

# Alabama's Dauphin Island: Trip Report

## April 15 – 20, 2017 | By Guide Andrew Haffenden

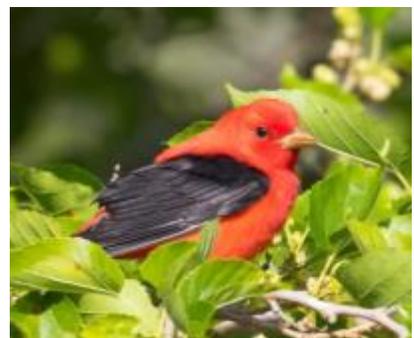
### Sat., April 15 Arrivals in Mobile, Alabama / Travel to Dauphin Island

Several participants overnighted last night and were picked up midday for some local birding before dropping in at the airport to collect our last guest. Highlight of the short period of birding was an adult Killdeer calling to its young chick; we got nice views and some photos of our first shorebird, even if it was nearly continuously on the move. We then headed south to Dauphin Island, where along the causeway and bridge Snowy Egret, Brown and White Pelicans, Double-crested Cormorant, Royal, Caspian, and Forster's Terns, and Osprey were seen. We checked in to our comfortable motel then headed out for some late afternoon birding. Some Australian Bottlebrush bushes just up the road from the motel were known to be harboring a few birds, and one that delighted everyone was a beautiful male Cape May Warbler. As we were on Dauphin Island, seafood at JT's restaurant was the preferred choice for dinner; gulf seafood remained a staple for most for the rest of the week.



### Sun., April 16 Dauphin Island

Today was spent rotating around the island hotspots, or wherever there were birds. We started at the airport, our target being Clapper Rail and perhaps Sora. No Sora for now, but a Clapper Rail walked across the road to give everyone great views, and for some photos. Others called away in the marsh, and Red-winged Blackbird chimed in from their exposed perches. A resident pair of Osprey were seen on their nest tower, though it was too early for any chicks. After the airport we headed for the Shell Mounds, usually the prime migration trap along the Florida Panhandle, Alabama and Mississippi and Louisiana to Cameron Parish. However, the weather had conspired a couple of weeks before the tour even started to make it a great migration time for the birds, but a pretty disappointing one for birders. 10 – 18 knot southerly winds persisted all week, which generally meant that on the coast, birds arrived after little effort made in crossing the gulf, and they arrived earlier in the day than usual, so most chose to continue further inland. So birding was hard work, with fewer results. The general birding method during spring migration is repeatedly visiting the same areas; some birds overnight and can be seen up to about 11:00 AM by when most have departed for the mainland and points north. A fresh lot arrive from their gulf crossing starting about 1:00 PM for the faster fliers, and peaking from 4:00 PM onward.



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During the day, the Shell Mounds produced several vireos, including White-eyed, Yellow-throated, and Red-eyed, while the warblers included several Ovenbird, Louisiana Waterthrush, Black and White, Prothonotary, Tennessee, Kentucky, ubiquitous Hooded, Yellow-rumped, and stunning Yellow-throated, and several Northern Parulas. The small cemetery on the main boulevard is usually reliable for warblers and hummingbirds in its many bottlebrushes, but flowering



has been getting earlier each year, and most bushes were past their prime. Nonetheless, both Rose-breasted and Blue Grosbeaks were seen here, along with Indigo Bunting and Orchard Oriole. Later, back at the Shell Mounds, both Summer and Scarlet Tanagers were a treat, and Northern Cardinal was a life bird for one member of our group. Dinner was taken at our breakfast and lunch restaurant; this was Easter Sunday, so very little was open. The seafood everybody ordered was excellent.

## Mon., April 17 Splinter Hill / Mobile Delta



We made an early start this morning, so breakfast was two part: substantial breakfast snacks, juice, fruit, yogurt, and coffee in the van on the way, then a top-up a few hours later in the field. Our target was nearly two hours north, The Nature Conservancy's Splinter Hill Bog Preserve. This is a beautiful, large pitcher plant bog with several species and also smaller sundews. Surrounding is Long-leaf Pine Savannah. Although we knew it had had a rotational burn, necessary for the health of the habitat, reports from a couple of weeks earlier indicated the growth was good. But, as with the birds, the weather gods were against us. A continuing drought, with virtually no rain since the burn, severely slowed plant growth, so only small, but still beautiful patches of plants were in full pitcher development and flowering. This slow growth also pushed the resident Bachman's Sparrows further afield, and only one was occasionally heard by Andrew in the distance, but not well by anyone



else. Other pine forest birds were seen, with great views of a pair of Brown-headed Nuthatch and a very obliging Eastern Towhee who sat up out in the open and called for us. It's not often such excellent views of this often furtive bird are had. After more snacks and coffee we returned to the coast and Five Rivers Delta Resource Center. From here we took our 11:00 AM eco-boat tour of the swamps of the lower Mobile-Tensaw Delta, but first said "hi" to a beautiful captive Eastern Screech Owl in the education section. From the center's porch we listened for and heard a King Rail calling across the river. The Mobile-Tensaw

