

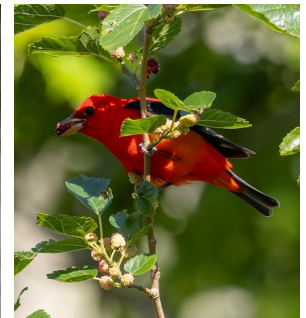
Texas Coast & Big Thicket | April 17 – 25, 2024

Trip Report | by Mason Flint



Guides: Mason Flint & Greg Butcher

Participants: Susan, David, Ron, Fran, Larry, Ruth, Robin, Zita, Leon, and Deke



Wed., Apr. 17

Arrivals, W.G. Jones State Forest

After collecting everyone at nearby hotels and the permanently under construction GW Bush International Airport in Houston, we drove to our hotel in The Woodlands to check into our hotel and then drove a few miles to W.G. Jones State Forest. This small section of a larger managed forest is a great spot for Red-cockaded Woodpecker and other piney-woods birds. We saw Brown-headed Nuthatch creeping on Long-leaf Pine trunks, Eastern Bluebird, and Pine Warblers among others, but it took us more than an hour to track down a Red-cockaded Woodpecker. Success! From there we drove directly to the Republic Grill for our welcome dinner and shared our plans for tomorrow.



Thu., Apr. 18 Big Creek Scenic Area, Lake Livingston Dam, and Martin Dies State Park

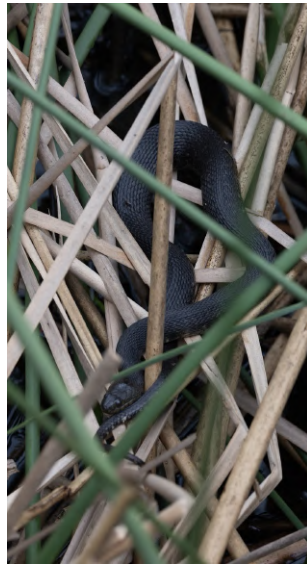
We departed early this morning for Big Creek Scenic Area, a beautiful woodland area northeast of Houston that's a good spot for breeding migrants. On the drive, some of the group saw a Swallow-tailed Kite fly over the highway, a good bird! Luckily, the rest of the group saw another later in the trip. After arriving at Big Creek, we birded the road and walked a short loop trail through the woods. We saw a few dozen species including Mississippi Kite, Red-shouldered, and Broad-winged Hawk, heard and got glimpses of Carolina Chickadee and Wood Thrush, and a two or three Louisiana Waterthrush along a small stream.

From there we drove to Lake Livingston Dam & Spillway where we saw at least 100 America White Pelican, Neotropic and Double-crested Cormorant, several species of wader, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Lark Sparrow, and many others. After lunch at a nearby Mexican restaurant we continued to Martin Dies State Park where we birded a boardwalk and trail along the lake on the north side of the park. The birding was fairly quiet, but we still saw several species including several dozen White Ibis, Red-eyed and White-eyed Vireo, Prothonotary Warbler, Northern Parula, and Indigo Bunting. From there, we had a short drive to Jasper where we checked into our hotel before heading to a yummy barbeque dinner at Smitty's Smokehouse.

Fri., Apr. 19 Martin Dies State Park, Angelina National Forest

We returned to Martin Dies State Park in the morning, but this time we birded the campground area on the south side of the highway and the birds were active. After parking we saw a few Black-bellied Whistling-Duck out on the lake. As we walked north along the shoreline many passerines flitted around in the tall trees in the campground including Red-bellied Woodpecker, Great-crested Flycatcher, Eastern Kingbird, Carolina Chickadee, Eastern Bluebird, Orchard and Baltimore Oriole, and Hooded and Yellow-throated Warbler. Near the end of the campground loop we heard the croaking sound of a Yellow-billed Cuckoo high in a maple and eventually got good, but neck straining looks.

