



Texas Spring Migration Trip Report (April 18 - 26, 2022)

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Day 1: Houston 18-April The Texas Spring Migration & Hill Country tour kicks off on a Monday night at our hotel near George Bush Intercontinental Airport. After introductions and a brief summary of tomorrow's plan, we head into Houston for a quick bite and prepare for an early morning. **Day 2: Houston to Winnie 19-April** We first head north roughly 30 miles to Woodland, and visit one of the nation's largest working urban forests - the 1,700-acre W. Goodrich Jones State Forest. This will be our only chance to explore a southeastern pine ecosystem and see a few of the bird species unique to these forests. We get here early, and quickly hear our main target, the Red-cockaded Woodpecker (RCW), knocking and making *churt* calls off in the distance. RCWs need well-spaced stands of mature pine that are burned frequently - conditions which have largely been removed in the Southeast after decades of lumbering and fire suppression. As a consequence, they were placed on the endangered species list in 1970, under a law that preceded the Endangered Species Act of 1973. At the time of listing, the species had declined to fewer than 10,000 individuals in widely scattered, isolated and declining populations. Today, the population is stable and hovers around 15,000 individuals. While considered a habitat specialist, its habitat was once far from special and covered 90 million acres of the Southeast before European settlement - *less than 4 million acres exist today*. RCWs nest in colonies and W. Goodrich Jones State Forest still has several active clusters. Where we find our two (probably a few more in the distance) birds is within one of these clusters, which are a collection of trees with nest and roost cavities. Unique among North American woodpeckers, RCWs excavate solely in living trees - specifically mature pines, because: 1) these trees have a soft core, also known as the heartwood, caused by the fungus *Porodaedalea pini* making cavity-building easier; and 2) RCWs want that cascade of gooey sticky resin since it functions as physical and chemical barrier for their main predator, tree-climbing rat snakes. Since heartwood takes 60 years to develop, managers have accelerated the recovery of RCWs with

artificial cavities, and we notice several boxes that are inserted into young trees in this cluster. We slowly do a loop through the northern end of the preserve, hearing lots of rapid trills from Pine Warblers, squeaky toy calls from Brown-headed Nuthatches, singing male and female Northern Cardinals, and the *PEEaweeee* of an Eastern Wood-pewee. We get amazing views of a Yellow-breasted Chat and Red-headed Woodpecker. Migrants are also present in smaller numbers, and we find a warbler we initially ID as a male Blue-winged... only to observe bold yellow wingbars when it flips over to grab a worm - while some plumages of Blue-winged can have yellow-tinged wingbars, this bird's wingbars are far too golden. This is a "Brewster's" Warbler, a hybrid between Golden-winged and Blue-winged. These two species produce fertile hybrids regularly, and the genetic permutations resulting from different generations, backcrosses, etc. result in many different variations. We then grabbed some picnic lunches, picking up a few new species in the parking lot that we wouldn't see the rest of the trip: American Robin and Mississippi Kite. Continuing on towards Winnie, we pass through farmland where we start seeing our first Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, and then make a stop to eat our food and bird at Double Bayou Park. It's windy and the middle of the day so the birding is slower. The only bird that gives us reasonably good views is a White-eyed Vireo so we get back in the vans and drive towards Anahuac NWR. Short of the turnoff on CR 1985, we find a large congregation of raptors - Swainson's Hawks mostly, Crested Caracaras and Northern Harriers in an agricultural field that is getting tilled. In the opposite field, we find an impressive number and mix of swallows - Barn, Bank and Cliff. Further down CR 1985, not far from the junction with SR 124, we check out flooded rice fields full of shorebirds. The wind and heat shimmer make viewing less than ideal, but we still manage to see a great mixture of birds. After checking into our hotel in Winnie, we proceed to High Island on the coast, and visit Houston Audubon's Smith Oaks Sanctuary - 177 acres of fields, woods, wetlands and ponds. We take the fantastic new boardwalk first that courses through the center of the reserve and gives us a nice view of the waterbird rookery - nesting is in full swing and there is a cacophony coming from the hungry chicks. Most of the nests we see are Roseate Spoonbill, Great and Snowy Egrets, Tricolored Heron, and Neotropical Cormorant. We then cut back under the elevated boardwalk through a dense thicket, and start seeing a few migrants. Overall, it's a slow day for songbirds so we have to dig a bit. As it starts to get dark, we head back to the hotel and have dinner. **Day 3: Gulf Coast 20-April**

