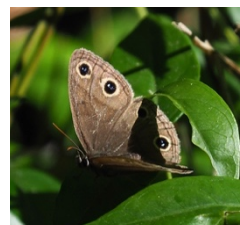
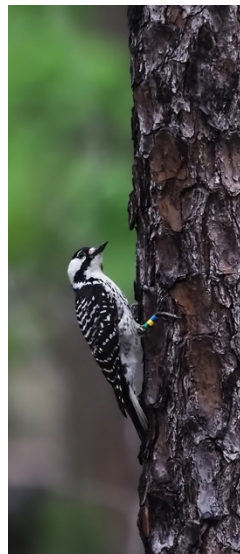


# Texas Coast & Big Thicket | Trip Report

## April 19 – 27, 2021 | Written by Steve Shunk



With Guide Steve Shunk, and participants Carla, Russ, Susan, & Brian







Combine the onset of breeding season in the uplands with the peak of spring migration on the coast, and you get perfect timing. Explore pine forest, coastal plain, bottomlands, and beach, and you get broad habitat diversity. We enjoyed both—perfect timing and habitat diversity—on our trip to East Texas this spring. We tallied over 200 bird species, including 31 shorebirds and 27 warblers. We experienced perfect weather conditions, with mild temperatures and a few well-timed storms. And we explored a great network of birding oases. Here is a summary of our adventures.

### **Mon., Apr. 19 Jones Forest & Mitchell Preserve**

After an early rendezvous and a delicious lunch at Jason's Deli, we headed out for some afternoon exploring. Our first stop took us to the Spring Creek Greenway on the George Mitchell Nature Preserve, a great plot of open space conserved by the city of The Woodlands. Habitats here included small lakes and the adjacent deciduous forest. Great Crested Flycatcher called from the tall stands of trees, and Eastern Kingbird foraged at the edge of the ponds. We found our first shorebirds—Least Sandpiper and Greater Yellowlegs. We got excellent looks at Red-shouldered and Broad-winged Hawks. Eastern Bluebird made a showing, and we saw our first Red-headed and Pileated Woodpeckers. On to W.G. Jones State Forest.

'Jones' serves as a tiny oasis for Red-cockaded Woodpeckers surrounded by rampant residential development. And this spunky little woodpecker did not disappoint. Shortly after entering the north stand of the preserve, we heard the distinctive chatter of Red-cockaded, and a family group of at least 4 birds entertained us for some time. We watched them flaking bark and chasing each other right in front of us, with some birds feeding below our eye level! This experience proved to be one of the major highlights of the entire tour. But this was just the auspicious start to what would prove to be an eventful trip.

### **Mon., Apr. 20 Big Creek | Big Dam | Big Thicket**

We had a transit day ahead of us, moving from The Woodlands to Jasper, in the heart of the Texas Pineywoods. Breaking up the road time, we managed some fun birding stops en route. The first was Big Creek Scenic Area. The songs of Kentucky Warblers echoed from the woods as we drove into the area. On the trail, we were surrounded by Hooded Warblers, and we had our first Pine and Black-throated Green Warblers of the trip. We found several other species that would prove to be common in these northern woodlands, including Red-eyed Vireo, Tufted Titmouse, Indigo Bunting, and the ubiquitous Northern Cardinal.

Our next stop was brief but productive—the Livingston spillway. This dam on the Trinity River consistently proves to be a productive waterbird spot, with major fish concentrations below the spillway. Again, not disappointed. Over 300 American White Pelicans dominated the feeding frenzy, among dozens each of Neotropic and Double-crested Cormorants. Dozens more Great Blue Herons and Great Egrets lined the edges of the river, and we saw our first Caspian Tern of the trip. Songbird highlights around the parking area included over a 100 Cliff Swallows and our first two Scissor-tailed Flycatchers—an icon of Texas's breeding avifauna.

After lunch at the Blue Duck Kitchen and Bar—a delicious Livingston hole-in-the-wall—we headed for our introduction to the Big Thicket: the Birdwatchers' Trail, at the confluence of Menard Creek and the Trinity River. Birding was a little slow in the afternoon, but we still managed to find our first Acadian Flycatcher, Northern



Parula, and Prothonotary Warbler of the tour. We also enjoyed some special Texas wildflowers, including violet wood-sorrel, Virginia spiderwort, and the stunning Prairie Nymph, a regionally endemic *Herbertia*. We were ready for Jasper.

