

# Dauphin Island Migration | April 10 – 15, 2022 | Trip Report | by Drew Haffenden



With guides Drew Haffenden and Rick Weiman and participants Ann, Barry, Dan, Linda, Louise, Mina, Nancy, Paul, Suzanna, and Terri.



## Sun., Apr. 10

## Arrivals | Exploring Dauphin Island

Our first day started with good weather, which was a trend that ran through to the end of the trip – no washed-out days as has happened in the past! Rick picked up Linda from her hotel in Mobile mid-morning and they drove to the island, stopping along the way at a small pitcher plant field just off the road. The pitcher plants here are Pale Pitcher Plants, also known as Green Pitcher Plants. Linda was delighted to see these and some sundews and got plenty of photos. The rest of the group were driving to the island, quite unusual, and we all met up at the motel at 2pm. After a run-through of the rest of the week we headed out to see our first birds, though Mina and Terri and Dan had all been on the island since the day before and had already started tallying their own birds. Naturally we started with the island's best-known - for good reason – hot sport, the Shell



Mounds. The Shell Mounds are just that – large piles of oyster shells discarded by the local Mississippian Culture Native Americans between the 11th and 18th centuries. They are now covered by moss-draped Live Oak, Magnolia, Hackberry, Mulberry, Slash Pine and other plants which provide a welcome food source for arriving Spring migrants – and make the Shell Mounds provide the best birding on the island. Early April is always an interesting time on Dauphin, as Spring migrants are arriving yet some of our winter birds remain. So, it proved today, as the group saw new arrivals Hooded and Black-and-white Warblers, but also over-winterers such as Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and Yellow-rumped Warbler. After the Shell Mounds we went to the small airport on the island, well-known among birders for being one of the best places anywhere to see Clapper Rail, which many people have heard but never seen, and often other marsh birds. Several rails were heard calling but did not seem to want to come out. But patience paid off when one stepped out from the marsh grass and gave us over ten minutes of viewing time. Then a tinkling call descending into a buzz could only mean one thing – Marsh Wren - and most were lucky enough to get views of this often-hidden bird. A killdeer with a nest was seen and heard and try as we may to find something different (especially Cave) we could only find Barn among the swooping swallows. We then called it a day, or rather an afternoon, and returned to the hotel to get cleaned up before dinner. For this we made a short walk to Islanders, one of several visits we would make to this restaurant. Fresh gulf seafood was the call for most of us as it would be often in the days ahead.

## **Mon., Apr. 11                      Mobile-Tensaw Delta | Birding by Boat**

Pre-made breakfast casseroles, fruit, juice, toast, and bagels did the job of fortifying us for the day ahead. As the boat we use for exploring the Mobile-Tensaw Delta has room for just six passengers we split up today with one half going to the Delta and the rest staying on the island. The small boat allows us to get deep into the delta and the feeder creeks. So, the Delta group left us early with Rick, while the rest of us headed for the beach. The prior evening, we spent time looking for a Least Bittern that was seen in the marsh leading out to the beach, with no success, and checked the area again this morning, again with no success. As it turned out the boat group made us beach-goers jealous as they had great views of one in the Delta! But we had a beautiful morning on the beach, not too hot but sunny and a refreshing breeze blowing. As usual the beach walk was in part a shore- and beach-bird workshop, aimed at simplifying shorebird identification. We had plenty of different shorebirds to work with, including three species of small plovers – \_Semipalmated, Snowy and Piping – \_though sandpipers and allies



were in surprisingly short supply. But there were enough of different sizes such as Sanderling, Short-billed Dowitcher and Willet, to help the workshop along. A nice Greater Yellowlegs enabled a discussion on separating this from the very similar Lesser. The usual first step of separating plovers from sandpipers enabled everyone to ID birds to either group at distance or without bins – a good first step as it reduced possibilities for both groups to just a few species. As some of the plovers were banded, we talked about their origins especially the endangered Great Lakes pipers and the local breeding snowies. Given we were just on the beach and dunes the twenty-four species tallied in a couple of hours is always a surprise, especially as there were a few notable absentees. After we left the beach, the call came in that a Grasshopper Sparrow previously seen at the Sealab was once again singing away on the same bush. We immediately raced off to see this usually winter only very uncommon species, and sure enough it was singing away when we arrived. Great views and photos were had by all. Unfortunately, due to some rain and other factors we could not relocate the bird despite several attempts for the second half of the group, but such is how birding goes.

