

# Texas Coast & Big Thicket with The Nature Conservancy & Naturalist Journeys April 22 – 27, 2026 | Trip Report Written by Dave Mehlman



**Guides/Hosts:** Dave Mehlman, Steve Shunk, Steve Sondheim, and Seth Blitch;  
**with participants:** Ann, Barbara, Bonnie, Carole, Dianne, Jane B., Jane T., John,  
Kathryn, Richard, and Russ



## **Wed., Apr. 22 Arrivals in Houston | High Island**

Our group assembled today in bits and pieces, some having come earlier to visit the Houston area, others arriving that day and being picked up by Steve and Dave at the Houston “Intergalactic” airport. In the early afternoon we loaded up and hit the highway to head to our destination for the next few days: the small town of Winnie.

Arriving at the Hampton Inn, we met Seth, one of our TNC hosts who had driven from Baton Rouge and checked into our rooms. At this point, Steve and Dave had decided to modify our original itinerary a bit to try to take advantage of the fall-out conditions that had accompanied recent bad weather in the area, so we loaded up late in the day and headed straight south to High Island and the famed Boy Scout Woods Sanctuary managed by Houston Audubon. Muscling our way through the horde of birders there, we spent some time at the viewing benches by the ponds at the front and wandering the trails. Indeed, the remnants of the previous days’ fall-out were present; those at the pond and front drip were rewarded by Scarlet Tanager, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Hooded Warbler, Gray-cheeked, Swainson’s, and Wood Thrush, Painted Bunting, and a Swainson’s Warbler. Unfortunately, the afternoon rapidly drew to a close, so we reluctantly headed back to Winnie and then walked



over to Tia Juanita's next door for a very nice welcome dinner, including a discussion of what the tour was all about and our plans for the following day.

## **Thur., Apr. 23**

### **Winnie Rice Fields | Jocelyn Nungaray National Wildlife Refuge | High Island**

We began the day with the breakfast buffet at the Hampton in Winnie and then organized ourselves into the two vans for a day in the field. Our first stop for the morning was the rice fields south of Winnie and north of the Nungaray National Wildlife Refuge, favored by birders for migrating shorebird and waterbird spotting. The first set of fields we visited was a large area covered by a shallow layer of water—ideal for shorebirds. Indeed, as we got out and started scanning, present were easily over a thousand Long-billed Dowitchers. Scanning more carefully, we began to pick out other species among the dowitchers, including many Stilt Sandpipers, Black-necked Stilts, Lesser Yellowlegs, and a few Wilson's Phalaropes. Other species around included many Blue-winged Teal, Mottled Duck, White-faced Ibis, and Little Blue Heron. We then moved to another spot a bit to the north where the grassy fields were drier. Here, we enjoyed the amazing sight of well over 200 Buff-breasted Sandpipers moving and flying about the fields, including some doing their wing displays. A concentration of this size can be found few other places in the country outside of coastal Texas in late April. Also present were Savannah Sparrow, Eastern Meadowlark, and Turkey Vulture.

Finishing our birding in the fields, we headed to the nearby Jocelyn Nungaray National Wildlife Refuge (formerly known as Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge). Our first stop was at the visitor center to use the facilities and take a short walk. Upon arrival, we found many, many other birders present—it's likely no bird was left undetected here today! A special treat awaited us here: a Barn Owl nest in the old gazebo with adults and several nestlings. A walk on the Willows Trail yielded a singing Sedge Wren, White-eyed Vireo, Summer Tanager, Tricolored Heron, Crested Caracara, Swainson's Hawk, and Cliff Swallow. Done with our walk, Dave and Steve picked everyone up at the small parking lot and the group headed toward the Shoveler Pond loop, a well-known wildlife drive.

Unfortunately, numerous other birders were also out on the drive at the same time, making parking and stopping a challenge in a few spots, but we ended up finding over 50 species of birds on this lovely drive. Highlights included Sora (both seen and heard), a Reddish Egret (somewhat out of place in this fresh water wetland), great looks at peeps (including Semipalmated, Western, and Least Sandpipers), many Dunlin, a huge horde of Semipalmated Plover, Black and Forster's Tern, a feeding aggregation of American Avocet, several Roseate Spoonbills, a single fly-by American White Pelican, and Common Gallinule. What a great feast for the eyes!

