

Texas

13–28 April 2014

Participants

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Golden-cheeked Warbler

Timing of this tour is critical. We have to be early enough to catch the last of the Whooping Cranes on their wintering grounds but on time to find summer breeding species on territory. We need favourable weather conditions to maximise our time with migrants and of course we have the south-eastern Texas resident species to enjoy. I think we got it pretty near perfect this year. This was a thoroughly enjoyable and memorable tour made so by a combination of successful birding, good companionship and a completely hassle-free Texas. Highlights were many but three really stick out in one's mind. The prenominal passage of adult Franklin's Gulls low over our heads; the "grasspipers" at La Feria Sod Farm and that exquisite adult male Golden-winged Warbler coming into bathe in Sabine Woods. For the main, the weather was distinctly cooler than we had expected and the prevailing northerly winds during our first few days certainly aided migrant numbers.

Day 1 The group finally met up at Houston airport having flown in from London, Ottawa, Hertford and Dusseldorf. Those travelling from England hit continental North America over the frozen landscapes of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick before flying down the eastern seaboard. At the airport Immigration and Customs checks were quite straightforward; the administration of the rental vehicles however left much to be desired. Houston was overcast, warm and muggy. Nevertheless, by 5.00pm we were on our way south west on a four-hour drive to Rockport, our base for the first two nights of the tour. Few birds were seen en route however a flypast of Solitary Sandpipers and circling Cave Swallows outside our restaurant close to Victoria deserve mention.

Day 2 The day dawned cool and overcast with a fresh south-easterly breeze, warming up by late morning to mid-70s °F. However the weather was to have a dramatic effect on a spectacular days birding. By midday, the wind had turned right round to the north, increased to 35 knots with occasional driving rain and the temperature plummeted. This provided a phenomenal visible migration during the afternoon. As day broke, Great-tailed Grackles were extremely vocal in the car park together with our first Northern Cardinals. Around 7.15am, we drove a short way along the coast, parked up and boarded the vessel *Skimmer*, skippered by the comedic but extremely informative Capt. Jay for a

