

**Dauphin Island
April 12 - 17, 2015**

TRIP REPORT

**Guides: Peg Abbott, Dodie Logue,
and Andrew Haffenden, with
ten participants: Lynn, Walter, Susan,
Liz, M.J, Johanna,
Carla, Charlotte, and Jean**



Sunday April 12 Arrival in Mobile / Dauphin Island



Everyone arrived in Mobile, Alabama, by early afternoon, and by 2:30 pm we were in our two vehicles heading out to Dauphin Island – in the pouring rain. Southeast weather was kicking up, boding well for migrants if the front held them to the Coast, but making for challenges over the next two days for migrant watchers.

We made a short stop at Greer's Market en-route to allow everyone to pick up a few provisions and made it to the Gulf Breeze Motel by 3:45. We

quickly unloaded the vans, checked into our rooms, and went out to get in a bit of birding before dinner.

Warblers were on everyone's mind!



It was lightly drizzling as we made our way to Shell Mounds to see what the rains had brought. Stepping out into the lush green-



infusion of Live Oak and Spanish Moss was a contrast to the still snow-covered ground some had left behind in the east.

We walked across to a small pond by the parking area, discovering our first Mottled Ducks, new for several of our group. While several cars were here, it was not crowded, and all who we met were helpful. Everyone was obviously excited by the weather and movement of birds, and eager to find out what might come in.



Shortly after getting out of the vans there was movement in some large trees across a yard, both Summer and Scarlet Tanager were seen, as well as Red-eyed Vireo and Orchard Oriole.

There was a lot of activity, but we heard there had been a very recent sighting of a Swainson's Warbler - a target bird for many of us - so we moved into the dense woods to search for it. Once we got to the spot we saw

an Ovenbird right away. We spent quite a bit of time looking and had just decided to move on when Susan spotted the Swainson's Warbler! It acted and looked somewhat like a waterthrush, bobbing a little and foraging on the moist ground, probing under leaves and pushing things aside with its beak. Very good looks were had by all, and for 8 of the group it was a life bird.

One of the yards near the parking lot was quite flooded, and even this was a focal point for birds, Orchard Orioles, buntings, and beneath all flying about – calling frogs! We were

At this time Andrew, who would be our local guide the next few days, joined us. Brief introductions were made and we birded a bit more, seeing a Belted Kingfisher and a few Common Loons; but light was draining from the sky and we had dinner reservations at Pelican Reef across the bridge, so we soon headed out.



Crossing from the island to the mainland allowed us a taste of gulls and terns, shades of things to come!



Dinner was a seafood feast, and we were able to sit out on the deck right on the shore of the Fowl River. Our birding wasn't done yet however, as Carla spotted a night-heron fly by and land. Luckily she had her binoculars and we were able to see it was a Yellow-crowned - last bird of a great first day.

Monday April 13 Dauphin Island Hot Spots



After breakfast we met our local guide Andrew to check out Dauphin Island hotspots. We enjoyed his company immensely and he got us on to some great birds!

It had rained hard much of the night, but let up a little as we headed out, first to the airport marsh area for rails. We had great luck with Clapper Rail, one stepped out in plain view almost as soon as we got there, and we heard a few doing their clapping calls much of the time we were there. Sora was heard but not seen.

Here we also saw Least, Gull-billed, and Sandwich Terns, as well as Snowy and Tricolored Herons, and Osprey on a nest. Back at the parking area, Peg spied a Red Fox out in the field, just sitting there and looking at us.

From the airport we made a quick stop at a Brown-headed Nuthatch nest hole which a friendly island birder had shown us, and we watched a bird go in and out a few times, then it was off to Shell Mounds again. It was a very birdy morning, especially for tanagers, vireos, and warblers. A highlight was our first Worm-eating Warbler which can be quite elusive, but over the week became one of our regular sightings!

It started pouring again, and we stayed to bird for a time but were finally soaked through and thus decided to go to the Estuarium at the Dauphin Island Sea Lab, on the East side of the Island. 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. This is a cool place!



