

Texas

7-21 April 1997

Participants:

Neil Anderson

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Leader:

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**Picture: Golden-fronted
Woodpecker**



Day 1: Meeting at London Gatwick airport for our 10.00 departure for Houston but unfortunately the flight was delayed. After a 9-hour flight we arrived at Houston about half an hour late. After transferring to the vehicle rental office, it was discovered that the minibus specification had changed from previous years and the group were now unable to fit comfortably in the new vehicle, fortunately, one of the group members volunteered to drive a second vehicle. Even during the delay, some of the group members were able to start their birding seeing common species like Blue Jay. Unfortunately, we were now two hours behind schedule and our arrival at Corpus Christi was going to be very late. We did however, take a rest stop en-route and were rewarded with several Scissor-tailed Flycatchers making the 11.00 p.m. arrival more bearable!

Day 2: Despite yesterday's late arrival, everyone was up early in eager anticipation of the first day's birding. We drove back northeast to Refugio where we had the first of many "Whataburger" breakfasts of the tour! Soon afterwards we were birding seriously and heading east towards Aransas and seeing the first Turkey Vultures. Near Aransas, many of the field were partially flooded following heavy rains and they proved very attractive to shorebirds with Long-billed Dowitcher, Semi-palmated Sandpiper, Lesser Yellowlegs, American Golden Plover, Killdeer, Ruddy Turnstone and Semi-palmated Plover all being present with Red-winged Blackbirds everywhere. On arrival at the visitor centre at Aransas it promptly started to rain and large numbers of Mosquitoes compounded this! Nevertheless, we persevered and were rewarded with species like Orchard Oriole, Indigo Bunting, Common Yellowthroat, Lincoln's Sparrow, Prothonotary Warbler, Green Heron and Least Bittern. Moving on to the motor trail the first bird of note seen was a Merlin giving prolonged views at close range. Moving on to the viewing platform, we were able to see 3 Whooping Cranes in the distance together with large numbers of other birds including American White Pelican, Franklin's Gull, Bufflehead, Lesser Scaup, Ruddy Duck, Great Blue, Little Blue and Tricoloured Herons, Great White and Snowy Egrets and Willet. The return journey along the trail gave us good views of a Black-billed Cuckoo and Anhinga and we left well satisfied. On our way to our next stop at Goose Island Park, we saw a superb White-tailed Hawk. There had obviously been a fall of migrants at the park and we saw Hooded, Yellow-rumped and Tennessee Warblers, American Redstart, Blue-grey Gnatcatcher, Wood Thrush and Summer Tanager as well as the resident Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Northern Cardinal, Brown Thrasher and Inca & Ground Doves. Our next stop was at the bridge connecting the Aransas and Fulton/Rockport peninsulas and a number of additional species were seen here including Great Northern Diver, American Oystercatcher, Brown Pelican, Laughing Gull, Forster's and Royal Terns and Savannah

Sparrow. Passing the Sandollar pavilion where we would start our Whooping Crane tour next day, we had excellent views of a pair of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks in the car park! By now the wind had risen but we still had excellent views of an American Kestrel sat on overhead wires.

Day 3: An early departure and breakfast before boarding the MV Skimmer for our Whooping Crane tour. Even in the marina were Brown Pelican, Great Northern Diver and Eared Grebe while out in the bay we had good views of Royal and Least Terns with Great Blue Herons and Double-crested Cormorants nesting on the structures. As we headed up the narrowing intra-coastal waterway, we saw Spotted Sandpiper, Lesser Yellowlegs and Seaside Sparrow. Eventually our target was located and by the end of the tour we had seen some 40 of the 158 remaining wild Whooping Cranes at ranges down to 20 metres! Also seen were Hen Harrier, Long-billed Curlew, American Avocet, Marbled Godwit, Black-necked Stilt, Black Skimmer, Mottled Duck, Blue-winged Teal and good sized flocks of Lesser Scaup and Bufflehead. Herons and egrets were plentiful with Reddish Egret and several immature White Ibis added to our lists. Great-tailed Grackles were everywhere. On the return journey to the marina, we saw the strange sight of the Shrimp boats steaming in tight circles! Our next stop was Fulton Beach where we enjoyed good views of a large raft of Eared Grebes and Blue-winged Teal with a Bonaparte's Gull, several Ring-billed Gulls and Black Skimmers. Waders were represented by American Golden Plover, Semi-palmated and Western Sandpipers, Ruddy Turnstone and Willet. The sharp eyes of one group member picked out our only Horned Lark of the tour while we were watching the spectacular sight of large numbers of herons, egrets and Roseate Spoonbill nesting on an island.

