

TEXAS

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

8-22 APRIL 2006

Leader: Darren Rees

Guests: John & Maggie Tester, Ian & Lydia Taylor, Jenny Standish & Margaret Forrest.

Day 1 Our long flight to Texas is not without highlights as the cloud over the north Atlantic finally breaks up somewhere over the snowy wastes of Labrador. The vast boreal forests around Hudson Bay eventually make way to a landscape marked by a grid pattern of hundreds of farm roads as we approach the Great Lakes. Travelling down Lake Michigan, we cross over the heartland of the US, and the orderly patchwork of thousands of farms over the mid-west.

Finally, we slowly descend into Texas and George W Bush Airport at Houston. We pass through immigration, but fail to collect our bags – it seems that they haven't made the crossing with us – and so starts the carry-on that is luggage retrieval. We pick up the rental vehicle and get set for the drive to Rockport when Darren's cell phone springs to life. They've found the bags so it's back to terminal E. Twice we drive back to the airport and eventually all cases are accounted for. We start our journey to Rockport nearly four hours after arriving in America!

The drive takes us past the skyscrapers of downtown Houston before we cross the coastal plain south and west. We stop at a roadside eatery, Mikeska's BBQ, and sample our first Texan hospitality. The food is good and plentiful, though not everyone gives the thumbs up to the beef and turkey jerky. We even start our bird list off with some birds from the car park – Eastern Meadowlark, Cave Swallows, Killdeer, Red-winged Blackbirds, Great-tailed Grackles and a wonderful Buff-breasted Sandpiper. We eventually arrive at the Best Western Fulton at 9.00pm. Whew, what a long first travel day.

Day 2 A pre-breakfast stroll from the motel gives us some common birds of the area. These include Mockingbird, Laughing Gull, Loggerhead Shrike, Mourning Dove, and Cardinal. On the local pond are Redhead and Green Heron, and in nearby bushes we get a taste of the migrant passerines on the move, with Orange-crowned Warbler and White-eyed Vireo. At the shore we see Purple Martin, Spotted Sandpiper, Willet, Turnstone, Royal Tern and wonderful Brown Pelicans.

After breakfast we drive to Sandollar Harbour, meet our guide Vicki and Captain Eddy, and board the Mollyanna for our boat trip to Aransas National Wildlife

Refuge. This is the stronghold of the small winter population of Whooping Cranes and these are the target species for the day. As we leave, birds at the harbour include Lesser Scaup, Brown Pelican, Laughing Gull, Double-crested Cormorant, Great Egret, Ruddy Turnstone and Royal Terns. We move out into the open water where there are lots more terns flying around and we get our first Gull-billed, Sandwich and Forster's Terns. We travel across Aransas Bay and start to work through the sand bars and channels around the southern tip of Aransas Nature Reserve – there are birds everywhere. On the first shingle bar is a local rarity. Among the terns and American Oystercatchers is a pink American Flamingo, brought here by last year's hurricanes. As we near the marsh a small group of Whooping Cranes are soaring around reminding us that they will soon be heading north. We are in luck as another individual is at the water's edge, and we approach really close. While we are getting wonderful views and photos of one of the rarest birds in the world John notices a hawk drop from the sky. A White-tailed Hawk has some prey on the ground – fantastic. A Seaside Sparrow starts displaying in song flight, and, what will prove to be a common occurrence on our Texas tour, we are spoilt for birds to look at.

We move along the channels getting our first views of American Avocet, Marbled Godwit, Whimbrel, Long-billed Curlew, Greater Yellowlegs, Lesser Yellowlegs, Dunlin, Semi-palmated Sandpiper, Sanderling and Bottlenose Dolphins. A Black Tern follows the boat alongside the Laughing Gulls, and we add Eared Grebe, Northern Harrier, Crested Caracara, Black and Turkey Vulture to the growing species list. We start ticking off all the heron species and through the course of our boat trip we see Snowy and Great Egret, Tri-coloured Heron, Little Blue and Great Blue Heron, and ducks include Blue-winged Teal, Shoveler, Gadwall, Mottled Duck and American Wigeon. At the furthest sand bar a Wilson's Plover scurries between the loafing Black Skimmers.

We wind our way back to Rockport Harbour adding Common Loon and Goldeneye, and a fantastic Peregrine sitting on a marker buoy that allows us to get remarkably close.

After lunch at the local Subway deli, we move north from Rockport to the Lamar Peninsular and Goose Island State Park, where there is a mixture of marshland and woodland thickets. We drive into the woods to one of the feeding stations that have been placed to attract birds. It works a treat and we watch the busy collection of Red-winged Blackbirds, Brown-headed Cowbirds, Cardinal, Mourning and Inca Doves, Gray Catbird, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, White-eyed Vireo, Black-crested Tufted Titmouse, White-throated and House Sparrows. Before ending the day we take a look at the beach, seeing more egrets, herons and fishing Least Terns. On the way back we add Pied-billed Grebe and close Lesser Scaup and Blue-winged Teal. It's been a great first day.

Day 3 Before breakfast we visit nearby Connie Hagar Sanctuary and there are birds everywhere. There are noisy heron rookeries on some islands in the lagoon, bustling with Great Blue Heron, Great, Snowy and Reddish Egrets. Ian finds a Bottlenose Dolphin and Maggie finds a Black-crowned Night Heron. We get wonderful views of the incomparable Black Skimmers – a truly remarkable bird and an immediate winner of *beak-of-the-week* award.

After breakfast we load the van ready to leave, but Maggie has her eyes on birds in the trees. There are migrants moving through the live oaks and we watch Myrtle and Audubon's Yellow-rumped Warblers alongside Swainson's Thrush. Also, Ian finds a spectacular Blue Grosbeak.

