

# Texas

7–22 April 2011

## Participants

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**Swainson's Warbler**  
Courtesy Craig Holden

## Leader James P. Smith

**Day 1:** After a relaxing 10-hour flight direct from Heathrow to Houston, we all got our bags and met up with James in the arrivals hall, and introduced ourselves to one another. With pleasantries dealt with we trooped to the car rental terminal where the short journey produced our first birds including Cliff Swallow and Swainson's Hawk, birds we would become very familiar with as the tour progressed. After picking up our sizeable minibus and packing the luggage away we were off to our first base, Rockport. We made good time through Houston, not really hitting any traffic, and were soon finding the surroundings less urban and much more agricultural. As we motored south-west towards the coast all eyes were keenly scanning and we saw some very good birds: Bald Eagle, Northern Caracara, Red-headed Woodpecker and Black-bellied Whistling-duck being the pick of the bunch. Amongst more the common species that we would see daily, both Turkey and Black Vultures and Great-tailed Grackles featured throughout the drive. About four hours later, which included a stop for a meal, we rolled into our very nice motel overlooking Aransas Bay in Fulton/Rockport. Most of us had been up for nearly 24 hours and we all retired weary but excited with what our first full day would bring!

**Day 2:** The habit of my personal body clock waking early stateside on the first day meant that Craig and I had been waiting since 04.00 for first light. At around 06.00 we met the others for breakfast and I got my first introduction to a waffle machine! I can say, now with some experience, that they're not as easy to use as they look! With breakfast soon finished some of us viewed the harbour from the motel car park and we were treated to close views of Laughing Gull, Great Blue Heron, Royal Tern and Brown Pelican – all birds we'd see lots more of as the day went on. James then rounded us up and we travelled the short distance to the marina where we boarded our vessel for the next four hours, the *Skimmer*. We were booked onto a trip into the Aransas Bay National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in search of the globally endangered Whooping Crane. Once on the brink of extinction, over 200 birds winter here and we hoped at least some would still be present. A Great Northern Diver lurked in the harbour as we sped off across the bay. As we reached the refuge new birds came thick and fast on a series of pools and shingle islands. Shorebirds were particularly numerous with good views of American Oystercatcher, American Avocet, Least Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Stilt Sandpiper, Long-billed Curlew, "Hudsonian" Whimbrel and Long-billed Dowitcher. These pools were also home to many Blue-winged Teals and Gull-billed Terns. From a non-avian viewpoint we had fantastic looks at five Coyotes on one of the islands as they tried in vain to hide amongst the sparse grasses. Some of us also saw a Wild Boar too! We continued into the refuge getting good views of singing Seaside Sparrows before

suddenly there before us were two majestic Whooping Cranes! The birds' white plumage was slightly muddied but they still took my breath away as they picked gracefully around the pools, preying on unsuspecting Blue Crabs, apparently oblivious to our presence just 75 yards away. We watched these birds for over 30 minutes, an amazing experience and a stunning start to the trip! We left the cranes to feed in peace and ventured around the bay checking several shingle islands as good birds just kept coming. One small island held a pair of nesting Wilson's Plovers and another had a rookery of Great Blue Herons containing a smart Reddish Egret and Roseate Spoonbills hiding amongst the crowd. At our final stop we got really close looks at American White Pelican and Neotropic Cormorant. It had been an incredible morning and the group returned happy as we moored in Fulton marina with the same Great Northern Diver still present in the harbour and giving good views. With lunch fast approaching, we took time to have a lovely meal in a harbour side restaurant. Feeling fully refreshed we set off for the remainder of the afternoon to Port Aransas on Mustang Island. Just down the road from the restaurant we found both Greater and Lesser Scaups diving in the shallows literally feet from the shore, presumably finding food washed in by the strong southerly wind that had been blowing since our arrival the night before. As we left Rockport, we made a short stop at some roadside pools that were teeming with birds. Here we added to our wildfowl haul with Redhead, Northern Shoveler and Green-winged Teal and we also had much closer views of some shorebirds seen earlier in the day and our first really decent looks at the impressive White-tailed Hawk. Once on Mustang Island our first stop was a tiny reserve called Paradise Pond. This 'postage stamp' sized spot really looked good and, although a southerly wind wasn't ideal for migrants, with a little work we managed to winkle out some good birds in the shape of Northern Parula, Summer Tanager, Orchard Oriole, Swamp Sparrow, Indigo Bunting and a lovely male Ruby-throated Hummingbird. As it was a bit slow for 'land-bird' migrants we decided to take a look at the beach as we'd had a tip off from a local that there were lots of birds there. On arrival large flock of terns loafed on the beach and hordes of waders scurried amongst the seaweed on the shore. Many Black Terns were present amongst the throng, and we counted at least 47 birds. We also had our first Sandwich and Common Terns and a lone Black Skimmer. Hidden amongst the terns was an American Golden-plover and James was pleased to get this bird so early in the trip. If only we knew at the time how many more we would see during the tour! The tide line was alive with shorebirds as Sanderling, Dunlin, Western and Semipalmated Sandpipers, and best of all a lone Piping Plover, all vied for attention. As is often the case in North America, the shorebirds allowed us to approach them to within a few feet – a photographers dream! Having checked the beach thoroughly we moved onto the Neuces River Wetland Centre. As we walked out on the boardwalk we had a Sora creeping around in the ditch below us. Climbing to the top of the observation tower, there were many birds present on the lagoon before us, including large numbers of wildfowl with Redhead, Lesser Scaup, Ruddy Duck and a fine male Cinnamon Teal. In the bushes below, a smart Common Yellowthroat sang and showed itself briefly whilst Green Heron, Least Bittern and White-faced Ibis were all seen in flight as stunning Purple Martins hawked insects overhead. Just before leaving the tower, James noticed an absolutely MASSIVE Alligator; it was a monster and must have been at least 10ft long! We watched it as it tried to stalk a Great Blue Heron; luckily the heron was alert to the threat and this gigantic 'gator would have to wait a bit longer for its supper! Back at the parking lot some of us had brief looks at an Orange-crowned Warbler before a very excited local birder told us she had just seen a Blue Bunting – a rare vagrant from Mexico and an exceptional bird in spring. We quickly dashed back to Paradise Pond and staked out the spot, but on this occasion luck was not on our side and no buntings of any kind could be found. However, we did add White-eyed and Blue-headed Vireos to the birds seen previously. This pretty much saw an end to our first day and what a day it had been with over 100 species seen! With another lovely meal to round off the day we all retired in eager anticipation of tomorrow's journey south into the Rio Grande Valley.

**Day 3:** We awoke to find that the strong southerly wind had not abated. Undeterred, we loaded the van and set off on our journey south. As we left Rockport a group of 15 Hudsonian Whimbrels flew low over the van – a sign of things to come. The next couple of hours were fairly uneventful as we headed south, save for numerous Scissor-tailed Flycatchers adorning the roadside wires. Just south of Sarita we made the first stop for our primary target, Tropical Parula. However, it was clear from the outset that the strong winds were likely to scupper our plans. I'm sure birds were present, and the habitat was perfect but hearing them over the wind and traffic was practically impossible. Despite the testing conditions there were clearly many birds in the oaks and new birds were quickly added to the list. Couch's Kingbirds chased each other around and both Golden-fronted and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers showed well, these becoming a common fare for the next week or so. Next, a calling Black-crested Titmouse was coaxed closer and flew excitedly above our heads. The birds just kept coming and we were stunned by the beauty of numerous Hooded Orioles – what a beautiful bird! Finally, we found two Lincoln's Sparrows skulking as only sparrows can do, and a fine Buff-bellied Hummingbird zipped between the trees feeding on pink flowers draped amongst the Spanish moss clad oaks. We moved on the short distance to Sarita rest stop area where we tried again for Tropical Parula, unfortunately with similar results. We did, however, see our first Green Jays and the far less glamorous Brown-headed Cowbirds and Brewer's Blackbirds. We pressed on south towards Raymondville, the gateway to 'the valley' and just north of there we found some promising roadside wetlands holding lots of birds. Good numbers of both Hudsonian Whimbrels and American Golden-plovers were present, neither ever common on this tour but these numbers were note worthy. On the pools

