden-cheeked Warblers and Black-capped Vireos here, but they remained high up the canyon and I was thankful we had good looks of both species earlier. But it wasn't just about the Golden-cheeks here, this is a very diverse park with a weird combination of birds. We had numerous eastern birds like Louisiana Waterthrush, Black-and-white Warblers, White-eyed Vireos; Western birds like Rufous-crowned Sparrows, Lesser Goldfinch, and Mexican birds like White-tipped Dove and Olive Sparrow. A fun experience was having a male Northern Parula and a male Tropical Parula battling over territory. Having three three (and a half!) Tropical Parulas is definitely a new high count for this tour! We also were treated to one final fantastic look at a Painted Bunting at a feeder at our picnic lunch. Feeling very satisfied with our efforts, it was time to finally pack in and head into San Antonio for a final farewell meal at a wonderful Italian restaurant. Yet another amazing migration tour de force of Texas and I was so happy to see that everyone had such an incredible and fun trip!



Tropical Parula © Skye Haas

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