Day 4: An early start and heading south with the first stop at the Sarita rest area, a well known stake out for Tropical Parula. It wasn't to be however, although we had excellent views of Black-crested Titmouse, Hooded Oriole, Eastern Bluebird and Brown-headed Cowbird whilst overhead, we had our first Sharp-shinned Hawks. Heading south again, several Wild Turkeys gave a good show whilst Harris's Hawks and Crested Caracara's started to become commoner and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers abundant! After a brief stop at a shopping mall in Harlingen, we arrived at the Brownsville rubbish dump only to be told that it was closed due to flooding. We therefore carried on to Sable Palm Sanctuary where right next to the office we saw Plain Chachalaca, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Olive Sparrow and White-tipped Dove, not a bad start! Unfortunately, the trails are extremely difficult to bird and other than Great Kiskadee, little was seen. This all changed at the lakes however, with a small fall of migrants including Black & White, Blue-winged, Black-throated Green, Yellow, Tennessee & Cerulean Warblers. Residents included Swamp Sparrow and Golden-fronted Woodpecker whilst waterbirds included both Pied-billed and Least Grebes, American Wigeon, Northern Shoveler and Blue-winged Teal. Our attempt at seeing Parrots at the end of the day was unsuccessful but we did record our first White-tailed Kite.

Day 5: A slightly later start as our destination today was Bentsen Rio Grande State Park was only a few miles away and we were spending all day there. Our first stop was the trailer park but most of the 'snowbirds' had already departed. Nevertheless, the 1 or 2 feeding stations still present gave us excellent views of Plain Chachalaca, White-tipped Dove and Green Jay. Altamira Oriole were giving a superb show when our attention was drawn to the sky by passing raptors. The first bird seen was a Grey Hawk although subsequent sightings of hawks were all Broad-winged and Sharp-shinned. Bronzed Cowbird and Couch's Kingbird were added to our lists before we walked one of the trails, which turned out to be fairly birdless. Further forays around the trailer park yielded prolonged views of Long-billed Thrasher singing from the top of a tree. By the time we start searching for Red-billed Pigeons along another trail it had become rather hot and very little was seen apart from Brown-crested Flycatcher. We therefore decided to return to Mc Allen for a meal before our evening visit for nightbirds. On our return, we had time to walk another trail to the Rio Grande which in the cool of the evening was more rewarding with good views of Green Kingfisher, Hook-billed Kite and in the gathering dusk, several Lesser Nighthawk. Unfortunately, the Elf Owls were not as co-operative but nevertheless, we had several views of Common Pauraque.

Day 6: Another relatively late start as our visit to Santa Anna National Wildlife Reserve was equally close. For most of the day we walked the trails with those around Pintail Lake being the most rewarding. Good numbers of Cinnamon Teal were still present and we saw our first White-faced Ibis. White-winged Doves were migrating north and raptors included Swainson's Hawk and an Aplomado Falcon from the release programme at Laguna Atascosa. Chipping Sparrows proved problematical for some to see but not so the Ringed Kingfisher, seen well by everyone. In the evening, we returned to Bentsen for nightbirds but the Elf Owl again eluded us although we had good views of Common Pauraque. The most frustrating event however, was as we carefully approached a small nightjar which was almost certainly a Common Poorwill, in the road, the park warden flushed it when driving up to tell us that the park was closing!

Day 7: Dawned very cold and so it was to remain all day. After an early start, we arrived at Salineno on the River Grande to look for the specialities. Huge numbers of birds were present including many waterbirds. The highlights were Muscovy and Wood Ducks and more Hook-billed Kites. The sheer spectacle of so many birds somewhat compensated for our failure to find any of the specialities, probably due to the weather. Moving on to Chapeno, we again failed to find any of the specialities but the number of birds present at this site nearly equalled Salineno so there was plenty for everyone to look at. Our next stop was Falcon Dam and here we were in the middle of the day with jumpers and coats on when the temperature should have been nearly 100! Again large numbers of birds were present including many waders such as Least, Baird's and Pectoral Sandpipers. A few Yellow-headed Blackbird were migrating through and we saw our first Bewick's Wren. Osprey hunted the river and nearby Falcon Lake together with yet another Hook-billed Kite and American Black Vultures. Our next stop was Falcon State Park and here the birding took a distinct turn for the better. Even before we entered the park we saw Cactus Wren and Curve-billed Thrasher. Although most of the