20+ American Wigeons would prove to be the only ones we would see on the entire trip. Not to be outdone, raptors were also in evidence with a pair of Northern Caracaras causing havoc and yet another White-tailed Hawk gave our best views yet. We reached Raymondville around lunchtime, and James did us proud with a lovely little Mexican restaurant he had used before, which didn't disappoint. After lunch we took the scenic route to Weslaco and it soon became apparent that there were lots of raptors around. Most were Swainson's Hawks but also our first gorgeous White-tailed Kite appeared as did a brief Sharp-shinned Hawk. Whilst we had been watching the raptors James's heard a singing Cassin's Sparrow but despite some conservative playback we couldn't locate the bird, hardly surprising considering the strength of the afternoon wind. Before we moved on we decided to explore a little farther down the same farm track as the fields further on looked promising. We were rewarded with a fantastic colony of Cave Swallows nesting under a bridge over an irrigation canal. The birds swooped and swirled just above us given breathtaking views. On the fields we found yet more American Golden-plovers and some very smart Horned Larks, including a few singing males. It all very different from the 'Arctic-like' conditions that I'm used to seeing 'Shore Larks' in back home! We continued, turning south once again and finding more promising wetland areas. The first stop provided us with Least Grebe, Fulvous Whistling-duck and noisy, colourful Great Kiskadees. The call of this bird would provide a seemingly constant soundtrack to our time in the valley. At the second site the wind made holding 'scopes difficult so viewing was somewhat awkward. There were many wildfowl and shorebirds present though two Lark Sparrows were new for the trip and they performed well just a few yards away as they foraged along the fence line. Just before we left this site we witnessed the most bizarre sight of the trip. James picked up a small green-and-yellow bird flying rapidly over the lake, quickly identifying it as a Budgerigar! We watched in disbelief as it proceeded to persistently chase and harass some poor Least Sandpipers all over the place for many minutes – very odd indeed! Just before we reached Weslaco some keen eyes had James applying the brakes and doing a quick u-turn. Soon we were all enjoying five Upland Sandpipers as they strode around their chosen paddock, and these were complemented by two Eastern Meadowlarks whose large size surprised some but we all marvelled at their sumptuous yellow breasts. And that was almost game over for the day as we arrived at our motel in Weslaco, which would prove to be a very comfortable base for the next four nights. But the party's never over, and even in the motel car park we still continued to add new birds with Curve-billed Thrashers and Inca Doves giving good views. That night we went to the Blue Onion for dinner, a venue with good food and beer which we would use several times during our stay, and the staff were extremely pretty too!

**Day 4:** The day dawned warm and sunny though still with a strong southern wind. There were many birds around the motel grounds with the highlight being two Harris's Hawks on the telegraph poles. Some news was gleaned overnight of a Sprague's Pipit at nearby La Fiera sod fields and we set off in optimistic mood for our first full day in the Rio Grande Valley. As we travelled east through Mercedes, James expertly spotted four Tropical Kingbirds on wires over an empty parking lot. We quickly pulled over and were able to enjoy prolonged views and hear vocals of this rare bird, and study the subtle differences between these and the very similar but much more widespread Couch's Kingbirds. The locals swear that they can only be separated by voice! With good directions we found the correct sod fields though were somewhat daunted by the prospect of finding a tiny pipit in such a large area – a needle in a haystack came to mind. However, we soldiered on and began to search, first finding many Upland Sandpipers and American Golden-plovers but initially no sign of the pipit. Checking the eastern section of the fields, I soon picked up a bird just in front of the bus which James instantly confirmed as 'the bird we were after' – a fine Sprague's Pipit. First we had decent views from the bus but against the light. We then drove on, parked up and waited to see if it would return to its favoured feeding area which it did after about 15 minutes – exactly where we initially found it. Rarely does a group get to enjoy prolonged scope views of this true denizen of grasslands! Delighted with success, we moved on to Estero Llano Grande State Park. This was a super site with a broad range of habitats and a wealth of birds. On the lagoon by the visitor centre were many familiar shorebirds and wildfowl and we were able to get our first decent looks at White-faced Ibis, and Richard finally caught up with Cinnamon Teal. After consulting the park staff we went to an area around the fearsomely named Alligator Lake. We hoped to find Common Pauraque (a large nightjar) at its daytime roost. On reaching the lake we quickly found a Green Heron and three Yellow-crowned Night-herons whilst an Olive Sparrow sang its 'bouncing ball' song from the bank side vegetation though remained frustratingly hidden throughout our time there. Other than a few egrets the lake was very quiet, with not even an Alligator on view so we began our search of the scrub for the Pauraque. Initially we had no joy, it was quite like an avian game of Where's Wally! We did however turn up some good things in the process: Yellow-breasted Chat, Long-billed Thrasher, the almost prehistoric Plain Chachalaca, and a real bonus with great looks at a Groove-billed Ani. We decided to have one last try for the Pauraque and, at the 11th hour, I was lucky enough to pick one out and was then amazed to see it was actually two birds – an adult bird brooding a chick. Wow! We rounded up the stragglers and all had superb views of this gorgeously cryptically plumaged Nightjar skilfully hidden just feet away in an impenetrable thicket. With thoughts turning to lunch we decided to head back to the bus but en route we were stopped by another even closer singing Olive Sparrow, once again we couldn't find the bird but whilst searching we heard a blood curdling squeal coming from some poor, ill-fated mammal. A couple of Black-crested Titmice began mobbing furiously, and then I saw it! It was a huge snake

which James believed to be a Texas Rat Snake – never mind rats, this thing looked big enough to eat a horse! Tightly trapped within its coils was the poor thing we had heard it squeal its last breath. Other than a large rodent, we were not sure what it was. We watched in morbid fascination as the snake tried to eat the rodent whole! I must admit I'd seen enough and walked away, and it still gives me the shivers thinking about it now. We went to lunch at the popular Blue Onion and discussed our options for the rest of the day. We decided we would return to Estero Llano for a brief afternoon session before heading to the motel to prepare for a visit to Bentsen State Park for owls and other crepuscular goodies. We entered Estero Llano Grande SP and searched the 'Tropical Zone'. At the first shady area James said "this looks like a good area for a thrush" and, as if by magic, there was a Clay-coloured Thrush flicking its way through the leaf-litter! This subtly-plumaged bird showed well and was a welcome addition to the list. We pushed on encountering many species now familiar to us, including the constant racket of chachalacas. James then heard an oriole sing and coaxed it to the top of a nearby tree revealing a stunning Altamira Oriole. The largest of the 'valley's' orioles was gorgeous and easily one of the most beautiful birds I have ever seen. It gave outstanding views and drew many gasps of admiration from the group before slipping away as quickly as it appeared. Further round the trail we got our first looks at White-tipped Doves but we had no luck optimistically waiting for a wintering White-throated Thrush at the water feature. We weren't too despondent as it hadn't been reported for over a week and had probably left for its normal home south of the border. With an evening owl session planned at Bentsen we left Estero Llano and returned to the motel for a break and to get geared up for the evening – long trousers, long sleeves and insect repellent being the norm for this outing. The mosquitoes at Bentsen SP have a fearsome reputation and we weren't taking any chances. In the event, we needn't have worried as we hardly saw an insect all night. Maybe the recent strong winds or drought had been keeping them at bay, who knows? As we walked into the park we stopped to admire a pair of Black Phoebes that were nesting under the bridge and a glorious Green Kingfisher sat amongst the reeds and proceeded to catch a fish, flying off with her dinner down river. Our first stop, near the park gate, had traditionally been the nesting site for a pair of tiny Elf Owls. We scanned the hole at the top of a telegraph pole and could make out a head inside the hole which we quickly checked through our 'scopes. The excitement was somewhat tempered as the head clearly belonged to a Golden-fronted Woodpecker – oh dear!! Now, unless the Elf Owl had taken on a lodger we had a problem. Not to worry, we still hoped we might be able to hear one in the park so we carried on. As we reached the maintenance area the loud rattling call of Ringed Kingfishers could be heard and then suddenly above us were two gigantic kingfishers. They were massive and a very impressive sight as they chased each other around the trees. We arrived at a likely looking spot for owls and decided to wait as the light began to fade. As dusk descended, the first of several Lesser Nighthawks appeared swooping around the darkening sky as they chased their prey. I then heard an Eastern Screech-owl call behind us but we were immediately distracted as a hunting Common Pauraque landing on the verge beside us and giving exceptional views down to a few feet. By this time, two screech-owls were calling and James managed to spotlight one as we watched this beautiful little owl sing its monotone trill typical of the *macalli* race within five yards of where we stood – wow ! We walked further into the park listening hard for an Elf Owl but it was not to be. We weren't too upset though as we'd had a wonderful evening with numerous additions to the trip. We returned to the hotel and prepared ourselves with an appointment with a cowboy the next day, and some very special birds.