As is always the case Ben Raines' Delta boat trip was a great success, with not only the aforementioned Least Bittern (actually two!) seen but 39 other bird species were eBird listed including Anhinga, Black-bellied Whistling-duck, Yellow-crowned Night-heron, Barred Owl, Pileated Woodpecker, Marsh Wren, Prothonotary Warbler and some 50 Cliff Swallows at their nesting roost under a bridge. In addition to the birds American Alligator appeared and dragonflies and butterflies were plentiful, including Zebra Longwing, a sub- to tropical species which has been expanding its range in the Gulf area over the last few years. Ben's encyclopedia knowledge of the plants, wildlife, and history of the Delta impressed all, as well as his obvious love of this place. The biggest problem we always face on this outing is getting Ben to return to the dock – there's always something else he wants to share with us. Our four hours always seems to drift into close to five and could easily turn into six if we let it! The planned lunch spot was surprisingly closed – a new regime to get a weekly Covid scrub-down done – and so a seafood restaurant was chosen, overlooking Mobile Bay. It was then back to the island to join the rest of the group in time for the first migrating birds to arrive.

First stop was, of course, the Shell Mounds. In Spring in the afternoon, when the trans-gulf migrants start arriving after their 18+ hour flight, birding on DI follows a predictable pattern. Visit the Shell Mounds, Grant



St/Goat Trees, various streets with Australian Bottlebrush shrubs flowering, and other regular sites. Drew checks incoming text messages or calls from other birders about what's being seen, and off we rush to that spot. Several sites are visited multiple times as birds come and go. This pattern repeated itself for our entire stay on the island, as one never knew what might turn up. When it was quiet the Shell Mounds provided a place to sit and watch; this year the foraging of a pair of Great-crested Flycatchers provided both watchers and photographers enjoyment and opportunity most days, and multiple uncommon Black-billed Cuckoos were regulars. But this afternoon was not just sitting and watching, as migrants started to pile up, including Eastern Kingbird, Yellow-throated Vireo (in addition to the usual Red- and White-eyed kinds), Worm-eating Warbler, Prothonotary Warbler, a usually sulky but today very accommodating Swainson's Warbler, Hooded Warbler, American Redstart and both Summer and Scarlet Tanagers, the latter often brilliant in the late afternoon sun. Once again fresh gulf seafood was the choice for dinner for most at our close-by restaurant.

## **Tues., Apr. 12                      Beach Day | Audubon Bird Sanctuary**

After the same style of breakfast as yesterday's beach birders went to the Delta and the others had their turn on the beach. As is the case with birding some birds were absent this today that were present yesterday, and some appeared today that were absent yesterday. The same format as yesterday introduced some alternative shorebird ID methods for this part of the group as well. As with yesterday five species of terns from the world's smallest, Least Tern, to the largest, Caspian Tern were on the beach as were several species each of plovers and sandpipers, though yesterday's Short-billed Dowitcher was replaced by Dunlin. Also like the previous day a pair of Gulf Coast Mottled Ducks gave us a fly-by view, though a flock of 28 Blue-winged Teal was a bit of a surprise. A bit of work brought a Sedge Wren into view and a Peregrine Falcon also showed itself. Although once rare in the South but now an expected bird in winter, an immature Lesser Black-backed Gull afforded us a good comparison with nearby immature Herring Gulls and an opportunity to go some of the way down the endless rabbit hole of immature large white-headed gull ID. Meanwhile, the Delta crew while covering the same species as yesterday upped the two Least Bitterns with both a Least and an American Bittern! And added a Swallow-tailed Kite for good measure. Once the Delta half returned (after lunch at now open Dragonfly, the artisanal taco place that was closed yesterday) we once again did the rounds of the hot spots, becoming more familiar with the already seen species and welcoming new ones, such as Northern Waterthrush and a late House Wren scolding away. Yellow-billed Cuckoos flew about, offering a lesson in both cuckoo flight in general and later helping to distinguish between flying Black-billed and Yellow billed Cuckoos. Our first Orchard Orioles appeared, and we were alerted to departing Green Herons several times by their nasal squawk, while two Bald Eagles flew over for us – \_an always welcome sight. Once again, I was reminded not to overlook the local common birds, as



