

Texas

9–24 April 2003

Participants:

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Buff-bellied Hummingbird

Leaders: Pete Basterfield and Nigel Warren

If, in two weeks, you find 33 species of American wood warbler, almost all in full breeding dress, 34 species of wader and 22 species of raptor (not to mention eight species of woodpecker and six species of oriole), then the toil of driving over 2200 miles, enduring (if not always relishing) "Whataburger" breakfasts, pales into insignificance. We found the vast majority of the localised specialities in the Rio Grande valley and Edward's Plateau; caught up with some unexpected lingering winter visitors, and hit some busy migration activity in and around High Island. A total of 311 species were seen on this trip (including four new for Birdfinders in Texas) and a further four species were heard, not seen. All in all, a most successful and enjoyable tour.

Day 1: A smooth flight was followed by a tedious two-hour immigration check. This meant that it was 4.30pm before we commenced the 140 mile drive southwest to Victoria, our base for the next three nights. It seemed to take an age to leave behind the sprawling conurbation that is Houston, the fourth largest city in the USA, but eventually we were driving across endless plains and agricultural fields. Birds were a combination of familiar and new. Eurasian Starlings and House Sparrows failed to raise an eyebrow, let alone a binocular. Of greater interest however, Black and Turkey Vultures drifted over the highway; a Red-tailed Hawk perched on a roadside pole, Mourning Doves, Common and Great tailed Grackles were seen in numbers and perched on roadside wires were our first Loggerhead Shrikes and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers (a bird that was to become a firm favourite). The final hour of daylight was spent in (and around) the Dairy Queen at Ganado. Whether pride of place goes to the variety of burgers consumed, the Killdeer that almost walked in through the front door or the small group of Upland Sandpipers feeding in the pastures outside is a matter of personal choice. As we boarded our buses for the final 30 miles to Victoria, flocks of Cattle Egrets and Little Blue Herons flew over, no doubt to roost nearby.

Day 2: A predawn Whataburger breakfast, preceded the two-hour drive south to Rockport and the coast. En route we found our first Northern Caracaras on roadside posts, flocks of Cliff and Northern Rough-winged Swallows hunted over roadside bridges and Eastern Meadowlarks perched up on overhead wires. Whilst waiting to board the "Molly Anna", watching from the jetty produced Great Northern Divers (so much nicer a name than Common Loon), Brown Pelicans, Great Egrets and Great Blue Herons, together with Laughing and Ring-billed Gulls. Birds appeared thick and fast once we set sail with small parties of Redheads swimming close to the shore line, both Sandwich and Forster's Terns following in our wake and a couple of American White Pelicans drifting past, sporting the orange bump on the upper mandible indicating full breeding plumage. Once we reached the open channel, shore and waterbird flocks were ever present. Both Neotropic and Double-crested Cormorants (the "little and large" of the cormorant family), Tricolored Herons and White-faced Ibis flew over in parties

of varying size. Ducks were well represented – Blue-winged Teal made up the majority, but were ably supported by Gadwall, Northern Shoveler, American Wigeon and Mottled Duck. The precise origin of the Mute and Black-necked Swans swimming past is open to conjecture. Birds of prey are not a normal component of a "pelagic". However several Northern Harriers, together with perched Merlin and Peregrine were all totally outclassed by the adult White-tailed Hawk that drifted high over the boat. The largest bird of the journey (and probably the rarest bird we were to find on the whole tour), Whooping Crane was anything but easy (two days earlier there were still 19 present). We definitely had three adults circling high but quite far off and another two pairs out in the saltmarsh, but the heat haze was less than kind. Waders were in good numbers, but many precluded specific identification from a (sometimes) fast-moving vessel. American Oystercatchers are reputedly decidedly uncommon here – we saw at least 10. Other highlights included perhaps 25 American Avocets in full breeding dress and a couple of Marbled Godwits. Familiar birds included Black-bellied (Grey) Plover, Ruddy Turnstone, Hudsonian Whimbrel and Sanderling. These were augmented by both yellowlegs, large flocks of "Dowitcher spp." and innumerable Willets. Throughout the morning seabirds followed in our wake, including "*smithsonianus*" Herring Gull, Royal, Least and Gull-billed Terns together with a simply gorgeous pink-flushed Franklin's Gull. Back on *Terra Firma* once more, an unscheduled visit to an area for (allegedly) wintering Sandhill Cranes was best forgotten; lunch at McDonalds being marginally more rewarding. Early afternoon was spent at Rockport County Park, the main focus of attention being a colony of perhaps 250 Black Skimmers. However, brief views of a Clapper Rail gained equal status as did a number of magnificent breeding plumaged Roseate Spoonbills and Reddish Egrets (the latter including at least two white-phased birds). The evening drive back produced several roadside Red-tailed Hawks, our first Eastern Kingbirds and a Belted Kingfisher. Pride of place, however, goes to the majestic and remarkably approachable adult Bald Eagle sat atop a pylon facing the fading sunlight. Our first full day's birding; at least 101 species seen – plus, of course, the swans.