**Day 5:** Today we planned a visit to a private ranch north of Raymondville for the opportunity to see the rare Ferruginous Pygmy-owl. To our delight the weather had finally turned in our favour. It was cooler, overcast and the wind had swung around to the west, and was forecast to be northerly by the afternoon. Could that be a nice recipe for a fall-out of migrants at South Padre Island later in the day? We set off early, stopping in Raymondville for a Macdonald's breakfast before meeting Carson (our guide) at the San Miguelito Ranch. If he wasn't a real cowboy then he certainly looked the part! We followed him into the ranch down a series of very sandy tracks and somehow James avoided getting stuck in the sand. We arrived at the ranch house, a lovely picturesque setting, but we were then given a stark warning to watch out for rattlesnakes! Carson led us into the back garden to look for the owls watching for rattlesnakes as he went. Expecting to have to search long and hard to find the birds we were stunned to have one looking at us curiously from a low branch no more than 30ft away! What an amazing owl and what incredible views, it even spontaneously called for us on a couple of occasions, truly wonderful! With a little spare time we searched the areas around the nearby pond and turned up some cracking birds as we found our first Vermillion Flycatcher, Eastern Bluebird, Blue Grosbeak and heard a Northern Beardless-tyrannulet, though we couldn't tempt the latter into view. Somewhat surprisingly we also added two shorebirds to the trip list with a Wilson's Snipe in the sedges around the pond and three calling Solitary Sandpipers flying high overhead. With our time up, Carson escorted us out of the ranch before James's luck in the sand ran out. Carson, with great efficiency, quickly towed us out with his truck like he'd done a thousand times before. We said our good-byes to Carson and with the wind now approaching the north we headed south and then east towards South Padre Island. As we crossed the Coastal Prairie near the Boca Chica NWR we made a series of stops to search for the re-introduced Aplomado Falcon. Although not officially ABA countable, this is still a very impressive bird and well worth looking for. Initially we struggled but we did see a nice displaying Cassin's Sparrow and several Chihuahuan Ravens, before finding an Aplomado on a pylon beside the road. Great 'scope views of this exquisite raptor were had by all. With everything seemingly

going to plan we entered South Padre Island in good spirits and decided to break for lunch – Subway in this case, and then set off in search of migrants. We pulled into the parking lot of the convention centre full of anticipation, immediately finding a Baltimore Oriole – a nice start. We then proceeded to search the small area of manicured gardens to see what had arrived. Initially things seemed a little slower than we'd hoped but we still managed to find Tennessee, Nashville, Black-and-white and Yellow-rumped Warblers and Northern Parula plus some Indigo Buntings and a Lincoln's Sparrow. Having covered the bushes we went to check the beach and there were a multitude of birds present. Pick of the bunch for me were around 50 fabulous Franklins Gulls, some with a lovely pink flush to their underparts. There were many shorebirds present with exceptionally close views of Marbled Godwit and Short-billed Dowitcher. It never fails to amaze me how close the birds in the USA will let you approach them. We could literally walk within feet of these birds as they fed seemingly totally unconcerned by our presence. It was a photographers dream – if only I had a camera! Richard then spotted a curiously plumaged gull which at first glance looked like a white-winged gull but a close inspection revealed that was not the case. The bird was in a heavily bleached and worn plumage state and the jury's still out on the identification but we think we narrowed it down to either an American Herring Gull or a Thayer's Gull. We may never know for sure, but it was an educational bird whatever it was. With the wind continuing to strengthen we renewed our search for migrants as there were clearly more birds arriving. There were increased numbers of the warblers plus a stunning Yellow Warbler, and vireos were represented by three Warbling and one Red-eyed. A gloriously gaudy male Painted Bunting was as outrageous in reality as it looks in the field guides! After a while we started to see the birds for a second time so we decided to finish off with a walk around the boardwalk over the marshes, we heard a King Rail and saw our first Clapper Rails and plenty of Soras. A ridiculously tame American Golden-plover stood directly below us as we passed by and a fine Spotted Sandpiper, complete with spots, shared a pool with a Greater Yellowlegs and two Pectoral Sandpipers. Amongst the mangrove bushes we continued to find tired migrants, the highlights being a female Hooded Warbler and a very skulking Northern Waterthrush, plus multiple Indigo and Painted Buntings. With a long drive back to Weslaco we reluctantly dragged ourselves away and headed home stopping at a Denny's for dinner. The day had been fantastic and had given us a taste of what migration can be like in Texas. We were assured that this was a relatively 'quiet day' but we were more than happy with our returns for the day.

**Day 6:** The wind remained in the north-west as the day dawned pleasantly cool. We planned to start at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge in the hope that the changing direction would have resulted in some raptors dropping in to roost the previous evening. Ultimately, we hoped to be at the 'official' Hawk Watch by about 08.30 to see any 'take off' as the birds lifted on warm air thermals. We pulled into the parking lot to the constant barrage of noise from Plain Chachalacas and Great Kiskadees. Arriving at the official counting station we set up our scopes in eager anticipation of the flight soon to take place. Whilst we waited we had our first decent views of Bronzed Cowbird and another Groove-billed Ani, which proved elusive as it moved around the mesquite scrub below us. We waited and waited, and then we waited some more and, save for some local vultures, no raptors appeared. So much for the predictions! After giving it over an hour we decided to go to look elsewhere. More than halfway down the track we noticed..., yes you've guessed it, raptors taking off from everywhere! We hurried back to the hawk watch and then spent at least the next 30 minutes getting really good views of mainly Broad-winged Hawks but also a handful of Sharp-shinned Hawks and well over 200 Anhingas in a spectacular movement north. With activity starting to quieten down we decided to go to the Hawk Tower and try for Hook-billed Kite and Grey Hawk. On the way White-eyed Vireo, Black-and-white and Nashville Warblers kept us entertained. Olive Sparrows sang but again didn't show. When we reached the tower I suddenly remembered my fear of heights! Oh well, nothing ventured and all that, so up we climbed to the top for fantastic views over the refuge from just above the canopy. All we needed now was some birds. Once again we began searching and diligent work from the group gave us an impressive haul of over 10 species of raptor in around an hour with our first Cooper's Hawk and a Peregrine which everyone saw unlike the brief flyover the day before. James did manage to pick out a distant immature Grey Hawk which not everyone saw and those that did hoped for better views to come. Despite all our hard work though, we couldn't turn up a Hook-billed Kite. The birding here wasn't all about raptors however, and from our lofty vantage point we got excellent views of Brown-crested Flycatcher, Bullock's Oriole and probably best of all a Northern Beardless-tyrannulet. All in all, it had been a fine morning and we set off to spend the afternoon at Bentsen Rio Grande State Park, stopping off in Pharr for lunch at Luby's. Bentsen offered another shot at our primary target aim – Hook billed Kite. We signed in and then caught the tram into the park. We had only gone 100 yards before the ride ground to a halt with a Greater Roadrunner right by the side of the road. What a wonderful bird, much bigger than I had anticipated which then proceeded to shatter all my illusions by climbing at least 6ft into a nearby tree! This wasn't what I'd expected at all and not even a Coyote or Acme bomb in sight! BEEP BEEP!! Anyway after having our fill of the roadrunner we trundled into the park and disembarked at the Kingfisher overlook. This part of the park was rather quiet and the heat of the day was clearly affecting the birds with only two fly-over Ringed Kingfishers, and a Northern Mockingbird doing a very good Chuck-wills-widow impression. We waited for the next tram and hitched a ride to the Hawk Tower, a lovely spot increasing our confidence of seeing our target after getting some promising information from one of the park rangers. Almost immediately upon arriving Alistair found a gorgeous White-tailed

