



Naturalist Journeys, LLC



Grand Texas Coast and Big Thicket

April 21-29 2012

Guide Bob Behrstock, and six participants,
Dwayne and Marj, Judy, Betty, Terry and Susan

Trip Report

by Bob Behrstock

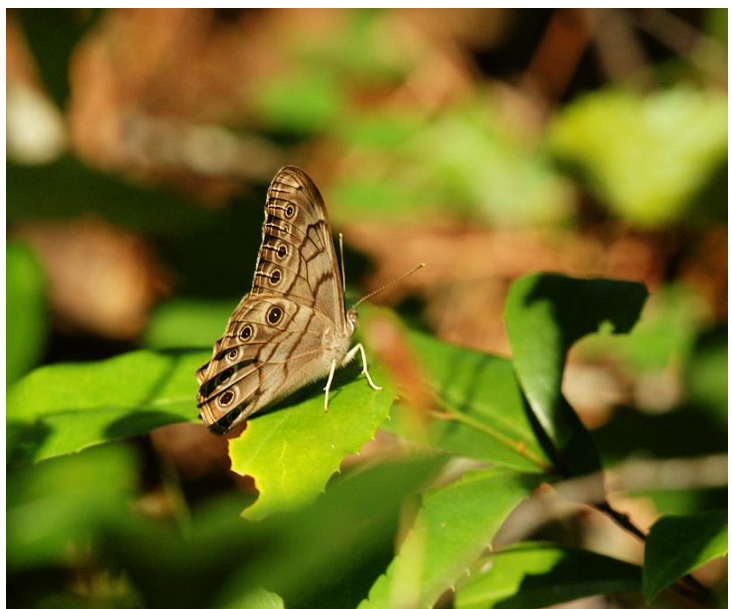
Sat., April 21, 2012 Arrivals in Houston

Conveniently, all six participants arrived at the same terminal and we left George Bush Houston Intercontinental Airport by about 2:10 PM. A half hour or so on Interstate 45 got us to our hotel in The Woodlands--a large, planned community north of Houston. After checking in, we drove to Mitchell Preserve about eight miles southwest of our hotel.

Here, in bottomland deciduous forest, we strolled a short trail that was alive with dragonflies, saw breeding Pine, Northern Parula, and Hooded warblers, heard a distant Barred Owl, saw our first Love bugs, a colorful Broadhead Skink, and several butterflies including Palamedes Swallowtail. Dinner was Mexican food at *Juanita's* across from our hotel and included a look at an active Loggerhead Shrike nest that I had noted a day earlier.

Sun., April 22, 2012 Jones State Forest / Martin Dies Jr. State Park /

After a 6:30 breakfast at the hotel, we packed up and departed at 7:10 for the very short drive to Jones State Forest just NW of the hotel. As is generally the case, Jones was good to us, its managed pinewoods alive with birdsong, and we soon found our primary target--the federally listed Red-cockaded Woodpecker which we all saw well and some participants were able to photograph. As well, we encountered a number of other birds of the Eastern Pinewoods including: Pileated, Red-headed and Downy woodpeckers, perched Wood Ducks, Eastern Bluebirds, Carolina Chickadee, and Brown-headed Nuthatch--a southeastern specialty. Leaving Jones, we drove eastward to the Big Creek Scenic Area. Here, we saw Louisiana Waterthrushes on the nesting



grounds (fortuitous as it was now too late to see them migrating along the coast), Palamedes Swallowtails, and Creole Pearly-eye, a rather special butterfly whose caterpillars feed on cane in moist bottomland forest. After a quick lunch at the *Subway* in Shepherd, we continued eastward to the LP Dogwood Trail where we saw a male Kentucky Warbler, another early migrant we were unlikely to see on the coast. At the boat ramps of Martin Dies Jr., State Park, we encountered the first of many Red-bellied Woodpeckers and the large Prince Baskettail dragonfly. Crossing the Neches River, dammed here to form the huge Steinhagen Reservoir, we visited Sandy Creek Park where we continued to see birds of the wet woodlands including Prothonotary Warbler, White-eyed Vireo, and Eastern Wood-Pewee. Here also were exotic-looking Zebra Swallowtails--one of the Southeast's finest butterflies. After arriving in Jasper, we had surprisingly good Italian food at *Fratela's*.