Day 3: Once again the day started at Whataburger, against an incessant musical background that was Great-tailed Grackles at roost. As dawn broke, the trees behind the car park started to yield birds. A party of Cedar Waxwings, with their referee's whistle calls flew in and a couple of White-winged Doves perched right out in the open. Unfortunately a rather elusive Nashville Warbler was seen by only a few. Overhead, Chimney Swifts were joined by Purple Martins and a lone Upland Sandpiper passed by. As John said "3 ticks and 3 dips, and we haven't left the motel yet!" Our main port of call for the morning was the huge coastal reserve at Aransas. A petrol stop at Tivoli en route, was meant to be just that. However, the Ladder-backed Woodpecker, adult male Ruby-throated Hummingbird and Lincoln's Sparrow in the suburban lanes behind the garage were not keeping to the script. On the outskirts of the reserve, new birds came through apace. Least Bittern, Tree Swallow, Lark and Vesper Sparrow showed well to all. By contrast, the small party of Indigo Buntings and the male Common Yellowthroat didn't hang around. On reaching the reserve, we were greeted at the Visitor Centre feeders by a pair of Buff-bellied Hummingbirds. Just outside, a Ladder-backed Woodpecker was harassing a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and a Sora Rail crept through the reedy fringes of a small pond. Sadly, the very vocal Sedge and Marsh Wrens remained hidden from view. Surely, all but the most desperate of "tickers" would question the origin of the "Wild" Turkey, which, at one point walked along the main building's guttering! By mid-morning, things were really quietening down. A long walk through coastal woodland produced our first White-eyed Vireos but little else. Beyond the trees, a small pond hosted another rather confiding female Least Bittern. Once we reached the saltmarsh, small areas of open water were very active with birds. Short-billed Dowitchers and Stilt Sandpipers were present in numbers and we managed to find at least four Wilson's Snipe – perhaps our only chance for this species. After a detour, we parked up to view the saltings and lagoons on either side of Capano bridge. On one side, a few Red-breasted Mergansers could be seen, on the other, five summer-plumaged Eared (Black-necked) Grebes swam close inshore and a Savannah Sparrow scurried along the tide-line. Most of the afternoon was spent walking the roads at Goose Island State Park – and it was heavy going in the heat of the day. Eventually, our tally included two Common Ground-doves, two Eastern Kingbirds, Black-crested Titmouse, two Yellow-rumped (Myrtle) Warblers, White-throated and Chipping Sparrows and an adult male Orchard Oriole. The drive back was fairly uneventful save for the male Northern Harrier crossing the road in front of Bus No. 1 – what the occupants of the front seats in Bus No. 2 identified it as will remain confidential, to save their blushes. By quirk of coincidence, we had again found 101 species of bird today – increasing the tour list to 127. The joys of a Chinese buffet, Texan style (some of the vegetables, but none of the spices) was our reward this evening.

Day 4: Whataburger has one redeeming feature – it is open 24 hours a day. The availability of coffee made a 5.00am departure from Victoria almost bearable. Much of the day was to be spent driving down to the Rio Grande valley – a total distance of some 330 miles. Shortly before dawn, we were at Up River Junction, and another Whataburger, this time for breakfast. Our first birding stop was amongst some roadside trees close to Sarita where we discovered our first true indication of passerine migration. In one small area we found Blue-headed Vireo, Summer Tanager and Yellow-rumped (both Myrtle and Audubon's forms) Warbler. Additionally, these trees were home to specialised resident birds of the area including Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Couch's Kingbird, Eastern Bluebird and Hooded Oriole. However, the most unexpected find was a White-collared Seedeater, about 100 miles north-east of its known range. A few miles down the road is a more traditional birding stop – the Sarita Rest Area. Few migrants were in the trees, but the floor was home to at least 30 Brewer's Blackbirds. Our continued drive south-west was interrupted first by a Greater Roadrunner perched up on a thick tree stump and then, initially, by a flock of over 500 American White Pelicans soaring to the south of us. However, right over our heads, three Swainson's Hawks appeared. Shortly before Brownsville, Bus No. 2 had excellent views of a White-tailed Kite soaring low over roadside shrubbery. We then entered Sabel Palm Audubon Centre and Sanctuary where we were to spend a very fruitful few hours. Lunch was taken at picnic tables overlooking a feeding area teeming with Plain Chachalacas, White-tipped Doves, Great Kiskadees and Green Jays. A Long-billed Thrasher came down to bathe and the usual gang of Great-tailed Grackles were joined by red-eyed Bronzed Cowbirds, whilst a couple of Olive Sparrows skulked