morning cruising the shallow waterways within the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. Our principal focus was to find the last of the remaining Whooping Cranes before they begin their northward migration back to Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada. Less than 300 cranes overwinter in Texas and we were fortunate to watch at close quarters ten of the eleven birds that remained. Being the first day of the tour, new species came through thick and fast. Good numbers of Great Blue and Tricolored Herons, Black-crowned Night-herons, White Ibises, Great, Snowy and a couple of Reddish Egrets all showed well. Most of the duck species had already migrated north, however nearly 100 Blue-winged Teals were still on site and small flocks of resident Black-bellied Whistling-ducks regularly flew over. Few raptors were to be found but we did see a high flying White-tailed Hawk and several Crested Caracaras. Amongst the waders on view, we found American Oystercatcher, dark rumped *hudsonicus* Whimbrels, Long-billed Curlew, both eastern and western Willets, Black-necked Stilts and a skulking Pectoral Sandpiper. Laughing Gulls were ever present and we enjoyed a couple of migrating groups of Franklin's Gulls flying overhead. Little did we know what part this species was to play during the afternoon. In sheltered mud-fringed bays, numerous Royal, Gull-billed and Forster's Terns were particularly showy as were small roosting flocks of Black Skimmers and a couple of Caspian Terns. Land birds really were keeping their heads down in the ever strengthening wind. However we did find our first handsome Scissor-tailed Flycatchers together with several Boat-tailed Grackles and Seaside Sparrows, both these latter species are restricted to salt marsh habitat. In the shallow channel we were joined for a short while by an inquisitive couple of Atlantic Bottle-nosed Dolphins, whilst grazing out in the marsh was the largest Wild Hog I have ever seen – Jay estimated him to be at least 200 lbs. By 11.00am, the water had become distinctly choppy and so we returned to our dock arriving perhaps only 30 minutes before the storm broke. Following a leisurely lunch, in part waiting for the rain to push through, and after watching a party of six Redheads at close quarters, we drove south west for 15 miles or so to scout out a few areas that might prove worthwhile given the potential "fall out" weather conditions. Whilst we found a number of migrant species during the afternoon, without doubt the drama was overhead. At least 5,000 and possibly many more Franklin's Gulls; all adults; all pink-breasted whistled over our heads, many at "chimney pot height". Indeed, whilst briefly stopping to buy bottles of water and snacks, flocks totaling 1,000 birds flew over the supermarket car park. We headed for Port Aransas, which involved a very short car ferry ride. Within moments of landing on Mustang Island we quickly came to sudden stop. Again, right over our heads, parties of Mississippi Kites were pouring through – we were to see about 360 during the course of the afternoon. Our first scheduled stop was to check the bushes and willows flanking the boardwalk at Paradise Pond. Here we found our first Painted and Indigo Buntings, several Grey Catbirds and an Ovenbird foraging amongst the leaf litter whilst the trees produced a handful of Summer Tanagers, a few Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, a couple of Lincoln's Sparrows and a briefly confiding Nashville Warbler. A little further on brought us to the Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Centre, an area of small trees leading out onto a boardwalk traversing freshwater marsh. By now the wind had really picked up and the temperature had gone from chilly to downright cold. Warblers quickly flitted through the trees seeking both sustenance and cover. We found our first and rather expected Black-throated Green, Audubon's Yellow-rumped and Tennessee Warblers. However the male Canada Warbler that showed well, albeit briefly really was less than anticipated. Traditionally this is a late migrant and a species often missed on this tour. A couple of Soras probed the muddy fringes under the bushes and our first Acadian Flycatcher, Eastern Wood-pewee and Orchard Orioles perched out in the open. Bracing ourselves against the elements, we walked out onto the marsh boardwalk. Wetland birds were not only numerous, they were extremely tame and confiding. In amongst the Blue-winged Teals and Northern Shovelers were Ruddy Duck, Green-winged Teal and a trio of Lesser Scaups. New waders for the day included Wilson's Snipe and Wilson's Phalarope, Long-billed Dowitcher and Least Sandpiper. All the while, swirling flocks of Franklin's Gulls still poured over and an exceptional number of Coypu munched away at the vegetation taking no notice of either feeding birds or shivering birders. A further short drive took us to the Port Aransas public beach where perhaps 80 Least Terns fed over the shore line behind roosting Royal and Sandwich Terns. The early evening return drive to Rockport came to a sudden stop when a group of four colourful Roseate Spoonbills flew past and still more flocks of Franklin's Gulls poured over. Indeed they were still swirling over the hotel when we returned to our rooms to change for dinner.

Day 3 Today at first light there was not a cloud in the sky. The wind was still in the north, Franklin's Gulls were still