There were great exhibits with tanks of unusual water creatures, including tiny seahorses. We stayed a little over an hour, and as it continued to pour we went to lunch at the Golf Course Country Club. It was still pouring after lunch, so we headed back to our lodgings for an hour break.

Fortunately the rain did start to let up, and we were off in our vans, stopping by a flooded field (of which there were many!) to look at some Long-billed Dowitchers, a Willet, and a few Solitary Sandpipers. The roads were flooded and the yards were saturated with water - it seemed water was everywhere! But the weather cleared and the birds were streaming

past our hotel as we left. These adverse conditions were delivering birds!

We headed out to Shell Mound and the birding was fantastic; Cerulean, Prairie, Yellow, Yellow-throated, Black-and-white, American Redstart, were some of the warblers seen, and there were plenty of other species as well. After some time here, we went to Cadillac Park for a pit stop

and this area was full of birds as well - Wood Thrush, Black-throated Green Warbler, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, to name a few. One tree had over twenty Summer Tanagers – stunning.

We decided to head to the Audubon Sanctuary, a 160 acre protected area on the east side of the island. It seemed that the bad weather had indeed blessed us with birds!

Just as we pulled into the Sanctuary, Andrew got a report of a Painted Bunting - back at Cadillac Park! Off some of us went back there to look for the bird, which popped up just as we pulled into our viewing spot – it was a life bird for two of the group, thanks Andrew for the tip and networking!



Back at the Audubon Sanctuary, good birding continued - more Worm-eating Warblers, Hooded Warblers and good views of a Yellow-billed Cuckoo. We found several lizards and skinks throughout the week, and marveled at the number of frogs, so many in the area we parked we hated to walk across their path for fear of crushing them!



Tired, tonight we elected to have a quick dinner at the local BBQ place with the large pink pig out front. En route back to the hotel we stopped to see a Great Horned Owl briefly come into view over the water tower on the way back to our hotel.



Tuesday April 14 Shell Mound / Pelican Spit

This morning we met for a hearty breakfast at Pirates Pleasure, Andrew meeting us there, then we were off to check out the usual hot spots. It wasn't raining! First stop was at Shell Mound, where things started a little slow, some already seen warblers but soon Andrew found a Blackpoll warbler - new for the trip! Then a Painted Bunting was seen on an adjacent lawn, feeding and putting on a show. After we all had good looks at the bunting, a Common Nighthawk was spotted roosting on a branch; just as we were going to leave someone called out Black-whiskered Vireo, and we were all able to rush over and have great looks, even the "whiskers" were discernible! Another "lifer" for many of the group.



Andrew saw clear skies ahead for much of the morning and suggested we head to the beach. After the Shell Mound morning, we made a quick pit stop back at our rooms and then were off to Pelican Spit, a long strip of sand dune that has recently formed off the pier right near our hotel. Some of us walked barefoot and we soon came upon plovers, gulls, terns, and shorebirds. Andrew did a great job of teaching the group some of the identification points to look at, and it was especially fun to compare the terns - Caspian, Royal, Forster's, and Sandwich all lined up. We also saw a few Least Terns.



