

Texas Coastal Spring Migration 2014

A birding and nature trip by RV caravan

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Day 1. April 6 – South Padre Island Rendezvous

(Shari) It seems it has been forever since I've written a journal. We just finished our Birder's Reunion, a type of stationary caravan. We had 60 people attend and all seemed to enjoy it. As you readers know, I am not a birder and therefore I don't understand how people can enjoy birding for nine days straight and have a good time. To each his own, I guess. We then had two days to pack our RV, close our house and head for our next caravan about 90 mi. away at South Padre Island, Texas.

This too is a Birding Caravan, but one caravan I will enjoy because it is going to places I think are neat and along the coast of Texas: beaches, beaches and beaches; seafood, seafood and seafood. You get the picture. At one time we had a full caravan but for reasons beyond control five couples had to drop out. Especially sad is one because of a serious sickness of a daughter and another who fractured her hip from a fall and surgery is scheduled for tomorrow.

After our orientation meeting Nancy walks with me to find my first geocache of the trip. When I get home I ask Bert if he wants to hear of my first geocache or the bird I saw. I know it is a tough decision for him. I tell him the bird was the Curved Bill Curlew and then I relate the details of my first geocache of the trip. At 5:50 we walk to the restaurant for our welcome dinner. Although I will be paying for meals for the group, Russell surprises us when he buys appetizers for the whole table and macaroni and cheese for Barbara. He learned she liked that dish last night when they were out. The dish must have come from the children's menu because it is accompanied with a cardboard pirate ship and hat. Bert takes some really neat pictures with smiles usually seen at end of caravans, not beginnings. This group is gelling fast.





Day 2. April 7 – South Padre Island

(Bert) A morning walk alongside a saltwater marsh starts from our campground. The variety of shorebirds includes Long-billed Curlew and Whimbrel, as well as attractive waders, Tricolored Heron and Reddish Egret, each decked out in spectacular plumes and bright colors in the fleshy parts of their faces, a special plumage that is a sure sign of spring. We are not far along the trail when I get a phone call from Shari. She has contacted the boat operators and we are scheduled for a 9:30 AM departure.

The weather has turned surprisingly cold and in expecting it even chillier on the boat, we put on heavy clothes and jackets. As it turns out, the winds have died down and the Intercoastal Waterway is warmer, ideal for our boat trip. Our targets are Bottlenose Dolphins and Mangrove Warblers. Scarlet operates one boat and soon is pointing out her favorite dolphins to her passengers. We follow in the boat operated by George and quickly tally a list of waterbirds including one of my favorites, the petite Least Terns with yellow bills. We head to the small Black Mangrove islands in search of the warbler. George says they have a 90% success rate at finding the Mangrove Warbler, but the birds rarely stay still and instead constantly flutter through the mangroves in search of insects. Our first 20-min. search brings up no sign of life, so we venture farther into the open water at the southern terminus of the Intercoastal Waterway.

Two high-speed formidable boats race by us at amazing speed. The twin boats are powered by four 225-hp outboard engines. Emblazoned on their sides are the words “U.S. Customs and Border Protection.” They jet to open water, turn around and head back to their dock, with no apparent motive other than to burn fuel.

Large flocks of dark birds fly low across the water. George and Scarlet both pronounce them as cormorants but, when I disagree, George takes a closer look and also sees they are White-faced Ibis, about 50 or 60. He says they rarely see them in these waters. We also see flocks of White Ibis.

We are back at the Black Mangrove islands, patiently drifting with the tide, then motoring against the current to begin another drift pattern. A bird gets our attention and, when I say it is yellow, even more birders focus their binoculars on the spot. When I get a better look, I call it a Hooded Warbler. George and Scarlet are hesitant to agree since they hardly ever see that species here in the mangroves and waterway. Yet that is what it is: a bright male.

Patience pays and we begin hearing a singing Mangrove Warbler. We hear it frequently, but only once or twice do we see it in flight. It is all yellow, not one of the adult males with the maroon head, but by song we know we have the Mangrove Warbler.

As we head back to the dock, dolphins repeatedly surface. Apparently all for fun, one dolphin bow rides a passing tour boat.

After lunch we visit SPI Migratory Bird Sanctuary where migrant birds are attracted to this wooded oasis in a desert of houses, businesses and concrete. Lincoln Sparrows bath in pools of water, we see our first warblers, and to the delight of Jeff and Barbara we study a Rose-breasted Grosbeak, a life bird for them.

The Convention Center is definitely where all the action is. Within minutes, in sequential order, we quickly tick off Orchard Oriole, Kentucky Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Black-and-white Warbler, Northern Parula and Blue-winged Warbler. A tree-sized red bottlebrush shrub is adorned with a dozen Ruby-throated Hummingbirds attracted to the prolific flowers.

At the start of the boardwalk a plethora of waterbirds are attracted to the first pond. We have studied them for the past 15 min. when I draw the group's attention to a flock of Laughing Gulls floating in the center of the pond. I know Beryl has wanted to find a special life bird and I ask the group to find one bird different from the others in the flock. Stephen is the first to point out one is pinkish, the others cleanly white. I direct attention to the tips of the folded wings and they recognize the white mirrors. Beryl has a new life bird, a Franklin's Gull. It is a good exercise in the penalty of ignoring what we think is common and not looking for differences.

One more good bird for the day, we see a Least Bittern fly across a pond, alight on a cattail and then fly across again. Stephen counts this as the best of the day, I'll pick the Kentucky Warbler and I'm sure Beryl would choose the gull. We end the day with 12 warbler species and 92 total species.



Reddish Egret spear fishing



Boating in the Intercoastal Waterway



U.S. Customs and Border Protection



Bottlenose Dolphins



Orchard Oriole (female), Convention Center, South Padre Island



Ruby-Throated Hummingbird at Convention Center



Kentucky Warbler



Northern Parula



Black-and-white Warbler



Black-throated Green Warbler

Day 3. April 8 – Sabal Palm Sanctuary and Brownsville Landfill

(Bert) On a fence post bordering grassy coastal plains, I spot a White-tailed Hawk. We pull our cars off to the broad shoulder for a closer look. While one adult hawk stays on its post, another rests on a nearly invisible nest near the top of one of the few trees in the area. Only a fraction of the nest sticks protrude from the dense cluster of olive leaves and only the hawk's gray head, white chin and yellow cere are visible. Its wary eye remains fixed on us.

When we arrive at Sabal Palm Sanctuary, we are treated to another nesting bird. A Great Horned Owl sits in a hollow of the massive trunk of a Sabal Palm. The park manager has focused his spotting scope on the nest and, if not for that bearing, we would not find the bird with binoculars. We are told this is the second nesting for the owl and it is sitting on eggs. I take several photos with my long lens and Barbara uses her iPad to take a digiscoped photo. We are amazed at the quality of her photo.

We find yet another nest, this one in construction. At the pond viewed from the blind we watch several Least Grebes, including a pair preparing a flimsy nest in the center of the pond. One grebe rests on a few sticks, supported by who-knows-what. The other grebe repeatedly paddles between shore and nest carrying a stick which is then interwoven with the others.

The morning is filled with more wonders. On the boardwalk we stop to study a mud hole, the remnant of a dried up resaca. Hundreds of golf-ball-sized Rio Grande Leopard Frogs cluster in the mud on the perimeter and many more tadpoles flop in the little remaining water. We wonder how these frogs can survive the drought, but when I check my amphibian book I read that they tolerate dry conditions by burrowing under rocks and shingle. In another mud hole a White Ibis fishes by swishing its long curved bill left and right.

On our way to the Brownsville Landfill we stop momentarily to watch a Swallow-tailed kite fly overhead. When we climb to the ridge of the massive ground-covered hill of garbage we are amazed at the sight before us. Standing in huge flocks are Laughing Gulls. I count a group of 50 in one binocular view and then swing my binoculars across the flat ground, summing up the views. Five thousand one hundred Laughing Gulls and that is only the ones in front of the active dump site where lug enabled caterpillars churn, shift and crush the incoming garbage. When we reach the action, gulls swarm through the air like bees at a hive and more rest in the field beyond the dump. It could easily add up to another 5000 gulls or 10,000 total. I repeatedly scan for rare gulls but only come up with expected Ring-billed and Herring Gulls. The best birds, however, are two Horned Larks.



White-tailed Hawk sitting on nest



Great Horned Owl sitting on nest in Sabal Palm
(cropped photo by Bert's 400 mm lens)



Great Horned Owl on nest, digiscoped with Barbara's iPad
(brightened and contrast-enhanced with computer software)



Rio Grande Leopard Frogs



Buff-bellied Hummingbird



Front line of 5100 Laughing Gulls



Brownsville Landfill and Laughing Gulls



Day 4. April 9 – Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge

(Bert) Birding is so good at the South Padre Island Convention Center that we return again this morning. We see many of the same species, yet add Palm Warbler and two very vocal Clapper Rails to the list. Then we hitch up and caravan to Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. At the Visitor's Center nature trail Barbara is the first to see a Long-billed Thrasher and joyously announces "Bingo!" As past caravaners know, Shari likes devising a Bingo game to play while traveling. Each Bingo element is a photo of something to look for en route. The thrasher was the last box to fill for Barbara's Bingo.

We drive to Osprey Outlook and then walk to Alligator Pond, finding it bone dry and devoid of alligators. We spot a few shorebirds along the lake and drudge along a sticky beach to get a better view. A quarter mile later we finally are close enough to be rewarded with two Baird's Sandpipers, two Semipalmated Sandpipers and three Lesser Yellowlegs. Rather than backtracking through the mud, we bushwhack through the grass to the road, while looking carefully for rattlesnakes and luckily finding none. On the drive back to the RV's we watch a flock of 30 spiraling American White Pelicans flash white in reflected sunlight and then disappear momentarily on the flipside, only to repeat the white-dark pattern as they climb higher into the clear blue sky.

(Shari) "Well I guess I have something to write about," I tell Bert. The day starts calm enough. I take a 2.5-mi. walk to McDonald's, have an egg white muffin and return before the birders are back. We visit the national wildlife refuge and are ready to head to our next campground by 2 PM. About 8 mi. into the trip we are stopped at a "Road Closed" sign and detour that goes west instead of north. Oh, oh, now what! I check "May," our trusty GPS, and she is all confused. I look at my iPhone and notice a road that goes north, in the same general direction as our original route. Let's take that I tell Bert. Soon the road deteriorates and gets narrower. Then it turns into gravel. Up ahead it looks even worse. I tell Bert to stop so that I can walk down a driveway and ask for directions. I see two trucks and a mobile home. Just as I pass one of the parked trucks a huge dog barks at me. I scurry up the staircase and frantically knock on the door. No one answers and the dog keeps barking. I am trapped. I call Doug on my iPhone and ask him to tell Bert to come and scare the dog away. The ploy works and I can run around one side of the truck as the dog is now busy barking and growling at Bert on the other side.

However, we still do not know the condition of the road ahead. Doug, in his massive EarthRoamer, drives ahead to reconnoiter the situation and I stop a pickup truck and ask for advice. The driver says the road is fine, but Doug thinks we should turn around. We are especially concerned about Steve and Nancy and their 55 ft. of motorhome and towed car. Steve unhooks and turns around so that the two of us can retrace our route back to the paved highway and find another route. The remainder of the group forges ahead. When we get to the campground we find we were only about 10 min. late. I settle in to make taco salad for everyone and then take my chair to join the already boisterous group at river's edge. The next three hours are hilarious and it is hard to keep track of all the conversations. Needless to say, today was an adventure.