Kite sat in full view only a few hundred yards away. This bird and its mate were clearly nesting close by as they saw off any intruder that dared enter their airspace and we were also treated to a food pass between the two birds. We scanned long and hard but I'm afraid we couldn't find that Hook-billed Kite. We did however see Verdin, Altamira Oriole, Northern Harrier, Ringed Kingfisher and Black-crowned Night-heron before we waived the white flag and started our long walk back to the parking lot as the trams stopped running at 16:30. We saw many Broad-winged Hawks along the way as birds were coming in to roost up for the night, and the roadrunner was still lurking in the same area when we passed on our way out. We decided to finish our day by trying for Red-crowned Parrots at a pre-roost gathering site in Weslaco. We eventually found the site in the suburbs but no parrots. We waited for a while but thought, maybe, they had already gone to roost so we set sail for the motel. You'd have thought we would have learnt something from this morning but we hadn't! We were no more than 100 yards down the road before I spotted five large parrots flying over us heading straight to where we'd just been. James duly turned round and we were soon back in the parking lot. We could hear the birds as they called from some hidden spot before eight broke cover and gave us a great fly past even enabling us to get good looks at the red crown. Eventually we had over 40 parrots and, to finish off yet another great day, we witnessed the fabulous sight of over 200 Mississippi Kites swirling around looking for a suitable place to roost – pure magic!

**Day 7:** After an early start we were packed and on the road by 05.40. Salineno boat ramp on the Rio Grande would be our first stop hoped-for Muscovy Duck and Red-billed Pigeon amongst other things. The journey, most of which was in darkness, was fairly uneventful save for a Lesser Nighthawk crossing the road in the pre dawn gloom. On arrival some birders were already present and we learned that both of our target birds had already been seen – hmmm. The boat ramp was a wonderful spot and probably my favourite location of the whole holiday. Trees and bushes adorned both sides of the river and birds were everywhere. James found our first Audubon's Oriole, a smart male, as it shared a tree with three (!) Altamira Orioles, to be joined a little later by a beautiful male Bullock's Oriole and a male Hooded Oriole for good measure – not too shabby! Soon afterward we had a brief look at a Clay-coloured Thrush and Ken, with his affinity for certain species, found his second Groove-billed Ani of the trip! Unlike the previous skulkers, this bird was extremely showy and proceeded to give great views on and off for the next hour or so, and Craig had left his camera in the minibus! Shortly afterwards, James declared he'd found two Red-billed Pigeons perched distantly on a dead snag. We all got decent 'scope views of the birds and over the course of the morning up to five pigeons could be seen using the same perching spot. There was still no sign of Muscovy Duck, though distant Mexican Mallards and a pair of Gadwall had us excited at times until their identity was clarified. As the day warmed up there was an obvious increase in migration as raptor numbers increased. All the time we'd been scanning for Hook-billed Kite as this would be the very last chance of the tour. At about 11.00 I found three distant raptors circling, two of which were Turkey Vultures but I wasn't sure of the third until it banked showing me the very obvious wing shape of a Hook-billed Kite! I quickly got James and the others onto the bird and was delighted as it started gliding our way. We continued to watch it for the next ten minutes or so as it came right up to our position opposite us over the river. At times it even put on some butterfly display flight for us. It was just reward for the group who had invested a lot of time in searching for this bird and to get such prolonged views was a real bonus. The raptor numbers continued to increase with us seeing over ten species including our first American Kestrels and a distant adult Grey Hawk. Just when we thought we would have to be content with poor views of this species James found a juvenile Grey Hawk perched right on the edge of the river and this one showed exceptionally well, staying until we left. To finish off our morning we had three American Pipits flying north calling as they went and we had the stunning spectacle of a flock of over 200 American White Pelicans soaring north, a fitting way to end a superb morning. We headed for Zapata, not only to lunch but also the first site in our attempts to find the very tricky White-collared Seedeater. After lunch we made our way down to the local lake in the town park, a traditional site for the seedeater. On this occasion we were out of luck, as we searched hard with no sign at all of seedeaters. We did, however, have two Least Bitterns and our first House Finches of the trip. We pressed on towards our night-time destination of Laredo but before arriving made another stop for the seedeater, a scenic river overlook at San Ygnacio. James had seen the birds here on multiple occasions but again, there was no joy for us on this day. The highlight was some gorgeous male Summer Tanagers. With time and heat pressing we left and planned a last ditch attempt at a new site the following morning. Our Motel 6 was easily found, however check-in was painfully slow, the slowest of the tour to date. We ended another great day with a fabulous meal at the Texas Roadhouse with superb food and drink, and bouts of singing and dancing from the staff for a customer's birthday – all very entertaining!

**Day 8:** After breakfast, we made our way to Casa Blanca State Park in Laredo for a final attempt at White-collared Seedeater knowing full well that leaving the Rio Grande Valley would see an end to our chances for this bird. We found the site with little problem and began our search for this tiny elusive finch. There was a lot of bird activity on and around the lake with many Little Blue Herons and lots of Least Sandpipers, some of the latter very close. Out on the lake there was a small group of eight Black-necked Grebes (aka Eared Grebe) and a small shingle island held two Black Terns, two Least Terns and a Black Skimmer, both of the latter being noteworthy so far inland. The bushes and reeds were full of birds including our first looks at