After returning to Jasper, we stopped at Sandy Creek Park. In past years we saw nesting Red-headed Woodpecker nesting in utility poles, but they were absent this visit. We saw several other species including a high-flying Chimney Swift, Little Blue Heron, Mississippi Kite, Red-shouldered Hawk, Cliff Swallow, Carolina Wren, and our only Lincoln's Sparrow of the trip. From there we drove a few blocks to Elija's Café for lunch. Like many of our meals in Texas, the food at Elija's was good but healthy options were limited!



We spent our afternoon driving the roads in the nearby Angelina National Forest. Our primary target was the often elusive Bachman’s Sparrow. Mason knew a few good spots from prior years but noted that two years earlier they saw the sparrow directly across the road from an active prescribed burn. Our first stop ended up being on a road with a very recently completed burn with smoldering trees and burned grass, so we quickly moved on. Our next stop looked more promising but lacked the preferred open grassy areas. A pair of Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Brown-headed Nuthatch, and Indigo Bunting helped make up for another miss for Bachman’s Sparrow. Strike two. Mason and Greg decided to try a spot neither had visited before, north of the highway on the way back toward Jasper. After driving a few miles up a side road and turning onto another we stopped to look and listen and immediately saw the sparrow perched up in a tree next to the road. Then, to our amazement, the bird flew down into a low bush immediately across the road from us and proceeded to sing its heart out for ten of 15 minutes despite cars and trucks passing by every few minutes. Success!

Since we were already close to the south shore of Sam Rayburn Reservoir, we drove to a mostly deserted campground and spent a half hour birding from the shoreline. We were surprised to see one, then two, and eventually seven Common Loon and a Herring Gull floating far out on the lake.

After returning to our hotel in Jasper and taking a quick rest, we headed to dinner at The Cedar Tree. Our timing could have been perfect as it was Friday fish night. However, it was clear that service was optimized for the buffet so those in our group who ordered from the menu practiced patience until they were eventually served. Lesson learned!

Sat., Apr 20 **Big Thicket National Preserve, Tyrell Park, and Sabine Woods**

After breakfast we loaded up our luggage and started our journey toward the coast where we’d stay for the next four nights. Our first stop was one of the jewels of the Big Thicket National Preserve – the Pitcher Plant Trail. The Big Thicket is the name given to what Wikipedia calls “a somewhat imprecise region of heavily forested area of Southeast Texas” that includes part of the mixed pine-hardwood forests or “Piney Woods” of the Southeast US. The Big Thicket National Preserve was established in 1974 and is recognized as a biosphere reserve by UNESCO. The Pitcher Plant Trail is a 1-mile loop that includes a boardwalk through a bog filled with carnivorous pitcher plants. Other than the beauty of the bog and plant life, this is a reliable spot for two “good” birds – Red-headed Woodpecker and Kentucky Warbler. Within a minute or two of piling out of the vans we heard the cackling,



raucous noises of the woodpecker and soon saw a pair moving around in large snags next to the trail. We continued down the boardwalk searching and listening for Kentucky Warbler which are often seen foraging low to the ground. Mason's reliable spot turned out to be unreliable, but we continued around the loop and eventually everyone got great looks at two of these beautiful birds.

After two hours birding the Pitcher Plant Trail, we moved on, making a couple of unsuccessful stops to look for Prairie Warbler, before arriving at Tyrell Park on the edge of Beaumont. Mason knew about the park but had never birded there. We knew it would be a good spot for a picnic lunch, but it was a bit of a gamble in terms of birding. We snuck into a "reserved" picnic spot and wolfed down our lunch just as the people who reserved it arrived. Good timing! Then we walked the boardwalk into the beautiful Cattail Marsh and knew the gamble paid off. The ponds held dozens of Blue-winged Teal, a Fulvous Whistling Duck, Common and Purple Gallinule, Black-necked Stilt, Lesser Yellowlegs, several species of waders including Tricolored Heron, Several White-faced and one uncommon Glossy Ibis, and Northern Harrier. Then someone called out Least Bittern! The often secretive bird was mostly hidden in grass on the far side of the pond but steadily moved and most of the group eventually got decent looks. Then, as we made our way back toward the vans, Mason prompted Sora to call and make brief appearances in the reeds and then a Virginia Rail strolled by, giving some in the group quick looks.