We then took a break for a lunch stop at Channel Marker 17 just south of the town of Anahuac (which proved to be a very interesting example of local dining culture!) and then drove south to High Island again, this time to the Smith Oaks Sanctuary tract. Although the land birds were a bit slow here today due to the very nice weather, the rookery did not disappoint. The impressive boardwalk viewing platforms yielded great views of nesting Great and Snowy Egret, Tricolored Heron (with at least one nest where the lovely light blue eggs were visible when the pair



did an incubation switch), Neotropical Cormorant, and Roseate Spoonbill. As we watched, Anhingas flew by, Purple Gallinules periodically appeared in the marsh below, and the American Alligators rigorously enforced the no swimming rule. A walk through the woods yielded a Solitary Sandpiper, many Gray Catbirds, Northern Waterthrush, Ovenbird, a few Red-eyed Vireos, and a nestling American Barn Owl almost hidden in the old pumphouse. As our day here concluded, we returned to Winnie for a short break and then walked over to Tia Juanita's for another crack at their large menu. Upon our return to the hotel, many went to their rooms while a few stayed to review the daily checklist.

## **Fri., Apr. 24**

### **Big Thicket National Preserve | Pitcher Plant Trail | Tyrrell Park**

The day started with another buffet breakfast at the Hampton followed by our routine of loading up in the vans. We then headed north to our first destination of the day, the Big Thicket National Preserve Visitor Center. The weather was overcast and we arrived at the visitor center to find the gate closed; however, an early arriving employee soon came out to let us in and we used the facilities. The group was met there by Kathy Sweezey, Coastal Restoration Project Director for The Nature Conservancy Texas. Kathy took the time to give us a brief overview of TNC's work in Texas in this area and on some of her coastal restoration work. We next took a short walk on the nature trail through the pine woods at the visitor center, hearing and seeing typical Big Thicket birds like Hooded Warbler, Tufted Titmouse, Red-eyed and Yellow-throated Vireo, Pine Warbler, Carolina Chickadee, Indigo Bunting, and a small group of Cedar Waxwings.

Our next stop, as the weather improved a bit was the lovely Pitcher Plant Trail on the Preserve a bit more to the north. Arriving at the parking lot, we unloaded and then spent the rest of the morning on the excellent combination boardwalk and trail through the bog and surrounding forest, which had recently been prescribed burned. During our slow walk, we discussed and identified birds and plants and got an opportunity to look at the role of prescribed fire in the pine woods ecosystem of this area. As can be guessed from the name of the trail, the true highlight of the walk was the huge numbers of Pale Pitcher Plants (*Sarracenia alata*) growing in the heart of the bog. This impressive plant, with pitchers almost 2 feet tall, dominated large areas of the lowest part of the bog and many plants had flower stalks sticking high in the air. Also present, though less obvious, were sundews (*Drosera capillaris* and *D. brevifolia*) on the more open, sandy areas right next to the boardwalk. Numerous birds were also seen or heard, including Kentucky and Hooded Warbler, Pileated, Downy, Red-bellied, and Red-headed Woodpecker, Blue-headed Vireo, Broad-winged Hawk, and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. After our walk ended, we loaded back up and headed to nearby Lumberton for a great lunch at Nice Guy Ricky's.

After lunch, we headed to Beaumont for a final birding stop at the excellent Cattail Marsh boardwalk in the city's Tyrrell Park. The boardwalk and the observation tower offered great viewing, even in the afternoon, of many species; new to the tour were flocks of Fulvous Whistling-Ducks, but we also found Yellow-crowned Night-Herons,



many Purple Gallinules, White and White-faced Ibis, the only Fish Crows of the tour, Purple Martins occupying a gourd nest colony, many Boat-tailed Grackles, and a Painted Bunting. In late afternoon, we finally finished up and headed back to Winnie for a short break. After the break, most in the group headed down to Tony's BBQ for dinner, spotting a Solitary Sandpiper in the small pond out front. After returning, the hardiest of the crew wrapped up the daily species list to conclude the day.