## **Tues., Apr. 21 Martin Dies & Boykin Springs**

Our second full day took us into both bottomland and pine forest. We headed west of Jasper, with a quick stop at a roadside pond, where we found our first Solitary Sandpiper and Dickcissel. Our main destination of the morning was Martin Dies, Jr., State Park, a classic birdy spot along the shore of Steinhagen Reservoir on the Neches River. Tracking down the singers among the park chorus would prove tricky along the densely foliated trail and very tall trees, but we scored several key species. Among seven different warblers, we got fleeting glimpses of a Worm-eating, plus great looks at multiple Pine, Prothonotary, and Yellow-throated Warblers. Other highlights included a couple of Wood Ducks, a few Summer Tanagers, and four woodpecker species. Floral features at Martin Dies included native saw palmetto, as well as Jacks-in-the-pulpit and Carolina woollywhite.

After lunch, we headed into the Texas pineywoods. The forest around Boykin Springs was eerily quiet. The local Red-cockaded Woodpecker family was out and about somewhere beyond ear-shot of the nesting stand. We finally heard a distant Pine Warbler, but none of the hoped-for Brown-headed Nuthatches. Our main quest, though, was the Bachman's Sparrow. We played the song track for this elusive bird. No response. It was getting late and it was getting hot. Just before turning back, we heard that high-pitched opening note in the grassy understory—we had found the sparrow. He was hard to locate, singing from just below the tops of the tall grasses, but he was there. We all got good looks at this special bird, and we went home triumphant.

## **Wed., Apr. 22 Big Thicket | Fish Crows | Migrant Mania**

It was another transition day. We planned to spend a few hours in the Big Thicket, followed by a rendezvous with local Master Naturalist, Shelli Ellerbe, and our first visit to the coastal plain. The weather was a bit unsettled, but it didn't keep us from exploring. We made two key stops at the Pitcher Plant and Turkey Creek trails before cruising the famous Gore Store Road.





It was delightfully cool for our stroll along the 1-mile Pitcher Plant Trail. The trail starts with a boardwalk, right away featuring the yellow trumpet pitcher plants, *Sarracenia alata*. Bird diversity along the trail was relatively low, but we got excellent looks at Eastern Wood-Pewee, Tufted Titmouse, and, finally, a family of squeaky Brown-headed Nuthatches. We also enjoyed a pair of Red-headed Woodpeckers near the end of the loop. Moving on to Turkey Creek, lined with sweet gum and bald cypress trees, we enjoyed our first Yellow-throated Vireo and Swainson's Thrush of the tour. Our traverse of Gore Store Road yielded the expected Prairie Warbler, among other common songbirds.

We met Shelli for lunch in Beaumont and quickly got back on track. Our next goal was a Fish Crow, a specialty of the southern Sabine River area. We headed to Beaumont's Tyrrell Park and immediately found the crow, our only one of the trip. But Tyrrell proved to be far more than just a crow spot. Soras whinnied from the marsh, and we found our first Tricolored Heron and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons. We had great looks at Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, along with our first Black-necked Stilts and American Avocets. Long-billed Dowitcher, Greater Yellowlegs, and Willet rounded out the shorebirds. Purple Martins and our first Boat-tailed Grackles showed well for all. The icing on the cake was our first American alligator.