Clay-coloured Sparrows and a skulking Marsh Wren. We moved around the lake a little listening for the song of the seedeater. After a while James thought he heard a song reminiscent of the seedeater and moving in closer, James became convinced. After a few minutes a small finch suddenly flew from an unseen perch and dropped into deep cover. The singing stopped, surely indicating it was our bird, but we needed to get much better looks to be sure. We waited for some time giving up in favour of searching for a Cactus Wren which Ken had just seen, a pair of which proceeded to show extremely well for the next five minutes. These impressive birds more than lived up to my expectations and then some! Whilst watching these we also finally got a good first look at Olive Sparrow. After hearing so many it was nice to finally see one so well, that's as well as a male Audubon's Oriole lurking in the mesquite bushes. Resuming our search for the seedeater was a bit easier as the bird had started singing again, and pretty quickly James found the bird singing from high atop a cane stem, confirming its identity as the bird we wanted. However, no sooner had he noted that it was a young male; the bird dropped into cover and fell silent again. This time we waited for over 30 minutes but with not a peep came from the bird. We left it alone and sought shade and liquid refreshment as it was getting hot. Whilst we took a break in the shade a Killdeer clearly had a nest nearby as it tried to lure us away with a broken wing display. Whilst we were watching the Killdeer, James suddenly cried he had the bird and there sitting in full view on a dead snag was a fine male White-collared Seedeater! Anxious seconds followed as some of the group couldn't locate the bird but eventually everyone got onto this difficult-to-see bird feeling a mixture of satisfaction and relief that our efforts had been rewarded. After 'scoping' it for a few minutes it promptly disappeared, and we set off straight away with quite a drive still remaining. As we travelled north up Route 83 it was clear much was changing in the area as the roadside scrub had been cleared to facilitate the construction of a new oil pipeline. This resulted in far fewer birds as we would have expected though we still saw many of the ever present Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, some Ash-throated Flycatchers and a few Harris's Hawks. Along this road we had to stop at a border control checkpoint and were asked to produce our passports, and answer a few questions. I was grilled by a very attractive female Border Patrol Agent who, much to my disappointment didn't detain me for further questioning. We then drove on to Carrizo Springs where we split up for lunch as there multiple options in town, before stocking up on alcoholic beverages as Neal's Lodges is situated in a 'dry' county and we had two birthdays to celebrate. It was Sean's today and mine on Saturday and there was no way we could let either occasion pass without a beer, if for no other reason than to dull the pain of another year passing us by. We continued on our way and had one more scheduled stop at a bridge over the Nueces River. There was a very large colony of Cliff and Cave Swallows nesting beneath the bridge and these gave us our best views yet of both species together. The surrounding area was a shadow of its former self and the effects of the on-going drought in was obvious by the extremely parched surroundings. As a result we saw little save for some White-crowned Sparrows and a very distant Greater Roadrunner. We pressed on and soon reached our destination of Neal's Lodges after briefly stopping for gas and ice cream in Uvalde. I hadn't been sure of what to expect from this leg of the tour but any doubts I had were soon dispelled when I saw the place. The location was just beautiful, the cabins were very comfortable and it was a haven for birds with the feeders outside reception being swamped by House Finches, Lesser Goldfinches and Chipping Sparrows. Somehow I just knew I was going to like the place. When James emerged from the reception he had news of a change of itinerary and our Bat Cave expedition was bumped forward to this evening. Our early arrival meant this was no problem for our accommodating group and we all quickly settled in before meeting for an early supper. Even while waiting for everyone to gather at meal time the feeders outside the restaurant had us captivated as gorgeous Black-chinned Hummingbirds zipped to and fro and a Hermit Thrush skulked in the shadows whilst Scarlet Tanagers added a splash of colour as they fed on logs packed with peanut butter. The accommodating staff quickly dealt with meal time and very good it was too. We soon gathered at the bus and drove the short distance to the Frio Bat Cave, home to millions of Brazilian Free-tailed Bats. Now we had heard a lot about this place but nothing was going to prepare us for the amazing spectacle that we would witness minutes later. Waiting for the bats to make their appearance was supplemented by singing Black-throated Sparrows and a Canyon Wren, and some lucky people even saw a rare Ringtail Cat. Just before the bats emerged there was an obvious gathering of raptors preparing to hunt the bats as they streamed out from the cave. First one then two Merlins appeared and then a hungry looking Red-tailed Hawk, they're timing was impeccable as within minutes the bats began to emerge leaving us spellbound as we watched the constant stream of bats pour from the cave entrance and form a snaking river disappearing over the Texas countryside. There are apparently over 10 million bats within the cave and it was truly awesome watching this natural wonder unfold. As darkness descended we then turned our attentions back to birds as first we had silhouetted views of a Great Horned Owl perched on a bush on the ridge above us. Then some sharp ears amongst us heard the first of up to four Common Poor-wills and although we tried to tempt them nearer they stubbornly refused to come any closer. We all climbed back into the bus and slowly made our way back out along the track hoping, perhaps, to see a nightjar on the road. We had no success with the nightjars but Suzanne pulled an amazing sight from the back of the bus – a Nine-banded Armadillo! This curious mammal's poor eyesight allowed us to practically walk right up to it as it shuffled around, seemingly more worried about eating than our presence. We left the armadillo to go on its way and made our way back to the road. As soon as I'd left the bus to open the gate I could hear a Chuck-wills-widow singing from the trees across the road. We left the bus again and tried to lure one of at least three calling 'chucks' within range of James's spotlight. Despite one being incredibly close we had to be content with just vocals, though

that in itself was a treat at such close range. Our day had come to an end and what a day it had been. The bat experience had made a BIG, never to be forgotten, impression on us all.

Day 9: Another glorious day dawned as we made our way to breakfast getting close up looks of a singing Carolina Wren en route. Seeing 12 Cedar Waxwings on the way back proved even mealtimes were productive for birds at Neal's! Today was our big attempt for the two specialist birds of Texas Hill country – Black Capped Vireo and Golden-cheeked Warbler. At 08.00 we set off for Kerr Wildlife Management Area, a key site for both species especially Black-capped Vireo. The journey took about an hour and was fairly uneventful save for our first Common Ravens and Wild Turkeys. We arrived at a blustery Kerr WMA unsure whether the conditions were going to hamper our attempts but in hindsight we needn't have worried. We began looking for the vireo and after finding some suitable habitat singing birds could be heard, though views were proving difficult. However with a little patience and perseverance we ended up getting exceptional views of a close singing male and his partner as they moved furtively about the scrub. James then heard the song of our other target bird, Golden-cheeked Warbler, and we moved in to see if we could locate the bird. Unlike the vireo, this bird had read the 'script' and behaved impeccably as it sang continuously from the tree tops. This is one of the more sought-after species of the tour and it was truly stunning watching this gorgeous bird sing his heart out. With our two key species safely in the bag we then turned our attention to the other birds in the surrounding scrub. We worked hard and were rewarded with Rufous-crowned and Field Sparrows, and three Pine Siskins flew overhead. Naturally however, most new birds awaited us back at the bus with Carolina Chickadee, Ruby-crowned Kinglet and Bewick's Wren, not to mention a very showy Summer Tanager. Kerr WMA had been kind to us and we moved on to our next destination at Lost Maples State Park stopping for lunch in the beautiful town of Hunt. For those who stayed awake, the drive through the countryside was very enjoyable and the scenery was stunning though had few visible birds except for an extremely brief Western Scrub-jay, which flashed fleetingly across the front of the van. We soon arrived at Lost Maples State Park. Wow! What a gorgeous place. It really was a pleasure to be there but it was made even better by virtue of the extremely good birding which started right at the Visitor Centre on the main entrance. Comfort stops and retail therapy ensued where conveniently placed feeders (outside the restrooms!) were attracting plenty of Black-chinned and Ruby-throated Hummingbirds. James then pulled one right out of the top draw when he excitedly announced he'd seen a male Calliope Hummingbird! What a little stunner, it was just beautiful and the iridescent purple streaking on the throat was a joy to behold. We enjoyed close and prolonged views and some very good photos were obtained to document the record. This was the first time this species had been recorded on a Birdfinders Texas tour and we strongly suspected that this western hummer was a locally rare find. It was not until we returned home that James had some correspondence with a local birder from Utopia that we discovered that this was an extremely rare bird in Central Texas in spring, and moreover, the fact it was a full adult male only added to its rarity. As far as we could ascertain this was maybe only the 2<sup>nd</sup> record for Lost Maples, so in hindsight was arguably the best bird of the tour. After this exciting start we moved onto the parking lot for East Trail head and saw a variety of sparrows on the feeders though the reported Lazuli Bunting eluded us. As we walked up the trail we saw some familiar warblers and heard both White-eyed and Red-eyed Vireos singing from deep within the trees. However, this was also a key site for Yellow-throated Vireo and miraculously about a mile into the walk, one appeared above us. We watched the bird for a few minutes before it dropped behind some foliage and James then astounded us by finding the bird sitting on its nest high in the fork of a oak. We continued on towards Kingfisher Pond when I heard an unfamiliar call coming from the trees up the slope behind us, we then played a game of hide and seek for what seemed like ages before I finally tracked it down and realised it was another vireo species, though which one I wasn't sure. Luckily James was soon onto the bird and confirmed the ID as a Hutton's Vireo. This was another good find as this bird was primarily a western US species and until a decade ago was unheard of in Central Texas. Now, apparently, it's a scarce breeder. Further on we found more Nashville Warblers continuing the good showing of this species on this year's tour and below us we had two fine Louisiana Waterthrushes on the stream. We eventually reached the pond where sadly no kingfishers appeared but we did see Eastern and Black Phoebes within yards of each other whilst Summer Tanagers sang above us. With time pressing on we made our way back down the trail to the car park and enjoyed cool ice tea whilst watching the feeders. Once again no Lazuli Bunting appeared but Clay-coloured Sparrow and Blue Grosbeak were added to the day's tally. Back at Neal's Cafe Friday night is catfish night and the place was heaving with holiday makers and locals alike which made for a great atmosphere. Another lovely meal rounded off yet another superb day.