our western US guests were keen to see our often-ignored birds, such as Northern Cardinal and Brown Thrasher. And it's true; if the cardinal was only found in some remote part of Colombia birders would make special efforts to go there to see it. Instead, we gush over Summer and Scarlet Tanagers, though the latter in warm sunlight is hard to beat. Both were seen today, along with the Cardinal. The afternoon finished in the Audubon Bird Sanctuary, a pleasant one-mile loop walk encountering different habitats ranging from mixed Long-leaf and Slash Pine Forest, dune fields, a lake and maritime oak hardwood forest. At the lake Gulf Slider turtles, an intergrade between Red-eared and Yellow-bellied Slider subspecies, came up to the observation platform, along with Florida Softshells. Along the edge of the lake the tail and hindquarters of the local resident American Alligator could be seen, and a nice collection of herons – Great Blue, Little Blue, Green and seven Yellow-crowned Night-herons were dotted along the same shore. A Belted Kingfisher regularly flew across the water, rattling away.

### **Wed., Apr. 13                      Splinter Hill Bog Reserve**

irony would have it, today was the first day one of the local restaurants was open for breakfast, but we had an early start for our 1.5 hour drive thus couldn't take advantage of it! So, after another scratch breakfast in Rick's room, we headed off the island and north to Splinter Hill Bog Reserve, a Nature Conservancy property about 40 miles north of Mobile. Splinter Hill, along with the adjacent Forever Wild Preserve is the largest pitcher plant bog in Alabama containing the most intact seepage bog habitat along the gulf coast; it is also the largest White-topped Pitcher Plant bog in the world. The drastically reduced Long-leaf Pine, now just covering less than 5% of its previous acreage across the southeast is one of the dominant tree species at the bog. Several species of pitcher plant occur here (pitcher plant taxonomy is continually in flux, and hybrids are common), along with sundews and other carnivorous plants such as butterworts. The dominant pitcher plant species is White-topped, followed by Wherry's, Purple and Parrot. All were seen by our group, plus some examples of hybrids. Tiny Sundews and Butterworts were also found. As far as birding was concerned our main target here was the uncommon and restricted Bachman's Sparrow, a bird of the grass and undergrowth in Longleaf Pine forests that is only seen when on a branch singing, usually only early in the season. As we walked into the preserve a bird could be heard singing in the preserve the distance, and a second far across the road behind us. A good sign, at least. A second wanted bird here was Brown-headed Nuthatch, usually reliable with a bit of squeaking. These family group birds are fierce defenders of their territory. While keeping both eyes and ears open for the birds, we initially spent time botanizing; t's hard to ignore thousands of pitcher plants spread about, with fresh



pitchers and flowers tempting us for both better views and photos. And of course, lifting the rain cap and looking for insects in the pitcher, fated to provide protein for the plants growing in these poor water-sodden ground. Once again Linda was in here element, wandering the bog with a rapt smile on her face, and getting many close-up photos of the plants. The rest of us were also keen to find the less common species – \_Purple and Parrot – \_and the sundews, which some had only ever heard about but never seen. As for most people, their very small size came as a surprise. Eventually a cooperative Bachman’s started singing, and great views and photos were had of it as it flew to various perches for us. The nuthatches also cooperated, their squeaky toy voices alerting us to their presence. While several got good photos of these birds, Paul won the photo prize with excellent photos of singing Bachman’s and an exceptional photo of the always moving nuthatch. As the morning warmed and our goals achieved, we head back to the vans for snacks and drinks, then head back towards the island, keeping a watch on the skies for hawks and kites. The highway to the bog crosses the middle of the delta via a long bridge, starting from the south with the high Dolly Parton Bridge. Adjacent to this on our return journey we made a new stop for the tour, a marina and boardwalk area adjacent to the delta’s water. Unfortunately, the boardwalk was closed for repairs, as we knew, but the area was still a great stop, especially as a Swallow-tailed Kite flew close over our heads as soon as we arrived. Walking the edge of the tupelo and a cypress swamp dripping in Spanish Moss is always an experience, and the calls of Prothonotary Warblers in their breeding habitat, and the views of their bright gold in the shady swamp is the icing on the cake. Nearly equally bright Hooded Warblers were also seen and heard calling, and Northern Parula joined in as well. Migratory Red-eyed, and breeding White-eyed, Vireos were calling as well, calls we were by now well familiar with from the Shell Mounds and other island sites. A lone Spotted Sandpiper in a pond gave us another shorebird that we had, unusually, not seen on the island.