We drive to the ferry from Aransas Pass to Port Aransas, gaining more views of Bottlenose Dolphins during the short crossing. Once on Mustang Island we drive to the beach where we can scan the open water of the Gulf. There are Royal, Sandwich and Least Terns around, and big groups of Laughing Gulls and Brown Pelicans are following the shrimp boats at sea. Ruddy Turnstone, Willet and Sanderling busy themselves between the stranded weed and creative sand sculptures on the beach – I guess there's always somewhere to park the bike.

Along Mustang Island John spots a large brown bird in a ditch - not one, but two American Bitterns at close range. Across the road is a pool holding a group of shorebirds, and it's our first opportunity to get the telescopes on some 'peeps'. There are Semi-palmated and Least Sandpipers alongside Black-bellied and Semi-palmated Plovers, and Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs. Further along Mustang Island we notice Eastern Meadowlarks, Crested Caracara, Redhead and Lesser Scaup. At the southern end we stop for more birds at another large pool, adding Belted Kingfisher, Horned Lark, and Western Sandpipers.

After lunch we take in one more birding stop before leaving the Corpus Christi area. At Flour Bluff shore the waders are very close and we get wonderful views of Marbled Godwit, Willet, Oystercatcher Short-billed Dowitcher, Least, Semi-palmated and Western Sandpipers. It's time to head south to the border...

After a couple of hours we stop along Highway 77 where there are Wild Turkeys beside the main road. We also see spectacular Harris and White-tailed Hawks. Pushing on we finally arrive at our base for the next three nights, the delightful Alamo Inn.

Day 4 Our destination for the morning is Bentsen State Park along the banks of the Rio Grande. Much of the park is mesquite thicket and riparian woodland, a long ribbon of green following the river and providing habitat for local specialities and migrants on the move. We walk into the park looking at feeders along the old road, seeing White-winged and White-tipped Doves, Golden-fronted and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers, Chachalacas, stunning Altimira Orioles and superb

Green Jays. At this time of year many hawks are passing through, using the lush vegetation of the Rio Grande valley as an overnight roost site, and as we continue our walk we notice a group of 15 Mississippi Kites lifting from the trees – we'd better get to that hawk platform. Maggie has had too much coffee though and has other ideas. Her exploration of the bushes proves an inspired move as she discovers a Pauraque on the ground.

We time our arrival at the hawk platform to perfection. From our elevated view we can look over the canopy and within minutes the hawks start taking to the air. Broad-winged Hawks slowly lift from the trees in a series of groups of 40 to 50 birds that dot the panorama. They start linking up and form large 'kettles', rising on the morning thermals, and soon we are counting hundreds of birds. Over a period of nearly two hours hundreds of Mississippi Kites join the many thousands of Broad-winged Hawks that stream over, passing from one circling thermal to the next. It's a truly impressive sight, witnessing migration in action. Other species are moving over too, and we add Red-shouldered Hawk, Swainson's Hawk, Cooper's Hawk and Sharp-shinned Hawk. The local birds are at hand to add a sense of the exotic, and we see Verdin, Couch's Kingbird, Kiskadee, Brown-crested Flycatcher and a rare Hook-billed Kite.

We have lunch at the café in the visitor centre, then drive to Weslaco for some more birding. At the Valley Nature Centre there is some much needed shade provided by a parcel of woodland, well equipped with bird feeders. At the hummingbird feeders Buff-bellied Hummingbirds dart to and fro, another Rio Grande specialty. Walking the short trail we see Summer Tanager, Long-billed Thrasher, Orange-crowned Warbler, White-eyed Vireo and obliging Yellow-crowned Night Herons at the nest. In and around a second feeding station there are Inca, Mourning, and White-tipped Doves, Kiskadee, Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, Blue-winged and Black-and-white Warblers.

For a change of habitat we visit nearby Estero Llano Grande, a lake busy with waterbirds – Avocets, Black-necked Stilts, Long-billed Dowitchers (summer plumage), Western, Semi-palmated and Stilt Sandpipers, Least Bittern, Peregrine, Harris Hawks, White-tailed Kite, Gull-billed Tern, Skimmer and White Pelican. There are several Diamondback Watersnakes weaving through the water too.

After a late afternoon break at the Alamo Inn, we set out again for an evening at Bentsen State Park, hoping to see some of the owls that are present there. We arrive with plenty of light left so check the old ox-bow lake or *resaca*. There are Pied-billed and Least Grebes, Swainson's Hawk, Caracara, Anhinga, Lesser Scaup and Ian finds our first Ringed Kingfisher. A short distance away some other birders are positioned close to a dead tree marked with a couple of holes. In one roosts a tiny Elf Owl. We wait for the light to fade hoping for a glimpse... There are distractions to take our attention from staring at a hole in a tree – a Northern Bobwhite walk across the road, freezing momentarily to look at a

quiet bunch of birders, and a Lesser Nighthawk flies about heralding the start of the night shift. A Ferruginous Pygmy Owl starts calling from deep within the woods soon afterwards. And then it happens. As I said, we were hoping for a glimpse and that's what we get. With no hint of a grand entrance or exit, a small dark blob drops from the hole and out of sight. The Elf Owl show has been and gone... We walk to the vans hearing Screech Owl and Pauraque on the way back. Near the car park we manage to get a look at a Pauraque sitting on the track, illuminated by Darren's torchlight.

