

Dauphin Island | Trip Report & Species List

April 11 – 16, 2021 | Written by Andrew Haffenden



With Guide Andrew Haffenden, and participants Brigitte, Nancy, Mary, Larry, & Fran





The group came from all over the US—AK, CA, MS, and PA. We enjoyed a variety of weather of the six days, from bright and sunny, to thunderstorms, torrential rain, and flooding. This weather mix with the causative fronts led to some great birding. Naturally the migrants, especially warblers, were at the forefront of everyone's hope to see list, though shorebirds were also high on the lists, too. In total 145 species were seen by the group, which was very good considering the amount of time spent sitting out the rain, which totaled about 18 inches during the tour. Due to flooding, our inland foray to Splinter Hill was cancelled, which eliminated 10 or more species usually seen. Warblers accounted for 23 of total species, and some, such as Prothonotary Warbler, were in amazing numbers with 8 or 10 individuals easily seen without shifting one's gaze. It is also a sign of a good trip when birds such as Scarlet Tanager, Summer Tanager, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak are visible in the high numbers. The island's restaurants, though limited in number and menu, have improved, and for most fresh participants seafood was a daily or even twice daily choice.

Arrival day birding began about 3pm, and in 3 hours we had over 60 species racked up, including specialty regional Reddish Egret, and often at the difficult end of getting such as Ovenbird and Worm-eating Warbler. An early Prairie Warbler was also nice, and the start of our daily sightings of Scarlet and Summer Tanagers, Blue and Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Indigo Bunting and Prothonotary Warblers started this afternoon. Unfortunately, Larry and Fran got the start date wrong and were unable to join us until after lunch Monday, but they pretty much caught up on everything we saw, save some shorebirds.

The next morning, we headed for the beach, where unusually for this time of the year, things had been relatively quiet, with expected birds either not showing or in very small numbers. Adding to this were changes to the beach itself, meaning many birds were at a distance and were only seen through the scope. However others were there usual friendly selves, not worrying about our close presence. An early visit to the airport prior to the beach garnered great views of Clapper Rail, for most birders more often heard than seen. It was a nice morning for a beach walk, and as it usually does, turned into a bit of a shorebird and seabird workshop, explaining the best techniques to ID what are for many birders, notoriously difficult birds. Using a different approach than with woodland birds yielded success however, with everyone identifying some species at distance without optics.

Of the possible 5 plover species (without extremely unusual good luck for two others) all were seen—Snowy Piping, Semipalmated, Black-bellied and Killdeer; considering the distance traveled is just one mile on the same beach, not a bad haul. Other notable finds were Whimbrel and Stilt Sandpiper. Of the eight beach tern species possible in Alabama—Least, Black, Forster's, Common, Sandwich, Gull-billed, Royal and Caspian—seven were recorded; unfortunately, the Black Tern does not arrive until May. Additionally, the tern relative, and one of everyone's favorite beach bird, Black Skimmers, were also seen.

Rain arrived in the afternoon, along with Larry and Fran, and intermittent birding including vehicle cruising was the order, but was still successful for many new species for the tour. Most notable was a 5-N (N= need) bird for Mary, a lifer that was at the top of her needs list: Cerulean Warbler. Following a call from a friend of Andrew's we



headed to some land owned by Dauphin Island Bird Sanctuaries, a non-profit established to buy land on Dauphin Island for permanent bird protection. After searching the trees, Mary finally shouted Cerulean! and had eyes on her bird. Adding to her joy, and ours sharing her happiness, at finally seeing this beauty, she was the one that found it, a double prize. Although high, it was still enough to ID the bird; a few days later in the tour thanks to another friend we spent 15 or 20 minutes following one, often quite close. Another stunning bird seen on this afternoon was a Hooded Warbler, a very active favorite of most birders.



The next few days continued the same way, a mix of heavy rain, flooded roads, trails and level land generally and lots of good birding once the rain stopped. The conditions were classic fallout, with birds coming in tired from meeting bad weather after crossing the Gulf and putting down as soon as they got to the closest land—Dauphin Island. Being in the Shell Mounds, where for hours birds in the trees, shrubs and grasses were continually competing for our attention, was an experience for all. Seeing three Yellow-billed Cuckoos sitting feet apart in the same tree, seven or eight Scarlet Tanagers 10 feet away, fifty or sixty White-eyed Vireos during the course of a couple of hours, Thirty Eastern Kingbirds swooping in and sitting in the thin branches of a small tree together, brilliant yellow Prothonotary Warblers everywhere one looked, and a hundred or more Indigo Buntings and Blue Grosbeaks feeding on a lawn together, interspersed with some Rose-breasted Grosbeaks and a couple of Painted Buntings—something not to be forgotten.



Our second morning we ventured into the Mobile-Tensaw Delta on a small boat with Ben Raines, a local naturalist, journalist, and filmmaker. The Delta is the second largest delta in the US at more than 250,000 acres, and the most diverse drains water from five states. Ben is a font of knowledge and took us to some of his favorite backwater places. We were all amazed that such a rich and diverse delta was right adjacent to Alabama's fourth largest city! The beauty of the delta and its inhabitants—birds, alligators, flowers and trees, entranced us all. At one moment we were looking at tiny bright-yellow Prothonotary Warblers, another at large Alligators gliding by, and another at a fledging Bald Eagle chick in the nest. Most of the group had their closest view ever of a Common Gallinule, just one of many.





