

# Texas Coast & Big Thicket

## With Naturalist Journeys & Caligo Ventures

April 23 – May 1, 2020

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The Upper Texas Coast has long been recognized as one of the best places to be during spring migration. Each year, 25+ species of warblers pass through the area's coastal woodlands, as well as many species of vireos, thrushes, flycatchers, and other passerines. Although the presence of songbirds is strongly weather related, other birds are numerous and more predictable. 36 species of shorebirds, including plovers, terns, most of the country's herons and egrets, pelicans, Black Skimmers, and several species of gulls.

During the first part of the tour, we investigate the Big Thicket northeast of Houston. There we see southeastern specialties like Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Bachman's Sparrow, Fish Crow, and Brown-headed Nuthatch.

Several nesting warblers may be on territory, including Prothonotary, Hooded, Kentucky, Pine, and, hopefully, Swainson's. The Big Thicket area is also known for its diversity of dragonflies and damselflies (about 100 species) and butterflies (up to seven species of swallowtails in a single spot!), and we won't ignore these as they appear. For the balance of the time, we alternate between the coastal woodlands at High Island, other nearby migrant hotspots such as Sabine Pass, and the surrounding rice fields, beaches, and wetlands around Galveston Bay.

Our schedule is somewhat weather-dependent: North winds, rain, or cold fronts put down migrating birds and we search for them in woodlands behind the Gulf's shores. If rice fields are flooded, we stand a good chance of seeing shorebirds like American Golden-Plovers, Stilts, Semipalmated and Buff-breasted Sandpipers, and Hudsonian Godwit, as well as Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, and both White-faced and Glossy Ibises. Along the coast, we look for Roseate Spoonbill, Reddish Egret, American Oystercatcher, and the endangered Piping Plover. In the process, we have a chance to study a variety of rails, shorebirds, terns, and other waterbirds.

### Tour Highlights

- Feel the pulse of migration at preserves created by the Houston Audubon Society; your visit supports protected habitat for thousands of migrants
- Listen to the cacophony of hundreds of breeding herons at Smith Oaks Rookery
- Study a smorgasbord of migrant shorebirds with an expert at Bolivar Flats Shorebird Preserve
- Watch or photograph stunning species like Roseate Spoonbill and Scarlet Tanager
- See as many as 25 species of warblers in bright, breeding plumage
- Enjoy secretive rails, bitterns, and myriad other species at Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge
- Bird pine country for southeastern specialties like Red-cockaded Woodpecker and Bachman's Sparrow

### Tour Summary

9-Day / 8-Night Texas Spring Migration Birding Tour with James Smith

\$2390, from Houston

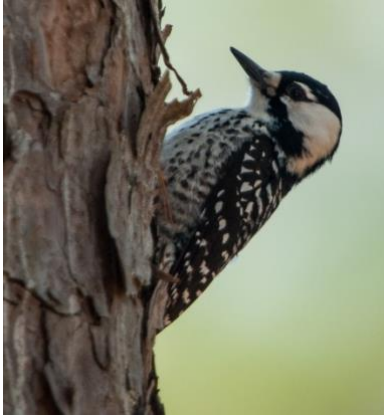
Airport is George Bush International (IAH)



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### Itinerary



#### **Thurs., April 23 Arrivals in Houston**

Welcome to Texas! After gathering at George Bush Intercontinental Airport (IAH) by 2:00 PM, we head to our lodging. We enjoy a welcome dinner, getting to know each other and going over a preview of our days ahead from guide Bob Behrstock. As time permits we check a few bird areas near our hotel, which is located close to W. Goodrich Jones State Forest north of the airport.

*Accommodations at Best Western the Woodlands (D)*

#### **Fri., April 24 W. Goodrich Jones State Forest | Big Creek Scenic Area**

After an early breakfast, we depart for W. Goodrich Jones State Forest, about 50 minutes north of the airport. The forest hosts several clusters of endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker, as well as Red-headed, and Pileated Woodpeckers, Pine Warblers, and other species characteristic of the region's pine forests.