Western Palm Warbler



Buff-bellied Hummingbird



Orchard Oriole (first spring male)



Ruby-throated Hummingbird



Sora



Giant Swallowtail on Basket Flower

Day 5. April 10 – Willacy and Kenedy Counties

(Bert) A pair of dolphins humps downstream on the Colorado River right next to where we camped for the evening. Repeatedly, mullets leap from the water, perhaps trying to avoid being eaten. High above, an Osprey hovers with a keen eye to the river surface.

White-tailed Hawks have a small and narrow range in the U.S., exclusively in Texas not far from the Gulf coast. Today we are in prime territory and get many opportunities to

see them perched on utility pole crossbeams, winging across prairies and soaring above us. On one of the few occasions when I am not carrying my camera, an adult White-tailed gently glides less than a hundred feet above my head, its undersides glimmering white, a white tail fanned wide and sharply edged in coal black, and a contrasting chocolate brown head. I sure missed that shot!

Fortunately the highway has a very wide shoulder with plenty of room for us to park our caravan while we scan the Sacahuistale Flats. We are hoping to hear a Botteri's Sparrow but even if it was singing we might not hear it, owing to the high winds. Barbara separates from the rest of us and soon calls us back to her location. She has found a male Vermilion Flycatcher and an unknown sparrow. Not sure what it is we go back for scopes and only then identify it as Savannah. Well, at least the Vermilion Flycatcher was worthwhile.

We stop at Raymondville Cemetery, a colorful, almost gaudy, display of plastic flowers, Easter decorations and other joyous reminders of lost love ones. Last year the abundant trees were a magnet for overflying migrants. This year the strong winds from the southeast have pushed the migrants farther inland and any that may have been here yesterday surely took similar advantage and continued north. Our bird count for today is a low 44 species and not one of them was a passage migrant; all could be classified as a lingering winter resident or a locally breeding bird.

At the Sarita (Kenedy County) Rest Area the birding is good. Two black birds loitering in the parking lot are too easily dismissed by the four West Coast birders as Brewer's Blackbirds, but when I see them I say they are Common Grackles, a species I would usually dismiss without much thought. Thus a discussion ensues on the field marks of common birds we usually ignore. The West Coast birders eventually come around to my way of thinking, but I am taken aback when I recognize how far south we are. Consulting the new Second Edition of The TOS Handbook I discover this rest area in northern Kenedy County is the extreme southern edge of the grackles' range.

(Shari) Our friend Jim told us about King's Inn years ago. He periodically would drive 70 mi. from his ranch to eat at King's. Bert and I finally dined there last May on our scouting trip and had to agree the food was delicious. On the Internet, if you search for the restaurant and look at reviews, you find people either hate it or love it. Any and all criticisms center on service. Last May our service was deplorable. My conversations with the manager about bringing a group also had much to be desired. The restaurant will not split checks, serves family style and has no printed menu.

I know Doug absolutely loves the place and as he is a connoisseur of restaurants, so I put him in charge of our L.E.O. (Let's Eat Out) tonight. He explains the ordering process and tells us we will divide the bill equally. We are all in as we want to savor those shrimp that are the best he ever ate. I make the reservation for 6:30 and we are seated promptly. This is a good sign. Doug orders for us and the platters of food arrive shortly thereafter. We feast on shrimp, fish, oysters, fries, avocado salad, hush puppies and the tastiest onion rings in the State of Texas. I have to agree the shrimp are the best ever too. No one

goes home hungry and Barbara and Jeff walk home to try and wear off some of those extra calories. I even go out to walk and meet everyone else doing the same thing. I am sure my keeper of cholesterol is very busy tonight. As Bert says, "We ate enough for three days."



Sunrise on the Colorado River; Laughing Gulls in the air



Common Grackle at Kenedy County Rest Area



Shari strolling under the trees at Kenedy County Rest Area



Eye-to-eye with a Hooded Oriole



Presumably a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker that is transitioning between juvenile and adult plumage

Day 6. April 11 – Kleberg County

(Bert) The winds have diminished to a light breeze. Maybe more migrants will arrive later today. Perhaps a bit warm for some, for me the April weather is perfect, making it my favorite month in Texas.

The pond outside our campsite is filled with ducks: big flocks of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks and Redheads, smaller numbers of Fulvous Whistling-Ducks, Mottled Ducks, Blue-winged Teal and Ruddy Ducks. Purple Martins gyrate high over the pond.

Hiking a trail through brushlands, we see few birds but hear many doves. In fact, within the first half hour I've heard six species, including Common Ground-Dove, the one we have found least so far.

When we break into the open again we walk along the shoreline of Baffin Bay. Many hundreds of waterbirds have gathered at the river delta. The oversized American White Pelicans are the first to catch the eye. Then it is the hundreds of American Avocets now with most sporting reddish necks and heads offset by white orbital feathers and a bull's eye black pupil. Their long thin bills gracefully curve upward. When portions of the flock take flight they circle a few times and then come in for a military-precise landing, all in sync. In the final glide they display a strange black-and-white wing pattern, like a five-fingered white hand and rounded palm, offset by black primaries and black back stripes.

I telephone Shari to say we are seeing so many birds we will not leave at 9 and instead will bird longer. We continue to marvel at the shorebird flocks and then slowly make our way back to the campsites. Impressively, we have tabulated 55 species in the two hours from 7:30-9:30.

Back in our RVs again, we drive to Kingsville and park near the A&M campus. I am hoping to see the Lesser Nighthawks that often fly near the university buildings, but we see none. We do add Chimney Swift to the trip list, though. After a brief visit at Bishop City Park where the most entertainment is four domesticated Mallards that waddle in front of us, we drive to Lake Corpus Christi for the night.

(Shari) If laughter could make you lose weight, I think I'd have lost 10 lbs. already. What a good group I have! Today is a leisurely one as most the group goes birding with Bert this morning and four sleep in. Russell is so good at pinpointing Bert's foibles and good-naturedly tells Bert things I have been telling him for 48 yrs.—like he has a heavy foot when driving; like he tells us we are leaving and only gives us 30 sec.; like lunch breaks are only 5 min. Of course this is all exaggerated and we laugh but there is an element of truth in it. Tonight at social we all admire Bert's ankles. Steve says they look like a sapsucker has been at them as Bert has chigger bites in a nice even circle around his leg. We comment on how well dressed Stephen is and he retorts that he wants to look like he knows what he is doing. Beryl relates yet another story from her repertoire and as she is a good story teller we all listen raptly. By the time we break up, I figure I lost another pound.



Our early morning birders



Fulvous Whistling-Ducks



Redheads



Black-bellied Whistling Duck, landing gear down



Plethora of wading birds



American Avocets



American Avocets



Wing pattern of American Avocets

Day 7. April 12 – Lake Corpus Christi and Choke Canyon

(Bert) On a pleasant stroll through a wooded wildlife sanctuary, this morning offered very few birds unless you count singing birds. Dozens of singing Northern Cardinals, at least a dozen singing and extremely reclusive House Wrens and nearly as many unseen Carolina Wrens are on territories throughout the park. The most unusual sighting is the rat that Kay sees—presumably a Wood Rat. For the rest of us the highlight is watching a Greater Roadrunner hunting insects, apparently oblivious to us viewing from our cars.

We take a breakfast break and then resume birding at Lake Corpus Christi. It is not any better birding and, again, we are waiting for transient migrants but see none. By 11:30 AM we are on our way to Choke Canyon. At 5 PM we gather for a picnic. I build a campfire and we roast sausages over the fire. Russell has made a delicious dish with colorful peppers that complements the sausages rolled in a tortilla.

(Shari) Birding quits as the temperature approaches 90 deg. and we close up camp to head for our next stop. Everyone stays indoors with air conditioning blasting until 5 PM. Things have cooled down a bit and we gather at Russell's and Stephen's site with the lake view for our social/travel meeting/sausage supper. I have a hard time controlling this chatty group and attempt to communicate the changes on the road log. Even Bert is no help. For a man of few words he uses a week's worth tonight. Also I mention I am leaving at 10:30 tomorrow, with or without Bert, because I want to attend Sand Fest in Port Aransas. That gets the attention of the SOB's (spouses of birders) and I lose control again. Finally I finish and it is Bert's turn. Everyone is quiet and I ask why? Jeff says, "We are listening." Very funny! Finally we can grill our sausages and eat dinner. Afterwards Bert goes birding with some and I join Steve and Nancy for some geocaching. We find 3 out of 3. Success!

(Bert) By 6:30 the day's heat is exhausted, a good time for an early evening walk. Shari goes with Steve and Nancy to look for geocaches while Jeff and Barbara join me on a hike through the wooded birding trails. Birding is better now. We hear a singing Bewick's Wren, watch a fly-over Roseate Spoonbill and later a Black-crowned Night-Heron, and see two Wild Turkeys grazing on the grass. I hear the high-pitched squeak of Cedar Waxwings just before the flock takes flight. The sun is below the orange horizon when we study the silhouettes of black birds, deducing the mixed flock contains Bronzed Cowbirds, Brown-headed Cowbirds and Red-winged Blackbirds.

Walking back on the trail we came on, we pause when we hear a distant Great Horned Owl. We follow the sound by turning onto another path. We hear Common Pauragues calling and turn on another path heading toward the sounds. A Sharp-shinned Hawk flies overhead, perhaps looking for a roost site. We are not lost but, on the other hand, we do not know where we are. The trails, and then the next, twist in circles and we see the nearly full moon first on our right, then on our left, then straight ahead. Darkness surrounds us though moonlight illuminates the trail. Curve-billed Thrashers emit subtle scraping calls from the thicket. We are surrounded by a dozen pauragues and catch fragments of their calls when distant and added phrases when close, often making it sound like different songs. Finally, the trail opens to the park road and from a sign we see we are a long distance from our campsite. On the hike back we twice encounter a pauraque that we know by sound is directly in front of us. I focus on a black spot on the edge of the road and see it take flight. I delight in the evening sights and sounds of wildlife.





Day 8. April 13 – Choke Canyon and Mustang Island

(Bert) The attractive red and yellow bird eludes full-body examination and instead lurks amongst the thin branches 75 ft. into the woods. When I identify the Summer Tanager by body shape and bill size and color, Beryl is surprised. The transitional plumage confuses most of the birders standing beside me.

I need to credit Doug for the next few sightings. Kay points out a distant Black-crowned Night-Heron carousing with three Turkey Vultures on the lawn near the fish cleaning stand. We ask Kay why she happened to be looking at the distant location and she says she got a text message from Doug who apparently is near the area. Doug catches up to

the group and then points out a bird atop a nearby tree. Binoculars focus on the spot and Jeff identifies it as a Bullock's Oriole. I comment that this may be the only Bullock's we will see on the tour, since it is a western bird.

Doug and Kay are on a roll, as within minutes Kay announces a Bewick's Wren is singing from the crown of a large tree behind us. The cheerful song is a continuous conjunction of a repeated sequence of melodic verse. Steve tells us the bird is called the Dial 9 Bird. When we concentrate on the ending of each verse we can hear the staccato clicking of an old rotary-dial phone as it devolves from dialing 9.

We have seen some good birds, but the two I most wanted to find at Choke Canyon have so far eluded us. Although my ears are tuned to the call of a Verdin, none have been heard nor seen. I am only slightly better on finding an Audubon's Oriole. For 10 sec. I hear the random-note song of the Audubon's, but it does not repeat and it comes from a location too deep into the woods. It is the same location where I saw the species a couple of years ago. Defeated by that bird, my attention is drawn to a posing Brown-crested Flycatcher easily photographed. Win some, lose some.

Shari has made it abundantly clear she wants to attend Texas Sand Fest and has rallied all the troops around her. So by 10:30 we all have left the state park and are headed to the Mustang Island beach. The crowd is expected to reach 100,000 this weekend and we find a significant portion of that number strolling at the beach now.