streaming overhead and it was mighty cold. Much of the day was to be spent driving south to the Rio Grande Valley but there was some serious birding to be done en route. In a less than salubrious area of Corpus Christie lies Blucher Park, known to be a migrant trap. We parked up and James announced that we may be here for 20 minutes or maybe for three hours; it would all depend on the birds – we were there all morning! This is quite a small area with large trees on one side of the road and much smaller trees, bushes and tiny brooks on the other. In the taller trees, birding was a little frustrating. Small passerines were extremely active often flitting through the vegetated canopies allowing mere glimpses whilst others were calling from out of sight. We started quite slowly finding a couple of Northern Parulas and Orchard Orioles. At one point, Sean called our attention to a tiny window in the leaves where what looked like a bird's eye was staring at him deep and high in the foliage – he wondered if it was a “nightbird”. After ten minutes or so, a large rufous toned “nightjar type” was then glimpsed swooping down and away out of the back of the wood. This was typical behaviour of a Chuck-will's-Widow but most of the group saw nothing. Similarly a Yellow-breasted Chat called repeatedly from high in a dense tangle of vegetation but never showed itself whilst a couple within the group caught sight of a Yellow-throated Vireo that immediately flew through the trees never to be seen again. But the park on the other side of the road was a different story altogether. The first warbler seen was a Swainson's – perhaps the most difficult of all the passage migrants to be found in Texas and often a real skulker. This one happily fed in the leaf litter completely oblivious to the many happy observers that encircled it. Over the course of the next couple of hours we were to find Worm-eating, Orange-crowned, Black-and-white and Canada Warblers plus several Common Yellowthroats and enjoyed exceptional views of both Northern and Louisiana Waterthrushes. Two of the group briefly saw a Kentucky Warbler and almost everyone caught up with singles of Yellow-billed Cuckoo and both Ash-throated and Brown-crested Flycatchers, White-eyed Vireo and several Long-billed Thrashers, whilst overhead at one point there was a whole pink and white cloud of Franklin's Gulls circling over our heads. After a brief lunch stop, we put some miles in heading south. A break at the Sarita rest stop brought us family parties of Hooded Orioles, several Yellow-rumped (Myrtle) Warblers and a perched Buff-bellied Hummingbird together with numerous Brewer's Blackbirds noisily feeding in the grass. By late afternoon we had reached our comfortable motel in Weslaco, which was to be our base for the next four nights, replete with Curve-billed Thrashers in the garden. The chill had certainly gone out of the day –indeed it was now pleasantly warm. Having checked-in and freshened up, there was time for an evening visit to Santa Ana Wildlife Refuge. With the wind still coming from the north, we had hoped conditions were favourable for migrating raptors to use the Refuge as a night-time roost site so we stood atop a levy, looking out over the trees. Whilst it didn't work out to plan, we did add a number of new species for the tour including Plain Chachalaca, White-tipped Dove, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Great Kiskadee and Lesser Goldfinch. Much more importantly, we saw two Clay-coloured Thrushes, a Central American and Rio Grande Valley speciality found nowhere else in the United States. Raptors didn't totally disappoint however, with two Harris's Hawks perched up on bare snags and up to ten light-morph Swainson's Hawks circling over our heads. As the sun began to set, we packed up and headed out only to find the barrier down across the entrance road. After an amusing few minutes varyingly pushing and pulling without any positive result, we found to our embarrassment that actually driving right up to the barrier activated a sensor that automatically allowed us through. This was potentially all the more embarrassing for some of us, as it is likely the whole episode was caught on the parks security camera system! We were soon back in town enjoying the ample delights of the Olive Garden restaurant after a memorable, tiring but truly excellent days birding

Day 4 Around sunrise, we took the short drive to spend the morning birding Estero Llano Grande Park. This is an extensive area of newly created wetlands and surrounding deciduous forest. From the visitor centre balcony, Fulvous Whistling-ducks joined the more expected Northern Shovelers and Blue-winged Teals whilst along the muddy edges, and in the shallows, immaculate breeding plumaged American Avocets accompanied Black-necked Stilts; Pectoral and Stilt Sandpipers with Long-billed Dowitchers and close to a boardwalk, several Soras fed alongside a much more furtive Virginia Rail. A White-tailed Kite displayed low over our heads and several Swainson's Hawks together with an immature Red-shouldered Hawk glided over. Nearby, the garden feeders held Buff-bellied Hummingbirds, Plain Chachalaca and several Green Jays. Slowly walking the wide tracks through the woodland, we soon found nest building Altamira Orioles, our first Bronze Cowbirds, Ash-throated, Brown-crested and Great Crested Flycatchers,