Day 5 After an early breakfast we drive south to Brownsville and the lush riverine habitat found at Sabal Palm Sanctuary. Here is a relic of the dense palm forests that once covered the lower Rio Grande valley, and along with the series of pools and resacas, the sanctuary supports a wealth of birds. A walk around the trails first yields Chachalaca, Couch's Kingbird, Green Jay, and Olive Sparrow. At the boardwalk a couple of birders are listening to a real rarity. America's only Gray-crowned Yellowthroat has taken up summer residence here and is singing from a stand of reeds. It soon moves higher up, first to the reed tops, then to the small tree above, singing away in full view. A lifer for the leader! At the same spot there is a flurry of activity nearby, with Cardinal, Indigo Bunting and Northern Parula flitting in the same tree. The pools are busy with birds best viewed from the hide. Ducks include Redhead, Pintail, Mexican Duck, Mottled Duck, Ruddy Duck, American Wigeon, and Blue-winged Teal. Also present are Anhinga, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Ringed Kingfisher, Least Grebe, Pied-billed Grebe, Green Heron, Northern Waterthrush and singing Black-throated Green Warbler.

Near to the sanctuary, and close to the airport, resides another American rarity. At the end of a quiet cul-de-sac, in a stand of tall evergreens, a pair of Mexican Crows has nested. We park and discuss the attraction with a helpful local who points to exactly which tree the birds have used. Within 15 minutes Lydia spots the crows' arrival. They are glossy blue and relatively small billed, but still a bit crowy, sadly lacking a sombrero.

Another lunch, another Subway, and then it's off to South Padre Island for some more birds. The southern section of this barrier island is largely developed for the tourist industry, but where the hotels stop the mix of salt marsh and bushes start can be productive for birds. With few thickets to shelter migrants, the ordered bushes next to the convention center can hold a surprising number of birds and we are in luck. We walk around the gardens and notice striking male Scarlet Tanagers, Orchard Orioles, Common Yellowthroat, and Indigo Bunting. A male Painted Bunting offers a tantalising glimpse only, but there'll be more from him later...

From the boardwalk we can scan the many birds found on the inner lagoon. These include Red-breasted Merganser, Lesser Scaup, Dunlin, Dowitchers,

Yellowlegs, Green Heron, Reddish Egret (white morph) and Black Skimmers. The boardwalk also allows us to look down into the reeds and we see confiding Marsh Wrens, two immaculate Sora Rails, and a Least Bittern (for some). It's also our first chance to look at the remarkable alligators found here – a large 12 foot (?) individual is just a few feet away.

After a much-needed Dairy Queen break, we check out another migrant trap at the curiously named Sheephead Street. In a small parcel of bushes and trees there are plenty of birds, and we see Scarlet and Summer Tanagers, Orchard Orioles in all plumages, Indigo Buntings, Long-billed Thrasher, Eastern Kingbird, Nashville, Tennessee and Kentucky Warblers.

Our route back takes us to the south of Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. This is a huge reserve comprising a series of salt marshes and dry coastal scrub, and is the site of a re-introduction programme in the 1980's for the endangered Aplomado Falcon. We stop about 10 miles short of the reserve to check an area where we suspect these beautiful falcons nest. Curiously, our first scan reveals a Peregrine sat on a pylon and Darren's wonder if it has muscled in to Aplomado's territory. A second scan puts everything to order as there is an adult Aplomado sitting on the ground nearby. We enjoy wonderful views of a spectacular bird, and a worthy *bird-of-the-trip* for some.

Driving back to Alamo, we decide that we should check the roost sites for parrots in Weslaco, as our timing should be just about right. We drive slowly around the leafy roads of the suburbs around 10th street, and we soon hear the squawking of parrots and follow a small flock to a corner of trees. A dozen or so delightful Red-crowned Parrots descend and give us a real show, and it's a fitting end to another great day.

Day 6 Buoyed by our parrot experience, we decide to check the roost of parakeets in McAllen first thing in the morning. We arrive at 7.00am at the corner of Dove and Tenth Streets and park in the Chase Bank lot. As if by magic, 50 or so Green Parakeets descend and land on the wires above, much to the amazement of both us and the friendly local who is using the cash withdrawal machine. What a start to the day!

After our final breakfast at the Alamo Inn, we drive to nearby Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge. Here, there is a system of freshwater pools and tropical hardwood forest along the shores of the Rio Grande, and it provides a great mixture of habitats for some unusual, essentially Mexican, birds. We take a walk along the dyke or levee, to where a small group of hawk watchers are assembled. There are lots of Swainson's Hawks overhead with White-tailed Kite, Harris Hawks, and Cooper's Hawk. A Clay-colored Robin is singing and we get views as it crosses the bank from tree to tree. Maggie finds it foraging on the ground with some grackles. We also see a Hooded Oriole alongside an Altimira Oriole.

Then, while we are all in the loos, Ian and John watch a Roadrunner – Meep! Meep! Let's hope we see another one. Once we are all back together we explore the trails that weave towards the pools. A Tropical Parula, another Rio Grande speciality, is singing from a tall live oak and eventually gives us good views. At Pintail Lakes we see Common Yellowthroat, Loggerhead Shrike, Least Grebe, Shoveler, Mottled Duck, Mexican Duck, Blue-winged Teal, Ring-necked Duck, Coot, Pied-billed Grebe, and Little Blue Heron. A family party of Harris Hawks are sitting in the trees and soon take to the air, but star bird goes to a richly coloured Cinnamon Teal. On our return walk is another highlight – a group of 250 or so White Pelicans are passing over in a dense flock.

Before leaving the Lower Rio Grande we stop at Anzalduas Country Park. Rare Gray Hawks have nested here before, and we are in luck again this year. A pair is using a nest close to the river, oblivious to the noise from the revellers on the Mexican side of the water. We get good views through the scope of a bird on the nest marked with a clean grey head and bright yellow cere.