Dozens of sand castles and mythical creatures adorn the beach, many standing well above our heads. The best have been built by professionals, although amateurs show artistic skills as well. My favorite is a fanciful sandcastle build on a hill and I photograph it with the shaggy-bearded, explorer-helmeted sculptor sitting on the sand in the foreground. I ask him how long it took to build and he says two of them worked on it for 22 hours. Shari poses for me in front of another whimsical sculpture and mimics it by putting her hand to the side of her face. One more sculpture that appeals to me is Hogwarts, complete with spiraling domes, windowed buildings and a forest of miniature sand trees.

(Shari) Over 100,000 people are supposed to attend Sand Fest this weekend. When we arrive at 2 PM, the crowds have begun departing and we find a parking place close to the entrance on the beach. This year I find we have to pay \$5 admission that goes to the local Food Bank, theater and Art Center. For the next two hours we admire and take pictures of many sculptures. On the outside of the fenced area are the vendors and miraculously I get through the long aisle of tents without buying anything. We return home and enjoy a long social hour before our L.E.O. for tonight. We dine Mexican tonight and Bert and I split my favorite whole fish dinner. It is enough to eat but not too much. I am trying not to gain weight on this caravan. Good luck!



Bullock's Oriole



Brown-crested Flycatcher







Day 9. April 14 – Corpus Christi

(Bert) The weatherman predicts the cold front will arrive about 2 PM. Meanwhile we get an early morning start and head inland about 45 mi. to Polywog Pond.

We are walking through tall grass which should appropriately be called chigger grass. Already having my share of sapsucker rings above my ankles, this time I tuck my pant legs into my socks to keep the bugs at bay. Fortunately, the next trail is short mown as we circumvent a large pond. We add Lesser Scaup to the list after a quick study of how they differ from Greater Scaup and Ring-necked Ducks.

The attention getter for the group is a loudly calling Green Heron, who soon attracts a second calling heron. Perhaps a mating ritual is in progress but it is soon complicated by the arrival of a third Green Heron. The trio disappears to a more private site.

Next we see a Spotted Sandpiper. Not an event to write home about, as we have seen the species daily. What's different is this is the first one we have seen wearing the distinct spots of breeding plumage.

I spot a female Painted Bunting and a fly-by Yellow-billed Cuckoo, but they disappear before I can point them out to anyone else. I detect the sighs of disappointment and will definitely need to find these two species again. I'm confident we will.

By 10 AM as we leave Polywog Pond we have tallied 49 species, a very good start for the day. Next stop is Hilltop Community Center and nature trails where we add four species. Then it is off to Tule Lake.

Upon arriving, Nancy sees few birds other than the obvious American White Pelicans. She is in for a surprise as we keep discovering more and more birds feeding among the marsh reeds and across the mudflats. A Least Tern holds a minnow in its bill and offers it to an unaccepting mate. Like a bewildered suitor, the tern continues to hold its bouquet, but the other turns its back on him and sits down on the sand, ignoring the offer.

Stephen, the fast-learning novice in the group, notices a shorebird with long bright yellow-orange legs. Thumbing through Sibley's he sees the similarity to a Ruff and, showing this to Beryl, she readily agrees. While the rest of us recognize the bird as a Greater Yellowlegs with unusually bright discolored legs, Stephen and Beryl continue the game, insisting on their version of identification, and light-heartedly chalking up a life bird. Soon it becomes a running comedy.

I call Shari on my cell phone and tell her we are on our way to Blucher Park where she and Russell will meet us. We bird Blucher for about 10 min. before the two arrive in Russell's Mini Cooper convertible, with poodle Lulu in the backseat. From the trunk they pull out fried chicken, several containers of macaroni and potato salad. Suddenly the cold front arrives and overturns one container of chicken. Extorting the 5-second rule we snatch the fried chicken from the pavement, plop it on paper plates and start eating. How great it is to have a catered lunch on a birding day!

A minute later the rains come and we hustle into our three cars, carrying food and whatever else we can grab. We finish the chicken and I notice I have the Reese's chocolate so I step out into the blustery rain. Russell is out too and asks, "Where is dessert?" I keep a few pieces for our carload and he takes the rest for distribution. The rain has not let up and the temperature has plummeted from 80+ degrees to 54. We head back to camp.

When I tabulate today's bird count, up until the 1 PM rain, it comes to 90 species. If we had finished the day birding Blucher I'm sure we could have topped 100.

(Shari) Steve says this is a 10 lb. day. We have laughed so hard that even Bert wipes tears from his eyes. But first, here is how the day started.

I accompany Russell to the grocery store. He is treating everyone to lunch today and we decide on fried chicken, potato salad, pasta salad and chips, plus Reese's candy for dessert. We meet the group at Blucher Park and I am amazed that a park has no picnic tables. We decide to tailgate and spread the food out on the hood of Steve's car and the open truck of Russell's car.

ALL OF A SUDDEN, and I mean sudden, like immediately, the wind starts to blow at gale force. We try to hang on to stuff and put other stuff in places out of the wind but the wind is faster than we are. One plate loaded with pasta and chicken flies off the open roof of Russell's new Mini Cooper convertible. One container of chicken plops on the ground and when Barbara mentions the 5 sec. rule, everyone scurries to grab the chicken

from the street. Beryl proudly announces she ate one of the fallen pieces, but peeled it first. I never thought of peeling fried chicken. Bert says he ate two of those pieces, without peeling them. I know I had one of them. But before we start eating, the rain comes. We each gather something and head for shelter in the cars. However, one carload has chicken and salad, but no forks. Another has forks but no food. The napkins are in one place and the plates in another. Who knows about the drinks! We have the Reese's cups in our car and think we get them all to ourselves, when Russell gets out into the rain and wind looking around. I surmise he is looking for the candy and Bert is ready with the bag.

I guess we all eat enough though and then decide to head home. Nap time for all of us as our rigs rock and roll in the blustery 50-mph wind. At 5, the rain has stopped and I announce that social hour is at the clubhouse for those interested. This is where all the laughter starts. We hear funny stories from Kay from past caravans. Why is it Shari's caravan when something goes wrong and Bert's caravan when something is perfect? We learn what a Japanese toilet is all about and I for one am ready to head to Japan tomorrow to try one out. Beryl talks about laundry and says something about a test for dirtiness. Does it stick to the ceiling? We try not to get our mind around that but end up succumbing into gales of laughter. So it goes. Another fine night of losing weight from laughter? Let's hope so. Oh, if wishes could be true!



Green Heron



Stephen, our best dressed birder, in one of his camouflage outfits. He also has matching shorts and birding vest, plus his newly acquired belt to hold up to three birding books.



The Prickly Pear flower Stephen was photographing.



Courting Least Terns



Roseate Spoonbills

Day 10. April 15 – Corpus Christi

(Bert) As we cross Mustang Island this morning, a flock of Sandhill Cranes passes overhead. I take it as a good omen for a successful birding day. We start birding where we left off yesterday–Blucher Park. In the Nature Conservancy backyard, Stephen gets as excited as I have ever seen him. “Painted Bunting” he exclaims in nearly a shout. We respond, “Where? Where?” It’s between the cross rungs of the chain link fence—a life

bird for Stephen and one that hardly ever reaches Beryl's east coast home. Amazingly, as the day continues, Stephen finds three more Painted Buntings, earning him the title of Painted Bunting King.

Doug points out a strangely behaving hummingbird gyrating high above us. Just above the treetops, the hummingbird repeatedly flies high, rockets downward and propels upward in a wide U. It does this with amazing speed and constant repetition, as if it is stuck in one loop of a giant roller coaster. I've seen something similar when I watched the courtship display flight of a Broad-tailed Hummingbird in Colorado and I wondered if other hummingbirds do this. So I posted a question to TexBirds and subscribers suggested Black-chinned, Ruby-throated, Rufous and Allen's Hummingbirds as well. After looking up descriptions of courtship displays on the Internet, I believe Black-chinned Hummingbird is the one we watched.

Lurking in the lower branches of an oak, a Worm-eating Warbler is an exciting find for the group. Always in the shadows and not colorful, it is one of the least attractive in a family of beauties, yet perhaps it is the infrequency of finding one that gives it appeal.

Beryl has been asking for a good look at a Northern Waterthrush. We have been seeing them regularly, but they always seem hidden or quick to flight. The thin drainage ditches at Blucher Park make finding one an easier task and finally Beryl gets the long look she desires. A bird that Beryl adds to her life list is Chuck-will's-widow. Apparently, she did not get a good look at the one sleeping at Alan Williams' backyard, so she is delighted to have a clear view of one sleeping here at Blucher Park. A group from New Jersey found the bird and was not sure which nightjar it was until I outlined the field marks.

Flock after flock of hundreds of Franklin's Gulls pass overhead and when we visit Hans Suter Wildlife Area we see thousands more over Oso Bay. Close up they cover the sky; at a distance they look like enormous swarms of insects. Barbara claims she sees a rattlesnake on a miniscule grass island but it is wishful thinking in order to fill another square in the Bingo game. I photograph the snake and with my reptile book I identify it as a Blotched Water Snake.

We visit more sites in the afternoon, adding many more bird stories to our repertoire. For brevity I'll simply state we ended the day with 99 species, including 10 warbler species.



Summer Tanager



Chuck-will's-widow



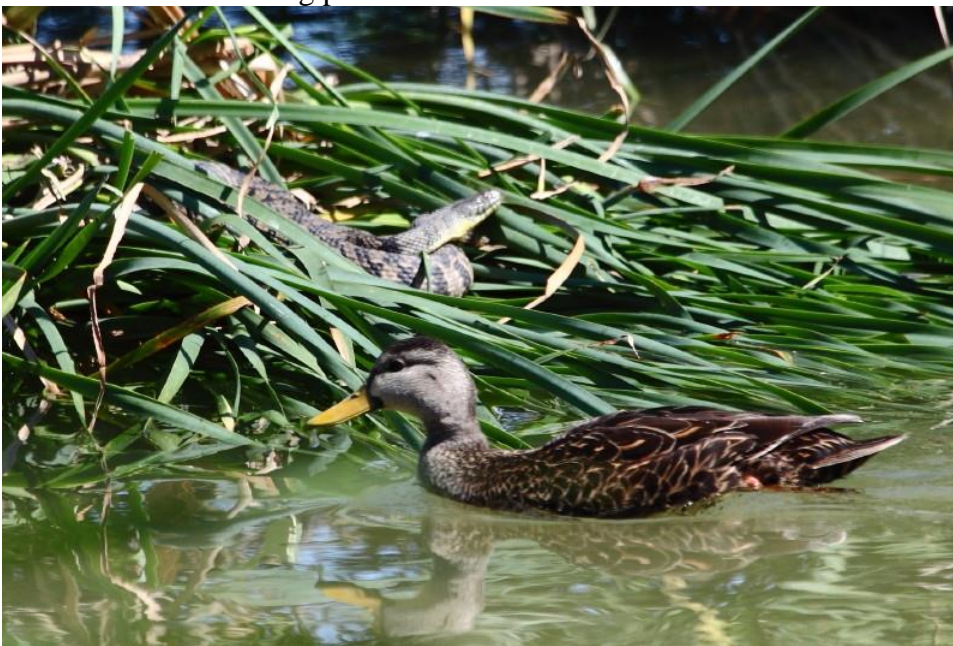
Worm-eating Warbler



Franklin's Gulls cover the sky



Franklin's Gull showing pink



Mottled Duck passing a Blotched Water Snake, a subspecies of Plain-bellied Water Snake



Blue-winged Warbler

Day 11. April 16 – Port Aransas

(Bert) We bird the ponds and then the beach behind the campground, adding Wilson's Snipe to the list and studying a Black-bellied Plover in transitional plumage. Then we revisit Leonabelle Trunbull Birding Center in Port Aransas. Boardwalk proximity to the birds and the great variety that visit this pond make it a premier birding site and today is no exception. I've visited it often and yet have never seen so many Nutrias. Looking like oversized Muskrats, they are lying around everywhere and certainly appear to have overpopulated the area. Too bad the alligators aren't hungrier. I'd say the best birds here this morning are the Eared Grebe, Pectoral Sandpiper and Yellow-headed Blackbird, mostly because they are new to the list.