whilst both an agitated Carolina Wren and an extremely mobile Northern Beardless-tyrannulet led us a merry dance. In this rather dry woodland and in the mid-morning sunshine, we spent some while patiently watching over a tiny pool fed by a dripping pipe, watching birds coming into drink and bathe. Over the space of perhaps 45 minutes we saw not only Black-and-white, Black-throated Green, Tennessee, Orange-crowned and Nashville Warblers but also a stunning Yellow-breasted Chat and a slightly shyer White-eyed Vireo repeatedly soaking their feathers. Throughout the morning, we were continually accompanied by Golden-fronted Woodpeckers calling and drumming atop numerous dead trees, Ruby-throated Hummingbirds feeding on flowering bushes and both Inca, White-winged and White-tipped Doves scurrying around on the forest floor. Following a leisurely early afternoon lunch, we assembled once more shortly before 4.00pm and drove to Anzalduas Country Park, only to find new regulations stating that the park closed at 5.00pm daily! Not to be outdone, we parked outside and watched from the raised bund overlooking the international border. In fairness we didn't find either the hoped for Hook-billed Kite nor Grey Hawk but during a watch of about 90 minutes did find around 40 Swainson's and a single Broad-winged Hawk soaring over. Sean found a distant basic-plumaged American Golden-plover, our first Black Phoebe fed alongside a narrow waterway and several Eastern Meadowlarks perched up in the grassy fields. Perhaps the most enjoyable sighting was a superb adult male Blue Grosbeak found by Patrick, showing at close range in an isolated mesquite bush. From Anzalduas, it is only a few miles to Bentson State Park. Here we parked up, gathered our sandwich dinners and hiked in to a lakeside picnic area. Upon arrival around 90 Mississippi Kites were circling low over the trees and a smart adult male Green Kingfisher perched atop waterside vegetation. Whilst we waited for the sun to set, Graham and Paul had wandered off and returned with quality photos of a perched adult Grey Hawk, which sadly didn't hang around for the rest of us. We then walked to a known area for Elf Owl, the smallest owl in the world. We arrived on site at around 7.45pm. Within ten minutes, a Lesser Nighthawk sallied out over the trees and a minute later the female Elf Owl peered out of her woodpecker nesting hole (we understand that she has two chicks inside). She re-appeared several times over the course of the next 15 minutes before responding to her mates call from nearby dense cover and flying out and away. As it got dark, both Common Pauraque and Eastern Screech-owl began to call. We found a Pauraque sat on the track within a few minutes and shortly afterwards a large fluttering shape flew strongly down the road away from us; it was a Chuck-wills-Widow but the views were hardly sufficient. It then took a good deal of patience to finally entice an Eastern Screech-owl into view but thanks to perseverance and James' sharp eyesight, we were able to watch a grey-morph bird, no more than five metres away from us, peering inquisitively for around 30 seconds. This bird was of the subspecies *mccallii* restricted to the Rio Grande valley, sometimes known as Mexican Screech-owl. It only occurs in a grey phase and is distinguished by slightly different vocalisation. With quality "nightbirds" under the belt and after watching a skunk scurrying through the short grass close by, we returned to the vehicle park and made the 40 minute drive back to Weslaco.

Day 5 Another day of very untypical Rio Grande valley weather. Perhaps one of the most bizarre sights of the whole tour was the balancing act of a Black-bellied Whistling-duck perched on overhead utility wires in the hotel car park. We drove south to Brownsville in thickening cloud, which turned into light rain as we turned into Boca Chica Boulevard, finding three wet and rather bedraggled looking Red-crowned Parrots on over-head wires. Further along, running parallel to the border fence is an area of grass and sedge fields, interspersed with scattered mesquite bushes and yucca trees and a known location for Botteri's Sparrow. Whilst birds were calling almost from the moment we arrived, it took the rain to clear away and the day to brighten up before at least six Botteri's were happily singing from exposed mesquite snags. Over the course of the next couple of hours, Lark Sparrows, Western Kingbirds and Eastern Meadowlarks became ever more numerous. John R. and Graham briefly saw a Vesper's Sparrow and we were all able to enjoy both a couple of fine adult White-tailed Hawks and a crisply-plumaged Aplomado Falcon perched on a fence post, whilst at least six Northern Bobwhites were sat tight in mesquite. A massive Ringed Kingfisher flew past and as the morning warmed up, we found single Bewick's Wren, a stunning male Scarlet Tanager and a very photogenic Clay-coloured Sparrow. At one point, a swirling migrating flock of at least 90 American White Pelicans drifted over. In the distance we could see a swarm of gulls feeding over the enormous Brownsville landfill site. Gaining access was quite straightforward and we drove up onto the top carefully staying on tarmac and gritted stretches of track. Here you could count Laughing Gulls in their thousands. Walking out, they would flutter away