Eventually hunger expressed itself, and we continued our way south for an excellent lunch at Fusion, a Cambodian and sushi restaurant in Bayou la Batre, of Forrest Gump fame. Unexpected in a small southern Alabama town, its presence tells of the Vietnamese and Cambodian people who settled here after being displaced by the Vietnam war, and now are a significant part of the area’s large shrimping and fishing fleet. After lunch we visited a reclamation area to see the work done to restore over 40 acres of marsh lost to erosion. The project is so far a success, with many birds using it for foraging and roosting. A highlight was 12 Whimbrel among the many other shorebirds, terns and gulls. Even a Bald Eagle was sitting there giving us a nice scope



view. The ten species of shorebirds gave us an opportunity to test our newly learned skills for identifying shorebirds at distance, based on behavior, shape, size and other mainly non-plumage factors. Everyone who tried out their new skills were surprised by their good test scores! Such restoration areas can become very important; in this case a Wilson's Plover nest was discovered here in May by an Alabama Audubon coastal biologist, and a second pair was also present. This is the first known nesting of the species in Alabama since 2016, despite previous comprehensive surveys. After a break in our rooms after the early start we once again forayed out to the regular haunts. However, the weather was in the birds' favor, not the birders, and it appeared most migrants continued, not stopping at the immediate coast, so things were very quiet. An earlier dinner, and earlier bedtime, seemed like a good idea and so it was.

## **Thurs., Apr. 14                      Alabama's Aquarium**

For the first time on the tour we actually had breakfast at a restaurant, at Pirate's overlooking Pelican Bay, where we already had several meals. Like those meals this was Southern in style, with biscuits, pancakes, white gravy, sausage, eggs and other Southern staples available. Afterwards we started today at the Shell Mounds, where a nice surprise was a pair of Black-bellied Whistling-ducks at a pond nearby. Although one group had seen them in the delta, this was a much better view and photo opportunity for all. It was a quiet morning, as nice overnight weather meant that yesterday's arrivals could continue their migration north overnight. But even if few birds it only takes a couple to make a birding outing satisfying, and a stunning Blue Grosbeak achieved that. A Northern Waterthrush was also obliging, and although most of us had seen several over the week a couple of people had to know to missed out, so it was very welcome. It also gave a demonstration of the difference between its call and that of Louisiana Waterthrush. As was done for most birds seen, a mini workshop on ID features and separating the bird from lookalikes ensued, in the case the aforesaid Louisiana. After waiting and hoping for more birds to pop up, without much success, we decided it was time to visit the Estuarium, recently renamed Alabama's aquarium. Apparently Estuarium was too confusing a term, despite hundreds of thousands of visitors over the 24 years since its opening. The Estuarium is set up to cover the four main habitats of Mobile Bay and delta, with history, live exhibits, shells, and skeletons, and even a touch tank featuring live stingrays, skates and a shark. Even after many visits it remains a fascinating place to spend an hour or more.