We move a few blocks to Paradise Ponds where we are enthralled with the colorful display of orange-feeding Scarlet and Summer Tanagers, Baltimore and Orchard Orioles, Painted and Indigo Buntings, all within a 20-ft. radius. At one spot, I've never seen so many Scarlet Tanagers—a favorite bird since I saw my first at age 12 and drew a picture of it for my 4-H project. Farther into the woods we study a tree line beyond the marsh, getting repeated glimpses of a Yellow-breasted Chat, Yellow-billed Cuckoo and more tanagers, including one in green and red mixed plumage.

We visit Port Aransas Jetty, see five tern species (plus two we saw earlier, makes seven), and then drive to Charlie's Pasture. The pond is loaded with birds and we check off seven duck species that have not yet flown north, including a single Northern Pintail. I get excited when I see two flocks of Wilson's Phalaropes, some still in winter plumage, others converted to spring. They perform their spinning water dance as they fish for insects. We are again discussing Long-billed versus Short-billed Dowitcher when Kay

suggests a field mark I had forgotten: Short-billed will stick their whole head underwater when feeding.

After having visited all of the local Port Aransas birding sites, we return to the Birding Center again and find bird life has changed enough for us to add Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Crested Caracara and Stilt Sandpiper. Then we need to return to camp for a special surprise Shari has planned. We finish the day with 86 species that includes some of North America's most colorful.

(Shari) I've had my ear open to comments and stories from Russell. One night at social, Russell was bemoaning the fact that he kind of missed his 50th birthday party. Stephen wanted to attend the Birders Reunion so it cut short their plans for a one week birthday celebration. I decided we should have a party for him and drove to the store yesterday to gather ingredients for a birthday cake. I also remember hearing his story about their inability to fly a guaranteed-to-fly kite. So, I also purchased an old fashioned kite. Hopefully this one will fly easily. Thirdly, I recall Russell's fondness for Oreo cookies, so guess what the ingredients for my cake will be?

Russell is making lamb curry for us all tonight and knows nothing of the birthday surprise. I lock myself in the kitchen trying to light the candles. Probably everyone knows what I am doing—since they signed the special birthday card—except Russell and he has many erroneous theories on why I will not open the door to him. Finally I come out and we sing Happy Birthday. He is surprised and laughs at the kite. The curry and conversation are delicious. And Russell eats most of the Oreos that adorn the cake.



Black-bellied Plover



Barbara being eaten by an alligator



Nutria



Scarlet Tanager



Painted Bunting



Baltimore Oriole



Summer Tanager



Day 12. April 17 – Goose Island

(Bert) Nicknamed “The Bird Lady from Texas,” Connie Hagar (1886-1973) is one of Texas’s most famous historical birders. Ornithologists just didn’t want to believe her reports of birds from Rockport, Texas, so she challenged them to come and see for their selves. They did and they believed. In 1934, her husband Jack bought and managed cottages in Rockport, close to the Gulf beach, and today we visit the property where the cottages once stood. Now it is a small bird sanctuary. Our best birds here today are a flock of Cedar Waxwings.

Tropical Kingbirds were first reported nesting at the H.E.B. in Rockport on 21 April 2010. It is my memory of that report and subsequent reports in 2011 and 2012 that prompts me to pay attention to a kingbird on a utility wire about a mile from the H.E.B. Its call identifies it as Tropical Kingbird and then it takes flight to join its mate farther into the park where we are birding. This is one of the farthest north breeding locations for the species.

The beachside oyster shell parking area where we park our RVs at Goose Island is carpeted with hundreds of Black Skimmers. These attractive birds have the oddest of scissor-like bills, with an upper mandible that only reaches two-thirds of the length of the lower mandible. And they fly across the water in the strangest of ways, just skimming the surface with their lower mandible, ready to hook a fish. And another oddity—try to see their eyes! It is as if they are eyeless in every photo I take, as the black eye is submerged in an array of black feathers.

We walk to the end of the very long fishing pier and watch as a pair of calling American Oystercatchers pursues a Turkey Vulture. On the way back, I mention that the spartina grassland is a good place to find Seaside Sparrow. Trying to get a closer look, Kay steps to the edge of the tall grass.

Suddenly, Kay screams “Snake” and jumps back from the edge. Like a Reddish Egret, as Steve describes it, Kay raises her flapping arms and high kicks her legs as she erratically springs away from the Rattlesnake. I, instead, step forward to get a photo of the retreating snake and especially notice the eight rings on its rattle tail. It is a small Rattlesnake, the most dangerous size, as the young snakes have not yet learned how to control their venom and are likely to inject the whole load if threatened. Fortunately, this one is as frightened of us as Kay is of it, so it wastes no time in crawling underneath a garbage container.

Well, there is a good side to every story. The rattlesnake block in the Bingo game has been the hardest to fill, and it may mean someone in the group has now completed every square on the board.

On our way to dinner tonight we drive to The Big Tree, a 1000-year-old Live Oak. The tree, also called the Texas State Champion Live Oak, has a trunk diameter of over 11 ft. near its base and its crown spread is 89 ft. By comparison, we look small in our group photo with the tree in the background.

Russell says every day should have five great experiences, although not necessarily all good experiences, just memorable. Most caravan days reach the goal of five; couch potato stay-at-home days rarely do. Today, we have one more great experience worth writing about.

For dinner we all go out to The Boiling Pot where they serve Cajun style boiled seafood. On our side of the long table, each couple orders the Dot Combo that feeds 2 people: 1 blue crab, 1 lb. crawfish, ½ lb. shrimp, ½ lb. sausage, plus potatoes and corn-on-the-cob.

The waitress comes with a large metal bucket for each order, which she pours on the table already spread with butcher paper. This is finger food and do-it-yourself peeling of the whole crawfish and shrimp. It is a good thing we have plastic bibs tied around our necks and a large roll of paper toweling handy, because this is messy eating. But what a feast! And, what an experience!

(Shari) Last night at social, Russell found a U-tube video on how to eat crawfish, crawdads, or as some people call them, mud dogs. So everyone is ready for our restaurant experience, especially after Kay's rattlesnake excitement this afternoon. This restaurant does not believe in plates and our meal comes out in a bowl that is dumped on our butcher paper covered table. Heaping piles of crawfish, potatoes, sausage, corn-on-the-cob, crab and jumbo shrimp cover our table.

We are clad in bibs that announce our crab boil. How fun is this? We chow down and again enjoy a unique experience in Texas. Beryl and Sid, Doug and Kay did not order crawdads, but the rest of us devour them. First we take off the rather large head-at least 2/3 of the body. Some people suck the juices out of the head, but not me. Then we take the body out of the lobster-like shell, involving about as much work as peeling a shrimp. Finally we can eat the tiny morsel of meat. Steve thinks the work involved in peeling the dumb things exceeds the value. Good thing in addition we have plenty of sausage, potatoes, corn and shrimp.



Tropical Kingbird



Brown Pelicans crowd a lamp post



Black Skimmer



Rattlesnake head



Rattlesnake rattle



Texas Champion Live Oak



Boiled seafood served on butcher paper



Ready to eat the seafood feast

Day 13. April 18 – Goose Island and Calhoun County

(Bert) I've traveled the Texas coast many times before, but rarely was I aware of the rather abrupt change in ecoregions between Aransas County and Calhoun County, just to its north, a transition from South Texas Brushlands to Central Coastal Prairies.

This morning our birding starts at Goose Island, Aransas County, when we join camp hosts Larry and Judy for one of their birding walks. They know which campsites sponsor water drips and feeders, and which groves of trees are most popular with migrants. Again we are treated to many sightings of Scarlet Tanagers, a bird so impressive I cannot see it too often. I am surprised when Judy spots a White-throated Sparrow, the first indicator that we are switching ecoregions and a bit on the late side to still be finding these in Texas.

Better than most days, we are seeing a good showing of warblers, starting with Chestnut-sided and Tennessee. Larry and Judy are playing a game of calling out field marks rather than naming the bird. So, when Barbara says she sees a yellow bird and I recognize it, I instead say a warbler with a black necklace. That gets Judy's attention because they haven't seen a Canada Warbler yet this season on morning walks. While others are trying to follow Judy's directions for a better look, I check out the commotion going on behind us. Two Carolina Wrens are fussing loudly and the hullabaloo is drawing in other birds, especially Prothonotary Warbler, Black-and-white Warbler and Yellow-breasted Chat. Meanwhile, Russell is photographing birds at one of the feeding stations. To my surprise, he later shows me photos of a Blue Grosbeak, one species the rest of our group have not yet seen on this trip, as well as a good photo of a Worm-eating Warbler which we have only seen a couple of times before.

Back to the theme of changing ecoregions, we see a Brown Thrasher, a replacement for the Long-billed and Curve-billed Thrashers we have been recording up until now. At our next birding stop I hear a Red-bellied Woodpecker and a Tufted Titmouse, replacing Golden-fronted Woodpecker and Black-crested Titmouse. And the site after that gives us Blue Jay, replacing Green Jay. We are also now in the range of Boat-tailed Grackle, which we first see at Magnolia Beach.

At Magic Ridge I meet a couple visiting from northern England. I am surprised when they tell me they are members of Texas Ornithological Society. So I tell them I was on the Board of Directors when we acquired Magic Ridge and I give them a bit of the history about its purchase. They have been traveling from Upper Texas Coast and say today is their warmest day. We, traveling from the south, consider it a mild day and far from our warmest.

We see another thrasher and this time Jeff puts it in his scope and we carefully confirm that it is indeed a Brown Thrasher. On the marsh side, we watch a white morph Reddish Egret fishing. When a Snowy Egret enters its territory it aggressively and repeatedly chases it away. At the cemetery, I point out an Eastern Kingbird, the first of our trip. Through binoculars, Nancy sees a yellowish belly which is confirmed when I look at the bird through the spotting scope. Yet all other features—black head, back and tail, white chest, white tail tip—match Eastern Kingbird. Perhaps lighting effects are causing the yellow cast, but it does not appear so. I don't know how else to account for the anomaly.

Our birding day ends when we drive into Port Lavaca and a flock of 15-20 Anhingas flies overhead.



Northern Cardinal (female)



Rose-breasted Grosbeak taking a bath



American Alligator



Indian Blanket

Day 14. April 19 – Port Lavaca to Matagorda

(Bert) The group birding won't start until 7:30, but I am anxious and out an hour earlier. Take note of the fantastic sunrise I photograph from our campsite.

The Formosa Wetlands at Port Lavaca are famous for Clapper Rails, a chicken-like bird that clings to marshes. Were it not for its loud clapper of a voice, it would be hard to locate the rail. I find three of them, the same as we find when the group joins me later and the lighting is better for photographing.

We have been hearing Marsh Wrens on many days but not seeing any. Now I hear one close to the boardwalk and can discern where it is by the way salt grass stalks tilt left and right. I cannot see down the 2-ft. stalks to the base and the wren remains hidden until it reaches a less dense patch at the base of the boardwalk upright beams. I quickly snap a photo but only catch a few feathers, the rest still blocked from view.