It's time for the transfer to our next base up river, Dairy Queens on the way. Before we reach Zapata we check out a section of the river about 30 miles south of the town, at Salineno. The Rio Grande is very narrow here, and Mexico is a stone's throw away. Birds include Pied-billed Grebe, Couch's Kingbird, Kiskadee, Bewick's Wren, Olive Sparrow and local rarities Red-billed Pigeons. Along the access road we see our first Vermilion Flycatchers with a brilliant male displaying to a female close to the nest site. We also see our first Bullock's Oriole, Curve-billed Thrasher and Chihuahua Ravens. At the access road to Falcon Dam we see Lark Sparrows, Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, Harris Hawks, Osprey and plenty of Black and Turkey Vultures.

Day 7 We have a pre-breakfast outing from the motel, heading out early for the river at San Ygnacio. Here along the Rio Grande there is a similar cross-section of birds as at Salineno, but this is also a site for the handful of White-collared Seedeaters that breed in the US. At our first spot we check the feeders. There are Swamp and Lincoln's Sparrows, Black-crowned Night Herons, and a Warbling Vireo. At the second access to the river a small stand of reeds is marked by orange tape as Seedeaters have been nesting here. While we wait we see Altimira and Bullock's Orioles, Bronzed Cowbird, Ringed Kingfisher, Spotted Sandpiper and Osprey, and Margaret finds our first Green Kingfisher. Soon we notice a male White-collared Seedeater calling from a dead tree and we get great views of a rare bird through the telescope. What a great start to the day.

After Tina's big breakfast we drive to El Rio Park at Chapeno hoping to catch up with another local specialty. The feeders here are regularly topped up and can attract rare Brown Jays, a species that breeds here and nowhere else in the U.S. As we arrive a superb Gray Hawk circles low overhead, later joined by a second

bird – a real bonus. At the feeders are Great-tailed Grackles, Red-winged Blackbirds, and Golden-fronted Woodpeckers. Other birds include Purple Martins, Verdin, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Caracara and Painted Bunting. After a short break the Brown Jays fly in, first a young pale-billed bird, then an adult.

We head upriver to Laredo, stopping for a late lunch, and then drive the 2½ hours north to the hill country. We finally arrive at Neal's Lodges shortly before 6.30pm and check in at our new base, set amidst the green and rolling hill country. There's even time before our evening meal, for a little sample of the birding on offer, and we sit by the feeders at cabin 61. There are House Finches, Olive, Lincoln's and White-throated Sparrows, Ruby-throated and Black-chinned Hummingbirds, White-winged Dove, a brilliant Hooded Oriole, a stunning male Painted Bunting and a White-tailed Deer mother and young. And so to dinner...

Day 8 After breakfast pancakes we explore further the birds of our new surroundings. Close to our cabins we see Eastern Phoebe, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, and Bewick's Wren. Along the Rio Frio we see more new birds. There's a few beautiful Yellow-throated Warblers singing and on show in the tall cypress trees that line the bank. A Black Phoebe is flycatching from the boulders mid-stream, and we add Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and Carolina Chickadee. Other birds include Green Kingfisher, Cave Swallow, and Summer Tanager. We walk back along the river and bump into some birders who've just been watching a rare Rufous-capped Warbler. We'd better hang around! It's worth the wait... first a smart Wilson's Warbler works it's way along the trees, then the Rufous-capped warbler starts singing nearby. It soon comes closer and gives us a real show, throwing its head back and trilling away in front. Another tick for the leader!

Next, we are pointed to a gnarled tree outside cabin 10 where a Screech Owl is at its daytime roost. We amble up and there it is in full view, looking not unlike a lump of bark itself. Fantastic! Opposite, near to the restaurant, is a tree full of Cedar Waxwings – it's one bird spectacle after another.

We decide to take a second trail past the cattleguard feeders. At the feeders are Chipping, Clay-colored, Lincoln's, Lark and White-crowned Sparrows, Pine Siskin, Lesser Goldfinch, Yellow-throated Warbler, House Finch and White-winged Dove. Walking further yields Ash-throated Flycatcher, Bell's Vireo, and Vermilion Flycatcher. At the furthest point some tall trees hold Nashville Warbler, Orange-crowned Warbler, and nest building Bushtits. On the return walk we get good views of White-eyed Vireo, Black-throated Sparrow, Ruby-crowned Kinglet and Common Ground Dove.

After lunch and some middle-of-the-day lazy time we assemble for some late afternoon birding. At Pecan Grove we see lots of American Goldfinches with Chipping Sparrows at the feeders. Around the bushes are Summer Tanagers, Vermilion Flycatchers, Carolina Wren, Common Raven, and a Caracara that chases

a Turkey Vulture forcing it to disgorge food. The cattleguard feeders are as busy with an array of sparrow species including Black-throated, and our patience is rewarded with views of a new species - Canyon Towhee.

Day 9 We have breakfast at 7.00am and get on our way by 8.00am, heading north into the hill country and our destination for today, Lost Maples State Park. The road takes us through scrubby farmland fields and thicker scrub and we check some stony fields just west of Utopia. It's still early morning and the birds are busy and calling. A Vermilion Flycatcher is displaying and a Bewick's Wren singing. In the field a sparrow gives its four part song, display flights then perches in a bush - a Cassin's Sparrow. Also several smart Blue Grosbeak males are chasing each other around. We also find Lark and Chipping Sparrows, as well as Western Kingbird, Ash-throated Flycatcher and Caracara.

We arrive at Lost Maples State Park and check in at the Visitor Centre. At the feeders there are House Finch, Eastern Phoebe and Black-chinned Hummingbirds. We walk a short circuit around the car park as there are birds calling from the wooded slopes. One is sounding like a buzzing Yellowhammer - the rare local breeder, Golden-cheeked Warbler. We locate the bird singing from the top of tree, showing off his striking black and yellow plumage, and looking great in the centre of the telescope (not enough in the centre for some!).