Day 10: It was a cool but bright start to my birthday and I couldn't have wished for a better place to be. After another great breakfast at Neal's Cafe we assembled outside the store where dozens of House Finches, Lesser Goldfinches and Pine Siskins squabbled over the feeders. Our plan was to work the birding trails on site as we still needed some specialist birds for the area. As we started the trail a gorgeous male Vermillion Flycatcher sallied from the fence line providing a cracking start. The cattle guard feeders shared many of the birds from the store front but these were supplemented by Chipping Sparrows, a female Pyrrhuloxia and a Black-throated Sparrow. Continuing down the path we were treated to unusually good views of a pair of Bell's Vireos with the male singing his heart out in full view. Whilst watching these, a Verdin and two Field Sparrows vied for



our attention. Moving on we reached an area of rough pasture with cattle, but it was also alive with sparrows. Here we found our first Vesper Sparrows, which scratched around in the grasses looking for seeds, along with lots of Lark, Chipping and Clay-coloured Sparrows. A blaze of colour adorned the fence line with male Blue Grosbeak, Painted Bunting and Vermilion Flycatcher all sitting together, an unforgettable sight. It was then James found a special bird amongst the sparrows. It was a female Lark Bunting, not such an unusual bird here in winter but excellent in mid April. It was also another 'write-in' for the Birdfinders' checklist. Delighted with our morning we continued round the trail just in the nick of time to hear a couple of young English birders further down the trail giving us a 'heads-up' for a Zone tailed Hawk soaring over the field and away. Needless to say we were very grateful! Checking every Turkey Vulture had proved very rewarding in the end as Zone-tails can show a remarkable similarity to Turkey Vultures at times. From a nearby oak James heard a familiar song, which to us was reminiscent of a Willow Warbler, but James knew exactly what it was and soon we were being treated to outstanding views of one of America's most beautiful warblers, a glorious male Yellow-throated Warbler – what a stunner! As we began our way back along the trail Anita expertly spotted a Hermit Thrush perched silently in the understory allowing those that had missed it previously to catch up. Finally we found a pair of Canyon Towhees on the path and got even better looks at the Lark Bunting on the return visit. This completed a fantastic morning walk producing many key species for the group, and all in the immediate area of Neal's. A short break was followed by a quiet walk up the Buchanan Trail with only a brief Hutton's Vireo heard singing. The views from the hilltop though were stunning as were the views we had of a Golden-cheeked Warbler singing overhead on the descent. A Black-and-white Warbler sang but was difficult to track as it moved quickly through the trees and our first and last Western Scrub-jays gave good views as they perched amongst the junipers. Neal's Cafe was the venue for lunch where Ken entertained us with tales of his dinner parties, which although were very funny, cannot be repeated here! After lunch we had a 90-minute break though four hardy souls braved the sun and heat sitting at the cattle guard water drip and feeders, being rewarded with a gorgeous male Lazuli Bunting, not to mention our best views yet of Olive Sparrow and Painted Bunting. We met up with James and drove down the road to the Pecan Grove eventually finding the 'famed' water drip but in the afternoon heat things were slow. Again the young English couple kindly offered reports of Spotted Towhee and Grasshopper Sparrow nearby and we promptly abandoned the feeders! An area of trees within the grassland seemed a magnet for birds and we quickly saw Vermilion Flycatcher, Yellow-breasted Chat and, with a little perseverance, the Spotted Towhee and a House Wren were both added to the trip list. We then decided to walk an area of suitable grassland for the Grasshopper Sparrow. Almost immediately we had flushed a likely looking candidate into some small bushes and after some manoeuvring we all enjoyed views of this attractive little sparrow. We had one last area to check before we finished for the day and drove to the entrance to the Bat Cave where searched scrub habitat for Black-tailed Gnatcatcher. We tried very hard but the best that we could manage was a bird calling behind the fence though it could not be lured into view. We did have superb views of the normally skulking Yellow-breasted Chat and also Black-throated and White-crowned Sparrows, and Yellow-throated and Nashville Warblers. That was about it for the day. All that remained was to return to the lodge to pack and enjoy our final supper here as the following day we set off for Winnie and the delights of High Island.

**Day 11:** After breakfast we reluctantly said good bye to Neal's Lodges and set off on our long road trip east across the state in time to reach Anahuac NWR in time for a designated rail walk at 16.30. The journey went well but was pretty low on avian activity though we did add American Crow to the trip list and James claimed a fly-by Pectoral Sandpiper at 80 mph! On arrival at Winnie in mid-afternoon we checked into the Days Inn Motel which was more than comfortable. After a short break were off to Anahuac for the rail walk. At the refuge HQ we had our first Eastern Kingbirds and there were many Northern Harriers on the approach road. Solitary Sandpipers provided our first proper looks of this species before we gathered to have a pre-walk briefing and then went off to Alligator Marsh where we were assured there were no Alligators! We set off across the marsh dragging jugs filled with stones attached to a length of rope, all of which was intended to flush rails. It was very hard work trudging through the sedges and we did see lots of Sedge Wrens which were new for us and many Seaside Sparrows. We gave it our best shot and although an Eastern Meadowlark got some people excited, no rails flushed for us today. Even in late afternoon, exciting news of over 28 species of wood-warblers tempted us towards High Island to see what we could before dark. What followed was possibly the best hour of birding I have ever experienced. Boy Scout Woods was absolutely heaving with birds and it was impossible to know where to look first. At the grandstand new birds came thick and fast. There were Kentucky, Hooded and Yellow Warblers, Grey Catbird, Swainson's Thrush and Northern Waterthrush. As we walked the trails it was obvious there had been a large fall-out as birds flitted from every bush. Firstly a Blue-winged Warbler showed well only to be replaced by an incredible Worm-eating Warbler at point-blank range. As that disappeared, a stunning male Rose-breasted Grosbeak appeared directly above overhead as it gorged on Mulberries. As we walked, more of the same birds were seen as well as Ovenbirds, Black-and-white and Tennessee Warblers, Scarlet and Summer Tanagers, and Grey-checked Thrush. Luckier member of our group managed to see a Swainson's Warbler and a Veery at the photo-blind before the fading light closed play for the day. Supper was taken on the way home at the excellent AL T's restaurant in Winnie where quite a bit of celebrating took place!