Today, we join forces with the other Eagle-Eye Tours group that is two days ahead of us led by Skye Haas. We are going to areas that are fairly wide open and can accommodate our combined parties, and extra eyes are always a good thing. We head east to the Texas/Louisiana border, and our first stop is at Tyrrell Park - Cattail Marsh near Beaumont. Well inland, our goal here is to see birds that prefer freshwater marshes. Tyrrell Park has many parts, and the Cattail Marsh section encompasses 900 acres of managed wetlands with fantastic infrastructure for birding, mainly a boardwalk and viewing platforms added in 2016. This preserve is a treatment wetland originally constructed in 1993 by the Beaumont Public Utilities Department to handle wastewater using the nutrient uptake and filtering capabilities of wetland plants. These natural systems are a win-win-win (probably some other wins I'm forgetting): effective water treatment, incredible habitat for wildlife, and lots of opportunity for outdoor recreation. We head down the central boardwalk picking up Sora, Purple Gallinule, Fulvous Whistling-Ducks, Least Bitterns, and more along the way. We then travel around the perimeter of the impoundments on the raised gravel trails, mainly on the hunt for King Rail that we only heard from a distance from the boardwalk. On our way around, we see Marsh Wren from very close range. Soon, our strategy pays off, when Skye's crew finds a very bold and obliging King Rail out in the open! By the time most of us get there, it has retreated a bit into the marsh, but eventually we all see it as it passes through gaps in the clumps of sedge. On our way out, we find a flock of Fish Crows raiding a picnic site - last time we'd see this species.



Scarlet Tanager at Sabine Woods © Chris Burney

At mid-morning, we continued to the coast to look for migrating songbirds at Sabine Woods, an isolated patch of live oaks owned and managed by the Texas Ornithological Society. Again, it's very windy and catching movement amongst the swaying branches is tricky so we search for areas that are a little bit more sheltered, mainly the southern edge of the forest. In the fields here, there is a lot of action amid the wildflowers - we get great looks at Blue Grosbeak, Indigo Bunting and Orchard Oriole, and above us giving *Wwreep* calls is a Great-crested Flycatcher. Orioles are singing here too. As we walk through shaded areas with lots of ground cover, we see several thrushes - Veery, Gray-cheeked, Swainson's and Wood. Singing vireos are also numerous, and we get lots of practice with Red-eyed, Yellow-throated and Blue-headed. For lunch, we sample some classic Gulf Coast fare at Tammie's in Sabine Pass. On our way back to Sabine Woods, we find a bird feeder in town that is loaded with blackbirds including a male Bronzed Cowbird, easily separated from the rest with its bright red eyes and humped back appearance. Once back in the woods, it's the midday lull so we visit the drips (water stations for the birds), and a few are loaded with birds. At one point, we have males and females of Blue Grosbeaks and Indigo Buntings in the same bath providing a comparison between the two species, with female Painted Bunting nearby! Other birds waiting in line are Yellow Warblers and American Redstarts. It's starting to get late, so we make one more pass through the woods and we get super lucky with a very cooperative Swainson's Warbler. Back to Winnie, and barbecue for dinner. **Day 4: Gulf Coast 21-April** For the first part of the morning, we head back to the rice fields which were full of birds a few days earlier to enjoy some better viewing conditions, mainly calmer winds and less heat shimmer. Thankfully, the birds are still there, but the composition of species is a little different. While the Hudsonian Godwits and Upland Sandpipers appear absent, we do find the two "long-winged" sandpipers, Baird's and White-rumped amongst a horde of Pectoral Sandpipers. Unfortunately, a farmer is tilling the field they are foraging in, and moving them everywhere. Stilt Sandpipers mixed in with Dunlins are nearby in the fields on the opposite side, and are in various stages of alternate plumage - they are relatively still so we get lots of opportunity to study them closely. At one point, a Peregrine Falcon makes a seemingly casual effort to catch something and sends many of the birds skyward. Other new birds here include Green Heron and Savannah Sparrow. We get back in the vans and head to High Island. We spend the rest of the day at Smith Oaks Sanctuary, taking a break at midday for lunch and some rest back in Winnie.

Migration is a bit sluggish locally and we have to dig for most of our birds. Towards the end of the day, we get a tip that Grackle Pond has some activity - we head that direction and start finding a decent mix of birds. We all get great looks at a Solitary Sandpiper, appropriately alone feeding in a shallow puddle. High in the cypress above it, we also find our first Blackpoll Warbler for the trip. The activity is definitely picking up a bit as we find more Blackpolls, Tennessee Warblers, Black-and-white Warbler, Yellow Warblers, Northern Parulas and Black-throated Green Warblers in a foraging flock. Below them are more thrushes, both waterthrushes and Ovenbirds. Towards the end of the loop, we find Hood Warblers, a lone male Magnolia Warbler, and a male Black-headed Grosbeak. Great finish to a slow morning.