Mon, April 23, 2012 Boykin Springs Recreation Area / Upland Island Wilderness Area

After a 6:30 breakfast, we departed just after 7:00 for the Boykin Springs Recreation Area NW of Jasper. Along the way, we detoured into managed forests of Long-leaf Pine, where we found ourselves in a bit of a windy cold front that seemed to affect birdsong. The result was rather frustrating experiences with three or four Bachman's Sparrows, which we heard, but were unable to see as they sang from uncharacteristically deep cover. Boykin Springs itself was surprisingly quiet, and we settled for lizards, wolf spiders, a toothpick grasshopper, and finally, a tree that yielded a selection of basking butterflies including our only Tawny Emperor for the trip. As we drove away from Boykin Springs, we stopped in young pine plantation, getting nice looks at Prairie Warbler on its breeding grounds (another bird we

were very unlikely to see on the coast), Yellow-breasted Chat, and Indigo Bunting.

Lunch was at *Carlene's Place* in Zavalla, a friendly small town eatery where the "vegetable soup" came with a quarter pound of ground beef and the buffet included things that, well, people from out-of-state had never seen before. Welcome to Texas. Forging on, we drove through woodland in the Upland Island Wilderness Area, where a singing Yellow-throated Vireo was seen well. Returning to Martin Dies, Jr. State Park, we cruised the Walnut Ridge Unit seeing rather distant Purple Gallinules, closer Northern Cardinals and other songbirds, and a fine adult Bald Eagle soaring overhead. Dinner in Jasper was at *Tamollie's Mexican Restaurant* where seemingly astonished tour participants were introduced to the 99 cent Margarita.

Tues., April 24, 2012 Big Thicket National Preserve / Beaumont / Skillern Tract of Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge

After a 6:30 breakfast, we returned briefly to Sandy Creek Park, and then drove west and south to the Hickory Creek Savanna Unit of the Big Thicket National Preserve. We walked the Sundew Trail loop, seeing just a few tiny, carnivorous sundews, then continued south a bit to the headquarters of the Big Thicket National



Preserve to see their interpretive displays and learn a bit more about the Big Thicket. Continuing eastward via Gore Store and Camp Waluta roads, we ran into a couple of singing Painted Buntings and dozens of fresh Cloudless Sulphurs. Lunch was at a couple of restaurants in Silsbee, then we drove south through Beaumont to Tyrrell Park where we saw a few waterbirds at the Cattail Marsh treatment ponds and barely added Fish Crow to the species list. From there, we drove west to Winnie and checked in at our hotel. As it was still reasonably early in the afternoon, we continued through foraging Scissor-tailed Flycatchers to the Skillern Tract of Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge, getting close looks at Lesser Yellowlegs and other shorebirds, and seeing our first Fulvous Whistling-Ducks and a Crested Caracara. A bit further west at the main part of the Refuge, we circumnavigated Shoveler Pond, seeing a few American Alligators, Boat-tailed Grackles, and a number of waterbirds including our only Wilson's Snipe for the trip, Least Tern, and Black-necked Stilt. Dinner in Winnie was at *Hunan Chinese Restaurant*.