We pull up stakes and drive to Formosa-Tejano Wetlands. The first wayside stop has a viewing tower. However, the rising sun is a glaring backlight to the birds in the swallow water and mudflats, so we quickly leave. Later we hear that Doug and Kay visited when the sun is higher and saw a single Hudsonian Godwit and a flock of Buff-breasted Sandpipers, species the rest of us have not yet encountered.

The second wetland site is much better. In addition to the many waterbirds (and alligators), we get a good look at a Tennessee Warbler viewed from the top as we are on another observation tower. An oak mott—an oasis of tall oak trees in the midst of a flat prairie—provides for good birding, although the birds easily hide among the leaves. Best

are Orange-crowned, Black-and-white and Black-throated Green Warblers, Orchard Oriole and Indigo Bunting.

Perched on a tall stack of cleared brush, a White-tailed Hawk alights, descends and lithely snaps up a rodent, perhaps a Hispid Cotton Rat. The hawk carries it off in its talons, rattail drooping, and gracefully settles on a nearby fence post to dine on its lunch.

We stop at the waterfront in Palacious where the Luther Hotel is sponsoring the town's first annual Easter festival. Kids will soon enjoy an egg hunt, music is playing and craft booths are set up to sell homemade wares. I talk to one of the vendors and coincidentally find out that she knows Larry and Marlene who will be our Tailgunners for our next caravan.

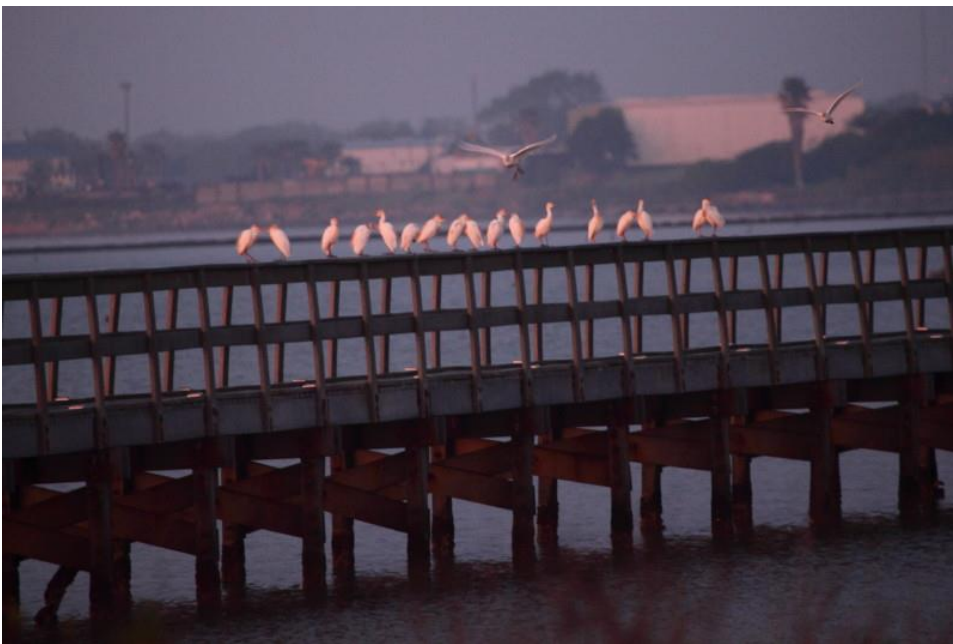
Beryl is anxious to see Cliff and Cave Swallows close up, i.e., perched and not flying too fast to see field marks. So, we stop at a small park beside Tres Palacious River where last year I saw both species at nest sites. This year I can only find Cliff Swallows, which Beryl enjoys, but I still need to find another site for the Cave Swallows.

We arrive at our campsite on Matagorda Bay and find it overcrowded with Easter weekend beach goers. It is a good thing Shari made reservations a few months ago or we would not have found a campsite otherwise.

(Shari) As I check our group into the campground, I tell the clerk we have grandparents, parents, kids and aunts and uncles. That is how we have started to view ourselves. Bert and I are the parents and Sid and Beryl the grandparents. Since Russell and Stephan are so young, they of course are the kids. The rest are aunts and uncles. We spent the day moving from one bird site to another and the SOBs with me were ready to quit right after lunch. But no, we have more sites to visit. At least, I could look for geocaches at a few of the sites. At others I read my book or jabber with the other SOBs. It is beyond my comprehension how people can enjoy birding day in and day out. The day is just perfect and after dinner I walk the campground and pier adding to the boardwalk walk I did this morning. I am trying to get in 2 mi. per day and am so lucky I have such scenic places to do it.



Gulf coast sunrise



Cattle Egrets reflecting pink sunrise



Clapper Rail



Tricolored Heron wings over wetlands

Day 15. April 20 – Bay City Nature Center and Matagorda Bay Nature Park

(Bert) An eerie mist hangs over yellow-green willows and drifts across the pea green lagoon, draping the early morning in magical wonder. Complex rings and cross works of dew laden spider webs stretch across branches, forming strings of silvered pearls. A Yellow-crowned Night-Heron rests atop a spindly nest. She is adorned with a spiked crown reminiscent of the fanciful hats British ladies wear at a royal wedding. The male

stands sentinel on an adjacent branch and occasionally bows his head to his feet, splaying head and tail feathers outward like a displaying peacock.

A patchwork of lagoons, a lazy Colorado River, grassy walkways, floral displays and densely wooded areas, matched with superb weather combine to make this Easter morning walk a wander through God's creation. This could have been a perfect setting for an Easter sunrise service instead of the first one I recall ever missing.

We return to Matagorda Bay and take a walk along the beach where we search for a sparrow Beryl saw earlier. Instead we see a couple struggling to get their car out of the soft sand. He managed to back up into a drift, hang one wheel six inches into the air and dig two other wheels deep into the sand. The fourth wheel of his 4-WD vehicle spins idly. Three of us try getting the car out, but it isn't until we get the help of two more men that we can push the car out of its trap. Right in the middle of all this action two Blue Grosbeaks appear on a few stalks at the edge of the beach. I lift my binoculars just long enough to confirm the birds and go back to pushing. Jeff spots a bird in the dunes, a Wilson Plover, our first. We meet two women driving an open top Jeep across the rolling sand drifts and then attempting to drive it under the foot bridge. The windshield could clear but not the American flag on an upright 5-ft. pole mounted in the bed. Fortunately, Steve stops them before disaster. Kids are playing in the surf, just beyond the signs discouraging swimming because of the strong undertow. Holiday weekend beach goers, released from the throes of an unusually cold winter, are perhaps a bit too exuberant.

In the afternoon we arrange our lawn chairs in a circle on the soft green St. Augustine grass and learn how to needlepoint from a lesson taught by Russell. On the one hand it seems a complicated process, but on the other hand Russell makes the rules simple to understand and within a half hour I have needlepointed two and a half rows, all in white yarn. He has taught us the Continental Stitch where we weave from the front and the back and then the Scoop where we combine top and bottom weaving into one step.

I am sure Shari will tell you about the games she arranged. She misses grandchildren and great-grandson and our group becomes the surrogates for the Easter egg hunt, etc. The group really gets into the egg toss, but I'll let Shari fill you in on the details.

At dinner time we feast on Texas Redfish and other special dishes in an outdoor picnic. Other campers have now mostly left, so we have an unobstructed view of the Colorado River and the wildlife moving up and down the channel. This has been a magical blue-sky day of incredible weather, beautiful scenery and wonderful company.

(Shari) Today is only the second time in my whole life that I have not attended an Easter church service. For most of the day, I feel like something is missing. Doug says that God will forgive me, but that is not the point. I feel empty. The birders are all gone, doing their thing and I am all alone. I walk around the shore and on the long pier noticing that so many people have been here to enjoy a long Easter weekend. They are pulling out in droves now, and soon we and handful of other campers are the only ones

left. I breathe in the fresh air and just thank God for my wonderful life. I have been so blessed.

At 3 PM, we gather outside. Russell is giving us a needlepoint lesson. He tells us the three basic rules and he is extremely good at verbalizing the craft, making it easy. Even Bert can do it and he does, as have most all the men in the group. Russell has given each of us a canvas with a colorful bird stamped on it. When finished, he will make it into a coaster or Christmas tree ornament for us. We learn how to separate the wool into strands, how to thread the still thick strand into the small eye of the needle, how to move right to left on the canvas, and how to anchor the yarn end. Soon we have one row complete, then another and another.

At 5 PM it is time for fun and games. I hid hard boiled eggs around my campsite and everyone is to find one egg. They look at the electrical box, on the rig bumper, in the palm tree, on the grass etc. until each has an egg. Next I have set up a table with five different liquid colors in a bowls for egg coloring. Then we have an egg toss. Each couple stands close to each other and hands off the egg. Then they move one step back and hand off the egg. Another step back, the egg has to be thrown and the laughter and groans grows louder. Plop, someone's egg hits the pavement and it cracks. They can use both eggs and finally Barbara and Jeff are declared the winners at about 25 ft. apart.

I also have put chocolate covered candies in a see-through plastic container. Each individual has to guess the number in the container and Nancy guesses 234, exactly the right number. I award prizes and social hour begins. I think this caravan is just one big social hour.

Russell and I are making fish for the group. I should say Russell is doing the cooking. Yesterday Bert and I stopped at the fish store and bought some nice big Red Fish fillets. Russell and I put a filet on a sheet of aluminum foil, top it off with capers, tomatoes, a slice of compound butter and a lemon slice, wrap the foil up and put them on the grill. Soon we are having our fish along with great side dishes from the group. Russell and Stephan bought homemade pies for dessert and we are all full, but who can resist homemade Jack Daniels pecan pie or homemade apple pie with Bluebell ice-cream? As the sun sets, I decide I need to walk off some of this dinner. I accompany Bert to the garbage containers that are a third-mile away. As I return, Stephan is also going to the garbage. I accompany him. Then as I reach camp, I see Kay with garbage in her hand. I accompany her too and have logged 1 mile just going to the dumpster and back. The walking makes me feel better.





Yellow-crowned Night-Heron on nest



Wilson's Plover on sand dunes



Needlepoint





Egg toss

Day 16. April 21 – Matagorda to Quintana

(Bert) Yesterday I announced an 8 AM departure for this morning and also say I will bird in the saltmarsh behind our campground at 7 AM if anyone is interested. All of the birders but one join me.

I have a keen ear for the musical trill of a Sedge Wren, proceeded by a three note staccato preamble and can hear it even when we are a long way from the source. Now I hear a chorus of a dozen with at least one quite close. This time we can actually see the Sedge Wren twitching in the grass stalks and I shoot a series of photos hoping at least one is not blocked.

Although we have to fight off saltmarsh mosquitos, we see lots of birds and, in fact, tally 27 species in 45 min., including yet another large flock of Franklin's Gulls heading north.

We travel to San Bernard National Wildlife Refuge and take the loop drive through a portion of the preserve, stopping at Wolfweed Wetlands. At the edge of the wetlands is a

boardwalk through dense woods strung with long gray beards of Spanish Moss. After hearing a few birds here and there we come upon a sweet spot where we are first attracted by an Eastern Wood-Pewee. While angling for a better view we again hear a Yellow-billed Cuckoo, see it and then another. In come Summer Tanager, Red-eyed Vireo and Carolina Wren. Still not moving from our boardwalk position, we add Chestnut-sided Warbler, Northern Cardinal and listen to Tufted Titmouse and Red-bellied Woodpecker.

Moving on to the wetlands we study dark ibises, trying to make them into Glossy Ibises, but their field marks tell us they are White-faced. On the hike back to the RVs we watch a Ribbon Snake and know it is not the same one we saw when we came in because it is not injured. Knowing it is harmless, I tell Jeff he can pick it up, which he does. But the 18-in. striped snake makes a sudden movement, surprising Jeff, and he drops it to the grass and it slithers out of sight. It is not the only reptile we find, as there are many alligators lurking in the wetlands and along the canal where we drive with our RVs.