amongst the ground litter. After lunch, a walk along the wooded trails produced our first "numbers" of wood warblers: Black-throated Green, Black-and-white, Nashville, Blue-winged and Northern Parula. From a hide overlooking a shallow lagoon both Yellow-breasted Chat and Louisiana Waterthrush augmented the warbler list. Both Ringed and Green Kingfishers (the latter a rare bird here) repeatedly flew the length of the water, whilst Solitary Sandpiper and Black-crowned Night-heron fed at the water's edge. Back at the picnic area an urgent and raucous cacophony of Green Jay screeches heralded the presence of a Texas Bull Snake, at least 6ft long with two Altamira Orioles amongst the company of onlookers. As we left the park, Pete B ignored the perils of wearing shorts, walked in and flushed five Northern Bobwhite from a particularly thorny weedy field and several more White-tailed Kites were seen. Whilst the scarce and very local Tamaulipas Crow failed to put in an appearance at Brownsville airfield, the evening drive to McAllen brought to a close a most successful day. Our species tally today had been 87, and the trip list had increased to 158.

Day 5: A day of highs and lows. Our main destination was to be Bentsen–Rio Grande Valley State Park. However, we had not anticipated a major road improvement plan which, temporarily removed a number of critical road signs, making for a somewhat fraught journey. Laughter is the best cure and John came to our rescue by admitting to the purchase (at a nearby garage) of a sachet of "Horny Goat Weed" – for a friend, allegedly. In all previous years, numerous recreational vehicles were parked up for the winter – each with feeders out and birds aplenty. For some inexplicable reason, the park authorities saw reason to remove these vehicles effective from April 1st this year – many birds saw this action as detrimental to their *raison d'être* and, no doubt, fed elsewhere. Just after checking in at the park HQ, the first birds of a very significant raptor passage drifted over to the north-east. For the next hour we watched well over 500 Swainson's Hawks (more than the cumulative total of the last five Birdfinders tours), perhaps 100 Broad-winged Hawks, six Mississippi Kites, one Red-shouldered Hawk, two Sharp-shinned Hawks and an American Kestrel pass over. We were soon to realise that the bright sunshine was not conducive to passerine fall conditions and so we concentrated on the speciality birds of the area. After a couple of attempts, nest building Northern Beardless-tyrannulet and nesting Gray Hawk were seen by all. Unfortunately, only half the party managed to get on to a particularly flighty Clay-colored Robin. By late morning birds had become very thin on the ground, save for a party of Indigo Buntings and a flypast Yellow-billed Cuckoo. The plan was to take our picnic lunch at Anzalduas Country Park; the problem was finding it! Again the roadworks caused confusion; so much so this time that we retraced our steps to Bentsen and ate there. During the course of the early afternoon, people did their own thing, birding in different directions. Andy saw not only a pair of Brown-crested Flycatchers, but also a Bobcat. Jim located a Least Grebe on the main lagoon which, lingered to the relief of all. Otherwise, single Nashville and Black-and-white Warblers were the only other birds of note found. At Bentsen we had one chief target left; it would not appear until dusk along with, we were assured, every flying bitey insect known to mankind. So back to the motel to bathe and eat, dress appropriately and return armed with long sleeves and long trousers. We were birding again by 6.00pm – but the birds did not perform, save for another Brown-crested Flycatcher, a couple of Couch's Kingbirds mimicking the call of Brown-crested Flycatcher, and a party of Cedar Waxwings. By 7.30pm, we were onsite, telescopes at the ready, anticipating the departure of an Elf Owl from its roosting tree hole. The bird performed magnificently to its gathered audience despite the intervention of an obnoxious American birder who had to be "persuasively ushered away" from standing directly under the tree, filming us. The next hour or so was spent driving the buses two abreast around the park roads seeking out "nightbirds". We saw three "nightjars", one was identified by Bus No1 as a Chuck-wills-Widow but could not safely put a name to the others, heard Ferruginous Pygmy-owl, and enjoyed two Nine-banded Armadillos and a Raccoon sauntering across our path. Just as we were leaving the park. Bus No. 1 flushed up a Common Pauraque from the roadside. The return journey was an equally fraught affair – had Bus No. 2 got a slow puncture? Only the morning would tell. Yes, it was a day of frustrations, but we saw some really important birds amongst a total of 71 species bring the running total for the tour to 169.