Wed., April 25, 2012

High

Island / Smith Oaks / Bolivar Peninsula

A 6:30 breakfast at the hotel, and then we drove south to the town of High Island. Our first order of business was to obtain our embroidered patches from Houston Audubon Society, granting us access to their various sanctuaries. Houston Audubon has been selling these patches since 1989 and they have become a birder's collectable. Thus began several difficult (frustrating) days of birding characterized by strong southerly winds that blew the migrants over our heads to their nesting grounds: good for the birds but bad for bird watchers. After pronouncing Boy Scout Woods dead, we continued to Smith Oaks where the

fruiting mulberry trees provided our first colorful migrants in the form of Summer and Scarlet tanagers, Baltimore Orioles, and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks. Unfortunately, the colorful warblers which we (and dozens of other visitors) were searching for just weren't around. However, we were, after all, on the Texas coast which offers the visitor a rich assortment of waterbirds--both residents and migrants--so not all was lost. A short stroll took us to Houston Audubon's Clay Bottom Pond rookery, home to an assemblage of nesting Roseate Spoonbills, Snowy and Great egrets, Tricolored Herons, and Neotropic Cormorants. After enjoying the rookery, watching the birds' behaviors from conveniently placed viewing platforms, taking advantage of the abundant photo opportunities, and chatting with Houston Audubon's roving interpreters, we took a break for lunch at the *Gulfway Motel*. After more than 30 years' experience with this eatery, I was pleased to see that the restaurant had entered the 21st Century rather dramatically by adding sweet potato fries to its menu.

After lunch, we drove west along the Bolivar Peninsula--a finger of land that defines the seaward margin of eastern Galveston Bay. At Rollover Pass, an artificially maintained fishing cut in the peninsula, we walked out on a sand bar to look at waterbirds roosting not far away. Galveston Bay is known for its assortment of birds that associate with the seacoast, and it did not disappoint. From one spot, we had looks at seven species of terns including Black, Sandwich,



Common, and Least; Black Skimmers, four species of gulls highlighted by a pink-breasted Franklin's Gull well into breeding plumage, Red-breasted Merganser, American Oystercatcher, American Avocet, and a host of other species characteristic of the Gulf's shores including two southeastern specialties: Reddish Egret and Wilson's Plover. After getting a cold drink in Crystal Beach, we backtracked to High Island where we saw a few migrants including Yellow, Tennessee, and Black-and-white warblers, Orchard Oriole, Red-eyed Vireo, and one of the trip prizes, a singing Yellow-green Vireo that was present in the woods for about a week and which we found again a couple days later. This species breeds in northeastern Mexico and occurs now and then on the Texas coast, probably as an overshoot during its northward migration. Dinner was our first of two at *Al-T's Seafood and Steakhouse* in Winnie, a restaurant that's been providing Cajun food to birders (and others) for about 30 years.

Thurs., April 26, 2012 Sabine Pass / Texas Point NWR / Sabine Pass Battleground State Park / Rice Fields

After the usual 6:30 breakfast, we departed east then south through part of the Port Arthur refinery complex--a surrealistic maze of pipes, towers, and tanks that looks like it could go at any moment. Continuing through coastal marshes and along the shore of Sabine lake, we reached Sabine Pass along the Texas-Louisiana border. First, we visited the Texas Ornithological Society's Sabine Woods Sanctuary. The star performer here was a Tropical Mockingbird which had been present for two or three weeks.



If accepted, the bird will be the first U.S. record. It was easy enough to see (and photograph) as if fed on lantana berries and flew around a clearing with a Northern Mockingbird at the front of the sanctuary. Sadly, we (and the several dozen other birders present) found the trails in the woods to be painfully devoid of migrants, but provided us with looks at a few birds including Great Crested Flycatcher, Common Yellowthroat, Gray Catbird, Tennessee Warbler, and Brown Thrasher. Afterwards, we made stops at Texas Point NWR, watched huge ocean going tankers slide by us at the Sabine Pass Battleground State Historic Site, and drove a bit of the way out Jetty Road where we saw roosting Common Nighthawks and a few Seaside Sparrows. Lunch was at *Tammy's Diner*, a

friendly--if breezy--open air eatery in Sabine Pass. On the way back we stopped for a close soaring Swainson's Hawk then pulled off at a rice field that provided us with the trip's only Buff-breasted Sandpipers. On the way back we stopped at High Island and made visits to Smith Oaks and Boy Scout Woods. Dinner was at *Papa's Place* in Winnie.