trailers had departed, there were still a couple of feeding stations, which attract Pyrrhuloxia and Northern Bobwhite. Suddenly a Greater Roadrunner appeared and the earlier disappointment of missing the Mexican specialities evaporated. More good species just kept appearing however, Verdin, spectacular Vermilion Flycatcher and Lark Sparrow. Reluctantly, as we were behind schedule we had to move on to our overnight accommodation at Laredo. Not however, without a stop at a gas station where we had the most amazing views of a number of Lesser Nighthawks.

Day 8: With most of the day to complete our journey, we made a number of stops as we headed north. The first was at a bridge where there was a large colony of Cave Swallows. As we drove through endless miles of Mesquite, we stopped in suitable looking areas and added Cassin's, Clay-coloured, White-crowned and Black-throated Sparrows to our lists. As we neared the Edward's Plateau we had excellent views of Western Scrub-Jay but this was somewhat eclipsed by the beautiful sight of the River Frio running through the heart of Neal's Lodge where we were staying for the next 3 nights. On the feeders right by the office were Pine Siskin, House Finch, Black-chinned Hummingbird and Carolina Chickadee so there was plenty for everyone to look at. Several pairs of Eastern Phoebe were scattered around the cabins and not long after settling in we saw our first Black-capped Vireo. After dinner we walked along a riverside trail seeing Canyon Wren and as dusk fell Great Horned Owl. The day was not over however, as we returned to our cabins we saw a Carolina Wren which had built its nest in a disused building.

Day 9: Walking to breakfast is an absolute delight at Neal's Lodge through the early morning light filled with bird song. A walk along one of the trails proved very productive with Lesser Goldfinch, Canyon and Spotted Towhees, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Orange-crowned and Nashville Warblers, Bell's Vireo and another Greater Roadrunner. Our main stop today was Garner State Park where we went for a good walk. A Hermit Thrush proved elusive to some but not so the Ruby-crowned Kinglet and Bushtit around the parking lot. Driving around other good areas of the park we also saw nesting Eastern Bluebird and another Vermilion Flycatcher. After returning for an early dinner we set off for the highlight of our stay here, the bat cave. We were not disappointed, with 17 million (Barry counted them!) Mexican Free-tailed Bats emerging. As about 1000 pairs of Cave Swallows also nest here, it was quite a spectacle seeing the swallows trying to return to roost with the bats leaving theirs! All the time predators were waiting and several Red-tailed Hawks were seizing the bats with their talons with about a 50% success rate!

Day 10: One feature of Neal's lodge is the good food (and pretty waitresses!!) and we were not disappointed with our breakfast after which we set off to Lost Maples State Natural Area. A Scott's Oriole was seen immediately upon arrival and after some initial frustration, eventually Golden-cheeked Warbler proved easy to see, also, another Green Kingfisher was seen by a lucky few. Moving on to another part of the park, we walked up a canyon to look for an American Robin which didn't oblige. We were however, rewarded with good views of a small flock of Cedar Waxwing and a few saw a Spotted Towhee. On the return walk a distant raptor was almost certainly a Golden Eagle but a nearer one was a Cooper's Hawk. We also found a Western Scrub-Jays nest, Bushtits gave good views and we had our only sightings of Common Raven. Several Rufous-crowned Sparrow were seen and more Golden-cheeked Warbler heard, proving that they are not uncommon in suitable habitat. On returning to Neal's Lodge we were able to find the pair of Black Phoebe by the river and spend time looking at the numerous other birds at this superb location. Yellow-breasted Chat and Spotted Towhee were eventually seen by most and in the gathering dusk we had excellent views of the Great Horned Owl. Finally, we drove a mile or so back in towards 'town' to look for Chuck-will's-widow which were only heard. A conversation with a local however, provided some extra entertainment!