Driving east, we stop at the Big Creek Scenic Area. Occasionally, Louisiana Waterthrush can be found near the parking area, as well as Gray Petaltail — one of the Southeast's special dragonflies. This area can be productive for butterflies and a sunny morning may yield a variety of swallowtails.

Continuing eastward, we check the boat ramp at Martin Dies, Jr. State Park for Prothonotary and Yellow-throated Warblers, Yellow-throated Vireos, and other woodland species such as Eastern Wood Pewee and Great Crested Flycatcher. A short drive further east takes us to Jasper, our home for the next two nights.

*Accommodations at the Best Western, Jasper (B,L,D)*

#### **Sat., April 25 Piney Woods | Angeles National Forest**

After breakfast, we investigate several sites in the Angeles National Forest, including the vicinity of Bouton Lake. Bachman's Sparrow have become very local in East Texas but this area supports several territories. Brown-headed Nuthatch, Wild Turkey, Indigo and Painted Buntings, and Red-cockaded Woodpecker may be seen along the roadsides. Lunch is at a local café. During the afternoon, we work our way back to Jasper, perhaps by way of

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the fish hatchery outside town. Dinner tonight is at your leisure.

*Accommodations at the Best Western, Jasper (B,L,D)*

### **Sun., April 26 Big Thicket National Preserve | Winnie**

Today, we bird our way from Jasper to the town of Winnie. En route, we visit several sites in the Big Thicket National Preserve where we look for Swainson's, Kentucky, Hooded, and Prairie Warblers, and more widespread species such as Tufted Titmouse and Carolina Chickadee.

Butterflies in the area include Palamedes and Zebra Swallowtail, Southern and the scarce Creole pearly-eye, and several interesting skippers such as Lace-winged Roadside-Skipper and Hayhurst's Scallopwing. Dragonflies can be numerous.

If we haven't yet encountered Fish Crow (decidedly local in East Texas), we look for it as we pass through Beaumont. We should arrive in Winnie with a little time to relax before dinner.

*Accommodations at Holiday Inn Express, Winnie (B,L,D)*

### **Mon., April 27 High Island | Boy Scout Woods | Smith Oaks | Rollover Pass**

We don't have to travel far today to explore some excellent preserves managed by the Houston Audubon Society. These woodland oases or "coastal mottes" as they are called, provide refuge to thousands of Neotropical migrant songbirds. Having just crossed the Gulf of Mexico, a 600-mile non-stop journey, tired birds often pause in these woodlands for food and shelter.

Boardwalk trails allow for amazing and consistently close viewing without undue disturbance to the birds. Walking the trails, we search for warblers, tanagers, vireos, buntings, and more. Warblers passing through the woodlands include Blue-winged, Blackburnian, Kentucky, Hooded, and the now rare Cerulean. The mix of vireos presents a greater challenge; it's a great time to practice identification skills to locate White-eyed, Red-eyed, Warbling, Philadelphia, and Yellow-throated. Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Scarlet Tanager are attracted to fruiting mulberry trees.

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After an afternoon break, we drive down the peninsula, checking several areas for terns, gulls, and wading birds. From Rollover Pass we hope to see Laughing Gull; Gull-billed, Royal, Sandwich, Forster's, and possibly Least Terns; as well as the closely related Black Skimmer. This is also a great hangout for loafing American Avocet, often joined by Marbled Godwit. Or, if weather is right for migrants, we leave this for another day and continue to explore the wooded migrant hotspots. Dinner tonight is at your leisure.

*Accommodations at Holiday Inn Express, Winnie (B,L,D)*

### **Tues. April 28 Bolivar Flats Shorebird Preserve | High Island — Smith Oaks**

We devote part of one day to Bolivar Flats, one of the country's most important way stations for migrant shorebirds. Recent hurricanes have reshaped the beaches of the Bolivar Peninsula and we probably cross over to Galveston Island (via a short ferry ride) for a better look at the flats. The incoming tide directs the birds towards us and makes for better viewing, so we study the tide chart to plan our day. Habitats at Bolivar and around East Beach on Galveston Island include beach, mudflats, and salt marsh, all of which provide a nutrient-rich smorgasbord for shorebirds. This is one of the best places to slow down and really study these far-ranging migrants.