from your feet. Strangely well over 90% were adults. In amongst them, were about 250 pink-flushed adult Franklin's Gulls together with a smattering of both Ring-billed and *smithsonianus* Herring Gulls. Traditionally we associate rubbish tips with corvids. Despite a thorough check, we could only find a single Chihuahuan Raven sat amongst a number of Turkey Vultures. We then drove further south and west crossing the huge road bridge onto South Padre Island. After a "Subway lunch" we drove a short distance further and parked up at the Convention Centre. This is a known migrant trap with a small area of stunted trees surrounding the building and overlooking coastal lagoons and mangrove edges accessed by a series of boardwalks. With a north wind still blowing, as the afternoon progressed the trees were teeming with tired migrants gorging themselves on the cut oranges placed on bare snags. Whilst for aesthetic value alone, pride of place goes to a couple of Red-headed Woodpeckers, the site became alive with warblers. We probably found at least 25 Tennessee Warblers – at one point there were four birds perched precariously on a tiny isolated shrub all taking turns at the sliced orange. If you add in at least ten Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, an Alder Flycatcher, single Grey-cheeked and Swainson's Thrushes, a Warbling Vireo, single Worm-eating, Blue-winged and Nashville Warblers, at least six Northern Parulas, four Black-and-white Warblers, four Black-throated Green Warblers, a Northern Waterthrush, a couple of Common Yellowthroats and numerous Baltimore and Orchard Orioles, many at extremely close range, it really was a photographers dream. By walking the reed-fringed lagoons, both house points and gold star goes to Freda for finding a sometimes showy Least Bittern. Slightly easier to see were single Roseate Spoonbill and White-faced Ibis, a manic dancing adult Reddish Egret, perhaps a dozen Redheads and lone Fulvous Whistling-duck and Red-breasted Merganser. On the rising tide ten Marbled Godwits flew over and we managed to entice into view a Clapper Rail working the mangrove edge. We had the luck of the weather today. The northerly wind brought the migrants in and we were on our evening drive back north to Weslaco when the rain set in with a vengeance.

Day 6 Another overcast and cool day with the wind prevailing in the north. We spent the entire morning back at Santa Ana WFR heading straight for Pintail Lakes. The surrounding woodland gave up one of our main priority birds – Grey Hawk. We found four including a superb perched adult. Other species new for the tour included a pair of Least Grebes, a flock of at least 25 Anhingas, our first flyover American Kestrel and a pair of Tropical Kingbirds arguing atop a close tree. Throughout the morning, Northern Rough-winged Swallows were forever either circling overhead or chattering perched on utility wires. We certainly saw 600, perhaps many more. As the northerly wind picked up, raptors began to find warm air thermals and we decided to try our luck from the observation tower. Perhaps 20 Broad-winged Hawks soared over, some of them passing at very close range together with a few Swainson's, whilst the resident Harris's Hawks perched in prominent trees. Sean picked out a roosting Lesser Nighthawk and we all enjoyed prolonged views of Altimara Orioles. Perhaps the most unexpected find was a fast flying flock of 12 Hudsonian Godwits heading north. As we descended the tower Eddie pointed out a more photogenic second Lesser Nighthawk perched in a nearby tree. Due east of Weslaco lies La Feria sod farm, in fact it's just one large irrigated field. We spent the entire afternoon along the borders watching flocks of shorebirds feeding and bathing. The numbers and diversity were simply staggering. Most numerous were Baird's Sandpipers – we must have seen over 100. If you add into the mix at least at least 70 Pectoral Sandpipers, 60 each of Long-billed Dowitcher and American Golden-plover, at least 50 Buff-breasted Sandpipers, 17 Wilson's Phalaropes including five full breeding plumaged females and 14 Upland Sandpipers many well within our photographers range, it was a truly magnificent spectacle....and they weren't the major find. Creeping about in the short grass was a furtive Sprague's Pipit, a species much sought after by American birders. Whilst it was never close, it occasionally gave excellent views through a telescope but frustratingly went missing for long periods of time, only to re-appear in exactly the same spot. With the prospect of an extremely early start the following morning and with drizzle starting to fall, around 5.00pm we made the short drive back to our hotel