Day 6: Up before dawn – no puncture for Bus No. 2 – a good omen for the day. Following the now mandatory Whataburger breakfast, we took the relatively short journey to Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge – a variety of habitats, both wetland and woodland, a well appointed Visitor Centre and helpful staff. Even before we reached the gates, two Ringed Kingfishers flew over our heads. Once inside, literally the first bird we saw was an exquisite Yellow-throated Warbler performing close to the path. Our principal target species here was a nesting Rose-throated Becard. Within five minutes of our arrival at the nest site, the female put on a tantalising show, almost always partly obscured, before flying into the nest hole. Our frustration however was short lived. During the next half hour, she performed for all. Hot on the heels of the becard came our next priority – Tropical Parula – which had been reported singing about 400 metres away. At this point the tour party split into several groups, one searching for the Parula, others staying to enjoy the becard. Sadly, only one small group saw the grey-phased (presumed male) Hook-billed Kite which flew low over the trees. After 30 minutes of hearing what was certainly the parula calling from a dense group of trees, Tony picked it out amongst some hanging Spanish moss, close to a parking area – a magnificent male, and the best views ever had by a Birdfinders tour. In the same vicinity we saw not only Northern Parula, but also small parties of both Nashville and Black-throated Green Warblers. Amongst flowering shrubs, both Black-chinned and Ruby-throated Hummingbirds fed together, and Frank caught up with Olive Sparrow. During the late morning, we left the shade of the tree canopy to check out "Pintail Lakes". These held a number of Pied-billed Grebes, up to 15 White-faced Ibises, both Black-bellied and Fulvous Whistling-ducks, and a Clay-colored Sparrow seen by a lucky few. On returning for a final woodland bash, two Clay-colored Robins performed right out in the open to the relief of those who were unlucky at Bentsen. The "Myiarchus" flycatcher debate raged on – deciding between Brown-crested and Great Crested on one particular individual – only being 100% resolved by its response to a CD rendition of both songs – it was a Brown-crested! On our return to the Visitor Centre for lunch we disturbed a 5ft long Indigo Snake from sunning itself on the walkway and close by a Diamond-backed Water Snake dozed beneath a footbridge. Just before we left, a singing male Lesser Goldfinch appeared beside the boardwalk, sadly missed by most of the group. Our afternoon site, McAllen Sewage Ponds, was reached only after a visit to a local DIY store. They had never heard of the term "sewage

ponds" but gave explicit directions for a "water treatment centre". The ponds themselves were seriously degraded and reflected the long-term drought in the area. Waders present included at least 50 Least Sandpipers, six Solitary Sandpipers and two Short-billed Dowitchers. A couple of Gull-billed Terns quartered the ponds and a shy and retiring sparrow was eventually identified as a Grasshopper Sparrow. Tropical Kingbirds were reportedly breeding in the area – sadly the few Kingbirds we found were all definitely Couch's. Following a late afternoon spent either showering/shopping/eating or a combination thereof, we set off once more, this time for "suburban exotic birding" in McAllen itself. Our first stop, beside Hastings Bookstore, immediately produced nine Green Parakeets. Our final stop, an upmarket residential area looking for two species of "Amazonia" parrot, was a more drawn out affair. We obtained lousy views of six birds almost in silhouette which were identified as Yellow-headed Parrots. However, the evening was a success; a party of six Mississippi Kites flew north over our heads and a flock totalling perhaps over 100 Cedar Waxwings perched in roadside trees. A truly excellent day. Amongst the day's tally of 86 species, we had found some really rare birds. The tour list progressed to 181.

Day 7: We set off from McAllen at the ungodly hour of 5.15am to reach the El Rio RV Park at Chapeño, for daybreak, the prime birding time at this spot right on the banks of the Rio Grande. Last year at this time, temperatures were soaring well above the 100°F mark. This morning the biting cold south-west wind was anything but Mexican. A stunning perched Great Horned Owl blinking in the early-morning light was much more appreciated than the fly past Muscovy Duck. Both Ringed and Green Kingfishers put in further appearances. The feeders attracted several Brown Jays, together with Audubon's, Altamira, Bullock's and Hooded Orioles and two Yellow-headed Blackbirds flew across in front of us. It took until mid-morning for everyone to have a good (if there is such a thing) view of Muscovy Duck, and try as we may, only a few members of the party saw Red-billed Pigeon. Nevertheless, there were plenty of quality birds to keep our interest. Northern Caracaras were forever on view, a couple of American Kestrels flew over, a few Swainson's Hawks tested the thermals and a flock of American White Pelicans drifted over. By late morning, we were crawling along the farm roads crossing scrublands between Salineño and Falcon Heights. We managed to find a considerable variety of dry country birds including a couple of Scaled Quail, three Greater Roadrunners, three Cactus Wrens, many Curved-billed Thrashers, Verdin, small parties of Clay-colored, Lark and Black-throated Sparrows, and at least 12 Pyrrhuloxias. Sadly, Falcon Dam was closed to us – heightened security procedures as a result of the war being the excuse. Lunch, therefore, was taken in the picnic site at Falcon State Park, with two cracking adult male Vermilion Flycatchers for company. Our target for the afternoon was White-collared Seedeater since many of the group had missed the one at Sarita. Our first attempt (after a much-welcomed ice cream) was beside a small wooded pond near Zapata. All this produced were Lesser Goldfinch and House Finch, so we moved on to San Ygnacio and a privately-owned small bird reserve on the edge of town. We were met by the owner who told us that there were three nests and that the male regularly came to drink at one particular "dripping tap". A two-hour wait produced Common Ground-dove, Long-billed Thrasher, Green Jay, White-eyed Vireo, Lesser Goldfinch and Yellow-breasted Chat all coming into drink, but only fleeting flight views of the seedeater. Throughout our stay here, parties totalling several hundred Cedar Waxwings were on the move. By 6.15pm, we were back on the buses to drive to our hotel for the night in Laredo, which on paper appeared quite straightforward. However, a combination of incorrect directions, the building of a new bypass and our 1988 Texas road map spelt trouble. Thanks go to Simon for having an up-to-date map and guiding us back in the right direction! We'd seen a lot of good birds today amongst the 92 species, and made light of the transit blunders. We'd reached the halfway point of the tour and our running species total had increased to 198.