Using high-powered spotting scopes, we carefully scan the flocks for Marbled Godwit, Red Knot, Ruddy Turnstone, Sanderling, Western Sandpiper, Dunlin, and both Long-billed and Short-billed Dowitchers. Here we're likely to be able to compare similar species such as Semipalmated, Piping (a wintering species), and Snowy Plovers, often in groups with the larger Wilson's Plover. American Oystercatcher may be present here, feeding among the smaller shorebirds, and Brown Pelican often fly in long lines above. There are hundreds of Laughing Gull; with patience we may find Herring Gull or a rarity such as Lesser Black-backed, Franklin's, or California Gull. Osprey may fly through, and we also watch overhead for Black and Turkey Vultures. If a Peregrine Falcon should come by, we get some spectacular flight displays!

In the afternoon, we return to our lodgings for a little siesta before heading out to the rookery portion of Smith Oaks. A viewing platform there affords outstanding views of colonial wading birds. At sunset, enjoy the spectacle of Snowy and Cattle Egrets coming to roost, joined by Roseate Spoonbill, Great Egret, Neotropical Cormorant,



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and Little Blue and Tricolored Herons. Dinner tonight is at your leisure.  
*Accommodations at Holiday Inn Express, Winnie (B,L,D)*

### **Wed., April 29 Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge**

We leave early this morning for the 34,000-acre Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge, located on the eastern end of Galveston Bay. En route we inspect groups of feeding shorebirds in the agricultural fields, looking for such species as American Golden-Plover, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, and Stilt Sandpiper. We circumnavigate Shoveler Pond on the auto route, stopping many times to get out with the scopes and view the abundant wading birds.

Some 280 species have been recorded here, attracted to prairies, patchy woodland habitat, and the marshes. Seaside Sparrow are fairly common in grasses near the bay edge. Roseate Spoonbill always attract a lot of attention; here they feed alongside White, and sometimes White-faced Ibises. Marsh Wren provide a background chorus, broken by the raucous calls of Boat-tailed Grackle. Yellow-crowned Night-Heron and both Least and American Bitterns often put on a good display; Least Bitterns nest here and may be numerous.

American Alligator are particularly plentiful in the extensive ponds and wet prairies, while Northern Harrier hunt from above. While we are here, butterfly enthusiasts want to look for Salt Marsh Skipper. For those new to butterfly watching, the garden at refuge headquarters makes learning and comparing species much easier! Mammals we may encounter include Coyote, Raccoon, Mink, Muskrat, and Swamp Rabbit. On short trails near headquarters we can stretch our legs and scan for songbirds before our drive back to High Island. Enjoy a free evening tonight with a choice of restaurants. Birding die-hards may want to check out what has turned up at nearby Boy Scout Woods.

*Accommodations at Holiday Inn Express, Winnie (B,L,D)*

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### **Thurs., April 30 High Island | Bolivar Flats | Bolivar Ferry to Galveston Island**

Today we are ideally positioned to make the most of where birds are plentiful, and to search for species we may have not yet encountered. If the action is high at Boy Scout Woods at High Island we stop there to check for warblers and other migrant songbirds. This and other Important Bird Areas all hold potential. In general we head down the coast, visiting ponds and shorelines and then crossing by ferry on to Galveston. Here we visit several key birding spots, before crossing back over to the mainland to position ourselves near Brazos Bend State Park for tomorrow's grand finale.