Snowy and Piping Plover were a hit; other



shorebirds included Least, Semipalmated, and

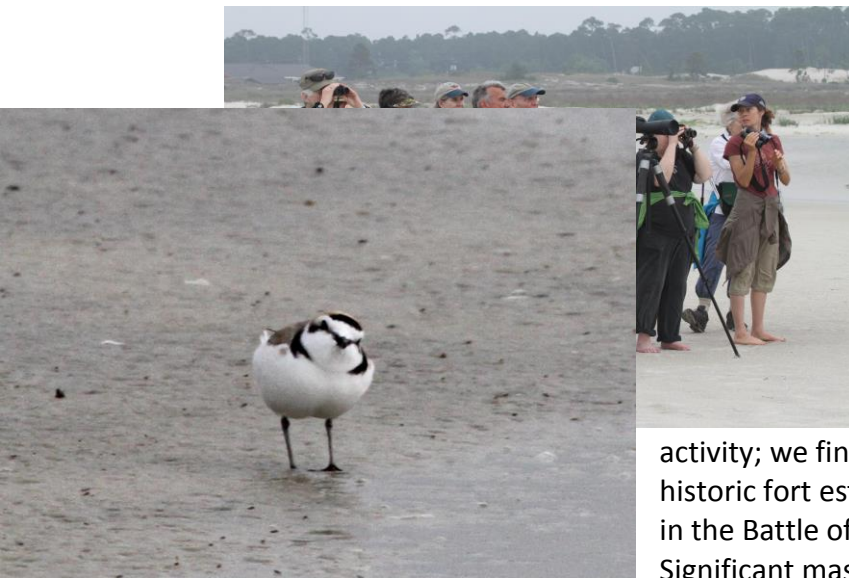


Western Sandpipers, Red Knot, and a breeding plumage Black-bellied Plover.



Later the weather moved in, and a new phrase got coined - "wet birding" - by Andrew...

After a wonderful seafood lunch at JT's on the water, we took a break as it started to pour.



Meeting back at 4 pm it was hard to decide what to do, we cruised the hot spots, but the rain was too heavy for any activity; we finally drove to the east end to Fort Gaines, an historic fort established in 1821. It is best known for its role in the Battle of Mobile Bay during the American Civil War. Significant masonry damages have been sustained during

hurricanes and tropical storms in the past decade. Though these damages have been largely repaired, the fort continues to be under threat from erosion. Ongoing erosional losses of sand dunes and beach total up to 10 feet per year. For these reasons, the Civil War Preservation Trust placed Fort Gaines on its *History Under Siege* listing on March 18, 2009. Just off shore here we saw some Bottle-nosed Dolphins breaching and a few birds, mostly Double-crested Cormorant and Brown Pelican, on the rocky breakers.

Tonight we dined at another local fish joint called Barnacle Bills. Most of us continued sampling the local seafood and several had Key-Lime pie!





Wednesday April 15 Splinter Hill Bog / Bellingrath Gardens

After another early breakfast at the Country Club's Pirate's Pleasure, which gave us great service and a friendly welcome, we headed off with Andrew to Splinter Hill Bog. He had mentioned Bachman's Sparrow and Peg decided to go for it, with success!



Located at the headwaters of the



Perdido River along Dyas Creek, Splinter Hill Bog is home to a variety of habitats, from sandy upland longleaf pine forests to seepage bogs to inundated small stream swamp forests. Much of the site is covered by some of the largest and most visually impressive White Topped Pitcher Plant bogs in the world. The Conservancy is working in cooperation with Alabama's Forever Wild Program to acquire and manage a significant portion of the remaining natural habitat in the Splinter Hill Bog area. To date the State of Alabama and The Nature Conservancy have acquired over 2,100 contiguous acres and will work cooperatively to manage this property using periodic prescribed fire and working to control non-native invasive species.

A few of us saw a Swallow-tailed Kite as we were crossing the "Dolly Parton" bridge on our way to the bog; and at Exit 31, while filling up with gas (once we found the gas tank!) at the Shell gas station pit stop, we saw a few amazing red Cecropia moths on the walls; Andrew said sometimes there are hundreds that come to the lights that are left on.

Once at the bog we headed out along the wet trail which was surrounded by pitcher plants; we were not too far along and we heard then saw our sought-after Bachman's Sparrow! Wonderful looks were had by all, and this was yet another "lifer" for many. Other birds included Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Brown-headed Nuthatch, Carolina Chickadee, and Pileated Woodpecker (heard only).



After a snack in the parking lot we were off to Bayou La Batre for a fusion-food lunch at Phenom Phen. All the fields were wet, but a great surprise was finding a group of nearly 50 White Ibis feeding.