Day 8: Shortly after dawn, we set off from Laredo due north towards Carrizo Springs. Our first stop was to view a hirundine colony under the bridge at the intersection between Highways 35 and 83. Over 300 Cave Swallows, with a smattering of Cliff Swallows thrown in for good measure, flitted around in front of us. The first few miles of Highway 83 were driven at a snail's pace. Amongst the dry scrub we found a couple of Greater Roadrunners, three Cactus Wrens, several very drab (but very local) Cassin's Sparrows together with parties of Yellow-headed Blackbirds and the occasional Bullock's Oriole. Perhaps most dramatic of all, a Coyote stared at us warily from bush cover no more than 30ft from the road. Shortly thereafter, we made a planned stop at "the water tanks", and hit the jackpot. The place was heaving with birds. First to show were a party of over 20 Lark Buntings, the males in transitional plumage together with at least two adult male Painted Buntings adding a splash of colour. In terms of rarity value, pride of place goes to the adult Green-tailed Towhee which, put in a couple of appearances (a first for Birdfinders in Texas). Additionally, a plethora of more common passerines came in to bathe including Clay-colored, Black-throated, Chipping, Lark, Song, White-crowned and Vesper Sparrows, Orange-crowned Warbler, Pyrrhuloxia and Audubon's Oriole. The importance of Carrizo Springs cannot be overstressed. Apart from a necessary lunch and petrol stop, it is the last chance to buy alcohol before entering "dry" Concan County, our home for the next three nights. The afternoon drive onto the Edward's Plateau was all but devoid of birds until the junction with Highway 1273. From Bus No.2, a Zone-tailed Hawk circled round together with two immature Red-shouldered Hawks, which took some while to "put a name to". Within a few moments, we were at Neals Lodges. While Pete handled the registration, a number of Black-chinned Hummingbirds vied for attention at the feeders, alongside both Lesser Goldfinch and House Finch. The chalets appeared rustic from the outside, but had air-conditioning, a fridge (for the beer) and more beds than you know what to do with. For the last hours of daylight, we walked to the south-eastern quadrant of the grounds, passing a Black Phoebe gathering nesting material beside the Rio Frio. One of the main target birds here, the elusive Black-capped Vireo, was reported to favour a drinking pool close to cabin 61. This evening, the vireo was a "no show" but we did find Eastern Phoebe, Long-billed Thrasher, Bewick's Wren, Western Scrub-jay, Yellow-breasted Chat and White throated Sparrow. Much of the day had been taken up with driving. Nevertheless, we had still managed to see 90 species bringing the running trip total to 217.

Day 9: Our first non-Whataburger breakfast was celebrated in style with home-cooked bacon and eggs, fruit juice and coffee that tasted of coffee. This set the tone for the day nicely. We drove for about an hour to Lost Maples State Park. En route herds of imported Indian Blackbuck vied for our attention with the first truly Wild Turkeys – five birds including a displaying male. No sooner had we alighted from our vehicles than we added a further two species to our list, still in the car park – Canyon Wren and Rufous-crowned Sparrow. By slowly walking one of the trails, we came upon the first of several Golden-cheeked Warblers to be found this morning, including a female building a nest. Close by, we added Yellow-throated Vireo, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher and Eastern Wood-pewee, as well as the now familiar Nashville, Orange-crowned and Black-and-white Warblers. Moments thereafter, both gold star and house points of the day went to Jim for spotting a Black-capped Vireo – seen well, if briefly, by all members of the group. Further up the valley, in habitat rather reminiscent of Pyrenean foothills we found Dark-eyed Juncos, Spotted Towhee, and a real local rarity, Townsend's Solitaire – at the absolute south-eastern extreme of its range but in the same location as one found in 2001 by a Birdfinders group. By late morning, with Common Ravens arching overhead, we retraced our steps back down the valley, stopping to watch another Diamond-backed Water Snake swim down river. Lunch was taken at a picnic site replete with soaring Zone-tailed Hawk and bonking Common Ravens before the mid-afternoon drive to Neals for a shower and early dinner. By 5.00pm we were back on the road for the short drive to a private estate which contains a system of caves housing approximately 17 million Mexican Free-tailed Bats. Driving through the estate, we encountered our first Field Sparrows of the tour, Vesper and Lark Sparrows and three adult male Vermilion Flycatchers. Nice as these were the real highlight was a Nine-banded Armadillo, which shuffled to and fro almost within arms length of the two buses. The scrubby slopes to the caves produced Verdin, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher and Pyrrhuloxia together with Black-throated and Clay-colored Sparrows, whilst a pair of Rock Wrens were seen taking food into a nest hole adjacent to the cave entrance. Overhead, Red-tailed and Swainson's Hawks drifted over, no doubt impatiently awaiting their evening snack, and a very pallid-looking Merlin shot through. By 8.15pm, the first bats trickled out. By 8.20pm several swarms spewed out of the fissures in plumes that would go on for four hours. What is perhaps even more amazing is that some of these bats had already been flying inside the cave for about an hour before reaching the entrance. By 9.00pm it was completely dark, the density of the escaping swarm had thickened still further, we were wet with "bat pee" and it was time to leave. We exited the track to the sound of several Chuck-will's-Widows before making the short drive back to Neals. Another excellent day. We might have only seen 79 species, but there were some real crackers amongst them. Running total for the tour increased to 235.