Further into the park we stop near the RV park where birders have reported the other hill country endemic, Black-capped Vireo. We stop and park safely in accordance to the state rules, enthusiastically enforced by the local ranger. The first bird we hear singing is another gem - a stunning Scott's Oriole. Then a Black-capped Vireo starts calling, provoking a second male to start to sing. We seem to be close to two territories and we witness lots of activity from both birds as they patrol their respective boundary. Great views of another rare breeder.

We drive to the trailhead for the East Pond Trail and start our walk that takes us along a narrow valley with wooded slopes. As soon as we leave the vehicles we notice more Golden-cheeked Warblers singing on the hillsides. Other birds singing include Summer Tanager, Black-and-White Warbler, Carolina Wren and White-eyed Vireo. We soon track down a Red-eyed Vireo and a Canyon Wren that sings from the twigs and debris of a Red-tailed Hawk's nest - the incubating bird is oblivious. Along the walk we get close looks at Ruby-crowned Kinglet, nest-building Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, White-eyed Vireo and more Golden-cheeked Warblers. Back at the car park a Rufous-crowned Sparrow is singing and performing well during our lunch stop.

At a second car park within the park we scan for raptors. We have no luck with the Zone-tailed Hawks and the heat makes us head for the shade and feeders. It's another good move - we relax and watch the Siskins, Phoebes and Bewick's Wren, then Maggie announces she has something. A Zone-tailed Hawk circles

overhead giving wonderful looks at its distinct black and white markings. A fitting end to our visit to Lost Maples – now let's check the ice-creams and drinks at the local store...

After an early dinner, we leave at 5.45pm and drive the short distance to the Cofer Ranch, host to the Rio Frio Bat Cave. We arrive in ample time to bird the slopes beneath the cave and we park up and have a nose around. Immediately, we hear the quiet mewing of a Black-tailed Gnatcatcher and manage to lure it closer for a better look. We notice that over the entrance to the cave is a group of Cave Swallows, just hanging around waiting to go to roost. There are sparrows singing from the scrub and we pick up on both Black-throated and Rufous-crowned Sparrow. We walk up to the cave entrance where there is a Canyon Wren calling and picking around. On the lower slopes, a Cactus Wren is sitting in a dead tree chugging away, and a Canyon Towhee makes an appearance. We choose a comfortable vantage point and scan around, taking in the evening atmosphere and noting the many raptors gathering. A female Merlin is sitting in a tree on the skyline, and several Red-tailed Hawks are drifting about. They are all waiting for their supper.

Slowly, one by one, the Cave Swallows go in to roost. And then it happens. At first a trickle of a couple of bats ... then suddenly a stream of bats comes out from the gaping cave. At the first sign of bats the Merlin that has been sitting patiently in a tree, launches to the air. Charging towards, us she strikes with deft accuracy immediately hitting a bat and taking it off in her claws.

What starts off as hundreds of bats exiting soon becomes thousands, then tens of thousands and even hundreds of thousands. The sound of a multitude of flapping wings is like the pitter-patter of rain, and a musty smell hangs in the air as they pour out. Great columns of bats climb into the sky, twisted this way and that by the evening breeze, and then more hunters come.

Red-tailed Hawks wade in and out of the continuous stream of bats, taking swipes of the column and eventually catching single bats. A Cooper's Hawk zips through in a more direct fashion. All the while bats pour from the cave. At this time of year an estimated ten million bats leave the roost each evening. It's a true spectacle and one of the most incredible sights to be seen in the whole of the natural world. We stay until it's almost dark, noting a Lesser Nighthawk flying and a Great Horned Owl calling, finally wandering down to the van just as the fireflies light up.

As we drive out in darkness we hear the distinct call of Chuck-will's-widow. It's close to the track and we manage to locate it in the torchlight. A Poorwill is also calling but are not as popular as the two Armadillos that are foraging around close to the track. It's the perfect end to the day.

Day 10 We start off with an early breakfast at 7.00am, followed by a birding session, hoping to find some species that have eluded us. We are in luck, and we find one such target bird straight away, or rather Maggie does. On top of a dead tree a Roadrunner delivers its mournful call (not meep, meep), and we get prolonged views of this truly remarkable bird – John and Ian can relax now. At Pecan Grove the Bluebirds are performing well, looking stunning in the morning light, and even a match for nearby Indigo Bunting and Vermilion Flycatcher. At cabin 61 a Spotted Towhee makes an appearance, alongside the male Painted Bunting and assorted sparrows. Yellow-breasted Chats are calling and we get wonderful views of two brilliant males holding territories and displaying.

It's time to start the long haul to High Island, our final destination, which lies some 380 miles to the east, on the Gulf coast. There are some birding sites on the way and our first stop is just 20 minutes away near Sabinal to check out the grain feed yards. There are lots of sparrows on the gravel track and stony field, and we see Vesper, Savannah, Lark and White-crowned Sparrows, plus a surprise Pyrrhuloxia. The blackbird flocks have a few Brewer's and one Yellow-headed Blackbird.

From Sabinal we drive to San Antonio for an unscheduled stop at the airport, and the offices of Alamo Rentals. One hour and a new vehicle later we're back on the road and chewing up the miles (and our Subway rolls). Finally, we leave the interstate and take in some birding stops, first at Atwater National Wildlife Refuge. Here we've previously had success on the bare fields at the entrance to the reserve and we check these out as we are driving by. We see the reintroduced herd of Bison that recall days gone by, when much of central Texas, and indeed the central U.S. was unbroken prairie. We are in luck too, and find a confiding group of curious looking Upland Sandpipers in a field nearby.