Fri., April 27, 2012 Anahuac NWR / High Island / Bolivar Peninsula / Smith Oaks
After breakfast, we began the day's birding with a trip around Shoveler Pond and a coastal access road at Anahuac NWR. Waterbirds in the impoundments are

decidedly different than those along the saline coast. Highlights included Least and American bitterns, King Rail, Stilt and Solitary sandpipers, Wilson's Phalaropes, and our first Hudsonian Godwits.

Departing Anahuac, we drove a bit north then east on Fairview Road to 124 and then south to High Island. Lunch was at the *Gulfway Motel*. Afterward, we drove west along the Bolivar Peninsula to the Bolivar Flats. Despite strong winds, we had excellent views of Piping, Wilson's, Semipalmated, and Black-bellied plovers and several other species of shorebirds and gulls, nesting Least Terns, and a Gull-billed Tern roosting on the flats. A drive through Port Bolivar provided us with more large waders and some photo ops of White Ibis right next to the van. Returning to High Island, we checked out Smith Oaks, where we encountered a small mixed flock with the previously seen Yellow-green Vireo, a Red-eyed Vireo or two and our only Philadelphia Vireo. There were a few warblers including American Redstart, Chestnut-sided, Magnolia and Black-and-white, as well as the usual assortment of grosbeaks and tanagers so we ended the day with a bit of luck and color. Dinner was again at *A/T's* which was good, albeit noisy.



Sat., April 28, 2012 Rice Fields / High Island / Bolivar Peninsula / Galveston Island

After the conventional 6:30 breakfast, we packed the van, and departed at 7:00 for a rice field on F.M. 1941 SW of Winnie. With information provided by the International Brotherhood of Itinerant Naturalists, we eventually found a flooded field with a decent assortment of shorebirds including both Black-bellied and American Golden-Plovers in breeding plumage, Pectoral and White-rumped sandpipers, and some stunningly plumaged Hudsonian Godwits. There were a number of other birders there and it was exciting to share these birds (which had been in Argentina a few days earlier and were now *en route* to arctic Canada, the North Slope of Alaska, and Siberia) with other birders from all over the U.S. and Europe.