Day 10: A "freestyle day" – a day off for the drivers. An opportunity to bird individually or collectively the various trails and feeding stations within Neals. Straight after breakfast most people found the two American Robins which, were late winter lingerers, and various pairs of Bell's Vireos on territories near the Lodges' main buildings. During the course of the morning, highlights included a fine-plumaged Red-shouldered Hawk flying up the valley; several Bewick's Wrens – drabber and colder-toned than the commoner Carolinas, up to four Bushtits, 10 Pine Siskins and a Wilson's Warbler (proving that it is nigh on impossible to make sense of the migration pattern this spring. On the one hand, Wilson's is a late migrant, on the other, common early migrants such as Common and Lesser Nighthawks had yet to arrive). Lunch was taken beside the river, but not before Jim gripped everyone off with the only Hermit Thrush to be seen on the tour. By early afternoon, several Ruby-crowned Kinglets and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers started to appear and later on Yellow-breasted Chats, Spotted Towhee and Rufous-crowned Sparrows performed by the drinking pool close to Cabin 61 – but Black-capped Vireo was conspicuous by its absence. It had been an excellent day for mammals with both Skunk and Possum being seen (but fortunately not smelt) well in the morning. Birds were not abundant at Neals, but it was relaxing birding allowing people to "do their own thing". The species total for the day amounted to 81 and the cumulative total, 244. Following dinner, the evening's entertainment was "Chez John and Pat". Simon walked off with the quiz prize, and Martyn will be sending Nigel his cleaning bill – why is it that people wait for me to have a mouth full of beer before cracking one-liner jokes?

Day 11: Much of today was taken up with the tedious journey east from Edwards Plateau through to Baytown – a long way, but not as long as envisaged. We gradually reacquainted ourselves with species absent from the plateau – Red-tailed Hawks, Eastern Kingbirds, Eastern Meadowlarks, and even grackles. Around midday, we left the monotony of Interstate 10 to drive the farm roads surrounding Katy's ricefields. Most of the fields were dry. However on open splashes we found excellent numbers of Fulvous Whistling-ducks amongst the more widespread Northern Shovelers, Blue-winged Teals and Mottled Ducks; both Northern Harriers and Swainson's Hawks flew low over the fields and at least five Upland Sandpipers fed in the wet meadows amongst a number of dowitchers (likely to be Long-billed). Unfortunately only a few members of the party glimpsed the immature Yellow-crowned Night-heron fly past (the only one to be seen on the trip). By mid-afternoon we had checked into our Motel 6 in Baytown and drove further east to White Memorial Park. Initially birds were loathe to give themselves up. However a group of four Baltimore Orioles was soon joined by several Scarlet Tanagers together with Chestnut-sided and Pine Warblers and Northern Parula. Both Downy and Red-bellied Woodpeckers performed well but sadly the only views of Pileated were in flight. This evening, the entertainment was at Iguana Joe's. The staff did not sell alcohol but they were quite happy for us to bring in our own. Frank therefore marshalled the troops, who quickly returned with armfuls of beer cases, acquired from a nearby garage. Day's count, 78 species – running total, 253.