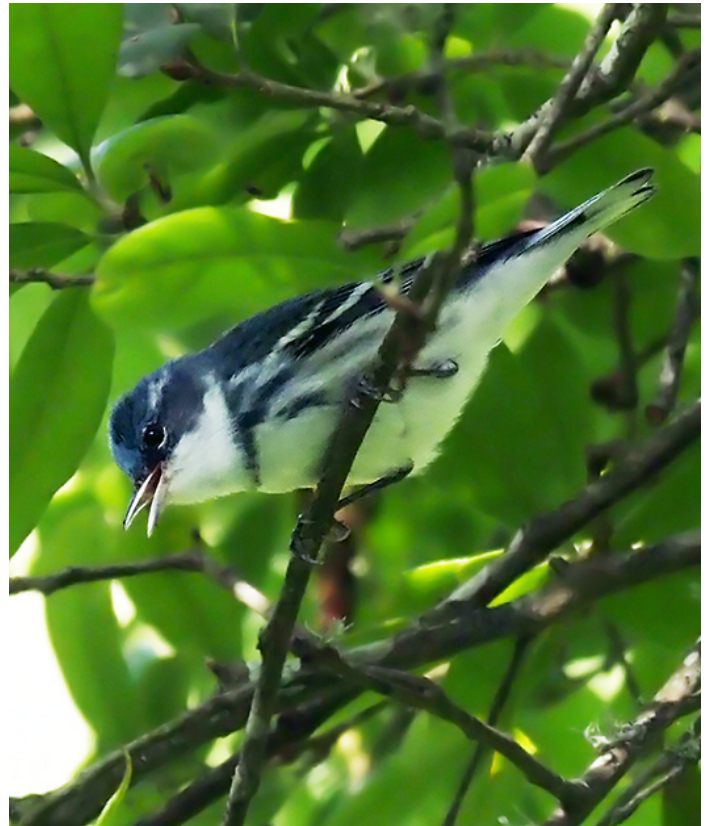
One more stop would wrap up our afternoon: the Texas Ornithological Society's Sabine Woods Preserve. This would be the first of several migrant 'traps' we would visit over the next few days. One never quite knows what to expect at these hotspots; they can be dead or teeming with birds. What would we find today at Sabine Woods? The crowd of cars parked on the road was our first indication that we would have an exciting visit.

As soon as we walked onto the property, we tallied three *Catharus* thrush species: Gray-cheeked, Swainson's, and Veery. A handsome Blue-winged Warbler foraged below eye level near the entrance station. Brown Thrasher thrashed in the understory and Scarlet Tanager glowed from the short, wind-whipped trees. We found our first Ruby-throated Hummingbird, the tiniest of the trans-gulf migrants. We saw our first Great Crested Flycatcher and more of the many Eastern Kingbirds we would find throughout the week. Sabine Woods came through for us, but it was just a portent of things to come. We headed to Winnie, our base for the next four nights.

## **Thurs., Apr. 23 High Island and Anahuac Refuge**

The wind was in our favor and a few rain showers helped to bring songbirds into the woods. We visited both Boy Scout Woods and Smith Oaks preserves in the morning, and we found Scarlet and Summer Tanagers, Blue Grosbeak, and Indigo Bunting. We tallied 15 warbler species, including Chestnut-sided, Worm-eating, Tennessee, and Blackburnian. And we were surrounded by Gray Catbirds. Catbirds, catbirds, everywhere. We









couldn't turn our heads without seeing more catbirds. The catbirds were a constant distraction, but we did just fine focusing on the amazing array of other migrants that dripped from the trees and shrubs at High Island.

The morning also featured an immersive experience at the amazing Smith Oaks waterbird rookery. Spread across the large pond, on a series of small islands, hundreds of waders nest each year in one of the great Texas birding spectacles. Roseate Spoonbills, Neotropic Cormorants, and Great and Snowy Egrets dominate the cacophonous (and odiferous) scene, with a few other heron species there in smaller numbers. We enjoyed the rookery from several different platforms before heading to lunch.

The wind was picking up and showers increasing, so we decided to head for Anahuac Refuge for a little birding closer to the vehicle. The Shoveler Pond auto tour was especially productive, with several new birds added to our adventure. A small flock of Fulvous Whistling-Ducks loafed on one of the islands, and we saw our one and only Northern Shoveler of the trip; apropos for the loop name! A flock of shorebirds included several Pectoral and Stilt Sandpipers, as well as our first Lesser Yellowlegs of the trip. Several Yellow-crowned Night-Herons hid among the cattails, and multiple Purple Gallinules were a bit more conspicuous. But one of the big highlights of the entire tour were two up-close encounters with Least Bitterns.

We barely dodged a rain shower as we finished our Anahuac visit on the Willows Trail near the Refuge entrance. The big highlight here was only had by two of us, as a skulking Swainson's Warbler dove through the underbrush, not to be found again. Nearly 100 species for the day; a nice accomplishment, to say the least.

