



Texas Spring Migration Trip Report (Apr 13 - 21, 2024)

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One of my most favorite tours of the year, and certainly the most birdy, the Spring Texas Migration tour was a fantastic hit this spring! A great double-header, we split this tour between a multi-night stay along the upper Texas coast, surveying the migrant trap woodlands, extensive salt marshes and low-lying rice fields for migrant passerines and waterbirds. Then for the final third of the tour, we relocate to the southern edge of the Edwards Plateau where in the more arid hill country birding takes on a distinct southwesterly feel to it. We recorded a solid 243 species of birds, with highlights like Tropical Parula, Chestnut-collared Longspur, Golden-cheeked Warbler, Black-capped Vireo, Black Rail, Ringed Kingfisher, Magnificent Frigatebird, Painted Bunting and Zone-tailed Hawk. The number of shorebirds we observed were in truly amazing numbers, and while we never experienced mind-blowing fallout, new migrants dropped in everyday to keep us satisfied.

We started our travels in Houston where the group convened. A preserve just north of Houston has some of the furthest south nesting Red-cockaded Woodpeckers in Texas and even though it took a while to locate this secretive bird, we found a pair at an active nest cavity! This managed pine woodland had a few nice birds besides Red-cockaded, including our only Brown-headed Nuthatches and Red-headed Woodpeckers of the trip. As we left the pinewoods, while stopped at a red light, we spotted a Swallow-tailed Kite coursing over. Some quick finagling into a nearby gas station revealed that it was actually a mixed flock of Swallow-tailed and Mississippi Kites actively migrating over the city heading north! Why I love this time of year! As we started our drive to the coast, bit by bit, we spotted several firsts for the trips, here an Ibis, there a Fish Crow. And of course, it's just not a trip to Texas unless you start counting up the Scissor-tailed Flycatchers along the roadways! After a quick break to check into our hotel, we then headed down to the coast in search of some evening shorebirds. First up were some farm fields where rice is grown. These fields are excellent places to check for "grasspipers", a paraphyletic group of shorebirds that prefer more upland habitat for foraging. We did well for these seeing several Whimbrel, Upland Sandpipers and our only Buff-

breasted Sandpipers for the trip. Some non shorebird grassland highlights were a pair of Northern Bobwhites and the wild-looking Crested Caracara. From there I had us scoot down to the salt marshes where an exceptionally rare bird for the Texas coast was giving fantastic looks, a beautiful Chestnut-collared Longspur. I don't suspect we will ever see another one of these on the spring migration tour!



Chestnut-collared Longspur © Skye Haas

We returned to the salt marshes early the next morning so we could target one of the specialty breeders there, Seaside Sparrows, of which there were a ton tee'd up and singing away the moment we stepped out of the vans. What took forever to tease out of the reeds was a robust Clapper Rail, which called for a long while before one of the group finally spotted it lurking in the tall grass. But it stayed long enough to get the scopes on and everyone had a good look. We then headed to High Island. Unfortunately there weren't a ton of migrants in; everyday is a different kind of day in spring, and without favorable winds, active migration can be slow. But there is always something amazing to look at when at High Island and we refocused our birding efforts to go 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. Another great bird was a Magnificent Frigatebird that drifted over the colony in a surprise visit from a bird that normally stays out over the ocean!



Tricolored Herons © Skye Haas



Roseate Spoonbills © Skye Haas

The next morning we went up 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 on our morning here. Numerous Orchard Oriole, Indigo Buntings, Great Crested Flycatchers as well as a few Blue Grosbeaks were all seen well, and we logged in 14 species of warblers on the trails including Blackpoll, Blue-winged, Hooded and Kentucky Warblers.



Kentucky Warbler © Skye Haas

We then went to Sea Rim State Park for a picnic lunch which gave us an opportunity to study the subtle differences between Boat-tailed and Great-tailed Grackles as both species eyed our sandwiches hoping to snag a morsel. After such a successful morning, we took a nice post-lunch siesta to wait out the hotter portion of the afternoon and headed back out for some early evening birding in the expansive freshwater marsh of Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge. A wading bird paradise, we saw lots of White and White-faced Ibis and even a single Glossy Ibis along with the prehistoric looking Roseate Spoonbill.



White-faced Ibis and Black-necked Stilt © Skye Haas

Lots of shorebirds were present with Black-necked Stilts being one of the most abundant. Always a nice find were several Stilt Sandpipers foraging among the Dunlin and Yellowlegs. A pair of Gull-billed Terns were our first for the trip and a couple of Least Bitterns would be our only ones for the tour. A King Rail grunting from the reeds was a fun get and we had numerous duck species here including a flock of Fulvous Whistling-Ducks. 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 (a fiddler crab specialist), and were treated to the amazing surprise of hearing a singing Black Rail! If that wasn't enough a pair of White-tailed Kites were courting along the dune ridges.