Day 7 As dawn was breaking, we were parked up beside the Rio Grande at the Salineno boat ramp. Here the river is no more than 40 metres wide. Of our target species, Audubon's Orioles were calling from both sides of the border from early on. However the first hour was rather overcast and it took some while for them to perch out in the open. Both Green and Ringed Kingfishers repeatedly flew up and down in front of us and Groove-billed Anis became ever

more approachable as the morning warmed up. We had one brief but close fly past view of a Red-billed Pigeon seen by only some of the group. The others had to contend with very distant views of two birds perched atop trees. Also of interest were a migrating flock of at least 250 American White Pelicans, a particularly bulky female Cooper's Hawk flying south on the Mexican side, a couple of daytime flying Lesser Nighthawks, a Clay-coloured Thrush in full song and a number of Green Jays. Of the speciality species of the area, the only bird not to be found was Muscovy Duck. We left late morning, or at least we got about a mile down the road before James spotted a male Bullock's Oriole initially perched on overhead wires. It quickly flew and whilst trying to relocate it, Sean picked out a Greater Roadrunner in a nearby field. During the afternoon we visited a park in the small town of San Ygnacio. Our principal target here was White-collared Seedeater. However before we reached the regular look out area, we found a feeding flock of perhaps 60 Cedar Waxwings together with singles of both Altamira's and Hooded Orioles all gorging themselves on a fruiting mulberry bush. The seedeater is known to frequent a fenced off dell covered by tall grasses, mesquite scrub and dead trees. Eventually Rob initially found a male perched out in the open that most of the group managed to see. It quickly disappeared and we had an anxious wait for another half hour before John R. picked out what looked like a fresher-plumaged individual. This latter bird stayed on view for a much more respectable period of time. One last birding stop north of town took us to a promontory overlooking the now much wider Rio Grande. Birds were few and far between in mid-afternoon, we did however, find a male Blue Grosbeak, whilst John W. picked out a distant adult Grey Hawk perched on the Mexican side and Sean pointed out a couple of Coyotes. All that remained was an hour long drive to Laredo, our base for the night and a fine dinner at the Texas Steak Roadhouse.

Day 8 We awoke to driving drizzle – so much for Texas being in the middle of a drought! During the day, there were intermittent periods of fine rain and the sky remained overcast throughout. To a degree this worked in our favour as much of the day was taken up in transit from Laredo to Neal's Lodge at Concan, our base for the next three nights. We broke the day up with some quality birding, which was mainly from the roadside. Our first stop was to look at a colony of Cave Swallows that regularly roost under a road bridge north of Laredo. Nearby, in the garden and surrounding scrubland of the Travel Information Centre, we found our first Cactus Wrens, Black-throated Sparrow and Pyrrhuloxia together with close up views of both Bullock's and Hooded Orioles and a furtive Greater Roadrunner. We then put some miles behind us before birding from a slightly elevated position over what seemed like endless mesquite scrub on Route 83 south of Carrizo Springs. Here we found a party of 21 Lark Buntings including many full breeding-plumaged males together with several more Black-throated and Clay-coloured Sparrows. After lunch, we made further highway side stops en route to Uvalde. At one stop we enjoyed the company of a manic calling Bell's Vireo on one side of the track and our first White-crowned Sparrows on the other, together with an extremely showy male Painted Bunting. On the opposite side of the highway, a number of Swainson's Hawks were sat in a ploughed field and a large brownish falcon hurtled through some distance away. Whilst it was most likely to be a Peregrine, the overall colour gave question to the possibility of a Prairie Falcon, a species not previously seen on this tour. On arrival at Neal's Lodge, the group did their own thing in the late afternoon finding a party of Cedar Waxwings, a few Chipping Sparrows and an Eastern Phoebe. After dinner, a few of the party managed to see a silhouetted Great Horned Owl.