## **Fri., Apr. 24 High Island & Bolivar Peninsula**

The stormy prior day grounded many new songbirds, and the migrant scene this morning at High Island was hopping, so to speak. We spent the first half of the day scouring Boy Scout Woods and Smith Oaks until we had to force ourselves away to get some lunch! Orioles, tanagers, and grosbeaks were active around every corner, only to be outnumbered by more catbirds. Five different vireos included great looks at Philadelphia. And the warbler magic was memorable. Among the day's 20 warbler species, the star by far was the presence of not one but two Cerulean Warblers. We found our first Painted Bunting of the trip and our only Yellow-billed Cuckoo and White-throated Sparrow before breaking away from the craziness.

We decided to change things up a bit for the afternoon, spending the rest of the day scouring the Bolivar Peninsula for water birds. Lunch at Steve's Landing took us to the Intracoastal Waterway, where we watched gulls and terns following the barges down the busy canal. Black Tern was the highlight here, along with quick glimpses at a couple of Bonaparte's Gulls. A large flock of Black Skimmers was dotted with terns and gulls at Rollover Pass, where we watched the entertaining feeding behavior of both dark- and white-morph Reddish Egrets.

An impromptu stop at the Port Bolivar Community Cemetery gave us a couple of very memorable surprises. We pulled in to watch a steady stream of raptors moving up the coast; it turned out to be hundreds of Broad-winged Hawks and our only Mississippi Kites of the tour. As we reveled in the raptor scene, we turned around to see



several male Bobolinks lining the fences. And before we could get back to our route, a flock of about 50 Dickcissels bombed in from the Gulf, another classic scene from the Texas spring migration.

At the end of the peninsula, the sandy shorebird sanctuary proved to be the most productive of the water bird hangouts. Among the many Laughing and a few Herring Gulls was a surprise Iceland Gull that was obviously late for its departure northward. We tallied seven tern species and an amazing 22 shorebirds. Highlights included Wilson's, Snowy, and Piping Plovers; White-rumped and Pectoral Sandpipers; and a solo Wilson's Phalarope. The countdown that evening was filled with anticipation. We had found almost 100 birds the prior day; did we beat it? The final tally took us to a whopping 124 species. Needless to say, we all enjoyed an air of satisfaction.

### **Sat., Apr. 25 Chambers County Backroads**

The weather had changed again, and a quick stop at Boy Scout Woods proved that weather is everything when seeking migrant songbirds. It was quiet at the sanctuary. A couple of waterthrushes and two young armadillos skirted the main pond, and a handful of songbirds came to the drip seen from the bleachers. We appreciated our fourth day seeing Worm-eating Warbler, with Magnolia and Chestnut-sided thrown in for good measure. We decided to spend the rest of the day crisscrossing the rural backroads of Chambers County.

We didn't have near the species tally of the prior two days, but today with not without its highlights. Our quest for Upland and Buff-breasted Sandpipers proved fruitful, and several Whimbrels were scattered across the agricultural fields. Our search for a nesting pair of Whooping Cranes was not as successful, although we enjoyed some nice concentrations of White-faced Ibis and Little-Blue Heron in the crawfish ponds at Oak Island.

### **Sun., Apr. 26 Bolivar | Galveston | Quintana**

Our last full day of the tour took us down the Bolivar Peninsula, across the Texas City Channel to Galveston, and down Galveston Island to Brazoria County. We had all day to make the drive, giving us plenty of great birding along the way.

Our first stops at Tuna and Bob Roads gave us some nice additions to the trip. Several Willets of the eastern subspecies courted and cavorted in the short grassy plain. We got excellent looks at Clapper Rail, as well as Nelson's and Seaside Sparrows. The 17<sup>th</sup> Street Jetty at the south end of the Bolivar Peninsula proved productive, with American Oystercatcher and over 1,000 American Avocets. On the ferry crossing, the many Laughing Gulls were being stalked by an attentive Magnificent Frigatebird.

After lunch in Galveston, we explored the south end of town, in the fields adjacent to the airport. Small flocks of Buff-breasted and Pectoral Sandpipers scurried around the grassy mounds, and our only American Goldfinch of the tour was heard flying overhead. Continuing southward, we stopped at one of Galveston's most celebrated migrant traps; despite the slow morning at High Island, we hoped for a few lingering migrants at LaFitte's Cove.