**Sat., Apr. 25**

## **High Island | Bolivar Peninsula | Galveston Island | Lake Jackson**

We began our final morning in Winnie with the Hampton breakfast buffet, followed by the intricate process of loading all our gear into the vans. Then we were off for a day on the Texas Coast. Our first stop, since it was directly on our way, was a final shot at the Boy Scout Woods Sanctuary on High Island. Unfortunately (for us!), the weather continued very nice and pleasant, so the birds were few and far between despite the many birders. Highlights included Scarlet Tanager, Veery, White-eyed Vireo, the ubiquitous Gray Catbird, and a fly-over Black-bellied Whistling-Duck. Leaving here, we drove down to the Bolivar Peninsula and started heading west, spotting two Magnificent Frigatebirds soaring over the highway on our way. Our stop for the morning was the legendary Bolivar Flats Shorebird Sanctuary at the west end of the peninsula. We parked the vans on the sand parking lot and joined many other birders for the trek along the beach on our quest for shorebirds.

Right from the start, the birds began to appear, with perhaps the star non-shorebird being a lovely White-tailed Kite hunting over the dunes. However, since the tide was fairly high, many hundreds of shorebirds were crammed along the edge of the beach feeding on the wrack. With our bins and the scopes, we found that the majority were Sanderlings (in a variety of plumages, from wintering to almost full breeding) with many Ruddy Turnstone and Dunlin mixed in. As we walked along the beach and examined the birds, we began to pick out Semipalmated, Least, and Western Sandpiper, Black-bellied Plover, and a few Wilson's Phalarope in the mix. Yellow-crowned Night-Heron and Hudsonian Whimbrel flew by to add to the fun. Toward the western end of the reserve, we saw some large aggregations of feeding American Avocets, along with many Reddish Egrets and a large collection of terns, including Royal, Sandwich, Caspian, Black, Least, and Common. The morning nearing an end, we turned around and trekked back to the vans, with Dave noting a few White-rumped Sandpipers in the bunch to add to our list. Once at the vans, we loaded up and then drove to the ferry to Galveston, where we waited in the queue until our turn came to board. Although short, the ride was enjoyable and those who got out enjoyed a few Bottlenose Dolphins swimming near the boat.

After reaching the Galveston side, we drove off and went to grab a quick lunch at the downtown Starbucks. After lunch, we drove a few blocks to Katie's Seafood House on the Wharf to see the stakeout Burrowing Owl (maybe it had come in on a ship?) in the parking lot. After this fun species addition, we went to the Lafitte Cove Nature Preserve, a bit further west on Galveston Island for our final birding outing of the day. This sweet little sanctuary in the middle of a housing community was great birding with wetlands, a boardwalk, and a trail through the oaks. Right at the start, as we parked the car, a Broad-winged Hawk flew over and a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher perched on the phone wires, so we knew we were in for a treat. The wetlands had numerous Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks



lounging around along with a few Blue-winged Teal and Mottled Ducks. Shorebirds were present, too, including Long-billed Dowitcher, Stilt, Baird's, Least, Spotted, and Solitary Sandpiper. As we moved off the board walk into the trees, many in the group had the unique experience of watching the arriving migrating birds literally drop into the mulberry trees; we watched large numbers of Orchard and Baltimore Orioles appear to feast on the berries. These were complemented by several Indigo Buntings, a Prothonotary Warbler, and several Gray Catbirds. Those who walked down the trail into the oak forest had the memorable experience of watching, in real time, a Water Moccasin (or Northern Cottonmouth) devour a male Baltimore Oriole it had caught at the bird bath under a water drip. Both horrifying and amazing, this scene was a vivid reminder of the circle of life.

The afternoon ending, we then returned to the vans and completed our drive to Lake Jackson, arriving at our comfortable Courtyard Marriott located next to a seemingly abandoned shopping mall. After a brief rest, those who were still hungry met in the lobby and we decided, due to the overall tiredness of the group and the long day, to walk over to the nearby Olive Garden for a nice dinner. After dinner, a few in the group met to do the bird list and then all turned in for the day.