Then we stopped at

Bellingrath Gardens, where some of us did the house tour and some just explored the gardens. The property on which the gardens would eventually be constructed were purchased in 1917 as a fishing camp by Walter Bellingrath, president of the local Coca Cola bottling plant. Mrs. Bellingrath began developing the gardens with architect George Bigelow Rogers in 1927. The home was completed in 1935, encompasses 10,500 square feet and features hand-made brick salvaged in Mobile, and Ironwork was obtained from the demolished



circa 1837 Southern Hotel, also in Mobile. The house design borrowed elements from many traditions and eras. Some of the most obvious are a formal Georgian staircase reminiscent of an English country house, French doors, and a Mediterranean courtyard. The interior is opulently decorated in quasi Rococo style, lots of antiques and elegant furnishings. Meanwhile outside in the gardens Blue-headed Vireo, Northern Parula Warblers, and Carolina Wren were seen, and the grounds and garden were enjoyed.

Late afternoon we headed back to the Island after stopping on the causeway for good looks at Boat-tailed Grackle; and a quick Shell Mound scouting gave most everyone good looks at Blue-winged Warbler. Peg also took a group back to where she's spied a Yellow-billed Cuckoo and it allowed us great looks as the day came to an end, likely a tired bird! We had managed to get in a day without rain! (Well, it rained while we were in the cars, but that doesn't count.)

Dinner tonight was at J.T.'s on the island again, then off to a well-earned rest. We enjoyed our restaurant time, to mingle with the locals.



Thursday April 16 Five Rivers Delta Boat Tour / Fort Morgan / Ferry





Another early breakfast at our friendly golf course restaurant, Pirate's Pleasure, which featured yummy biscuits. We were then off to check out birding hotspots including Shell Mound. We spent about an hour here before loading up the vans and heading north for a tour of the delta. We got to Five Rivers Delta Resource Center in enough time that we were able to visit their wonderful gift shop. At 11 am we boarded the Osprey for an hour and a half tour of the delta. The boat ride was pleasant and informative; we saw both Common and Purple Gallinule, many Alligators, Snowy Egrets, and terns. We also got very close to an Osprey nest with two adults on it. We learned about the acronym BATSMOBILE - the Five Rivers that make up the delta - Blakeley, Apalachee, Tensaw, Spanish, and Mobile. When our tour was done we made a quick stop at the visitors center, where some of us saw a ribbon snake on the tarmac, then off to lunch. Lunch today was at the famed Oyster House, where we feasted on seafood with a beautiful view of the delta. Full plates and full bellies compliment birding well!

From here we continued around the delta, going through some beautiful country and fancy horse farms. We drove through Gulf Shores and continued on out to the end of the road to Fort Morgan. Here we spent an hour birding before catching the ferry back across to Dauphin Island. There were some flooded fields that had some good shorebirds including Black-necked Stilt and Black-bellied Plover. We wished we had more time here – next trip!

Some of us saw our only sparrow besides the Bachman's, a Savannah Sparrow. After the cars were parked in line at the ferry - which we did not want to miss - we went to a piney area and



found a Pine Warbler that was singing and showing off - all had good looks. Some also saw a Northern Waterthrush in rocks and shrubs right at the ferry launch before boarding.

Despite our angst about lining up, the little ferry only had four cars on it this day, and after a brief 40 minute ride, we debarked on the island and went to our Motel for a brief rest/clean up.

Walter and Lynn were generous in sharing their suite for the checklist /party/ and next early morning breakfast food dispersal - thanks!

Our final dinner was at the Islander's Restaurant, which was right around the corner so we were able to walk. Many of us enjoyed a last meal of local seafood.

Friday April 17	Airport Departures
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An early morning of breakfast in our rooms and packing up the vans; then we were off to do some final migrant scouting. It had been very windy with some scattered rain during the night and we didn't know what to expect.



We met Andrew at Shell Mounds and he said the wind had been from the south and could have pushed the birds a little further north and incited others to continue on. It was a somewhat quiet morning, but we did manage to see a Spotted Sandpiper, new for the trip, and two beautiful Cape May Warblers, which brought our warbler count up to 24 species!

Dodie and Peg made the airport runs in two shifts, allowing those with later flights to bird for an hour more before heading to the Mobile airport and back home.

Thank you all for joining us on our inaugural to Dauphin Island! We all agree that it is a wonderful birding spot with friendly people, good migration potential, and tasty seafood. A special thanks to Andrew, an island resident and expert guide, who helped make this tour a success.

