

Texas Coast & Big Thicket

Trip Report | May 16 – 24, 2025

by Greg Butcher



Compiled by guide Greg Butcher along with Steve Shunk. Thanks to Shelli for sharing her local knowledge. Our clients included Ann and Don, Beth and Michael, Cathy and Mike, Debbie and Glen, Dick, and Vince



East Texas in April is a rite of passage that all U.S. birders should experience. We time the trip to experience the local nesting season and the height of spring migration for birds that breed farther north. The scenery of the Big Thicket, East Texas piney-woods, and Brazos Bend State Park is outstanding. The coast itself isn't as notable because of human development, but the quality and quantity of the birds more than makes up for it.

Wed., April 16 Arrival in Houston | Red-cockaded Woodpecker

After lunch, we all convened at W.G. Jones State Forest north of Houston for our first piney-woods species. The Red-cockaded Woodpecker was elusive, but we enjoyed two pairs of Red-headed Woodpeckers and multiple Pine Warblers, Eastern Bluebirds, and Brown-headed Nuthatches. The woods were open enough to see a Broad-winged Hawk soaring overhead. At last, Steve heard the Red-cockaded, and we followed it back to the spot where we first expected it. The woods are surrounded by a lot of Houston-related development, so it will be



interesting to see if the Red-cockaded persists. So far, so good!

Thurs., April 17 Big Creek Scenic Area | Martin Dies Jr. State Park

Big Creek is a truly beautiful forest with a wonderful assortment of forest songbirds, such as Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Pileated Woodpecker, Acadian Flycatcher, Yellow-throated and Red-eyed Vireos, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Wood Thrush, Summer Tanager, Louisiana Waterthrush, and Kentucky, Hooded, Pine, and Yellow-throated Warblers. Unfortunately, the forest is so thick and beautiful that most of these species were heard only. Luckily, we were able to get views of most (all?) of them later in the trip. The Wood Thrush was saddest of all, singing its ethereal song over and over, close by, but not a view to be had. After lunch, we visited Lake Livingston Dam, where we were birdwatching again (and not just listening). We had a few Lesser Black-backed and Herring Gulls among the numerous Laughing and Ring-billed. Steve listed 821 Double-crested Cormorants, but I think there may have been 822. White Pelicans were the second most numerous species, along with lots of Great and Snowy Egrets and Great Blue Herons. The Island Trail at Martin Dies Jr. State Park is more open, so we got great views of a Yellow-throated and Prothonotary Warblers, Northern Parula, and White-eyed Vireo. In the wetlands, we added Tricolored and Little Blue Herons, five Anhingas, and 86 (or 87?) White Ibises. We began our exploration of Texas cuisine with our visit to Smitty's BBQ – unforgettable!

Fri., April 18 Martin Dies Again | Texas Piney Woods

We followed a forest trail in Martin Dies Jr. State Park early this morning. We saw Chimney Swifts and Cedar Waxwings overhead. In the forest, we added Hairy Woodpecker, Eastern Wood Pewee, Great Crested Flycatcher, Yellow-throated Vireo, and Hooded Warbler. Tufted Titmice were everywhere! After lunch, we drove through Angelina National Forest to the Boykin Springs Visitor Center. Our target was Bachman's Sparrow, which prefers grassland in open pine forest, and we had excellent views with less effort than expected. At the end of the day, we visited Overlook Park at Sam Rayburn Reservoir. I was thinking that it was similar to Lake Livingston Dam, but less productive when someone found the first Mississippi Kite. More than 300 kites later, we were all flabbergasted! What a migratory flock! We had our first dinner tonight at Tia Juanita's Fish Camp. We eat there twice because (1) it's close to the hotel, (2) it has a lot of capacity, and (3) it has a varied menu. I think everyone enjoyed their meal. This weekend was much quieter than last year, probably because some folks stayed home for Mother's Day.



Sat., April 19 Big Thicket Pitcher Plant Trail | Sabine Woods

We stopped at the Neches River Bridge to pay homage to the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. The Big Thicket/Piney-Woods region of northeastern Texas was a vital region for the species before the forest was clear-cut in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Many believe that Ivory-bills still exist, but we lack a photograph worth printing in a birding magazine. Our only woodpeckers here were a Red-headed and a Red-bellied. Cliff Swallows nested under the bridge, and several flocks of Cedar Waxwings flew overhead. The Pitcher Plant Trail of Big Thicket National Park was one of my top favorites of the trip. A Ruby-throated Hummingbird zipped by. Even though the trees are widely spaced, we still had a lot of heard-only species. Breaking through the wall of sound into site were Yellow-breasted Chat, Kentucky Warbler, and Summer Tanager. County Road 4850 will never be famous, but we loved it because of Prairie Warblers, Indigo Buntings, and Blue Grosbeaks. Gore Store Road is more well-known and it produced for us a well-named Solitary Sandpiper, a migrating Scarlet Tanager, an Acadian Flycatcher, and four Yellow-throated Vireos. I only discovered Tyrell Park in Beaumont last year, but it's already a favorite, and why not? Fulvous Whistling-Duck, Blue-winged Teal, Sora, Common and Purple Gallinules, White and White-faced Ibises, Least Bitterns, our first Boat-tailed Grackles, a large Purple Martin colony, and a Bald Eagle!

I have a question about Sabine Woods. Across the road from the woods is an incredibly birdy wetland – what can we do to create access for birders? We know it had lots of dowitchers, yellowlegs, and a Peregrine, but what else? Within the woods, we found Orchard Oriole, Summer Tanager, and nine species of warblers: Common Yellowthroat, American Redstart, and Blue-winged, Prothonotary, Tennessee, Kentucky, Hooded, Blackpoll, and Yellow-throated. After a very full birding day, we were on our way to Winnie, our home for the next four nights.