We ran into a few old friends here, including Veery, Swainson's, Gray-cheeked, and Wood Thrushes. We also got our best looks yet at Ovenbird and Brown Thrasher.

It was a long drive, but we weren't finished yet. Our final stop took us to the Quintana Neotropical Bird Sanctuary, typically another very productive migrant trap. The sanctuary was overrun with nesting Great-tailed Grackles, but we were able to sort out a few migrants from the chaos. Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Scarlet Tanager stood out, and a very unwary Magnolia Warbler shuffled through the shrubs at eye level. American Redstart, Hooded Warbler, and Bronzed Cowbird joined the fray, along with a bathing Lincoln's Sparrow, our only one of the trip. And one of the last birds of the day was a Buff-bellied Hummingbird seen by only a couple of us at one of the feeders. We headed for our last night, in Angleton, with one more birding stop scheduled for the next morning.

## **Mon., Apr. 27 Brazos Bend**

One of Steve's favorite Texas birding spots lies on a big bend in the Brazos River aptly named and protected as Brazos Bend State Park. We embarked on our favorite route, the loop trail around 40-acre Lake. We filled a couple of holes in our trip list and enjoyed some excellent looks at birds only seen fleetingly earlier in the tour. We watched a couple of lingering Swamp Sparrows, as well as a swamp rabbit and several big alligators. And then sharp eyes spotted the first of two American Bitterns just off the trail. Check. Much easier to see in the center of the lake was an Anhinga. Check. A single Glossy Ibis foraged in the mud with several White-faced. Check. We heard Pileated Woodpecker from a distance and saw a couple of Red-bellied Woodpeckers, both of which we had left behind in the Big Thicket. And for the last bird of the trip, we all heard the unmistakable haunting call of a Barred Owl from the Hoot's Hollow trail.

After 207 bird species in 9 days—an average of 23 species per day—we all hit the airport feeling pretty darn good, with plenty of fond memories, several life birds, and the feeling that we covered East Texas in style.

## **A Few Other Highlights – Birds and more**

A few bird species deserve special mention for being seen on all or nearly all days of the tour. Black-bellied Whistling Duck was fairly common in the coastal region. Egrets and herons were abundant throughout. Eastern Kingbird, White-eyed Vireo, and Blue Jay all made good showings, along with Wood Thrush, Northern Mockingbird (the Texas state bird), and Hooded Warbler. We all enjoyed the daily Indigo Buntings.

With Shelli's help, we IDed western ribbon snake and broad-banded watersnake, and we had four days with American alligator. Butterfly highlights included Zebra, Pipevine, and Palmedes Swallowtails.

## **Bird Summary**

31 shorebird species, including 6 plovers

11 heron species, missing only Black-crowned Night-Heron

9 different raptors including Swallow-tailed Kite and Krider's Red-tailed Hawk

7 woodpecker species in the Pineywoods and Big Thicket

10 Icterids, including many Baltimore and Orchard Orioles

27 warbler species!



207 total bird species against a 7-year average of 181

Only 8 species tallied as 'heard-only' (King Rail, Marsh and Sedge Wrens, flicker, chat, American Goldfinch, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, and White-breasted Nuthatch)

Only 3 species tallied as 'guide-only' (waxwing, Bonaparte's Gull, and Sharp-shinned Hawk)

### **Photo Credits:**

Black-bellied Whistling Duck, Steve Shunk (SS); Group birding, Brian Nordstrom (BN); Eastern Pondhawk, SS; Birdwatchers Trail, BN; Red-cockaded Woodpecker, SS; Prothonotary Warbler, SS; Group pics, BN; Common Woodnymph, SS; Nelson's Sparrow, SS; Myrtle Warbler, SS; Cattle Egret, SS; Blue Corporal, SS; Yellow-crowned Night Heron, Carla Bregman; Solitary Sandpiper, SS; Pitcher Plant, SS; Summer Tanager, SS; Dickcissels, SS; Eastern Kingbird, SS; Magnolia Warbler, SS; Nine-banded Armadillo, SS; White-throated Sparrow, SS; Roseate Spoonbill, SS; American Alligator, SS; Purple Gallinule, SS; Cerulean Warbler, SS; Scarlet Tanager, BN; Hooded Warbler, SS; Boblink, SS.