Day 12: The start of the last leg of the tour, and hopes of hitting migration "big time". The day commenced at a cracking pace the moment we hit Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge. The first lake in the Shoveler Pond area was heaving with shorebirds and waterfowl. Perhaps as many as 30 Wilson's Phalaropes in full breeding dress dashed to and fro, many chasing flies. Pectoral and White-rumped Sandpipers fed in the drier grassy areas. Flocks of Semipalmated Sandpipers included single Least and Western, and some of the Stilt Sandpipers were in absolutely magnificent plumage. A single Franklin's Gull, easily "Ross's pink", was accompanied by Caspian, Gull-billed and Forster's Terns,

and amongst the Blue-winged Teals we found a pair of Green-winged Teals. Driving further up the track we came to Willow Pond. At first glance the trees seemed devoid of birds, but soon two or three Yellow-rumped (Myrtle) Warblers appeared, to be followed by the only Palm Warbler for the trip (and only the second one found in the last five Birdfinders tours). Hot on their heels were two Tennessee Warblers and an *Empidonax* flycatcher, which remained unidentified despite at least three different names being tentatively suggested. Still further on, three Least Bitterns appeared within feet of each other and a couple of American Purple Gallinules clambered through clumps of nearby reeds. At the western edge of the ponds, Marsh Wrens called incessantly from the reedbeds, Long-billed Dowitchers fed "too close to focus on" and a Sora Rail was glimpsed by a lucky few. Driving around the south-east side an American Bittern fed right out in the open, quite oblivious of the attention it attracted. By early afternoon, we had driven on to High Island; the distant rumble of thunder from the south-west being a taste of things to come. From the gallery, the bird list grew steadily with Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Swainson's and Gray-cheeked Thrushes, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks and a female Painted Bunting all putting in an appearance. Nearby, at Prothonotary Pond, three Yellow and a single Yellow-throated Warbler flicked through, whilst at the Cathedral a male Hooded Warbler showed extremely well. Within an hour of our arrival the heavens opened with lightning flashing all around us. Rather surprisingly, few birds dropped out of the sky – a few Northern Waterthrushes, at least one Brown Thrasher and a few Northern Parulas, but little else. "Word on the street" was that the weather was set in for the day, so by 4.00pm we retraced our steps to White Memorial Park where both Red-shouldered Hawk and Pileated Woodpecker performed before the rain caught up with us, bringing an end to the birding proceedings. A magnificent birding day – 111 species seen, and our trip total had taken a hike to 278. Now it was Easter Sunday, most of the restaurants had closed, and we were hungry. By way of a rather circuitous route, a raucous evening was had by most, not all, at the Outback Steak House, with Peter H needing windscreen wipers for his glasses – caused by the length (or lack thereof) of the waitress's skirt.

Day 13: Probably the most successful and enjoyable day of the tour to date. A total of 149 species seen by members of the party. Our first stop was at the salt marsh along Yacht Basin Road on the Bolivar Peninsula. No sooner had we alighted from the buses when the first of several Clapper Rails poked its head up. The target bird for this site, Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow, performed "according to plan" despite it being a breezy day, they responded to Pete's tape within moments and we soon had at least eight birds flying in to within fifteen metres of the road. Next onto the seabird/wader/shorebird roost. We arrived two hours before high tide and slowly drove along the sandy shoreline quickly adding both Common Tern and Piping Plover to the trip list. From the car park we walked the half mile along the saltings. Wilson's Plovers and Horned Lark were the first to announce their presence. In the shallows, flocks of up to 2,500 American Avocets (most in full breeding plumage) were constantly on view. Groups of roosting Dunlin included good numbers of both Western and Semipalmated Sandpipers, Snowy Plovers and a few Red Knot. As we approached the deep-water channel, a pack of at least 50 Marbled Godwit mingled with much larger numbers of both dowitchers and Hudsonian Whimbrel. Seabirds on the tideline included American Herring, Ring-billed and Laughing Gulls, Caspian, Royal, Forster's, Sandwich, Least and Black Terns. A lucky find were five Magnificent Frigatebirds slowly and gracefully drifting high overhead – a summer visitor to Texas and the first for a Birdfinders tour of Texas. The walk back to the carpark necessitated a slight detour, "Wilson's Plover nest on the pathway". From Bolivar we returned eastward to Rollover Pass. What started off as a "comfort break" turned into a fully-fledged seawatch with packs of ducks, gulls and terns flying past including four first-summer Bonaparte's Gulls, two immature Northern Gannets (another Texas first for Birdfinders) and a party of 19 Black Terns feeding on the tideline. Out at sea a school of at least nine Bottle-nosed Dolphins followed the progress of a fishing boat, with two actually breaching right out of the water. By midday, it was again time for High Island and Boy Scout Woods with hope that yesterday's rain and thunder had worked in our favour. We were not disappointed. A total of 21 species of warbler were found including excellent numbers of ground-hugging Kentucky and Hooded Warblers together with both waterthrushes and Ovenbird, Cerulean (a species who's population has crashed in recent years) and Prothonotary Warblers, not forgetting single Golden-winged, Blackburnian, Swainson's and Chestnut-sided. The supporting cast was made up from thrushes, represented by Swainson's, Gray-cheeked and Veery; vireos by Yellow-throated, Red-eyed and Warbling and last, but by no means least, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Baltimore Oriole, Scarlet and Summer Tanagers all found in double figures, and the first Common Nighthawks of the trip at their daytime roosts. From High Island we "twitched" Anahuac for a couple of splendid summer-plumaged Hudsonian Godwits. Many of the shorebirds seen yesterday were still present. A final stop was made again at White Memorial Park and again Red-headed Woodpecker failed to perform. The stop was, however, made worthwhile with Blackburnian and Yellow-throated Warblers, Pileated, Downy and Red-bellied Woodpeckers and a Great Crested Flycatcher all being seen well. The day ended once more at Iguana Joe's with excellent-value Mexican food and more than a few "imported" beers. Tour trip list increased to 302.