**Day 12:** The day dawned dull and cloudy, fuelling our hopes that some of yesterday's fall-out birds would still be present in the woods of High Island. After a quick breakfast we were on our way south from Winnie to Boy Scout Woods. When we arrived it was clear that a lot of birds were still present as there were lots of 'chips' and 'seeps' from warblers that could be heard as we entered the preserve. A quick look at the grandstand gave us a lovely male Hooded Warbler and a Swainson's Thrush. We wandered the trails seeing some of the same birds but Wood Thrushes singing from the thickets were new as was the gorgeous Black-throated Green Warbler that showed down to just a few feet. Next, news of a Cerulean Warbler had us scurrying to the spot and we waited no more than 30 seconds before this amazing blue and white wonder showed at eye level no more than four yards away. It surely doesn't get much better than that – but it did! We spent some time looking for a singing Swainson's Warbler that some had seen the night before but although it seemed really close, it remained hidden from view. A walk around some of the more open areas produced a perched Merlin waiting to prey on tired migrants and a brief Yellow-billed Cuckoo seen only by a couple of the group but we were assured by James that more would follow. Feeling a change of venue would benefit us we moved to Smith Oaks Preserve on the other side of town. Initially the woods seemed quiet but as we worked it we turned up some quality birds including Ovenbird, Hermit Thrush and our first American Redstart. We then found a productive area which produced two Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers and a lovely male Blackpoll Warbler, both new for the trip. With stomachs rumbling we set off to Winnie for a quick lunch and made a decision to go to Sabine Woods for the afternoon reaching parking lot of Sabine Woods by 13.00. One of the best sessions of the holiday commenced. As we set off amongst the trails it was clear there were many birds present as Grey Catbirds slinked away through the cover and the air was full of the calls and songs of migrants. A group of six Rose-breasted Grosbeaks were watched as they fed greedily on Mulberries and then James called a Canada Warbler! My pulse rate quickened as this vision of black, blue and yellow showed well, again just a matter of yards in front of us, and Ken found a fine Chestnut-sided Warbler. It was just getting better and better! Everywhere we went grosbeaks swooped silently from Mulberries and warblers vied for our attention as Black-and-white, Blue-winged and Worm-eating Warblers and Ovenbird were all logged. James then pulled another one out of the top drawer. As we approached a quiet corner he was attracted by an unusual call. We closed in on the bird and it eventually showed and proved to be a stunning male Mourning Warbler, a fantastic bird this early in the spring and the first time in sixteen years of Texas that Birdfinders had seen one – it was another 'write-in'! After some excitement we went to sit by the drip for a while to see what came in during the heat of the day. We had a wonderful sight of six Indigo Buntings sat together and our first Palm Warbler as it flitted around pumping its tail with its rufous crown glowing in the sun. The rest of the afternoon was spent wandering the trails as more new birds came in. Another Canada Warbler was amazingly confiding and a memorable tour for vireos continued with two more Yellow-throated. A sumptuous male American Redstart flitted around the oaks as a Downy Woodpecker hopped around the same trees. A single Acadian Flycatcher swooped in the shadows and many Eastern Wood-pewees shared the dead snags with Eastern Kingbirds and our first Great Crested Flycatcher. In the leaf litter, many Wood and Swainson's Thrushes searched for food and White-throated Sparrows fed by the weedy paths whilst Yellow-billed Cuckoos lumbered clumsily amongst the trees. It really was a magical afternoon with just so many birds to see. It was Texas at its best. We left Sabine Woods tired but thrilled. The only bird we missed was a MacGillivray's Warbler photographed at the water drip around the same time that we watched our Mourning Warbler. Ironically, two extremely scarce *Oporornis* warblers were evidently present in Sabine Woods at the same time! On the way home we went straight to AL T's to toast our success where Richard was served the biggest salad known to man and Ken entertained us as he had done all trip!

**Day 13:** We left 'breezy' Winnie at 05.45 for a visit to the Piney Woods zone near Jasper. We made excellent time and after breakfast and a fuel stop we arrived at our first site just prior to 08.00. As we got our things together an Indigo Bunting sang overhead. It was a beautiful morning in the woods with the wonderful aroma of the pines in the air, and as we walked the tracks into the forest we soon began to hear the calls of Pine Warbler and Brown-headed Nuthatch. Both species eventually showed well in the trees around us. We quickly located trees being used by our primary target, the Red-cockaded Woodpecker. This was quite easy as the researchers studying the birds paint white rings around the trunks of the nest trees. However, seeing the birds was much more difficult than finding the nest trees and although we spent a great deal of time checking here and the surrounding area we were unable to find any Red-cockaded Woodpeckers. However, we did have our first Tufted Titmouse as it sang from directly above us. Walking back down the road towards the bus we finally found a woodpecker, but alas it was not a Red-cockaded but a fine male Red-bellied which appeared to have a nest hole high in a dead pine. A little further along we heard the song of a Bachman's Sparrow, which we'd also been searching for since our arrival. We went off road looking for the source of the song and within a couple of minutes I located the bird singing from atop a stump and we all enjoyed great views of this scarce sparrow in fantastic light. When we had almost reached the van a Swainson's Warbler began to sing strongly from thick cover by the road. Finally, I thought, my chance had come to see this most elusive of the warblers. We readied ourselves in preparation for views, but the bird had other ideas and although it sang within a couple of yards of us it never revealed itself. My wait continued! We drove to a different area of the forest to see if our luck would change with the woodpeckers. It did, but

again it was not the species we most wanted. We had only gone a few hundred yards down a forest road before a Pileated Woodpecker flew across the front of the bus after it had tried to keep up with us alongside! A stop further along the road at another site again drew a blank with Red-cockaded Woodpeckers. However, we did find an impressive pair of Pileated Woodpeckers at a nest hole which gave brief but good views. With hunger winning the battle of wills we returned to Jasper for refreshments. After a very nice 'All-you-can-eat' buffet we left Jasper for the State Fish Hatchery. This had been a good site for raptors in the past, and apparently, for my nemesis bird – Swainson's Warbler. The wind had increased and was blowing quite hard and we hoped some raptors would show, but we had to be content with only a handful of Turkey Vultures. Then we tried the surrounding woodland in search of warblers. A sheltered ride with perfect habitat on both sides immediately produced a cracking Prothonotary Warbler. As we tried to watch this, a Swainson's Warbler began singing directly behind us! Once again we prepared in readiness for the bird's appearance. This time, with a little coaxing, the bird flew straight in and showed exceptionally well. It proceeded to be on show for at least five more minutes, not exactly in keeping with this characteristically aloof warbler. We even got to see it singing, throwing its head back and belting out its song – what a treat! It was a truly awesome experience and in true American spirit there were high-fives all round! To complete the warbler haul we also had gorgeous male Kentucky and Hooded Warblers vying for our attention. We then returned to the area of fish ponds near the bus and we quickly had Belted Kingfisher, Eastern Bluebird, Red-bellied Woodpecker and new for the trip but slightly less exciting were some Common Grackles and a very distant Wood Duck. To finish off a great couple of hours birding Suzanne found a spanking Red-headed Woodpecker very close to the bus, a bird which put on a great show. Since it was too late in the day to make the coast we decided to try one more site for Red-cockaded Woodpecker but drew another blank. Oh well, you can't see them all right?! To finish off the day James had a trump card up his sleeve and we paid a visit to Martin Dies Junior State Park to try for Swallow-tailed Kite. When we arrived at the fishing pier we were blown away by the beauty of the place. It was huge a lake carpeted with lily pads looking amazing in the early evening light. Everywhere egrets and herons could be seen and we also had good looks at three enormous Bald Eagles (two adult, one immature). With some patient scanning James eventually found two or three Swallow-tailed Kites that we all got reasonable 'scope views of. That meant we had seen all 24 species of raptor on the Birdfinders trip list, a pretty remarkable achievement. The birding wasn't just restricted to the lake, and the trees around us were alive with birds as we had stellar views of another Prothonotary Warbler by the waterside and a prehistoric looking Pileated Woodpecker shaved huge fragments of bark as it searched for food. We also saw Brown headed Nuthatch, Downy Woodpecker, Eastern Wood-pewee, Yellow-throated Warbler and a very unexpected addition to the list in the shape of a late Canvasback, picked up by Craig at the last. All in all, it had been another great day highlighting the great diversity of this trip and Texas as a whole.