Day 11: We had to leave early (reluctantly from this superb location) for the drive to High Island. One benefit however, was that we had views of a Chuck-will's-widow flying across the road. Our first major stop was Attwater NWR where unfortunately, the Attwater race of Greater Prairie-chicken is now critically endangered and no longer viewable. We walked a trail looking for Sprague's Pipit however and although not seen, White-tailed Hawk and a number of Upland Sandpipers and Eastern Kingbirds were the reward. Sparrows skulked in the grass but we eventually saw Grasshopper and White-crowned as well as the common Savannah Sparrow. Driving the motor trail we saw plenty of waterbirds but the surprise was a party of 10 White-fronted Geese. 20 Fulvous Whistling-duck were a welcome addition as they had until now eluded us together with a Northern Pintail! Leaving the reserve, we re-found the flock of Snow Geese that had previously been seen in flight and were pleased to see that 11 were blue phase and that there were 2 'genuine' Canada Geese with them! With a long drive still ahead of us, we continued our journey eventually checking into our motel at Baytown for the final 4 nights. With daylight still remaining however, we made a successful visit to a local park seeing Red-headed, Red-bellied and Downy Woodpeckers and Pine Warbler. The American Crows seen may have been a new bird but strangely, nobody was getting excited! Finally, we drove back to the hotel by a different route and were rewarded with Barn Owl and 2 more Great Horned Owls.

Day 12: Our first stop was the excellent Anahuac NWR where waterbirds were abundant. It was almost a case of not knowing which way to look with Least & American Bitterns, Sora Rail, American Purple Gallinule, Palm Warbler and Marsh Wren all being new additions to the list. It wasn't just the numbers of birds however, it was the stunning views! Reluctantly moving on, our next stop was the flooded rice fields set aside for passage shorebirds and we were not disappointed, as well as many of the waders seen before, 4 Hudsonian Godwit were the highlight. With High Island beckoning however, we could contain our anticipation no longer, arriving there early afternoon. Although the locals reckoned it was quiet, it was perfect for us as birding around the narrow trails is not easy and concentrating on getting good views of a few birds is better tearing around seeing little. Indigo Buntings were very common around the viewing area and we soon saw Grey Catbird, Wood Thrush and Brown Thrasher. It was the warblers however, that we were really looking for and with a little effort, we all saw Northern Waterthrush, Ovenbird and Blue-winged, Tennessee, Black & White, Prothonotary, Worm-eating, Kentucky and Hooded as well as Northern Parula and Common Yellowthroat and 4

species of Vireo, White-eyed, Red-eyed, Solitary & Yellow-throated. During the course of our rounds of the trails we also found Swainson's Thrush, Veery, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, White-throated Sparrow, Common Nighthawk (roosting in a tree) and the star bird, Painted Bunting. It had really been a superb day and we were all looking forward to return visits.

Day 13: Our first stop this morning was at Rollover Pass where, whilst looking at the numerous gulls, terns, waders and herons we were pleased to find a Lesser Black-backed Gull, a state rarity. We were really looking for California & Slaty-backed Gulls, which had been reported in the area, recently however, so we were even more surprised when Stan found an Iceland Gull, the fourth state record! Moving on to the Oryx oilfields, it started to rain but even from the minibus we managed to see Wilson's Plover amongst the other waders and some had brief views of a Clapper Rail. With the rain easing, we continued on to Bolivar Flats as we were keen to be back at High Island later in view of the change in weather. Bolivar is just an outstanding place for shorebirds and there were literally thousands. Amongst the commoner ones, we added Piping & Snowy Plovers to our lists but the sheer spectacle of so many birds was the real prize. At least 400 American White and 150 Brown Pelicans were counted together with good numbers of uncommon waders such as American Oystercatcher, Marbled Godwit and American Avocet. Sandwich, Forster's & Least Terns were all present whilst on the sea in with a flock of Lesser Scaup were 5 Surf and 1 Black Scoter. Having been told of a new site for Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow, we retraced our steps but only a few of the group got reasonable views. In compensation however, we all had excellent views of Seaside Sparrow and Clapper Rail. Once again, High Island called and on arrival, we were pleased to learn that there were several new birds about. Acadian Flycatcher had defeated identification by most local birders but not us and we then proceeded to add Blackburnian, Canada & Swainson's Warblers and Louisiana Waterthrush to our rapidly rising list. Baltimore Oriole, Blue Grosbeak Black-throated Green, Yellow & Cerulean Warblers, American Redstart and large numbers of Chimney Swift flying overhead were all additions from the previous day's visit. And once again we left well satisfied.