## **Sun., Apr. 26**

### **Brazos Bend State Park | Quintana Neotropical Bird Sanctuary**

Today began with ordering breakfast at the Courtyard, followed by van loading and then travel to our morning destination: Brazos Bend State Park. After a scenic drive, we arrived at the state park, paid our entrance fees, and then went to the parking area at 40 Acre Lake. Arriving there, we used the facilities as needed and then began our walk on the loop trail all around the lake after admiring the very attractive Prairie Nymphs blooming in the lawn (and avoiding the fire ants!). This lovely pond was full of birds and some very, very large alligators. Among the many Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks present were a few Wood Ducks, along with many Common and Purple Gallinules, a swimming Anhinga (or, an Anhinga neck at the very least), Green Herons, a very large colony of Western Cattle-Egret, and another Sora. A singing Northern Parula greeted us right at the start; most were able to pick it out of the Spanish Moss high above our heads with a little effort. As we neared the end of the walk, a drumming Pileated Woodpecker announced its presence from the swamp and we enjoyed views of a Prothonotary Warbler and a Baltimore Oriole.

Returning to the vans, we still had a bit more time, so we drove to the park nature center where some browsed the merch in the store and others walked a short bit of the nature trail across Creekfield Lake. This walk, although short, produced some nice birds for us including a calling and perching Great Crested Flycatcher, a Pied-billed Grebe in the lake, and a lovely Mississippi Kite that perched high in a tree and periodically swooped down to catch dragonflies. After finishing our walk and rounding up the crew, we loaded back up in the vans and headed to Angleton for a tasty lunch at The Dirty South. Our appetites sated, we loaded back up and headed south to the coast for a birding stop at the Quintana Neotropical Bird Sanctuary. We were met there by Rebecca Bracken, Conservation Research Director for the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory (GCBO) which manages this important site.



Rebecca gave us a short introduction to GCBO and how the sanctuary came to be and discussed some of their restoration efforts at this site. The group then spent about an hour and a half at the site, finding Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Baltimore and Orchard Oriole, Northern Waterthrush, Northern Yellow and Cape May Warbler; a few in the group found Bronzed Cowbird and Philadelphia Vireo. Upon conclusion of our birding here, we decided to take a quick peek at the Quintana Jetty; on our way there, we found a few Loggerhead Shrikes on phone wires. At the jetty itself, Steve and Dave took a quick peek, but little was to be found due to a strong wind and numerous people (and a strong odor!) except for a few Willets and Ruddy Turnstones.

As we departed for Lake Jackson, Steve's van made a fortuitous wrong turn and discovered a large flock of Blue Grosbeaks along the LNG plant fence. When Dave's van came over to see for itself, they in turn found several Dickcissels along the same fence! These last sightings provided a nice wrap-up to the day. We returned to the Courtyard, had a short break, and then most of the group drove to our final dinner at Lake Jackson Seafood where we enjoyed a feast from the sea. We returned to the hotel for our final checklist and then called it a night.

## Mon., Apr. 27 Departures from Houston

After breakfast at the Courtyard, we all did our final organizing of things and gathered in the lobby. We then loaded up into the vans, with Steve taking one group to Houston Bush Terminal A and Dave taking the others to Terminal C. We then said goodbyes to each other after a memorable time on the Texas Coast and then all dispersed to our various homes.

*Photo Credits: Group on Pitcher Plant Trail by Dave Mehlman, Gulf Fritillary by Dave Mehlman, Barn Owl Baby by Carole Schulz, Tricolored Heron on Nest by John Berry, Pitcher Plant Bog by Carole Schulz, Purple Gallinule by John Berry, Group at Boy Scout Woods by Dave Mehlman, American Avocets by Carole Schulz, Burrowing Owl by Steve Shunk, Water Moccasin by Dave Mehlman, American Alligator by Steve Shunk, Black-bellied Whistling Ducks by John Berry, Five-lined Skink by Dave Mehlman, Group at Cattail Marsh by Carole Schulz.*