White-tailed Kite © Skye Haas

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 10,000 American Avocets! Among them were numerous Marbled Godwits, Willets, Ruddy Turnstones, Sanderlings and our only Long-billed Curlew of the trip. 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 and Caspian Terns. Their odd cousins, Black Skimmers were also plentiful.



American Avocets © Skye Haas



Snowy Plover © Skye Haas



Least Tern © Skye Haas



Sandwich and Common Terns © Skye Haas

Afterwards we had a fantastic seafood lunch right on the coast, and then went into the salt marshes to successfully wrestle up some pumpkin-colored Nelson's Sparrows. We then headed back up to High Island for one last evening of coastal birding. Often late afternoons can be a great time to see newly arriving migrants who just spent 15 hours flying over the width of the Gulf of Mexico! There weren't too many warblers dropping in that evening, but a great selection of other neotropical

migrants like Acadian Flycatchers, Baltimore & Orchard Orioles, Summer & Scarlet Tanagers, Wood & Swainson's Thrushes, Rose-breasted, Blue and even a rare Black-headed Grosbeak, and seemingly at every curve in the trail, another Yellow-billed Cuckoo!



Nelson's Sparrow © Skye Haas



Summer Tanager © 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 so we spent the morning in the car, where hawks like Red-tailed, Red-shouldered and Swainson's lined the roadways and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers were always being called out as we drove along.



Scissor-tailed Flycatcher © Skye Haas

At a rest stop at the halfway mark, we could see the transition beginning with more southern and westerly species found like Common Ground-Dove, Black-crested Titmice and Bewick's Wrens. 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, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Black Phoebe, Vermilion Flycatchers, Canyon Wrens and right outside the dining hall, a very vocal Tropical Parula!

The next day we set out to explore this region in its fullest. Before we were five minutes down the road, we found one of the main targets for the tour- the hyperactive Black-capped Vireo! Getting a group on this sulky gnome of the juniper forests can be a hard task but this bird treated up to some fantastic looks at it as it uncharacteristically tee'd up for an extended period of time! We had barely made it back into the car before we were out again enjoying the melancholic songs of Cassin's Sparrows as we enjoyed our first good looks at male Painted Bunting singing from the utility wires.



Black-capped Vireo © Skye Haas

We then headed to Cook's Slough, a series of ponds in a mesquite woodland. We had several thornscrub species here like Painted Buntings and Bell's Vireos and our only Couch's Kingbirds and Long-billed Thrashers of the tour.



Painted Bunting © 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 after several hours of birding, we would have to tear ourselves away from the park. We had great looks at a lot of new species like

Black-throated Sparrows, Hooded Orioles, Great Kiskadees, Brown-crested Flycatchers and Golden-fronted Woodpeckers. Of note among the several singing Northern Parulas was a bird that at first glance appeared to be a Tropical Parula but upon close inspection showed to be a hybrid of the two species!



Tropical Parula hybrid © Skye Haas



Black-throated Sparrow © Skye Haas

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 are the Red-tailed and Harris's Hawks that will simply plow through the tornado of bats and easily snag a meal. As the sun set, the diurnal Cave Swallows returned to the caves before the bats emerged, and we had several Lark

Sparrows and Pyroluxias flitting about as we waited for the bats. Driving out in the dark, we had several Poorwill, Chuck-wills-widows and Lesser Nighthawks singing and foraging.



Mexican Free-tailed Bats © Skye Haas

For our final morning of birding we ran up 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! The main target of course here was the Texas breeding endemic and endangered species Golden-cheeked Warbler. It took a little while to track one down for good looks, but I knew it would be just a matter of time as they were singing all along the walls of the canyon. 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 Carolina Chickadees, Louisiana Waterthrush, Black-and-white Warblers, White-eyed and Red-eyed Vireos; western species like Woodhouse's Scrub-Jays, Rufous-crowned Sparrows, Spotted Towhees and Lesser Goldfinch, and Mexican birds like White-tipped Dove, Scott's Oriole, and Olive Sparrow. There was a nice flight of migrating Swainson's Hawks along the canyon ridge, and we were even lucky enough to have good looks at a Zone-tailed Hawk! And in addition to repeated looks at Golden-cheeked Warblers, there were more Black-capped Vireos- at one point, we saw both species in the same binocular view! 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.



Swainson's Hawk © *Skye Haas*

[Texas Spring Migration Bird List](#)