By the end of the tour, everyone was tired from so much birding, but of course we finished with a seafood dinner! And as usual, each participant contributed to the success of the trip. Brigitte brought her eagle-eye, spotting an overhead Magnificent Frigatebird, always a welcome sight, and pulling a bedraggled Gray Kingbird from the shadows of a bush during the rain. Nancy inspired with stories of personal conservation including rewilding a property she owns with some 15,000 trees. Larry and Fran, pretty new to birding, renewed our own interest in seeing birds we sometimes take for granted, and no-one will forget Mary's tears of joy in seeing her most wanted bird, Cerulean Warbler, reminding us of just how much our interactions with nature give to us. Parting ways in the morning, new friendships had been made, new birding experiences had been shared, and a new appreciation for the diversity and abundance of Alabama wildlife and habitats discovered.

Photo Credits:

Brigitte, Mary, Nancy and Fran in the Winged Pitcher Plant field, Andrew Haffenden (AH); Snowy Plover, AH; Scarlet Tanager, AH; Juvenile Bald Eagle, AH; Clapper Rail, AH; Caspian & Royal Tern, AH; Painted Bunting, AH; Hooded Warbler, AH; Common Gallinule, AH; Blue Grosbeak, AH; Yellow Warbler, AH; Lily, Nancy Bissinger (NB); Brown Pelican, NB; Great-crested Flycatcher, NB; Black-throated Green Warbler, NB; Cliff Swallows, AH; Yellow-crowned Night Heron, AH.

Species List

Canada Goose	American White Pelican	Carolina Wren
Wood duck	Brown Pelican	Ruby-crowned Kinglet
Mallard	Least Bittern	Eastern Bluebird
Mallard/Mottled Duck hybrid	Great Blue Heron	Veery
Northern Shoveler	Great Egret	Swainson's Thrush
Rock Pigeon	Snowy Egret	Wood Thrush
Eurasian Collared Dove	Little Blue Heron	Gray Catbird
Mourning Dove	Reddish Egret	Brown Thrasher
Yellow-billed Cuckoo	Green Heron	Northern Mockingbird
Common Nighthawk	Yellow-crowned Night-heron	European Starling
Ruby-throated Hummingbird	White Ibis	Cedar Waxwing
Clapper Rail	Glossy Ibis	House finch
Sora (heard)	Black Vulture	Seaside Sparrow
Common Gallinule	Turkey Vulture	Chipping Sparrow
American Coot (heard)	Osprey	Savannah Sparrow
Black-necked Stilt	Northern harrier	Eastern Towhee
American Oystercatcher	Bald Eagle	Red-winged Blackbird
Black-bellied Plover	Belted Kingfisher	Common Grackle
Snowy Plover	Red-bellied Woodpecker	Boat-tailed Grackle
Semipalmated Plover	Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	Brown-headed Cowbird
Piping Plover	Downy Woodpecker	Orchard Oriole
Killdeer	Pileated Woodpecker	Baltimore Oriole
Solitary Sandpiper	American Kestrel	Ovenbird
Greater Yellowlegs	Peregrine Falcon	Worm-eating Warbler
Willet	Acadian Flycatcher	Louisiana Waterthrush
Lesser Yellowlegs	Great Crested Flycatcher	Northern Waterthrush
Whimbrel	Eastern Kingbird	Black-and-white Warbler
Sanderling	Gray Kingbird	Prothonotary Warbler
Dunlin	Loggerhead Shrike	Swainson's Warbler
Pectoral Sandpiper	White-eyed Vireo	Tennessee Warbler
Semipalmated Sandpiper	Yellow-throated Vireo	Kentucky Warbler
Western Sandpiper	Blue-headed Vireo	Common Yellowthroat
Short-billed Dowitcher	Red-eyed Vireo	Hooded Warbler
Laughing Gull	Blue Jay	American Redstart
Ring-billed Gull	American Crow	Cape May Warbler
Herring Gull	Fish Crow	Cerulean Warbler
Least Tern (heard)	Northern Rough-winged Swallow	Northern parula
Gull-billed Tern	Purple martin	Bay-breasted Warbler (guide only)
Caspian Tern	Bank Swallow	Yellow Warbler
Common Tern	Barn Swallow	Blackpoll Warbler
Forster's Tern	Cliff Swallow	Palm Warbler
Royal Tern	Caroline Chickadee (heard)	Pine Warbler
Sandwich Tern	Tufted Titmouse (heard)	Yellow-rumped Warbler
Black Skimmer	Brown-headed Nuthatch	Yellow-throated Warbler
Anhinga	House Wren	Black-throated Green Warbler
Double-crested Cormorant	Marsh Wren	Summer Tanager

Scarlet Tanager
Northern Cardinal
Rose-breasted Grosbeak

Blue Grosbeak
Indigo Bunting
Painted Bunting

House Sparrow

Non-birds

Golden-speckled Minnow
Spadefoot Toad
Narrow-mouth Toad
Squirrel Frog
Green Anole
Eastern Garter Snake
American Alligator
Gray Squirrel
Bottle-nosed Dolphin

Winged Pitcher Plant