About an hour further on we stop for our main break of the day, at the beautiful Brazos Bend State Park, which is a mixture of wetland and woods. We arrive and walk the short distance through the moss festooned Live Oaks to a platform overlooking a pool. There are big Alligators in the water and lots of wetland birds to watch, including Coot, Moorhen, Great and Little Blue Heron, Tri-coloured and Green Heron, Great Egret, Snowy Egret, Blue-winged Teal, Black-bellied Whistling Duck and Mottled Duck. Then we are distracted by a Barred Owl that is calling in broad daylight in the tall trees nearby. We walk nearer and soon have it sitting overhead peering down at us – wonderful views.

The path takes us along a dyke between two pools, one with open water, the other covered with weed. We add more species – Purple Gallinule, Solitary Sandpiper, Prothonotary Warbler, Sora, Swamp Sparrow, American Bittern, Anhinga, Black-crowned Night Heron, Yellow-crowned Night Heron and lots of Coypu.

It's time to move on, and we still have some way to drive before our final destination of High Island. We take our evening meal at the Busy Bee restaurant in Alvin and finally arrive at the Gulfway Motel at midnight. It's been an exhausting day.

Day 11 Our time at the Gulfway Motel is always memorable, and our first breakfast is true experience. We have a date with the irrepressible Milly – the waitress with the mostest. It certainly is a show as we enjoy our full cooked breakfast served with extra helpings of Milly's Texan wit. Her t-shirt slogan says it all - 'God knows when you tip small'. Heaven help the decaff drinkers!

After breakfast we move over the road, to the Houston Audubon Society Reserve at Boy Scout Woods. There's a network of trails we can walk that visit assorted pools and open spaces beneath the canopy. This can be a migrant haven and over the morning period we work through the species on offer. At the first pool, where there is a mini grandstand, we see Gray Catbird, Carolina Wren, Blue Jay, White-throated Sparrow, Nashville and Tennessee warbler, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Baltimore and Orchard Oriole. From an adjacent clearing we can check the bush and tree edge and there are lots of birds to work through – Painted Bunting, Eastern Kingbird, Common Yellowthroat and Brown Thrasher.

For a change of scenery we drive the short distance to the beach and the pool at the southeast oilfield. On the shore is a collection of terns – Caspian, Royal, Sandwich, Forster's, Common, and Least with a Herring Gull, Turnstone and Sanderlings. At sea are lines of Brown Pelicans and a small flock of Black Scoter. Around the pool are Lesser Scaup, Neotropic and Double-crested Cormorant, Northern Harrier, Eastern Kingbird and Black Tern. We decide to view the pool from a second track that looks over a muddy fringe. There are Sora, Spotted Sandpiper, Yellowlegs and our first Pectoral Sandpiper.

We take our picnic lunch at a second Houston Audubon Society Reserve at Smith Oaks. There is a showcase heronry at Smith Oaks, just a short distance walk from the car park. It's a fabulous site with Great, Snowy and Cattle Egrets nesting alongside Great Blue, Little Blue and Tri-coloured Herons with a smattering of Black-crowned Night Herons, Roseate Spoonbills, Double-crested and Neotropic Cormorants. These are all packed in on a small island just a stone's throw away from the path, allowing us to get great photographs and great views of these truly spectacular birds. All the egrets are in fine, nuptial plumage with the long trailing *aigrette* feathers on the back and many showing bright coloured bases to the bill. These show red on Snowy Egret and vivid green with Great Egret. We enjoy the heron show for nearly an hour and then continue on a loop walk, seeing Orchard Orioles, Baltimore Orioles, Pied-billed Grebe, Myrtle and Audubon's Yellow-rumped Warblers.

Late afternoon we work Front Street woods where there are few migrants, but we do see two Swainson's Thrushes and a Brown Thrasher. At Boy Scout Woods it's a bit more lively, with Red-bellied Woodpecker, Orioles and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks feeding on the berries above the grandstand. Nearby are Indigo Bunting, Tennessee warbler, Scarlet Tanager, White-throated Sparrow, a beautiful male Hooded Warbler, American Kestrel (Lydia) and a Common Nighthawk.

Day 12 An early morning visit to Yacht Basin Road yields no less than seven Clapper Rails all showing well. Across the mud flats are Spoonbills, Egrets, Pelicans, Willets, Marbled Godwits, Whimbrel, Skimmers, Black Tern, and a Spotted Sandpiper with spots. We get a fly by from a White-tailed Kite – our closest views to date. The area can be good for sparrows, but this morning the wrens have taken over. From short vegetation we hear and see both Marsh and Sedge Wrens. From Rollover Pass we see more shorebirds including Oystercatcher, Reddish Egret and Wilson's Plover.

After another fun-filled breakfast with Milly, we drive to Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge for more birding. The route takes us through rice fields, some with water and waders. At the first there are American Golden Plover, lots of Buff-breasted Sandpipers, and a few Pectoral Sandpipers. At the second are more Pectoral Sandpipers, lots of Whimbrel, Black-bellied Plovers in summer plumage, and Gull-billed Terns. At the reserve a stand of willows hold Northern Waterthrush, Orchard Oriole and a superb Palm Warbler (thanks John). A long auto-route takes us around a series of pools, channels and reedbeds, and there is a rich and varied bird list including assorted ducks and waders, White-faced Ibis, Boat-tailed Grackle and Purple Gallinule. We get great views of Fulvous Whistling Ducks, Yellow-crowned Night Heron, a Bittern flushed by a Raccoon, and a confiding King Rail.