Day 14: Today, our last full day, we revisited Anahuac again first as we had been so impressed with our first visit. All the birds previously seen showed well again but we also managed to add Palm & a superb Golden-winged Warbler to our lists. There had obviously been a good fall of birds here as all along a row of trees were warblers with Cerulean, Yellow-rumped, Black & White & Blackburnian. Excellent views of several Common Nighthawk were obtained including one bird which landed in a small dead tree right next to the road. Sora Rails & Lilian's Meadowlarks showed well and we had a brief sighting of an immature Bald Eagle whilst a couple of members of the group were fortunate enough to see a King Rail. Time to check the shorebird fields again which contained all of the common waders again with the addition of a nice group of Hudsonian Whimbrel. Our final visit to High Island came next although everyone was aware that new birds would be hard to find. Nevertheless, after seeing many of the birds that we had seen over the last few days again, hopes were still high and the news that a Chestnut-sided Warbler had been seen spurred us to redouble our efforts which were suitably rewarded with excellent views. A few of the group also saw House Wren and whilst driving the short distance to Smith Oaks Wood for a final look, Bob found an American Robin. On the lake there we had a final look at Olivaceous Cormorant side by side with Double-crested. With time running out, we retraced our route over the intra-coastal bridge from which we had good views of 2 Yellow-crowned Night-herons.

Day 15: The last day of the tour and one important site still to visit so an early start and breakfast en-route. At W.G. Jones SP, we were successful early on and had good views of up to 5 Red-cockaded Woodpecker together with 2 Red-headed Woodpeckers and a Red-bellied Woodpecker. Eastern Bluebird and Pine Warbler were seen again and there was a small passage of Mississippi Kites overhead together with Broad-winged, Red-tailed and Sharp-shinned Hawks and American Kestrel. Returning to the airport it was discovered that Gatwick Airport had been closed due to a bomb threat and the flight had been cancelled! Fortunately, we were able to rebook on an American Airline flight via Chicago. This meant that my new group would be a day late arriving and I am sorry to advise you that on my way back from the airport to Baytown I saw a Red-shouldered Hawk, a bird we had spent the past 2 weeks looking for! Furthermore, rather than kicking my heels that evening I visited Anahuac again and found a Yellow Rail!!

Acknowledgements: I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the participants for their efforts in finding birds as whilst a leader can arrange the itinerary to visit all the right sites at the right time, the number of species seen has a direct correlation to the amount of effort put in by participants. The fact that 297 species were seen in 2 weeks speaks for itself and whilst we were unsuccessful with some of the Mexican specialities in the Rio Grande, this was entirely due to the weather as was proved with my second tour recording all of them with ease. Whilst it can be embarrassing to single people out for thanks, nevertheless, I would like to particularly like to thank Bob Bailey for driving the second vehicle, Phil Reed for navigating and pushing the minibus (ask him!) and Barry Mathews as usual for doing the bird log and providing a record of the Butterflies seen. A group checklist follows this report and it should be borne in mind that this represents the combined sightings of all of the group and will not represent the species seen by any individual. Most participant's totals were however, very close to the combined group total.

ADDITIONAL SPECIES SEEN DURING SECOND TOUR OF TEXAS

22 APRIL-4 MAY 1998

- 1) RED-SHOULDERED HAWK
- 2) YELLOW RAIL
- 3) RED KNOT
- 4) WHITE-RUMPED SANDPIPER
- 5) STILT SANDPIPER
- 6) BUFF-BREASTED SANDPIPER
- 7) WILSON'S PHALAROPE
- 8) RED-BILLED PIGEON
- 9) PILEATED WOODPECKER
- 10) OLIVE-SIDED FLYCATCHER
- 11) WESTERN KINGBIRD
- 12) BROWN-HEADED NUTHATCH
- 13) BROWN JAY
- 14) PHILADELPHIA VIREO
- 15) MAGNOLIA WARBLER
- 16) CAPE-MAY WARBLER
- 17) BAY-BREASTED WARBLER
- 18) WILSON'S WARBLER
- 19) DICKCISSEL
- 20) AUDUBON'S ORIOLE
- 21) BREWER'S BLACKBIRD