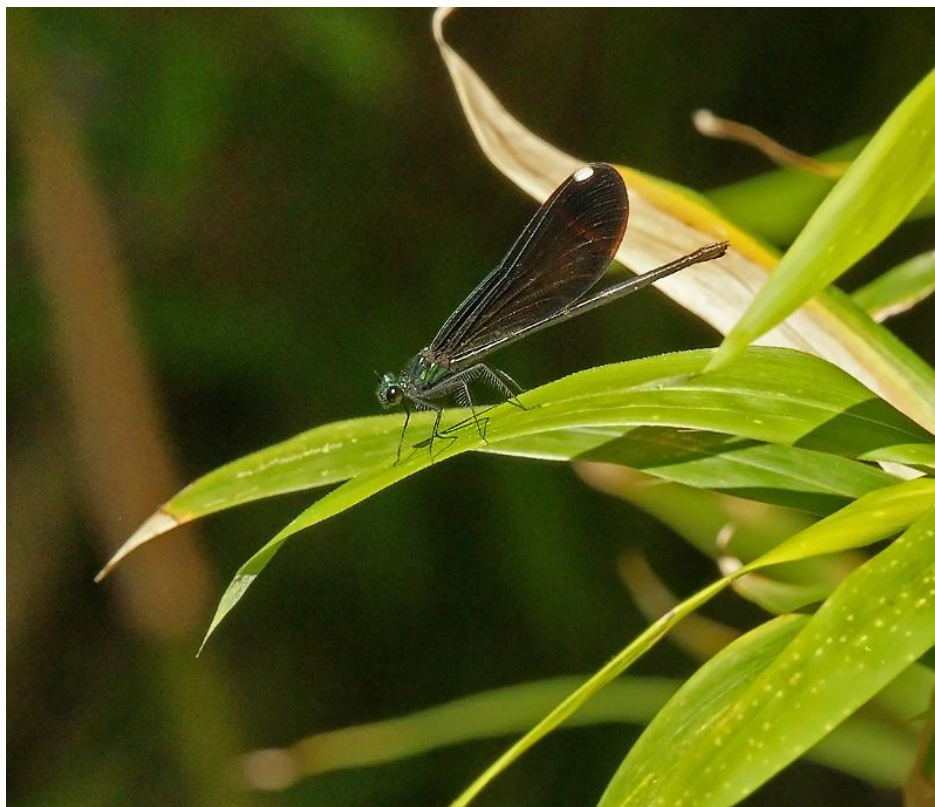
Continuing to High Island, we spent just a short time in the woods then moved on to the Bolivar Peninsula. We made a short stop at Rollover Pass for White Pelicans (absent and apparently on their way north), hit Yacht Basin Rd. for another try at Nelson's Sparrow (too windy but saw more Seaside Sparrows), and continued westward on the peninsula. At Bolivar, we boarded the second ferry for the crossing to Galveston Island. As the ferry was loaded, we scored an unexpected position at the bow, giving us excellent looks at Galveston Island and vessels heading up the shipping channel to the Port of Houston. During the crossing, some of us photographed Laughing Gulls and enjoyed looks at Atlantic Bottlenose Dolphins.

By the time we arrived in Galveston, participants had already used their cell phones to filter the available restaurants and demanded (well, suggested) a sandwich shop that was highly-rated on the Yelp website. Indeed, *Eatcetera* turned out to be a gem of a restaurant with an eclectic menu and tasty food. After living in East Texas for 22 years, it was the first time I heard a waitperson in Galveston ask someone whether they wanted their sandwich prepared for a Vegan or vegetarian.

Moving to the east end of the Galveston Island, we drove along the shore a bit, and then cruised the crowded beach resort area as we headed toward west Galveston Island. The woodlands at Lafitte's Grove were largely devoid of migrants but we saw a few waterbirds and there were dragonflies and butterflies along the pond edges and on ornamental plantings. A couple of stops on Sportsman's Road netted us additional White-rumped Sandpipers and a few other waterbirds. In the latter part of the afternoon, we crossed the bridge leading to Houston, and drove not far to the town of Alvin. After checking in and a short break, we had dinner at *Joe's Barbecue Company*, a huge, award-winning eatery and the reason Bob just had a small cup of soup for lunch.

Sun., April 29, 2012 Brazos Bend State Park / Departures

Hotel staff provided us with a 6:30 light version of breakfast so we could hit the road. At 7:00, we departed for the 35 minute drive to Brazos Bend State Park, seeing a distant, perched Red-shouldered Hawk *en route*. At the park, we immediately found a coiled Cottonmouth just outside the van at our first stop--a fine snake to start the day with. We birded lake edge and the surrounding live oak woodland trail until about 10:00, seeing lots of CLOSE American Alligators, Anhingas, Purple Gallinules, whistling-ducks, a variety of herons including nesting Great Blues and (finally) Black-crowned Night-Herons, had 'scope views of a singing Carolina Wren and Prothonotary Warbler, and a few new insects including Broad-winged Skipper and Four-spotted Pennant--a dragonfly that perches on the tips of branches and waves in the wind like a small flag. We then departed for George Bush Houston Intercontinental Airport, navigating the toll way which had light Sunday traffic.



Photos above, by tour participant, Betty Andres

Photos below by Bob Behrstock www.naturewideimages.com