I stop at a wooden viewing platform and am delighted to see an American Bittern in its mimicking tall grass stance, bill pointing vertically, black and yellow horizontal stripes blending well with the swamp grasses. I back away, hoping not to scare off the bittern before the other birders join me. Nonetheless, the bittern slips away. So, we align our binoculars with the expected area of its reappearance. Nancy sees the head protrude and describes the spot. We miss it and then again miss it when Nancy finds it once more. Finally I see it again and this time everyone gets a prolonged look at the bittern.

I've been hearing numerous Dickcissels calling 'DICK ... SIS - ILL' and begin searching the grasslands, seeing none. When I hear them again during our lunch break, I align my scope on one and quickly call the others to come and see. It flies away. Stephen says we can't count it unless everyone sees it. I try finding another and this time come upon two perched, both within the scope view and close by. Everyone checks my scope and now we can count it by Stephen's rules.

We are not as lucky when a few of us walk the wooded trails at Justin Hurst WMA. I see a Veery but cannot get the others on it and see an uprooted Barred Owl escape silently from view before I even get the words out.

We reach our campsite at Quintana beach and visit the small sanctuary there. We easily see a pair of Summer Tanagers, another Scarlet Tanager, Orchard and Baltimore Orioles, Painted and Indigo Buntings, Red-eyed Vireo, Swainson's Thrush and White-crowned Sparrow, but no warblers. The near absence of migrating warblers has plagued us on many days of this trip.



Sedge Wren



Woods adjacent to Wolfweed Wetlands



Hackberry Emperor



Southern Iris



Eastern Wood-Pewee



Boat-tailed Grackle



Green Anole



Herbertia



Swainson's Thrush

Day 17. April 22 – Brazoria County

(Bert) An early morning walk through Quintana Neotropic Bird Sanctuary produces few birds, though we watch a cute Hispid Cotton Rat nibble on grass. Lots of terns and gulls crowd the sandy beach and someone calls Ring-billed Gull for one yellow-legged bird. I disagree because its back is so dark, yet I keep quiet and instead take multiple photos of it standing and in flight. Later when I download the photos and check my field guide I recognize it as a third year Lesser Black-backed Gull and e-mail the photos to a friend who confirms my identification. It is a gull I see rarely and only my fourth Texas record.

(Shari) It is Jeff's birthday today and I have no cake mix. Usually I keep one on hand and now there is no grocery store for the next four days. What am I going to do? All of a sudden the light bulb burns and I decide I'm going to make a coffeecake, put candles on it and have it ready for when the birders come back. He'll never expect something in the morning and he did not.

(Bert) At the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory and its nicely groomed trails, we see a generous quantity of birds, though again fall short on migrant warblers, this time represented by singles of Northern Parula, Tennessee Warbler, Kentucky Warbler and Common Yellowthroat. We watch a pair of Eastern Bluebirds near their nest box, surprisingly only the first we have seen on the trip. Finally Stephen finds a store selling bird books and cannot resist adding to his large collection. Russell says whenever the quantity reaches 20 or so during their travels, they ship them home in a box.

I want to visit Sea Center Texas because when we were there last May we saw many birds at their mitigation marsh and ponds. I am disappointed when we find much of the vegetation missing and the ground uprooted. I meet Jerry, a volunteer at the center, who

tells me the habitat was vandalized by feral hogs that swam across the Brazos River from the forests beyond. Attempts to reduce the feral hog population have so far failed. As an alternative, Jerry offers to take us to one of the fish ponds that have recently been drained. There we find Pectoral and Least Sandpipers, Semipalmated Plovers and Lesser Yellowlegs scavenging fish remnants from the pond bottom.

Jerry then takes us on a tour of the fish raising plant. Financed by public and private grants, the center produces fingerlings of Redfish, Speckled Trout (Red Drum) and Southern Flounder to be released into the Gulf of Mexico. Through controlling water temperature and artificial lighting, they are able to simulate one year in the wild and reduce the hatching and raising cycle to only 156 days. We view one of the many tanks that each contains three females and two male fish, each 36-38 in. in length. After spawning, the eggs are siphoned off and transferred to other tanks with one million embryos per tank. Sixty percent of these hatch and within 60 hr. they reach the fry stage and are moved to the outside tanks where 50% survive. That gives a 30% success result which compares to 1% in the wild.

(Shari) We have two birding stops before we get to our stopping spot on Galveston Island. At Sea Center Texas I notice there is a geocache about 20 ft. from my car. While the group is gone birding, I look for it thinking that Nancy and Steve will be surprised. Alas, I cannot find it. I need Steve. We learn of a tour of the fish hatchery and we join a Texas Parks & Wildlife volunteer as he explains the process of incubating Redfish eggs and releasing fingerlings into the bay.

After the tour it's on the Galveston Island. We pass miles and miles of beautiful beach houses. These weren't there when we used to come to Galveston when our daughter was little. We let the birthday boy decide where he wants to go out to eat tonight and he decides he'd like Mexican. Russell finds us a highly rated restaurant on Yelp and off we go. It's a restaurant you'd never pick by driving by and it looks like it's a converted house set off from a residential street. The inside is Spartan. The owner gets wind of Jeff's birthday and comes from the back room wearing a sombrero, shaking castanets and pretending he's playing the trombone. It is hilarious. Food arrives and I hear no complaints as Bert and I devour our shared Carne Guisado.



Hispid Cotton Rat



Lesser Black-backed Gull



Lesser Black-backed Gull



Brazos River bottomlands



Black Drum

Day 18. April 23 – Galveston Island

(Bert) From paucity to plethora is the change in warblers and other migrants. It starts with a menagerie of sandpipers in a tiny pond surrounded by wet mudflats at Lafitte's Cove. Easily studied from the boardwalk are Pectoral, Solitary and Least Sandpipers, Long-billed Dowitchers, Lesser Yellowlegs and Killdeer as well as a yellow Northern Waterthrush, a calling Common Yellowthroat and many singing Marsh Wrens.

Scarlet Tanagers, four of them, adorn a leafless tree where a Gray Catbird takes center stage pecking at half an orange. Plentiful Summer Tanagers and Indigo Buntings add color and a handful of Eastern Kingbirds contribute contrast.

The real show, however, is in the heart of the woods, the place marked "Quiet Zone." Here is a stand of giant oaks planted in 1930 by John Egert near the house erected on his ranch. Now the oaks vertically dominate the oasis in the midst of a subdivision of attractive homes. From the air it must be a real eye catcher if you are a migrant warbler exhausted from a trans-Gulf flight. We are frozen in awe, standing in one spot and turning our eyes left and right, as we watch the quick movements of Black-throated Green, Black-and-white, Magnolia, Yellow, Blackburnian, Bay-breasted, Hooded, Chestnut-sided, Parula, and Tennessee Warblers. Continuing on the winding paths, we add a female Blackpoll Warbler and Kentucky Warbler. With the American Redstart we see on Settegast Road, our warbler species total comes to 15, the best day of the tour.

Our next stop is the Texas A&M University at Galveston Wetlands Center which likewise is hopping with birds, especially buntings, tanagers and orioles. The Galveston ferry takes us to Bolivar Peninsula and we park RVs in the campground, take a midday

break and head out again with cars. We are having a great birding day and I tell the group I want to break the 100 species barrier today. They ask what number we are at now and I say 96. But when we easily add species at Bolivar Flats I say we have ten more to find. I don't want to stop while the birding is good, and neither do they.

We add terns and gulls, shorebirds like Dunlins, Marbled Godwits and Black Skimmers. A White-rumped Sandpiper is an especially good find. We discover a single American White Pelican looking like the oddball in a huge flock of Brown Pelicans. We will be back to the flats another day, so we call it quits for today and return to camp for our now-routine 5 PM daily social. When I tally today's count it comes to an impressive 116 species.



Solitary Sandpiper



Pectoral Sandpiper



Long-billed Dowitcher with head under water, contrary to the rule mentioned on Day 16



Scarlet Tanager



Chestnut-sided Warbler



Quiet Zone



Summer Tanager



Summer Tanager (female)



Laughing Gulls following Galveston ferry

Day 19. April 24 – High Island

(Bert) An early start at T.O.S. Hooks Woods Sanctuary gives us no advantage. In a half hour I only list eight common species, though we do see two female Painted Buntings.

We move on to Boy Scout Woods, hoping for more of what High Island is famous for in spring migration. It starts no better. At 8:25 we finally see our first warbler, a Northern Waterthrush and the birding improves. We are positioned at a small portal into a tall cypress grove inundated with an inch of water supplied by a constant stream from a garden hose. Flitting through the canopy and understory of the miniature Louisiana swamp is a single Swainson's Thrush, an abundance of Gray Catbirds, and single warblers: Tennessee, Magnolia, Black-and-white, Yellow and our first Golden-winged. Not all at once, mind you, yet appearing between lulls short enough to keep us searching for the next sighting.

My first visit to High Island was about 40 years ago, the exact date buried in notebooks I kept before transferred to computerized records. While leading Audubon field trips, I visited annually until 1996 when we started RVing across America. Through most of those years the only birding sites were Boy Scout Woods and Smith Oaks and both were small, with only a few trails. Thanks to Houston Audubon and the Texas Ornithology Society, today there are six birding sites in High Island and enough trails to create a maze of bewilderment. Meandering along Boy Scout Woods trails this morning only yields a Wood Thrush, plus a surprising number of catbirds.

At Smith Oaks the canopy is more open and perhaps the birding will be better, though it is not. The trill of the morning finally comes when we reach the rookery at Heron Island.

I can smell it a quarter mile away and I can hear it soon thereafter. The sight of it is amazing. From our viewing decks we are only a stone throw away from a steeply sloped island covered in vibrantly green shrubs that are adorned with feathered ornaments of white, pink, red and black. They flit and flutter, twist and turn, reside and vacate. A quick count to 50, then multiplying the occupied space by six as I scan the width of the island viewable to us, gives me an estimate of 300 Roseate Spoonbills. Similarly, I estimate 75 Great Egrets, 225 Snowy Egrets and 100 Neotropic Cormorants. And that is just this portion of the island. A sign informs us that 8000-9000 birds roost on the small island at night.

We move from one viewing platform to another, enthralled by the display, watching the antics of the birds, preening, mating, displaying affection, fighting for territory, nest building, nest sitting. While our eyes are filled with this perpetual frenzy of activity, our noses gradually deaden to the smell, and our ears perk to the soft fluttering of feathers and to the squawks of arguing egrets, the grunts of cormorants and the croaking of Bullfrogs. Barbara likens the sound of cormorants to beer belching.

I think it was Nancy who first points out the Roseate Spoonbill following a rolling egg down the steep slope. Perhaps it fell from a nest. Whatever, the egret is protective and warns an encroaching Snowy Egret to keep its distance. The distraught mother bird cannot pick up the large egg with its wide soup spoon bill, cannot roll the egg uphill, nor keep it from rolling downhill. Ultimately the oval egg reaches water's edge and when we return to the spot later, the egg has been abandoned.

In the still waters surrounding the island the bulging eyes, the long snouts and a bit of their backs are all we see of lethargic floating alligators. I would have assumed the gators were a threat to the birds. However, the reverse is true since they are protectors by keeping raccoons and coyotes from approaching the nesting colony.

Birding along the wooded trails of T.O.S. Mary Edna Crawford Sanctuary is again slow, though we are delighted to watch a Yellow-billed Cuckoo in a broad oak. Here, as well as all the sanctuaries, the fragrance of blooming honeysuckle is powerful, almost overwhelming.