We would have gladly stayed longer if time allowed but we were on a mission to get to Sabine Woods, a preserve owned by the Texas Ornithological Society. Last year, we arrived later in the afternoon and lucked out with a mini fallout and the same thing happened this year. The excitement was palpable as we started walking through the oak woodlands and wound our way toward one of the bigger "drips" in the reserve. Soon we saw Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Summer Tanager, and a few warblers moving around in the oaks. When we got close to the drip, we saw a group of 30 or 40 birders and photographers excitedly pointing to what seemed like dozens of birds moving around the edge of the small pond. Instead of immediately joining the group, we stopped and started calling out birds to each other. There's a Kentucky Warbler low by the drip! There's a Blue-winged Warbler closer, in the small tree! I see two Orchard Oriole's behind us! Look, there's a Blue Grosbeak on the edge of the grassy area. Someone got a glimpse of a Painted Bunting. It was one of those birding experiences that you hope can last forever but we still had almost an hour to drive to Winnie so pushed on.

Most restaurants in Texas don't seem to take reservations which makes dining a challenge, particularly when hundreds of birders from around the world descend on the small town of Winnie. Unsurprisingly on a Saturday night, our favorite local restaurant Tia Juanita's was packed so we took the advice of our hotel receptionist and



visited an off-the-beaten-track Mexican restaurant on the other side of town. They seated us immediately and we had a decent meal without a long wait. We'd visit Tia's another day.

Sun., Apr. 21 High Island, Bolivar Peninsula

We started our first full day of birding at High Island and the Bolivar Peninsula with a stop at Boy Scout Woods, one of the most famous birding destinations on the Gulf Coast. Boy Scout Woods is one of a handful of properties owned by Houston Audubon. We had good species diversity but not the big numbers we were hoping for. Common Nighthawk, which often day roosts on the road near the parking area, was instead across the street from the entrance to the reserve. Nearby trees had a mix of species including several Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Baltimore Oriole. A few of us got glimpses of a Black-throated Blue Warbler before we headed into the woods. Over the next 90-minutes we saw nearly three dozen species including Brown Thrasher, Black-and-white Warbler, Summer Tanager, Indigo Bunting, and a lovely male Painted Bunting. The members of the group who missed the Swallow-tailed Kite on our first full day were rewarded with another soaring high over the marshy area.

Next stop was Smith Oaks, the largest reserve at High Island. On this visit we focused on the rookery where we watched and listened to Yellow-crowned and Black-crowned Night Heron, Little Blue and Tricolored Heron, Snowy, Western Cattle, and Great Egret, White Ibis, and Roseate Spoonbill. From there we took our first drive onto the Bolivar Peninsula, pausing briefly for a Loggerhead Shrike before reaching Rollover Pass, named because smugglers rolled their ill-gotten gains in barrels from ships on the Gulf to waiting boats on the bay side. We spent about 40 minutes enjoying roosting terns (Lease, Forster's, Common, Sandwich, and Royal), Black Skimmer, and a mix of shorebirds including Black-bellied and Semipalmated Plover, Marbled Godwit, Willet, Dunlin, and Semipalmated Sandpiper. While waiting for a table at nearby Stingaree Restaurant we added American Oystercatcher and Black Tern.

After lunch, part of the group returned to Winnie to relax and run errands while others drove the agricultural fields between High Island and Winnie. That group added American Golden-Plover, Upland Sandpiper, and Long-billed Curlew to the trip list. After joining the rest of the group back in Winnie, we enjoyed a tasty (and fast!) dinner at Tony's BBQ.

Mon., Apr. 22 High Island, Rollover Pass, Bolivar Flats

After breakfast at the hotel, we returned to Boy Scout Woods to check for activity. The woods were quiet but the Houston Audubon Field Station across the street had some activity. We saw 25 species in less than 45



minutes including Cerulean Warbler (an uncommon to rare bird in the area) and Scarlet Tanager. We moved on for our second visit to Smith Oaks but this time we walked through the woods south of the rookery. We had to work a bit but ended up seeing a good variety of birds including Wood Thrush, Orchard and Baltimore Oriole, Ovenbird, and Black-and-white, Tennessee, Kentucky, Hooded, and Blackpool Warbler.