Day 5: Gulf Coast 22-April We head directly to the coast today to get an early start in the intercoastal saltmarshes on the Bolivar Peninsula. On the way near High Island, a Virginia Rail comes out on the side of the road. Our main target once we get to Tuna Road is Seaside Sparrow, and we find dozens in quick time since they are very active, singing and establishing territories - we see lots of small brown blobs popping up and sinking back into the Saltgrass (*Distichlis spicata*) and Needlegrass Rush (*Juncus roemerianus*). Eventually, we find a few more cooperative birds that sit up nicely allowing us to study them well. The discordant calls of Clapping Rails burst all around us, but we struggle to actually see one since they are buried in the grasses until one is coaxed out into full view. Another bird that is singing incessantly, but staying tucked in the vegetation and out of view are Sedge Wrens. They seem everywhere, and eventually one pops out fully on a dead branch for all of us to see. Towards the end of the road, we find a couple of Nelson's Sparrows which have probably wintered in this area and are getting ready to head north. In the distance, we spot the distinctive outline of a Magnificent Frigatebird patrolling the intercoastal waterway. In addition to the marshbirds, we see a nice mix of terns and shorebirds. We then head a short way back to Rollover Pass to check the exposed mudflats, sandbars and oyster rakes for more coastal birds. A large sandbar at the mouth of the pass is covered with terns, skimmers, gulls and shorebirds and we spend considerable time working through the mix. We get nice side-by-side comparisons of Forster's and Common Terns, Eastern and Western Willet, and Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs. We find our first and only American White Pelicans on an island far in the distance. Other new birds include somewhat late Red-breasted Mergansers, Marbled Godwits, a white-phase Reddish Egret, American Oystercatcher and a Cooper's Hawk that glides through as we leave. We spent the remainder of the day back at High Island visiting both Boy Scout Woods and Smith Oaks Sanctuary. Again, migration is sluggish through these parts, and we see mostly the same collection of birds. Spotted Sandpiper is the only new one, and we find it where we had the Solitary Sandpiper the day before.

Day 6: Westward 23-April Today, we depart for the Hill Country. We pack the vans and head west along the coast making an early stop at Bolivar Flats Shorebird Sanctuary. On the drive in we pass a marsh where we find a pair of Gull-billed Terns courting. Unlike other terns, Gull-billeds are more opportunistic and feed on terrestrial animals as well such as grasshoppers, dragonflies, moths, spiders, earthworms, fiddler crabs, crayfish, lizards, frogs, small mammals, and occasionally chicks of other birds. When we get to the beach, we find massive numbers of seabirds and shorebirds hunkered down in the wind along the shoreline. Most of the shorebirds are Sanderlings, and mixed within them are Red Knots, Semipalmated Sandpipers, Willets and a lone Piping Plover. We get back into the vans and head south to the end of the peninsula. At the point, vehicles are prohibited and much of the area is roped off and signed for beach-nesting birds. In this area, we find Avocets, Wilson Plovers that seemed to be paired off, dark and light morph Reddish Egrets, Horned Larks, and a nice mix of shorebirds. As we are walking back, we spot a White-tailed Kite hovering over the sand dunes in the distance, and Mottled Ducks chasing each other over the marshes. On the ferry over to Galveston Island, a Magnificent Frigatebird makes a fly-by. Once over, we grab lunch and then make the long drive to our Lodges in Concan. We get to our lodge with a few hours of daylight left so once everyone is settled, some of us bird the grounds. The first bird we find is a Tropical Parula, but upon closer examination, this bird has parts of a white arc above and below the eye which hints at hybridization with Northern Parula, which seems plausible as we are within the hybrid zone for these two species. Over the next couple

days, we'll find several individuals on both sides of the highway that have varying amounts of white around the eyes. We also find at least one male without any white that we assume to be a pure Tropical, and a female Northern Parula. One of the better feeders at the lodge is right next to our group of cabins so we all take turns in one of the plastic chairs waiting patiently for the birds which include Black-crested Titmouse, Lesser Goldfinch, Lincoln's Sparrow and Painted Bunting. Near the volleyball court, we find a pair of Vermilion Flycatchers. At dinner, we find the hummingbird feeders which are getting a lot of attention from Black-chinned Hummingbirds.