After lunch we head for our final destination for the day, east at Sabine Woods. This is another migrant trap close to the Louisiana border, and as we arrive we notice several birder's cars parked, raising our hopes. We are not disappointed and the next few hours are an absolute delight. We walk to the wood edge where there are Orchard Orioles and Downy Woodpecker. We enter the wood and walk a short distance along the boardwalk. In the canopy above, feeding on berries are Scarlet and Summer Tanagers, Baltimore and Orchard Orioles and Indigo Buntings. Sunlight is falling through the trees and catching some of the Scarlet Tanagers, causing the red to pulsate when viewed through the binoculars. It's time to stop and marvel at the riot of colour that is spring migration in Texas.

A little further on we add Yellow-billed Cuckoo, roosting Lesser and Common Nighthawks, and some folk get views of a Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher and Chestnut-sided Warbler. At the far corner of the wood is a water drip that attracts lots of birds, and an inquisitive Armadillo. The afternoon drifts into evening and we sit and watch the birds visit the pool to drink and bathe. We get

wonderful views of Common Yellowthroat, Northern Parula, Yellow Warbler, Tennessee Warbler, Northern Waterthrush, Yellow-throated Warbler, and a stunning Blackburnian Warbler. At times there is a spectacular flurry of colourful birds attending with Painted and Indigo Buntings, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Summer and Scarlet Tanagers, and Orchard and Baltimore Orioles.

Reluctantly, we leave Sabine Woods after 7.30pm, but it's been a great afternoon session, and the birds are still not over. Close to the road as we drive to Winnie a Great Horned Owl perches on a radio mast. Wow!

Day 13 Our last full day starts with a quick look at Boy Scout Woods. Nothing more to add, but we do get good views of Northern Waterthrush and Red-bellied Woodpecker before returning to the motel and the Milly show.

After breakfast we drive west along the Bolivar Peninsula where the main focus for the morning is the shorebird concentration at Bolivar Flats. Driving along the beach to the car park we note lots of Turnstones, Sanderlings, Dunlin, Black-bellied Plover and our first Piping Plovers. We park then walk the short distance to the first collection of birds that are now packing close together as the tide advances. There are Western Sandpipers in big numbers with a few Least and Semi-palmated Sandpipers. There are Least Terns along with Royal, Sandwich, and Forster's Terns. Elsewhere a White-tailed Kite sits on a bush, and a migrant Veery hops along the edge of the grass looking for some cover. There are big groups of dowitchers on show, and with an expert commentary from Swedish maestro Lars Jonsson to help sort those Long-billed from the Short-billed, it's a magic moment for the leader. There are lots of small plovers to go through, and we manage to see the complete set of Semi-palmated, Piping, Wilson's and Snowy (thanks to Ian).

Walking further on we approach a spectacular congregation of waders roosting, as the tide nears its peak. Before us are a bewildering number of colourful American Avocets, Marbled Godwits and Short-billed Dowitchers, with Willets and Greater Yellowlegs offering a supporting role. A truly remarkable sight.

After lunch we return to Sabine Woods for a second session with the migrants. It's even busier than before with Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Yellow-billed Cuckoos and Orchard Orioles as we enter. At the drip we enjoy a brilliant show with Baltimore and Orchard Orioles, Rose-breasted and Blue Grosbeak, Scarlet and Summer Tanager, Painted and Indigo Bunting, Parula, Red-eyed Vireo, Black-and-white Warbler, and American Redstarts. Around the woods we add Eastern Wood Pewee and Downy Woodpecker as well as assorted buntings. Finally we end the day watching the spectrum of colour at the drip, noting Nighthawks, Northern Waterthrush and the local Armadillo. As we are just about to leave a stunning male Hooded Warbler joins the bathing with a Common

Yellowthroat and a Yellow Warbler. What a lot of yellow! And so to our last meal at the Cowboy Grill in Winnie. Steaks and Sheriff Burgers all round.

Day 14 We wake to overcast skies and the threat of rain. Indeed it starts to rain soon after we enter Boy Scout Woods, but not before John finds a Virginia Opossum foraging behind the pool. We hastily retreat to the Gulfway and Milly's breakfast, where there is a power cut due to the storm, so it's pancakes by torchlight. Finally the rain clears and we explore the woods hoping to catch a fall of migrants. We have no luck at Smith Oaks or Boy Scout Woods, but it was fun trying. We say our final goodbyes to Becky and Milly at the Gulfway Motel, then drive to Houston Airport. The final counter on the rental vehicle marks 2332 miles travelled, and Margaret wins the mileage sweepstakes – a mere 32 miles out. It's been an exhausting but fantastic two weeks in Texas and it's thanks to y'all.

The *Bird of the Week* vote is for Painted Bunting, the *Place of the Trip* is Neal's Lodges and the *Magic Moment* is the bat exodus at the Rio Frio Bat Cave.