After another short stop at Rollover Pass and lunch at a new Tia Juanita's in Crystal Beach, we headed to Bolivar Flats Shorebird Sanctuary, one of the premier spots on the Texas coast for shorebirds. From the parking spot on the beach, we walked south toward the end of the peninsula where we enjoyed shorebirds feeding in shallow ponds off the beach including American Golden-Plover, Piping and Wilson's Plover, Marbled Godwit, Wilson's Phalarope, Willet, Red Knot, and Least, Western, and Semipalmated Sandpiper. A real treat was a giant flock of American Avocet, numbering around 1,000, that were actively foraging close to shore near the end of the sandspit. A half-dozen Reddish Egret stalked fish off the beach as we walked back toward the vans.

On our drive back to Winnie we stopped at Hooks Woods, a small 2-acre parcel just off the beach by High Island. We arrived just after 5:00 PM and found a large number of vehicles parked on the narrow road leading to the entrance. As soon as we entered the reserve and arrived at a clearing below a giant tree, we saw why there were so many birders. The tree was hopping with numerous migrants freshly arrived from crossing the gulf. An Eastern Wood-Pewee hawked insects from a low branch and moments later we saw a Worm-eating Warbler crawling along a nearby branch. Soon we added Tennessee, Cape May, Magnolia, Bay-breasted, Yellow, and Chestnut-sided Warbler. Mixed in with the warblers were Warbling and Red-eyed Vireo, Swainson's Thrush, Orchard and Baltimore Oriole, Summer Tanager, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. With stomachs growling, we reluctantly loaded up and returned to Winnie for dinner – this time at the tiny but quite good Pho Express.

Tue., Apr. 23 Anahuac NWR, High Island

Our destination today was Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge and the agricultural fields nearby. Our first stop was Pear Orchard Road where we came across at least two dozen Dickcissel including one that perched up and sang close to the road. The fields were dryer than normal but spots with water held Black-necked Stilt, American Golden-Plover, Whimbrel, and a Green Heron. We walked the road next to an irrigation ditch and found a highly desired bird for the trip – King Rail! In fact, we ended up seeing two.

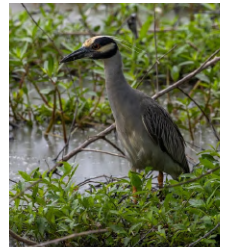
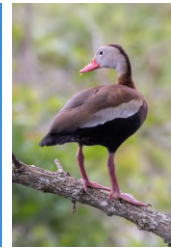


From there we entered Anahuac NWR. Before reaching the visitor center, we saw Black Bellied Whistling-Duck, our only Lesser Scaup for the trip, a Sora, and more waders. Based on a tip from past Naturalist Journeys clients Mason ran into in Winnie, we drove south from the visitor center to look for Bronzed Cowbird. No luck with the Cowbird but we did see a Palm Warbler and an oddly placed Scarlet Tanager that Mason initially thought was a Vermilion Flycatcher due to complete absence of any trees nearby. From there, we drove slowly around the large “Shoveler Pond,” stopping periodically to enjoy the beautiful scenery great birding. At our first stop we scanned for shorebirds and found several including Solitary, Stilt, and Pectoral Sandpiper. As we continued along the dike, the group in the first van spotted a Least Bittern flying low over the reeds. We found a spot to park and, after the rest of the group joined us, soon had amazing views at the bittern walking across the mud and then flying across the road where it perched up for photos. The ponds held Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, Blue-winged Teal, and Mottled Duck. During our walk on the boardwalk, we added White and White-faced Ibis, Roseate Spoonbill, and some in the group saw a Crested Caracara soaring over the ponds.

After getting our fill at Anahuac and an “expedient” lunch at Subway in Winnie, we decided to return to Hooks Woods Sanctuary, hoping we’d get lucky again with late-afternoon migrants. Activity was slower but we saw small numbers of several species including another Northern Parula, and Worm-eating, Magnolia, Bay-breasted, Yellow, and Blackpoll Warbler. But the real prize was a beautiful male Black-throated Blue Warbler that posed for us low in the trees along the entrance road. We returned to Winnie for our last dinner and packed up for an early departure in the morning.