Day 7: Hill Country

24-April As we walk to breakfast at 6:00am, we can hear a few Chuck-will's-widows and a Great Horned Owl in the distance. After breakfast, we start birding from the dining hall since there is great habitat on the slopes overlooking the Frio River. We slowly make our way through the network of roads for cabins finding an interesting mix of eastern and western birds. One bird we find is an apparent newcomer from the west, records of nesting Hutton's Vireos only started to be found on the Edward's Plateau of central Texas over the past 20 years. We also find a very vocal Brown-crested Flycatcher and another Yellow-breasted Chat that gives us great views. While it's still early, we get in the vans and travel a short ways down the road to try some other habitat types. We try a side road that passes through a vast expanse of juniper-oak scrub, and the first bird we hear when we get out of the vans is a Black-capped Vireo, one of our main targets for the Hill Country. We get fantastic views of a male as it slowly forages and sings in low bush. Not far from here, we find our other main target, the Golden-cheeked Warbler singing atop an Ashe Juniper. We stroll down this dirt road for a while since there is zero traffic and it's fairly birdy. Next, we hear the raucous calls of a Green Jay, and eventually this stunner comes into view. Other exciting finds are Field Sparrow and Hooded Oriole. We then make a quick stop in a more open grassy area not far from our last spot, specifically to find Cassin's Sparrow, and within a few minutes we hear a few birds not far from the road. We get one to cooperate, and we all get great looks at another "little brown job" (LBJ) - I might be the only one excited about this find. While I'm attempting to explain the finer points of Cassin Sparrow identification, a Harris's Hawk soars over and steals the show. We find a few other birds as we slowly make our way to Uvalde including Lark Sparrow and American Kestrel. Our next stop is Cook's Slough Nature Center. We start with a quick picnic lunch, and somehow while we are eating, it seems like the temperature goes up 20 degrees. We soldier on but the heat has also killed the bird activity - we walk around a few of the retention ponds and manage to find several new birds. However, the heat starts to make things miserable and we decide to retreat to the hills, making a stop for frozen smoothies on the way back. While pulling over for a Crested Caracara atop a utility pole, we hear the distinctive husky *cheedle* song of a Bell's Vireo - the bird darts back and forth, but we all see to some extent... as 18-wheelers whiz by. Other birds spotted on the drive back are Ash-throated Flycatcher and Wild Turkey. Back at the lodge we take a break before an early dinner, because tonight we are going to visit the Frio Bat Cave. The cave is not far from where we saw Cassin's Sparrow earlier so it's a short drive. At dusk, we join several other tourists and march up to the mouth of the cave... right as a storm is wrapping around the hill we are on. Harris's and Red-tailed Hawks take out a few of the bats in the first wave. A Canyon Wren is also singing, but very hard to find... might be in the cave. Steadily, the exodus of bats picks up until there is a solid ribbon of bats disappearing into the distance - it'll take a few hours for all 10 million bats to emerge. At this point in the season, most of the bats are female Mexican Free-tailed (*Tadarida brasiliensis*) that are raising pups inside the cave. Two other species, Cave Myotis (*Myotis velifer*) and Peter's ghost-faced bat (*Mormoops meglaphylla*) also inhabit the cave in much smaller numbers. It's a true wildlife spectacle, and getting to watch it from such close range is amazing, and a little unnerving as we feel sprinkles of rain or something else...



Frio Bat Cave © Chris Burney

Day 8: Hill Country 25-April On our last day of birding, a cold front arrives and the weather is a little more complicated with lots of rain in the forecast. While the morning is nice, we bird at our lodge again and click some final photos at the feeders - we find a Western Tanager which is a new bird for the trip. Back on the road, we make a quick stop along a creek and get very lucky when we find our target, a Green Kingfisher. When we get to Lost Maples State Natural Area, the weather turns and it starts raining hard intermittently. We take advantage of the lulls to find several new birds, particularly at the bird feeders. On our way to lunch, we almost hit a Sharp-shinned Hawk crossing low over the highway. In Utopia, we get our last taste of Hill Country cooking at the famous Lost Maples Cafe. We make one last birding stop at a small park on the south edge of Utopia hoping the poor weather might have dropped some migrants in the area. We see a nice mix, but nothing new. Our last new bird for the trip is a Vesper Sparrow among the hundreds of Lark and Clay-colored Sparrows in the agricultural fields north of Sabinal. The tour rolls into San Antonio, and we have one last dinner to celebrate!



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