Day 14: Our last full day's birding and a day of ups and downs. We decided to spend the bulk of the day in the High Island area, but allowed a brief stop east of Anahuac to view some wet ploughed fields. Waders were thick on the ground but the depth of the furrows meant that only a percentage of those present were ever on show. Amongst the large numbers of Hudsonian Whimbrel, Long-billed Dowitchers and Black-bellied Plover were parties of Pectoral Sandpipers and American Golden Plovers. Once we reached High Island, our first stop was at Smith Oaks Sanctuary. We were greeted at the car park by a Yellow-billed Cuckoo but, for the first hour, birds were reluctant to show themselves. One of the main attractions here, the egret and spoonbill colony lived up to all expectations with roll after roll of film taken on breeding dress Roseate Spoonbills. Back in the woods, slowly but surely we built up an impressive bird list. First to show were the ground-dwellers – Swainson's and Gray-cheeked Thrush, Ovenbird, Hooded and Kentucky Warbler. A female Blue Grosbeak flitted around the fringe of the woods before Golden-winged, Blue-winged, Blackburnian and Magnolia Warblers were found amongst an ever-increasing number of Tennessee Warblers. All this whilst Gray Catbirds seemed to forage in every available area of leaf litter. By midday, we hopped over to Boy Scout Woods and the tempo slowed a tad. Many of the species present earlier in the day were again seen, together with Veery, Yellow-

breasted Chat and female Painted Bunting. During the course of the afternoon highlights included an incredibly confiding Swainson's Warbler, our first male Blackpoll Warbler, a rather elusive Swamp Sparrow and many, many more Gray Catbirds. Then our luck ran out. We decided to visit an area where Swallow-tailed Kites were known to breed – a journey much longer than anticipated. Directions were vague, the weather overcast and we saw nothing, save the party of seven Mississippi Kites flying over the road. Nevertheless we had found 104 species during the day, and our tour list had increased to 305. The traditional last night meal of the tour required a revisit to the Outback Steak House – the meal was excellent and the beer flowed freely.

Day 15: After the disappointment of the previous evening at Liberty, it was important to end the tour on a high note. We spent the final morning at W.G. Jones State Park – and it was a huge success. The ornithological focus of the park management is its breeding population of Red-cockaded Woodpeckers. We saw at least five. On previous days we had visited White Memorial Park looking in vain for Red-headed Woodpecker. This morning we found at least three. Brown-headed Nuthatch can sometimes be tricky to find, this morning our first was seen within five minutes. All the while every group of trees appeared to have a singing Pine Warbler. Our last hour was spent around the Middle Lakes picnic area. Wood Ducks perched high in trees were an addition to the tour list; Northern Waterthrush, Yellow-breasted Chat and singing Hooded Warbler being the only other birds worthy of mention. A final comfort break, at the Forest HQ, was interrupted by perhaps the most unexpected find of the tour – two Wood Storks drifted over the car park, heading slowly north-east. All that remained was to return the vehicles to Advantage Car, say farewell to Martyn, and take the shuttle to the airport for the long flight home, with 310 species "under the belt".

Our grateful thanks are due to Pete and Nigel for handling all of the driving, the administration associated with five different sets of accommodation and arranging access to a variety of state parks and nature reserves. However, we all need to thank each and every one of the tour participants for gelling together so well, seeing the funny side of one or two "logistical blips", and ensuring an enjoyable time was had by all.

Postscript- After seeing the shuttle bus off, I picked up my rental car and drove back to Boy Scout Woods. It was overcast and windy and my expectations were low. For the first thirty minutes all I saw were smaller numbers of species seen the day before. Then at 2.45pm I guess I became rather (or even more) unpopular. Whilst sitting in that gazebo-type structure overlooking the marsh (in a futile attempt to see the Swamp Sparrow), a Swallow-tailed Kite flew low towards me, passing no more than 30ft away, circled the wood, and was gone. As if this wasn't enough, a couple of hours later, a Black-billed Cuckoo flew into a tree right beside the stalls at the Gallery and spent the next thirty minutes or so feeding on tent caterpillars. Anyone wanting to know what I saw at High Island on the 25th can contact me at martynkenefick@hotmail.com