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Delta is Mobile's greatest jewel, and an area many think is deserving of National Park status, where five rivers flow into Mobile Bay. While waiting to start, we watched a pair of Osprey on a nest, saw a distant Bald Eagle, Caspian and Royal Terns flying by, and a Least Tern hunting from a post in the water, frequently calling in its squeaky singsong voice.

Once underway we cruised amongst the open marsh, seeing a variety of wildlife that included an American Alligator, Great Blue Heron and Great Egret, Double-crested Cormorant, Brown Pelican, Common Gallinule, and an introduced aquatic mammal, a Nutria. Blue Flag Iris were blooming everywhere as were white Delta Lilies and Arrow Arum, once an important food for local Native Americans. We then headed off to The Original Oyster House for a very good, and large, seafood lunch. Despite the very filling mains and the continuously plentiful hushpuppies, most found room somewhere in their stomachs for the delicious pie(s) served here. While we ate, we observed the confident Boat-tailed Grackle flying and strutting around, Red-winged Blackbird calling from Phragmite stalks, and terns hunting on the river. We then returned to the island to bird the rounds, stopping on the way at a much smaller pitcher plant area that featured Yellow, or Winged, Pitcher Plants.



### **Tues., April 18 Pelican Peninsula**

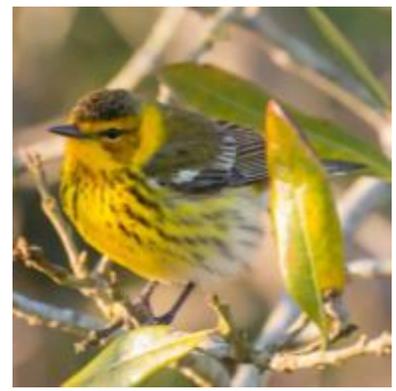
We headed out onto the Pelican Spit beach this morning. In addition to the well-known Neotropical migrants, Dauphin offers a wide variety of beach birds, including waders like Reddish Egret, shorebirds like American Oystercatcher and Ruddy Turnstone, a variety of terns, including Least and Gull-billed, and more. We found all these and many more, including an uncommonly seen Whimbrel. All eight of the possible terns were seen, including everyone's favorite, Black Skimmer. Top of the list of the shorebirds for many was Wilson's Plover, which obliged, and we had good looks at banded Piping Plover, about to fly to the Dakotas to breed, and Black-bellied Plover shifting into breeding plumage. We found all these and many more, including a flying Magnificent Frigatebird. After Pelican and lunch, we visited the Estuarium during the usually quiet part of the day. Part of the Dauphin Island Sea Lab, the Estuarium is an exciting educational public aquarium highlighting the four key habitats of coastal Alabama: the Mobile Tensaw River Delta, Mobile Bay, the Barrier Islands, and the Northern Gulf of Mexico. The Estuarium showcases the plants, animals, and other natural resources found in the estuary and its surrounding marine habitats. There are exhibits with tanks of unusual water creatures, including tiny seahorses, touch trays for skeletons, eggs, and other things often found on the beach, and even a touch tank with rays and sharks.

As mid-afternoon approached we started checking the migrant traps once again and Audubon Sanctuary. Due

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to the weather, it was still tough going, but some nice ones were seen including a couple of cooperative Cape May Warbler, a Parula, and several Blackpoll Warbler, which we could rely on in at least one of our spots on a daily basis. Another birder favorite, Painted Bunting, was also seen in addition to the ones seen on our first full birding day. Hearing a report on the grapevine — we had a number of birders calling Andrew every day to alert us of what they were seeing — of some ducks and a couple of other nice birds we hadn't yet seen, we made our way to the golf course and a small pond in the dunes. Access was through private property, so we walked under the house and out on the owner's boardwalk. As it turned out, what we thought was a cleaning service person preparing the house for the owner's arrival the next day turned out to be the early-arriving owner herself. Seeing a bunch of strangers in her backyard brought her out (a golf course employee had been giving us the watchful eye as well). This being a small island she recognized Andrew, was glad to see him since she had a bird question, then welcomed us to stay as long as we wanted and to return anytime. Why birding with locals is always better. Another fine dinner tonight, where once again, most people chose local seafood, then off to bed in preparation for our ferry ride to Fort Morgan the next day.