*Accommodations at Holiday Inn Express Alvin (B,L,D)*

### **Fri., May 1**

### **Brazos Bend State Park | Final Birding & Departures from Houston**

This morning we visit one of the best kept secrets of Texas Coast birding, Brazos Bend State Park. Here we often add several key species, in forests and wetlands. We plan to arrive at the airport by 12:30 PM, for flights out after 2:00 PM, so please plan your return travel accordingly. We do want the morning for birding, so please honor these flight times. (B)



### **Guide James Smith**

James brings some twenty five years of guiding experience to Naturalist Journeys. Originally from Sheffield in the United Kingdom, he discovered a love for guiding in Israel in 1995 where he helped establish the Kibbutz Lotan Center for Birdwatching in the Southern Arava Valley. Since then, he's led hundreds of tours throughout the Northern Hemisphere for a number of UK-based tour companies. His trips to Israel and North America are especially close to his heart but he's also led or co-led tours to Mexico (Veracruz), The

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Gambia, Kenya, Iceland, Scottish Highlands, Spanish Pyrenees, Central/Southern France, Greece (Lesvos), and India (Goa). An accomplished illustrator, James placed runner-up in the British Birds "Bird Illustrator of the Year" competition in 1992 and went on to have his work published in numerous birding magazines and journals. He also co-authored the two volume set *A Guide to the Birding Hotspots of Israel* (Published in 2000 by the Israel Ornithological Center and the S.P.N.I.). He returns to Israel every year to lead trips and remains an active member of the Israel Rarities and Distribution Committee. When not leading tours he can be found at home in Western Massachusetts with his wife Susannah and their young son Matan.

### Cost of the Journey

#### Plan Ahead!

Protect yourself with Allianz Travel Insurance. Please note, starting in January 2017, Naturalist Journeys pays 100% of your flight carbon offset.

#### Cost of the Journey

Cost of the journey is \$2390 DBL / \$2850 SGL from Houston, Texas. Cost includes: all accommodations; all meals as stated in the itinerary; group airport transfers; ground transportation; professional guide services; park, preserve, and other activity fees; and miscellaneous program expenses.

Tour price does not include: roundtrip airfare to and from Houston or items of a personal nature such as laundry, portage, telephone charges, or alcoholic beverages. Gratuities for maids or porters, and gratuity for your guides are not included — these are at your discretion, but highly appreciated and recommended. With fewer than 6 participants, a small-group surcharge (typically \$100 - \$300 per participant) may apply, or we may request that you pick up the cost of a few additional dinners in lieu of this surcharge.

#### Special Offer!

If you opt to pair this Texas Coast & Big Thicket tour with our [Texas Hill Country](#) tour (April 17 – 22), we'll reimburse your connecting flight up to \$100. Talk to us for details.

#### Travel Information

Plan to arrive in Houston no later than 2:00 PM on April 23, and plan to depart after 1:00 PM on May 1. If you arrive early or stay on after the trip in Houston, there are dozens of motels close to the airport; The Hampton Inn Suites and the Clarion Inn are just two with reasonable rates and free airport shuttle.

*Naturalist Journeys, LLC is an equal opportunity service provider and committed to the goal of ensuring equal opportunity for all in employment and program delivery.*

#### Photo Credits

Roseate Spoonbills, Betty Andres (BA); Snowy Egret and White Ibis, BA; Indigo Bunting, Jim Richmond; Least Bittern, Tom Dove (TD); Giant Swallowtail, Bob Behrstock (BB); Prothonotary Warbler, Doug Pratt; Widow Skimmer, BB; Black Skimmers, Tony Beck; Egrets Feeding Young, Naturalist Journeys Stock (NJS); High Island Rookery, NJS; Red-cockaded Woodpecker, TD; Red-headed Woodpecker, Terry Peterson; Wilson's Snipe, NJS; Creole Pearly-eye, BA; Blackburnian Warbler, TD; Male Roseate Skimmer, BB; Scarlet Tanager, Mahlon Hale (MH); Rose-breasted Grosbeak, MH; Tern Line Up, NJS; American Oystercatcher, Carlos Sanchez; Sanderling, Greg Smith; Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge, NJS; Greater Yellowlegs, NJS; American Alligator, Rob Colyer; Birding High Island, NJS; Roseate Spoonbill, NJS; Softshell Turtle, NJS; Guide Bob Behrstock, Karen LeMay.