Wed., Apr. 24 Bolivar Peninsula, Galveston

After loading up, we drove back to the Bolivar Peninsula. We had a fairly long drive ahead of us including a ferry crossing to Galveston and drive to Angleton for our last night but had business to take care of on the way. The north side of the peninsula has several short roads that pass through grassy marshes before reaching Galveston Bay that can be very good for sparrows. Our first stop was Yacht Basin Road and we soon started getting glimpses of Seaside Sparrow. With a little patience, we got good looks and a few photos when they popped up in the tall grass before dropping back down. Some in the group also got glimpses at a Sedge Wren. But the real prize was a rare Chestnut-collared Longspur that had been seen along the road in recent days. Based on a tip, we knew where to look but the bird was elusive as it walked slowly through short grass close to the road. At first only some of the group caught brief looks as the bird appeared and disappeared but eventually it walked right past our group, too close for scope views. The longspur was a new bird for several people in our group! Lost in the excitement was a Clapper Rail.



Our next stop was Tuna Road where we hoped we searched unsuccessfully for Nelson's Sparrow but got better looks at Seaside Sparrow. Pressed for time, we continued down the peninsula to catch the short ferry to Galveston and then lunch at Shark Shack, always a group favorite.

After lunch, we had one more stop before driving to Angleton and our last dinner together. Our destination was Lafitte's Cove Nature Preserve, a lovely birding spot surrounded by a fairly new housing development lined with canals. We spent about 90-minutes birding the ponds and small forested area where we saw Black-bellied and Fulvous Whistling-Duck, a few shorebirds, Cooper's Hawk, and several passerine migrants. Pushing on, we continued to Angleton, passing through one of the largest petrochemical manufacturing areas in the world on the way to our hotel. The check-in process at the hotel was...interesting...but we eventually stowed our luggage and headed to a nearby restaurant for our last dinner together.

Thu., Apr. 25 Brazos Bend State Park, Departures

Departure days can be a bit hectic, particularly when they involve driving through Houston to the perpetually under-construction George W Bush International Airport. But we started our day with a visit to Brazos Bend State Park, one of the best birding spots on the central Texas coast. We only had time to see a small part of the almost 5,000-acre park but made the most of it. We started with a short walk through a forested area before reaching the dike that surrounds 40-Acre Lake. The lake and the shallow marshes outside the dike were filled with birds including Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, Common and Purple Gallinule, several species of waders including dozens of Yellow-crowned Night-Heron. In addition to the abundant White Ibis and common White-faced Ibis, we saw one uncommon Glossy Ibis and at least two Limpkin, a species that was rare in Texas until relatively recently but are no established at Brazos Bend and a few other locations in the region.

With airplanes waiting, Mason and Greg had to encourage the group to continue back to the vans where we bid farewell to Ruth and Robin who were picked up but relatives and then drove to back to Houston to drop the rest of the group, completing our trip together.

Photo Credits: Group Photo (Mason Flint - MF), Blue Grosbeak (Ron Logan - RL), Great Egret (MF), Roseate Spoonbill (Larry Armstrong - LA), Scarlet Tanager (MF), American White Pelican (RL), Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (LA), Prothonotary Warble (MF), Bachman's Sparrow (MF), Kentucky Warbler (MF), Mississippi Green Watersnake (MF), Purple Gallinule (RL), Solitary Sandpiper (LA), Common Nighthawk (MF), Great Egret (MF), Rose-breasted Grosbeak (MF), Semipalmated Plover (MF), Ruddy Turnstone (LA), American Avocet (MF), Least Tern (MF), Reddish Egret (LA), Sanderling (MF), Worm-eating Warbler (MF), Black-necked Stilt (RL), Juvenile Cooper's Hawk (LA), Yellow-crowned Night Heron (MF), American Alligator (MF), Black-bellied Whistling Duck (MF)