We revisit Smith Oaks to see a mulberry tree that attracts more Scarlet Tanagers, five for the day. A brief stop at Eubanks Woods yields only three birds, so we return to Boy Scout Woods. The highlight is the 10+ Tennessee Warblers that feed at brilliantly red bottlebrush flowers on high bushes. Is it the nectar or the insects that attracts them? By the end of the day we have a reasonable assortment of species on our list, though hardly the diversity and abundance that makes High Island famous.

(Shari) Today is wash day. Russell puts down the convertible roof. I lift the container of dirty clothes over the door and set it next to Lulu, his dog. Off we go to the laundry only a quarter-mile away but too far to lug the clothes without wheels. While the wash is chugging up and down, I clean the RV, do the dishes and "batten down the hatches" to get the RV ready to roll. Crystal Beach has changed a lot since we came for birding more

than thirty years ago. Now there is a really nice grocery store and since we need stuff and grocery shopping is relaxing to me, I drive to the store. I do real good and buy all healthy stuff: fruits, veggies, low calorie tasteless bread, low fat turkey meat, etc. When I check out I see the word “gelato.” I roll the cart over to look into the glass case. Oh my, such wonderful tastes! I focus on the sea salt caramel and cannot look away. I have to buy a small cup. My goodness, it is good!

I return home and spend the rest of the afternoon needlepointing with Russell and Stephen. I hear that Bert was disappointed that I did not join the birders at a later time. When he comes back, he presents me with a pair of earrings. Now isn't that nice? The birds depicted on the jewelry are Cerulean Warblers and alas, may be the only way he can see that bird here. I understand birding was slow at the usually hot spots. Again tonight we have a L.E.O. This one is at a restaurant we found many years ago. Years ago, the restaurant was the only reason I would attend Bert's birding trips. In the past we ordered the fried fish platter. Tonight we spit the grilled platter and supplement it with an avocado salad.



Cypress swamp



Swainson's Thrush



Heron Island rookery



Great Egret pair on nest



Snowy Egret in breeding attire



Roseate Spoonbill



Rolling egg



Gator guard



Scarlet Tanager



Sunset from restaurant deck

Day 20. April 25 – Bolivar Peninsula

(Bert) I miss the turn to Bolivar Flats, so we continue on to the south end of the peninsula and bird at Fort Travis, a lucky change of plans since that is where we find a small flock of Buff-breasted Sandpipers spread across a wide stretch of neatly trimmed lawn. After studying them with binoculars and through the spotting scopes, I gingerly walk closer and closer to a few of the sandpipers, getting better and better photos.

The Buff-breasteds go about their business of food searching and then I notice one male has other thoughts. Inches in front of a female, the male stands erect, raises his head high, cocks his tail outward and spreads his wings wide open to expose his undersides. Then he tosses his head backward, bill pointed skyward. The male holds this pose a second longer, though the uninterested female about-faces, ignores the entreaty and retreats. Unperturbed and unabashed the male pursues the withdrawing female and repeats his tail-thrusting, wing-spreading, head-tossing performance.

The action is captured on my camera and it is good I have it set at rapid fire for the sequence of moves is separated only by one second each. A bit later I meet Victor, owner of VENT, and he asks if I could e-mail him the sequence of photos [at least one of which may appear in his electronic newsletter].

Leaving Fort Travis and continuing in the direction of the ferry, I stop suddenly when I see a Least Bittern posing on a weatherworn fencepost. Through the car window I get vivid photos. We are on our way to meet Russell and Shari for breakfast at La Playita, a Mexican restaurant that received terrible food reviews on the Internet. Our experience is completely the reverse and we enjoy delicious and filling Mexican plates in a nice open restaurant atmosphere.

With full stomachs, we continue birding Frenchtown Road, Horseshoe Marsh and then Bolivar Flats. On the entrance road to the flats I stop when I see a large wooden box perched atop a tall stout wooden pole. Cut into the box is a 6x9-in. opening, nicely rounded at the corners. I recognize this type of nesting box from another I saw at Smith Oaks and I think it is for Barn Owls. Although the box is a long distance from the road, we peer into the dark door with binoculars. A ghostly shadow appears, a pale body supporting an oval face, two dark sockets for eyes and a stubby bill. As if it knows we are window peeping, the ghost glides right and disappears. We wait, we watch, the ghost appears and again retreats. Once or twice more, enough time for me to get a couple long-distance photos and evidence the ghost is real.

Birding the beach is rewarding, especially when I find a color-banded Piping Plover. I have often studied these banded plovers at Mustang Island and I know from correspondence with the banders that most of these nest in Saskatchewan and winter on the Texas coast. This one has green and blue bands on its right leg and a green flag plus orange and yellow bands on the left leg, a unique color combination that defines this bird's origin and date of birth.

Bolivar Flats is crowded with thousands of birds. In one scope view we see five tern species—Forster's, Common, Black, Caspian, Least—as well as Black Skimmers. In the dunes, Barbara directs us to a Horned Lark. Here, we meet a birder from Washington who says he saw an Upland Sandpiper earlier this morning and he gives us directions to the street adjacent to a park.

As our cars arrive, a stream of others pull into the same parking lot and dozens of birders pour from the vehicles, stand in a line at the edge of the pavilion and focus on the broad lawn ahead. We have encountered the daily High Island tour group sponsored by Houston Audubon. Strangely, they depart before their leaders have pinpointed the sought-after bird. We persist, scanning the distant field with spotting scopes and binoculars. I locate the Upland Sandpiper feeding in 4-in. grass, but it takes many minutes of discussion, field book searching and repeated scope viewing before I convince Steve and especially Steven that this pin-headed, buggy-eyed, short-billed, long-necked, long-legged, long-tailed, chubby-bodied bird is an Upland Sandpiper.

Our last stop for the day is Rollover Pass where shore birding is excellent. Although I still have not found a Snowy Plover, we do see more Piping, Semipalmated, Wilson's and Black-bellied Plovers. Most interesting is the couple we meet from Barrington, Illinois. Barb and Bill show a keen interest in the birds we identify, mostly because they are new at the game and slow at recognizing species. To our amazement, they began birding because they enjoyed the movie *The Big Year*, wondered what birding was all about, learned that one of the hotspots in the movie was High Island and Bolivar Peninsula and now are vacationing here for the birds.



Buff-breasted Sandpiper: male displaying to female



Least Bittern



Barn Owl in nest box



Color-banded Piping Plover



Bolivar Flats



Lining up in search of Upland Sandpiper



Distant view of Upland Sandpiper

Day 21. April 26 – High Island

(Bert) Except for lunch and my late afternoon drive to Winnie, today was the most boring day I've spent at High Island. Years of experience, mine and others, have shown High Island to be one of the best places in North America to be at for spring migration, with the best time from mid-April to mid-May. Here we are at the apex of warbler migration and the warblers are almost totally absent.

At Boy Scout Woods we see a couple of Tennessee Warblers and a single Magnolia Warbler. At Smith Oaks, the rookery is again entertaining, but the warbler count is 3-4 Black-and-white Warblers and single Black-throated Green, Tennessee and Magnolia Warblers. And, at T.O.S. Hooks Woods Sanctuary we find no warblers.

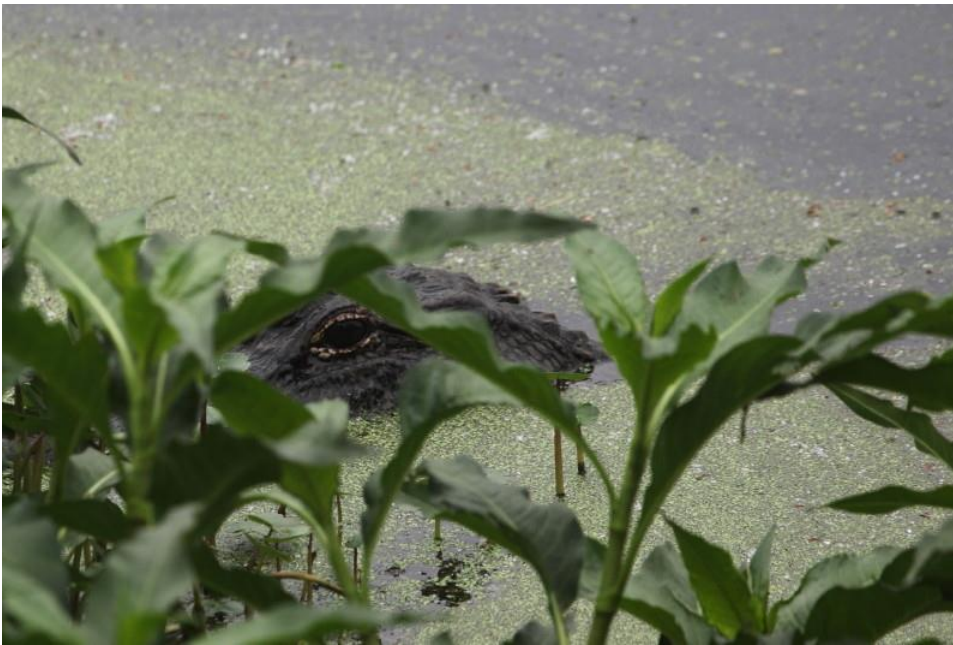
Lunch is a highlight though. We've arranged to meet for the BBQ lunch served at the Methodist church in High Island. While I am waiting for Shari and Russell to arrive, I meet Stan and Darnelle, veterans of our 2007 Belize Express tour. Not only do we know them well, but so do Jeff and Barbara since they were on the same Atlantic Canada tour.

Hoping the afternoon may bring in some new trans-Gulf warblers, we revisit Boy Scout Woods. The warbler count is slightly better with 5 Tennessee Warblers, 4 Northern Waterthrushes and single Hooded Warbler and Common Yellowthroat, plus a Blackpoll Warbler others in our group see, but I miss. Kay, alone, sees a Magnificent Frigatebird fly near the boardwalk. One other eye-catching sight is six Orchard Orioles all competing for the water drip near the sanctuary entrance viewing bleachers.

By 2 PM the non-birders have moved on to our next campground and the birders call it quits for the day. Gathering our RVs and cars, parked at various places in High Island,

we drive separately to Winnie. Slowly, I am driving alone and staying mostly on the shoulder so that I can scan the National Wildlife Sanctuary on either side of the highway. I stop to inspect a Clapper Rail roadkill, paying particular attention to the small feathers on its back: brown centered with grayish edges, a key field mark that separates it from King Rail, though hard to see on a moving bird in densely foliated marshland. I stop again to scan a pond and to my great surprise I see a Greater White-fronted Goose on the opposite side. Quite late to be finding this goose, had it been five days later, it would have been flagged as unexpected in eBird.

Finally, an explanation for why we are not finding warblers. In two words, I'd say it is "good weather." Good for migrant birds; not so good for expectant birders. With mild warm weather, no rain, no northern winds and, in fact, quite the opposite with gentle southern winds, the trans-Gulf warblers are overshooting the Texas coast and flying much farther inland. This same day that we are finding so few warblers, reports on TexBirds mention day sightings of 15 warbler species at a northeast Texas lake, including 30-40 Nashville Warblers and 10-15 Tennessee Warblers. And eBird submissions list 20 Black-and-white and 10 Nashville Warblers at far-inland Lost Maples State Park and 16 Northern Parulas at Buescher State Park in central Texas.