Early afternoon I received a call about a Bobolink in front of a house some friends of a friend were renting. So we piled into the vehicles and drove the few minutes to the house. Bobolink was target bird for several of our group. We pulled up at the adjacent street so not to disturb the bird, and were offered the use of the already set-up scope for a better than binocular view, though the bird was only yards away. The obligatory wows were expressed of this beautiful full breeding plumage male, and photos were acquired. We then were invited to look for birds in the marsh behind the house, especially a couple of Clapper Rails that had been wandering around in the open. Although we had good views and photos of Clappers earlier in the week, one never ignores a chance to watch this usually secretive bird. As it turned out the rails decided to wear their secretive cloak while we were there, but our hosts proffered, and we accepted, glasses of wine which made up for the missing birds. I then saw two birds appear in the water further along the channel, and immediately knew they were two Horned Grebes seen prior to the start of the tour. While Horned Grebes are a usual winter bird on the island, these two were in full breeding plumage, very unusual and of course quite stunning. We patiently waited as they swam towards us and were rewarded with good views of these two as they dove for food and meandered around. We ended up spending about an hour here, enjoying the company of new birding friends, and their wine, in a way that is especially Dauphin Island. We then went to the Shell mounds for the final time together, where though few migrants were arriving both a newly arrived and quite tired Black-billed cuckoo, several Yellow-billed Cuckoos, Red-bellied Woodpeckers, Red-eyed and White-eyed Vireos, Gray Catbirds, Hooded Warbler, Summer Tanager and some dozen other species gave us a final dose of relaxed birding and camaraderie in the field, which this group showed from the get-go, which is sometimes not the case. A better bunch of people to spend nearly a week birding with both Rick and I agreed was hard to imagine.

We finally pulled ourselves away as the dinner hour was approaching and our food source closed at 6pm. For our last night an al fresco dinner was enjoyed on the lawn behind our hotel adjacent to the same channel as the grebes were in. Fresh gulf shrimp, red potatoes, corn on the cob and Conecuh sausage (made about 90 miles north) was on the menu, an Alabama coast version of a low country boil. Ben & Jerry's ice cream served as



desert. Somehow beer and wine also appeared, and during the meal a Common Nighthawk flew past peeting, adding a new bird to our list. A wonderful last dinner together prior to our departure tomorrow.

## Fri., Apr. 15 Departures

We enjoyed another breakfast at Pirate's – with, I noted, everyone opting for the smaller selection after the overfilling effort yesterday! Our server remembered we had one hot tea drinker and had a separate pot of water on the boil, and a selection of teas at hand when we arrived – great service. Rick and Linda had to head off to the airport directly after for their flights, and while I offered to continue birding for part of the morning for those who wanted, the fact that it was the quiet morning and a likelihood of rain had almost everyone returning to their rooms to pack and head home or to their next destination. Terri and Dan stayed on in their camper for another couple of days though, continuing to enjoy the sharing hospitality of the Dauphin Island birding community and visitors. As mentioned earlier, Rick and I scored this as one of the best groups we have had the pleasure of guiding; friendly, sharing, and easy going, always allowing for the vagaries of weather and birds, and the resources available in a town of just over 1350 residents. We both want to say a heartfelt thank you to all for allowing us to spend the week with you, and I especially in being able to share my island and friends. Thank you all, and we hope to be meeting you again on future Naturalist Journeys tours.

*Photo Credits: Group Photo (Rick Weiman - RW), Summer Tanager (Paul Edelman - PE), Dauphin Island Sign (RW), Short-billed Dowitcher (PE), Cattle Egret (PE), Clapper Rail (PE), Snowy Plover (PE), White Flowers (Terri March - TM), Piping Plover (PE), Scenic (TM), Hooded Warbler (PE), Grasshopper Sparrow (PE), Swainson's Warbler (PE), Birders (TM), Beach Scenic (TM), Pitcher Plant Bog (RW), Marsh Scenic (TM), Splinter Hill! (RW), Ruddy Turnstone (PE), Pitcher Plants (TM), Trail Walk (TM), Bachman's Sparrow (PE), Brown-headed Nuthatch (PE), Lunch (RW), Rick & Drew (RW), Yellow-billed Cuckoo (PE), Black-billed Cuckoo (PE), Group Birding (RW), Loggerhead Shrike (PE), Boardwalk Birding (RW), On the Boat (RW), Rick & Barry (RW), Black-bellied Whistler Ducks (Dan March), Linda under tree (RW)*