**Day 14:** The day started slightly overcast but mercifully the wind had dropped. Grapevine news of some rice fields holding lots of good shorebirds within a few miles of the hotel saw us start with a search for the reported Hudsonian Godwits and Buff-breasted Sandpipers. Lots of shorebirds were present with flocks of Pectoral Sandpipers and good numbers of both Hudsonian Whimbrels and American Golden-plovers present, ensuring their good showing on the trip continued. A little later we found a Semipalmated Plover and a flock of 14 Buff-breasted Sandpipers, though initially we couldn't find the godwits. In a weedy field behind us James located some singing Dickcissels although it was awkward to get good views until one popped up reasonably close which a smart singing male. We moved position to check a different area of fields and Craig quickly found two Hudsonian Godwits on a flooded field on the other side of the road. Once again, although a little distant, we had good 'scope views including seeing the black under wing as they made brief flights. I was delighted as waders are my favourite group of birds and this was the bird I most wanted to see on the trip! The same fields also held good numbers of Long-billed Dowitchers and Blue-winged Teals, and a fence line visibly sagged under the number of Tree Swallows resting on it. With the sun now burning, the heat haze was starting to make viewing a slight problem so we decided to move on to Anahuac NWR. On the entrance road we had a very interesting almost white hawk and considered the possibility of a lingering Ferruginous Hawk but the views were far from great and we decided to let it go. The pond by the visitors centre held some nice close dowitchers and a Yellow Warbler showed well in the surrounding willows. We then drove the loop around Shoveler pond which was mostly dry due to maintenance work. Many birds were close to the dyke and we saw exceptional numbers of Least Bitterns and King Rails. We also found a Northern Waterthrush, two Soras, Seaside Sparrow and Northern Harrier, and finally we caught up with two gloriously colourful American Purple Gallinules. These were really spectacular and fully lived up to my expectations. Thrilled with these, we headed off towards High Island for lunch before our assault on the Bolivar Peninsula and finally the High Island woods. Our first stop after lunch was just a couple of hundred yards down the road from the café. At High Island R.V Park a Yellow-headed Blackbird had been reported coming into the feeders. We located the spot and waited as a melee of cowbirds and blackbirds visited the feeders. After five minutes Shaun spotted a cracking male Yellow-headed Blackbird in a tree above the feeders. Watching it in turn produced a second, partly obscured, Yellow-headed Blackbird to the right. We continued on to Rollover Pass on the Bolivar Peninsula to look for shorebirds. Along the coast road Alistair spotted a fishing trawler surrounded by a huge number of birds. We stopped to scan for a Magnificent Frigatebird and once again Shaun

delivered with one of these awesome birds drifting off the back of the feeding frenzy. We watched as it glided effortlessly, chasing Laughing Gulls now and then to steal their food. It then amazed us all by landing on the rigging of the trawler alighting alongside two others that had gone totally unnoticed! By the time we reached Rollover Pass the tide was too high for optimum viewing but there were still huge numbers of birds present. Both pelican species, Neotropic Cormorants and scores of Laughing Gulls jockeyed for position on the small islands, one of which held a breeding pair of American Oystercatchers. On the shoreline were a 100+ Black Skimmer and dozens of terns, comprising of mainly Least, Common and Royal with smaller numbers of Forster's and Black, some of which had nearly moulted into their smart breeding plumage. Also a close group of Semipalmated Plovers gave us a chance to study these birds at close range and even showing the webbing between their toes. With one target on the peninsula left to see we moved onto Yacht Basin Road to try our luck at locating a lingering Nelson's Sparrow. We found some good looking habitat but sadly no sparrows though James had a fright when a Clapper Rail erupted from the grass right at his feet. Moving on we drove the short distance to Tuna Road. Already our spirits lifted as there were many Seaside Sparrows present and a Sedge Wren sang from the rank grasses. A couple of 100 yards down the track Richard flushed a promising looking sparrow which initially played hard to get until it gave itself up and was indeed a Nelson's, and a very smart bird for a sparrow – it also had the honour of being our 300<sup>th</sup> species of the trip! As we continued down the track more sparrows flushed from the verge and we moved into the grasses to get a closer look. We were rewarded with fantastic, close looks at around 10 Nelson's and a 'bonus' Swamp Sparrow. Just behind the sparrows a quick check of a small tidal creek yielded two close Wilson's Plovers and several Greater Yellowlegs amongst some Pectoral Sandpipers. With heavily overcast conditions and very little wind we decided to finish the day at Boy Scout Woods to check for newly arrived migrants. Our hopes were raised with a Common Nighthawk over the road just outside High Island, and large numbers of cars present in the Boy Scout parking lot had us hoping we could finish the trip with more stunning warblers. We checked out the latest news on arrival and were excited to learn of both Magnolia and Bay-breasted Warblers present in the area of Prothonotary Pond and immediately headed there. We waited patiently, scanning the Cyprus trees for any movement and were rewarded with Black-and-white and Black-throated Green Warblers before the Magnolia was located and proceeded to show well. It was a stunning male and we marvelled at the bird's black, yellow and white plumage as it flicked around the Cyprus branches – it was also our 30<sup>th</sup> species of wood-warbler of the trip! We waited for a while but there was no sign of the Bay-breasted so we went for a walk finding another Magnolia, Tennessee and Black-throated Green Warblers and Grey-cheeked, Swainson's and Wood Thrushes. With time running out we went back to try for the Bay-breasted, of which there had been no further sign since we left. The wait produced Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Yellow-billed Cuckoo and great views of a hybrid warbler which had been present for a couple of days. The hybrid initially looked much like a normal Townsend's Warbler but further investigations and a consensus from other observers confirmed it was indeed a hybrid, almost certainly a combination of Townsend's x Black throated Green Warblers. It was certainly a very smart bird and actually much rarer than a pure Townsend's would have been on the Upper Texas Coast. Whilst watching this gem there was a suddenly cry of "Bay-breasted Warbler!" We scrambled to get in position as initially the bird was difficult to see and a few nervous moments followed as we waited. But, like many migrants at High Island, it eventually appeared just a few metres overhead giving spectacular views. The Magnolia and Townsend's hybrid appeared at the same time producing a flurry hard-to-see species all at the same time. Despite a relatively late finish, we still made it back to Winnie for supper where the staff at our favourite restaurant were pleased to see us once more.

**Day 15:** The final day of the tour had arrived but we still had time for a brief early morning visit to Anahuac before getting ready to leave for the airport. It was beautiful driving onto the refuge as the sun rose and a real privilege to visit the site at dawn. Our goal was to look and listen for the extremely rare Black Rail and perhaps some sparrows, including Le Conte's. Interesting birds along the way included Sora and King Rails sneaking out from the reeds and a Belted Kingfisher sat motionless on a snag, finally giving us good views which had eluded us all trip. We found a suitable area where James wanted to try for the rail and we all assembled by the edge of the marsh. Quite remarkably after only 20 seconds or so a Black Rail called three times in response to a little coaxing. However, only four of us had heard it. Despite a long wait, no further Black Rail calls were heard. We moved on in search of Le Conte's Sparrow, however, it seemed we had used up all our luck on the rail although we had good views of Savannah and Swamp Sparrows, and several Dickcissels, no Le Conte's could be found. With so many sparrows present it was perhaps not so surprising to see several Northern Harriers and a Merlin perched up on a dead tree in the marsh all looking for their breakfast. With time pressing on it was with great reluctance that we set off to leave for the hotel. However, this great refuge had one last treat for us as a wonderful American Bittern stood motionless in the middle of a dyke, a particularly sweet moment for me having dipped this species twice in Cornwall last autumn in the space of a week and involving driving over 1500 miles in the process! We returned to the hotel for a shower and had a trouble free journey to the airport returning our trusty bus to the rental company. We then made our way to the airport terminal after bidding our farewells to James who had been an excellent leader all through the tour, and I can not praise him highly enough. We then made our way to our check-in and after killing a couple of hours we had a relaxing flight home, arriving on time at Heathrow. I

cannot tell you how good this trip was, if you're thinking of doing it one day all I can say is **BOOK IT!** It's an amazing place with amazing birds – what more could you want!

**Craig Fulcher**