Peeping Alligator



Cattle Egret



Roseate Spoonbill



Great Egret standing on nest with chicks



Roseate Spoonbills on nest with eggs



Tennessee Warbler



Brown Thrasher well hidden in underbrush



Greater White-fronted Goose

Day 22. April 27 – Anahuac NWR and Chambers County

(Bert) On Texbirds I read last night of Ron Weeks' rediscovery of a Ruff that had been seen a couple of weeks earlier. He gave the location as "in the moist soil unit immediately north of the Jackson Oaks 'motte'." Since Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge is our scheduled birding site for today, I head first to the general area where Ron reported the bird. After parking our vehicles and walking out the 100-yd. boardwalk to the deck at its termination, the first bird I notice is only 50 ft. in front of me. Poking around the plant life in the shallow water is a shorebird with strikingly pumpkin-orange legs. I study its body shape and structure, not unlike a Greater Yellowlegs, but plumper and with a shorter neck, stouter bill and blotchier dark markings on its head, back and breast. I have only seen Ruff, an Old World species, three times before—twice at Gambell on St. Lawrence Island off the coast of Siberia and once at Barrow on the Arctic Ocean of Alaska—and if this bird is not a Ruff, I don't know what else it could be. Others arrive and concur we are watching the Ruff, although I find it somewhat remarkable that I located the reported rarity within seconds of my arrival, much luckier than my usual track record for finding other birder's sightings. I've got my spotting scope aligned on the bird and everyone, including other birders now joining us, gets a magnified view with the Ruff filling the objective lens, well front lit by the rising sun.

I am anxious to photograph this remarkable find, so close to my observation point, but for the first time in years I forgot to bring my camera. Perhaps it was because Shari is joining us this morning and we had more preparations. Regardless, I sure wish I had my camera. I ask Russell, also joining us for birding this morning, and Steve to take photos. Then I notice next to me Dave MacDonald with his very long lens camera. Dave says he will be posting his photos on Texbirds and he can send me one for this blog (see below).

This sighting is so remarkable I tell others in our group that birding will be humdrum from here on. However, although a Ruff is hard to beat, we do see other great birds soon enough. Within minutes, and back in our vehicles, we pass an American Bittern standing only a dozen feet away, fully exposed in mown grass, but with neck and bill raised skyward it pretends to be as invisible as a blade of grass in a field of grass. Not so, and Steve gets a great photo.

In a flooded marsh paralleling the road to Frozen Point, hundreds of birds gather. Most remarkable and certainly catching the fancy of Russell, are dozens of Fulvous Whistling-Ducks, mixed with fewer numbers of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks. Near Frozen Point I slowly drive past two Franklin's Gulls posing on fence posts and Russell gets a great photo of one.

At Frozen Point the bay water is turbulent, tossed by winds strong enough to blow off hats. Pushed up to the grassy edge, the water leaves no room for mudflats or beach, so we find no shorebirds. We are about to leave when I hear a sparrow calling from the other side of the canal. I suspect Seaside Sparrow and hustle across the road bridge and get to the spot where I heard the sound. Up pops a very dark sparrow with a strongly contrasting bright yellow supraloral patch connecting the eye to the bill. Curiously and without explanation, it looks remarkably like the extinct subspecies *nigrescens* depicted in Dunn and Alderfer. I try to get others onto the Seaside Sparrow, but it retreats, then pops up again and retreats again. We leave in our vehicles and see several more Seaside Sparrows en route, all giving flight-only views.

Along the road and pathways to Shoveler Pond we get repeated views of Least Bitterns and I see an American Bittern in flight. I suspect Anahuac is the most reliable site in Texas to find Least Bitterns and the second most reliable site to find American Bitterns.

Equally rewarding is the Prothonotary Warbler that dances from stalk to stalk at the base of the 15-ft tall reeds. Fortunately, the boardwalk cuts through the dense marsh reeds and gives us a portal for watching the Prothonotary's behavior.

Moving on to White Memorial Park, we stand among southern yellow pines towering above us, separated by vast expanses of grassy lawns that provide an opening to the powder blue sky. A Swallow-tailed Kite soars with Draconian spread wings, disappears from view and then rematerializes a few minutes later.

We meet another birder looking for the kite and we trade our information for his on the location of Red-headed Woodpeckers. Minutes later we see one, then two, then four adult males, perhaps America's most beautiful woodpeckers.

Our penultimate stop for the day is the Trinity River Mouth Waterbird Rookery. Although we saw many rookery nesters at High Island, we missed finding any Anhingas. Here they are, dozens nesting in the cypress trees, among Neotropic Cormorants, Roseate Spoonbills, a single Great Blue Heron pair and, by my count, 108 nests holding Great

Egrets. Surprisingly, I see not a single Snowy Egret as I scan across the vast waterbird rookery with my scope.

Trinity River Island Recreation Area is our last site. Most notably here is a pair of adult Killdeer tending three wayward chicks rapid-stepping across the gravel like toy racecars.



Our group scanning fields for birds (photo by Russell)



White-faced Ibis (photo by Steve)



Greater Yellowlegs (photo by Russell)



Ruff (photo by Steve)



Ruff (photo by Dave MacDonald)



American Bittern (photo by Steve)



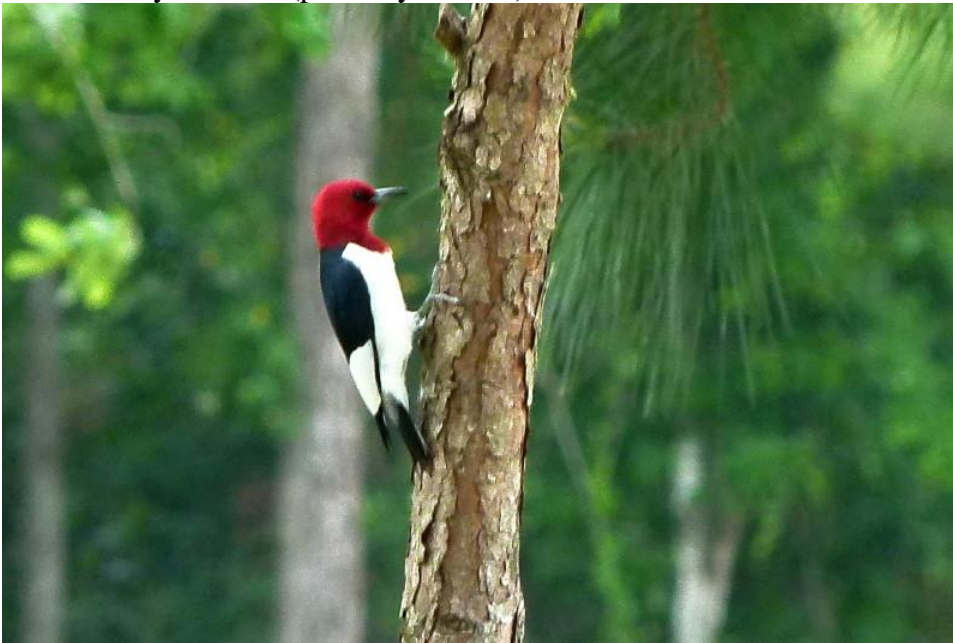
Franklin's Gull (photo by Russell)



Serious bird photographers (photo by Russell)



Prothonotary Warbler (photo by Russell)



Red-headed Woodpecker (photo by Steve)

Day 23. April 28 – Sabine Woods & McFaddin NWR

(Bert) In my plans for this tour, I thought I saved the best warbler spot for last, but given the dearth of warblers thus far, I have my doubts. The densely wooded portion of Sabine Woods is quiet when we arrive at 7:45 AM, although a few mosquitos are awake. We walk to the back side, entering the grassy field with scattered trees, and here there is more bird life. They are busily feeding, especially on the huge mulberry tree, flying to and fro and quickly hiding among the opaque leaves. Northern Parula, Chestnut-sided Warbler,

Orchard Oriole, Great Crested Flycatcher, Gray Catbird and Yellow Warbler are soon recorded.

I am surprised when we find a lingering White-throated Sparrow. When I lived in College Station for 25 years, the latest in the season that I saw this backyard species was May 3, but generally these common wintering sparrows had left the area by mid-April.

Birding is better than it was at High Island, with one sighting after another, though one would hardly call this a fall-out. At Howard's Water Feature, Steve points out two Rose-breasted Grosbeaks and then three Yellow Warblers make an appearance. Elsewhere we add at least three Eastern Kingbirds and two Bay-breasted Warblers, as well as singles of Painted Bunting, Summer Tanager and Wood Thrush.

We've walked a complete circuit in Sabine Woods, so I decide we next will visit McFaddin National Wildlife Refuge and then return to Sabine Woods at lunch time. McFaddin is a different style of birding: drive and stop. A highlight greets us at the entrance as we watch four Common Nighthawks hawking for insects and conveniently resting on fence posts and high wires for us to get closer views.

A lengthy gravel road circumscribes a large mirror-calm lake, bordered on the opposite side by tall-grass marshland and, frequently, a canal. Although we are not adding new species to the trip list, we appreciate getting sustained looks at some favorites, including Dickcissel, several Least Bitterns and frequent alligators, including one mid-sized gator crossing the gravel road in front of my SUV.

I stop for a chain of swallows linked wing-to-wing across a high wire. Over the FRS walkie talkie I tell the others that the line-up is led by three different swallow species: Barn, Tree and Bank. It's our first Bank Swallow of the trip. We reach the end of the road and stop at an observation deck and make a U-turn. On the way back I find the same broken-winged Least Sandpiper that the others said they saw earlier. I doubt this bird has much chance of survival.

After eating our packed lunches at Sabine Woods, the birding is better. Perhaps a few small flocks have newly arrived from the Gulf. We study two Yellow-billed Cuckoos, a Common Yellowthroat and an amazing six Painted Buntings. To the delight of several in our group, we get a clear and sustained view of a Philadelphia Vireo, a species they missed earlier in the tour.

I am not yet tired of Scarlet Tanagers and I photograph yet another. I checked my historical records. My first sighting was when I was a child in 1957 in Wisconsin and my second was not until 1992 in Texas. Since then I've recorded Scarlet Tanager in Texas migration for at least eight years and as migration or nesting in Iowa, Kentucky, Indiana, Ontario and Nova Scotia. Compared to other species, that is not many sightings for me, especially for a bird as beautiful as a Scarlet Tanager. In the past three weeks I've delighted in seeing multiple Scarlet Tanagers on six days.

Barbara is anxious not to miss our last site, so we leave Sabine Woods at 2:15 and drive the short distance to Texas Point National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge has only two short trails and there we add American Redstart to our day list. We want to be back at camp early enough for our farewell dinner tonight and are making a good start until we reach Port Arthur. In the midst of the heavily industrial refinery plants we are blocked by a train which repeatedly moves back and forth, unhooking train cars and side railing them.

Back at camp, I tally up the last of our trip sightings. For the coastal migration tour we found 256 bird species and when we add the additional species seen on the previous Lower Rio Grande Valley Birders Reunion we have a total of 289 species.

At the restaurant we are surprised a reserved table is not already set up for our group. The staff hustles to set one up, but the manager decides it is too crowded for the servers. Then she confides that another group took our table, claiming to have made reservations and when asked if they were for Sharon, they agreed. In a few minutes the manager gets another table set up for us in a different room all to ourselves. Good thing, because our group can get pretty loud and, now, at the end of the tour we have lots of exuberance and storytelling about a wonderful trip.

Day 24. April 29 – Winnie Farewell

(Bert) Hitch-up breakfast is what it is called. Our caravan attendees prepare their RVs for departure and one by one stop by our RV where Shari as spread breakfast snacks on a table and has coffee at the ready. It is both a joyous time and a sad time: joyous over good memories of the past few weeks; sad that we are going our separate ways. We promise to visit each other as we crisscross the country.

And in our continuing saga, some of these characters you will soon meet again in Vermont for another caravan, an adventure on the Road Not (Yet) Traveled, the Trans-Labrador Highway.



Yellow Warbler



Common Nighthawk



Alligator crossing the road



Port Arthur



Farewell Dinner