BIRDS

Common Loon
Least Grebe
Pied-billed Grebe
Eared Grebe
American White Pelican
Brown Pelican
Double-crested Cormorant
Neotropic Cormorant
Anhinga
American Bittern
Least Bittern
Great Blue Heron
Great Egret
Snowy Egret
Little Blue Heron
Tricolored Heron
Reddish Egret
Cattle Egret
Green Heron
Black-crowned Night-Heron
Yellow-crowned Night-Heron
White Ibis
White-faced Ibis
Roseate Spoonbill
Greater Flamingo
Fulvous Whistling-Duck
Black-bellied Whistling-Duck
Mottled Duck
Mexican Duck
Mallard
Blue-winged Teal
Northern Shoveler
Gadwall
American Wigeon
Redhead
Lesser Scaup
Ring-necked Duck
Red-breasted Merganser
Ruddy Duck
Black Scoter
Goldeneye
Black Vulture
Turkey Vulture
Osprey
Hook-billed Kite
White-tailed Kite
Northern Harrier
Sharp-shinned Hawk
Cooper's Hawk
Harris's Hawk
Red-shouldered Hawk
Broad-winged Hawk
Gray Hawk
Swainson's Hawk
White-tailed Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk
Zone-tailed Hawk
Crested Caracara
American Kestrel
Aplomado Falcon
Peregrine
Merlin
Plain Chachalaca
Wild Turkey
Northern Bobwhite
Clapper Rail
King Rail
Sora
Purple Gallinule
Common Moorhen
American Coot
Whooping Crane
Black-bellied Plover
American Golden-Plover
Snowy Plover
Wilson's Plover
Semi-palmated Plover
Piping Plover
Killdeer
American Oystercatcher
Black-necked Stilt
American Avocet
Greater Yellowlegs
Lesser Yellowlegs
Solitary Sandpiper
Spotted Sandpiper
Upland Sandpiper
Willet
Whimbrel
Long-billed Curlew
Marbled Godwit
Ruddy Turnstone
Sanderling
Semi-palmated Sandpiper
Western Sandpiper
Least Sandpiper
Pectoral Sandpiper
Dunlin
Stilt Sandpiper
Buff-breasted Sandpiper
Short-billed Dowitcher
Long-billed Dowitcher
Wilson's Snipe
Laughing Gull
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Gull-billed Tern
Caspian Tern
Royal Tern
Sandwich Tern
Common Tern
Forster's Tern
Least Tern
Black Tern
Black Skimmer
Feral Pigeon
Red-billed Pigeon
White-winged Dove
Mourning Dove
Collared Dove
Inca Dove
Common Ground-Dove
White-tipped Dove
Yellow-billed Cuckoo
Greater Roadrunner
Eastern Screech-Owl
Great Horned Owl
Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl (*heard*)
Lesser Nighthawk
Common Nighthawk
Pauraque
Chuck-will's-widow
Common Poorwill (*heard*)
Chimney Swift
Buff-bellied Hummingbird
Ruby-throated Hummingbird
Black-chinned Hummingbird
Ringed Kingfisher
Belted Kingfisher
Green Kingfisher
Golden-fronted Woodpecker
Red-bellied Woodpecker
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
Ladder-backed Woodpecker
Downy Woodpecker
Hairy Woodpecker
Eastern Wood-Pewee
Black Phoebe
Eastern Phoebe
Vermilion Flycatcher
Ash-throated Flycatcher
Brown-crested Flycatcher
Great Kiskadee
Couch's Kingbird
Eastern Kingbird
Western Kingbird
Scissor-tailed Flycatcher
Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher
Horned Lark
Purple Martin
Tree Swallow
Northern Rough-winged Swallow
Bank Swallow
Cliff Swallow
Cave Swallow
Barn Swallow
Blue Jay
Green Jay
Brown Jay
American Crow

Mexican Crow
Chihuahuan Raven
Common Raven
Carolina Chickadee
Tufted Titmouse
Black-crested Tufted Titmouse
Verdin
Bushtit
Cactus Wren
Canyon Wren
Carolina Wren
Bewick's Wren
Marsh Wren
Sedge Wren
Rock Wren (heard)
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher
Black-tailed Gnatcatcher
Eastern Bluebird
Swainson's Thrush
Veery
Clay-colored Robin
Gray Catbird
Northern Mockingbird
Brown Thrasher
Long-billed Thrasher
Curve-billed Thrasher
Cedar Waxwing
Loggerhead Shrike
European Starling
White-eyed Vireo
Bell's Vireo
Black-capped Vireo
Red-eyed Vireo
Blue-winged Warbler
Tennessee Warbler
Orange-crowned Warbler
Nashville Warbler
Northern Parula
Tropical Parula
Myrtle Yellow-rumped Warbler
Audubon's Yellow-rumped Warbler
Golden-cheeked Warbler
Black-throated Green Warbler
Yellow-throated Warbler
Palm Warbler
Black-and-white Warbler
Northern Waterthrush
Kentucky Warbler
Common Yellowthroat
Hooded Warbler
Rufous-capped Warbler
Gray-crowned Yellowthroat
Yellow-breasted Chat
Summer Tanager
Scarlet Tanager
Northern Cardinal
Pyrrhuloxia

Rose-breasted Grosbeak
Blue Grosbeak
Indigo Bunting
Painted Bunting
Spotted Towhee
Canyon Towhee
White-collared Seedeater
Rufous-crowned Sparrow
Olive Sparrow
Chipping Sparrow
Clay-colored Sparrow
Vesper Sparrow
Lark Sparrow
Black-throated Sparrow
Savannah Sparrow
Seaside Sparrow
Lincoln's Sparrow
Swamp Sparrow
White-throated Sparrow
White-crowned Sparrow
Red-winged Blackbird
Eastern Meadowlark
Brewer's Blackbird
Yellow-headed Blackbird
Great-tailed Grackle
Boat-tailed Grackle
Common Grackle
Bronzed Cowbird
Brown-headed Cowbird
Orchard Oriole
Hooded Oriole
Altamira Oriole
Bullock's Oriole
Baltimore Oriole
Scott's Oriole
House Finch
Pine Siskin
Lesser Goldfinch
American Goldfinch
House Sparrow

TOTAL SPECIES: 267

MAMMALS

Eastern Cottontail
Swamp Rabbit
White-tailed Deer
Gray Squirrel
Fox Squirrel
Coypu
Raccoon
Virginia Opossum
Nine-banded Armadillo
Bottle-nosed Dolphin
Collared Peccary
Mexican Free-tailed Bat

REPTILES

Diamondback Watersnake
Blue-collared Lizard
Green Anole
Brown Anole
Texas Spotted Whiptail
Alligator
Snapping Turtle
Red-eared Slider