Sun., April 20 High Island's Boy Scout Woods | Rollover Pass

Boy Scout Woods was quiet this morning, but we saw a good variety of birds anyway. Brown Thrashers are a personal favorite. We saw both Veery and Wood Thrush and heard Swainson's. Rose-breasted Grosbeaks are always fun. We saw both oriole species. For warblers, we saw Common Yellowthroat, Prothonotary, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Hooded. Rollover Pass was very productive for shorebirds and terns. An offshore island had more than 150 Brown Pelicans, and an Osprey and a Crested Caracara flew by. The terns included Royal, Forster's, Black, and Sandwich with Black Skimmers mixed in. The shorebird highlights were the two Marbled Godwits, but we also enjoyed Black-necked Stilt, American Avocet, Black-bellied Plovers (in a wide variety of plumages),



Short-billed Dowitchers, Willets, and especially the six Whimbrels on the grass. Bob Road added a Ruddy Turnstone and 21 Lesser Yellowlegs plus a Savanna Sparrow and eight Seaside Sparrows. After a great seafood lunch at Stingaree's, we found a Long-billed Curlew at Gregory Park. We swung by Smith Oaks on the way back, just looking for songbirds. Our highlights were Blue-winged Warbler and Northern Waterthrush, plus a Yellow-billed Cuckoo and a surprising Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. We had a group of Baltimore Orioles in the parking lot. On the drive back to Winnie, Steve stopped just in time to save an adult and two young King Rails that were crossing the road.

Mon., April 21 Bolivar Flats | High Island's Smith Oaks

To get to Bolivar Flats Shorebird Sanctuary, we have to drive along Rettillon Road, which can be very birdy. Highlights included three fledgling Clapper Rails and a hovering White-tailed Kite, not to mention three Roseate Spoonbills and seven Sedge Wrens. It's a great variety of birds here, including a pair of Gull-billed Terns, a Stilt Sandpiper, and three Long-billed Dowitchers. The flats themselves host large numbers of birds, including 168 Black Terns, 145 American Avocets, 143 Least Terns, 96 Sanderlings, 79 Laughing Gulls, and 41 Dunlin (all precisely counted?). Among the notable but less abundant species were Piping, Snowy, Semipalmated, Black-bellied, and Wilson's Plovers, plus Caspian Tern and Reddish Egret. Our afternoon visit to Smith's Woods on High Island produced our longest checklist of the trip: 55 species. The highlight here is the wading bird rookery, where x species had too many individuals to count: Neotropic Cormorant, Roseate Spoonbill, Tricolored Heron, and Snowy, Great, and Cattle Egrets. Purple Gallinules outnumbered the Common Gallinules. The best warblers included Ovenbird and Chestnut-sided, Blue-winged, and Golden-winged Warblers. Perhaps the best bird of the day was Black-billed Cuckoo.

Tues., April 22 Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge | Rice Fields

It is hard to get to Anahuac NWR because the rice fields en route are so productive. The new shorebirds included American Golden-Plover and Pectoral and Baird's Sandpipers. We also enjoyed such varied birds as White-faced Ibis, Osprey, Swainson's Hawk, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, and Dickcissel. Anahuac is now called Jocelyn Nungaray, but I won't go into the politics of that. The entrance was very productive with a Common Nighthawk, American Bittern, and a nest with four Barn Owl nestlings. We picked up a Bronzed Cowbird and a late White-throated Sparrow. The main target here is Shoveler Pond, and it didn't disappoint, with both Fulvous and Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, 18 Wilson's Phalaropes, American and Least Bitterns, and Marsh Wrens. Order was restored as Common Gallinules outnumbered the Purples here. We had at least one adult Glossy Ibis amid the White-faced.



We returned to the rice fields in the afternoon to enjoy the shorebird spectacle. We had our second BBQ tonight at Tony's.

Wed., April 23 Bolivar Jetty | Bolivar-Galveston Ferry | Quintana

After a wonderful four-night stay in Winnie, it was time to move on. We returned to Rollover Pass for the mass of shorebirds there. Our new species was American Oystercatcher. We had a great stop at the 17th Street jetty. We counted 765 American Avocets and 212 Black Skimmers. Our best new birds were a pair of Nelson's Sparrows well seen next to the jetty. I love a ferry ride, but the birds weren't very interesting. To make up for that, we enjoyed a Glaucous Gull on the Bolivar side and a Peregrine Falcon and Magnificent Frigatebird on the Galveston side. The previously reported Yellow-headed Caracara eluded us, but LaFitte's Cove produced a pair of Gray-cheeked Thrushes. We skipped Quintana Neotropical Bird Sanctuary last year, but it was very productive this year with two new black-throated warblers: Green and Blue. A couple of Ruby-throated Hummingbirds were a nice bonus. We had a fancy closing dinner at The Grape Taste in Lake Jackson; I can recommend it!

Thurs., April 24 Brazos Bend State Park | Houston Departures

Brazos Bend State Park may be the prettiest site on our tour, so it is a great last stop. The highly desired Limpkins were heard only, but we enjoyed 374 White Ibis, 48 Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, 29 Yellow-crowned Night-Herons, and 26 Little Blue Herons. We had great views of Anhingas. The nest with young of Red-shouldered Hawks and the newly fledged Pied-billed Grebes were special treats. And then we were off, back to Houston and our flights home, with memories of the eastern Texas breeders and transient migrants to take with us.

Photo Credits: American Avocets, Prothonotary Warbler (Mason Flint), Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (Larry Armstrong), Bachman's Sparrow, Kentucky Warbler, Least Bittern (Mason Flint).