### **Wed., April 19 Fort Morgan / Dauphin Island**

At 8:00 AM we ferried across the mouth of the bay to Fort Morgan (after chasing down a very nice Yellow Warbler while waiting for our departure), at the end of the peninsula that marks the eastern edge of Mobile Bay. As well as the fort itself, with Dauphin's own Fort Gaines, part of Admiral Farragut's "Damn the torpedoes, full steam ahead" battle of Mobile Bay, the grounds are good for migrants in the woods and if there's been rain, shorebirds like Golden Plover on the lawns. An added bonus was a consortium of bird groups, along with Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, spending several days catching and banding birds, an activity which had been regularly done here until a couple of years earlier after the death of the chief bander. However, the most anticipated aspect of the morning was hoping to see a Brown Booby, as several individuals had been seen from Fort Morgan sporadically over the previous week. On the 35-minute journey, all eyes were scanning the water for anything sulid-like, but not even gannets were flying ... just the expected Brown Pelican, Laughing Gull, Royal Tern, Sandwich Tern, and one lonely Least Tern. Common and Gull-billed Terns were also seen, so an enjoyable ride. As we got close to the jetty Andrew shouted to everyone that a booby was flying out from the point towards a buoy. By the time those that weren't at the railing got there and got their binoculars up to search, and even for the couple that were, finding a bird at half a mile

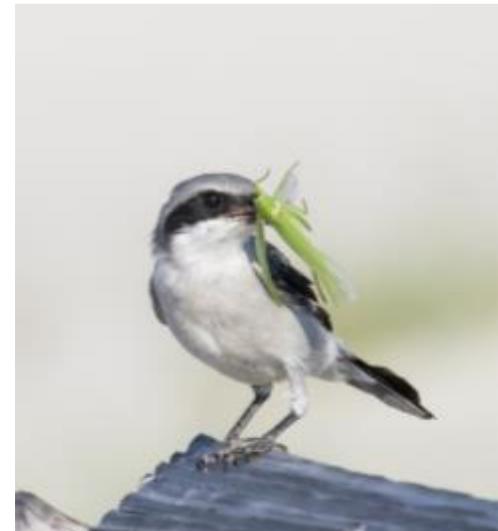
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flying away proved too much, and it was only Andrew that got to see it. It turned out it was the only one there; even though we searched for some time from the fort, none were seen, despite having a local on the beach also looking, ready to phone in a report. Her only call was to say that yes, a booby flew by here a minute or so before it was seen from the boat.

Birding on the grounds proved quiet, with Black-bellied Plover and Killdeer on the grass, Boat-tailed Grackle in the dune grasses. Carolina Chickadee (and Tufted Titmice) do not occur on Dauphin, and an effort to find one was rewarded, adding a new bird to the trip and a life bird for a couple of participants. We then headed for the banding station, which had several birds in bags being processed. Rather than wait for the next round, meaning an extra 1.5 hours on this side of the bay due to the ferry schedule, we opted to return to Dauphin for a break before our final afternoon of birding.

After a break, we once again toured the usual places, adding Loggerhead Shrike to the list, and many of our previously seen birds showed up to say goodbye, as it were. But this being Dauphin Island and coastal Alabama, even on this quiet birding day we managed over 80 species, ranging through an amazingly varied series of 43 bird families including birds as varied as Brown Booby, Mottled Duck, Anhinga, Osprey, Black Skimmer, Chimney Swift, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Downy Woodpecker, Eastern Kingbird, White-eyed Vireo, Fish Crow, Cliff Swallow, Brown-headed Nuthatch, Carolina Wren, Brown Thrasher, Prothonotary Warbler, Bobolink, Indigo Bunting, Summer Tanager, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and Baltimore Oriole. Not a bad day's birding.



### **Thurs., April 20 Dauphin Island / Departures**

Today our participants sadly departed the island to return to the airport for flights home, though for most, if not all, with a number of life birds to add to their list. They also returned home with some beautiful photos and some wonderful memories of birds, food, and new friends found.