Day 9 It would be easy to run out of superlatives to describe the day's birding. Whilst the overall species list was not particularly long, we hit all our targets and had some exceptional views. The early part of the morning was overcast with occasional drizzle however the skies had cleared by mid-morning and the afternoon was pleasantly warm, even sunny! As daylight broke, well over 100 Cedar Waxwings fed in trees surrounding the restaurant car park. We then drove for an hour or so before parking up within the Kerr Wildlife Management Area, an extensive area of scattered oak and juniper scrub forest and home to our two most wanted species – and we had seen them both well by 10.30am! How do you describe a Black-capped Vireo? Manic and hyperactive certainly; immaculate and stunning most definitely. We probably saw three different males hurtling around their territories, showing well for very brief periods before diving into cover and re-appearing several bushes away. This particular site is one of the most important in the world for this species. The vireos only breed in Texas and a small part of Oklahoma and Kerr holds around 100 pairs. Our patience was rewarded and all 16 members of the tour party eventually had excellent views. By

contrast, two male Golden-cheeked Warblers were on view for a considerable time sat atop stunted trees and singing their heads off. We also saw several Eastern Phoebes, Ash-throated Flycatchers and Blue-grey Gnatcatchers. And then it became the “sparrow show”. Our first, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, could not have been more obliging sitting out on an exposed snag. We also found our first pink-billed Field Sparrows and good numbers of Lark, Chipping and White-crowned Sparrows. We took a picnic lunch in the village of Hunt finding our first Wild Turkey en route – in a parking layby. It took absolutely no notice of us whatsoever, slowly walking nonchalantly across the highway and away. Shortly before entering the village, a Cooper’s Hawk engaged in a display flight over the Guadeloupe river. Most of our afternoon birding was at the scenic Lost Maples State Park, a large area embracing a river valley with sheer cliff faces and rolling hills covered in scattered scrub. Before we had even entered the park proper, a Zone-tailed Hawk soared across, albeit distantly. By design, our birding here restricted itself to two picnic sites. At the first, about a dozen Black-chinned Hummingbirds came into sugar water feeders, whilst seed strategically placed on flat rocks enticed a number of birds including Lincoln’s, Chipping and Clay-coloured Sparrows, Western Scrub-jay and numerous Summer Tanagers. A bare branched tree became a favoured song perch for a stunning adult male Scott’s Oriole who was joined briefly by his mate whilst a couple of White-eyed Vireos, Blue-grey Gnatcatchers and Black-crested Titmice (or is it Titmouses?) called from the taller bordering trees. At the opposite end of the car park one fruiting tree held a flock of perhaps 25 Cedar Waxwings. We then drove on to a second picnic area overlooking a cliff face. Here not only did we find two well-grown Great Horned Owl chicks in their nesting cavity but nearby one of the parents watched from a tree perch keeping half an eye on a pair of soaring Common Ravens and otherwise staring at us with total disdain. The final highlight of the afternoon came in the form of an immaculately-plumaged, extremely-confiding Yellow-throated Warbler that repeatedly flew from tree to tree close to us, and then posing right out in the open for extended periods of time. In one day, we had found almost all of the target species that the Edward’s Plateau has to offer but most importantly we saw all of them extremely well

Day 10 What a difference a day makes, the skies were crystal clear at dawn and once the sun came up, it became warm, verging on hot. If anything, the numbers of Cedar Waxwings in the fruiting trees surrounding the car park had increased over yesterday. There could easily have been in excess of 200 birds whistling away. This morning was to be far more relaxing than any today as we spent our time slowly walking the trails on Neal’s Lodge property. Birds were slightly thin on the ground given the weather conditions but we found some really good stuff. Starting off from the restaurant balcony, a Yellow-breasted Chat spiralled up in a display flight before sitting out on an exposed perch. Then across the road, a couple of male Vermilion Flycatchers were intent on posing for the cameras. As we started along the trail, several Bell’s Vireos called from in front of us. They became far less mobile and much more showy than our previous bird on Sunday. As we climbed up the hill, single Black-throated and Rufous-crowned Sparrows were on show along with another incredibly confiding Golden-cheeked Warbler and a male Blue Grosbeak. We heard a Black-capped Vireo but it was never close. On our way back down, we eventually all got reasonable views of a particularly mobile Verdin and as we reached back to the HQ, Summer Tanagers were calling all around us. After a refreshment break, many of us walked down to the river and walked the first few hundred metres of the river trail. We quickly heard the distinctive trilling call of “a Parula” before confusion crept in. A full breeding-plumaged male Northern Parula was seen and it sounded exactly like a Tropical Parula. At one point, a second bird carrying nesting material came into view – obviously its mate. It showed much fainter than expected orbital rings. This combined with the strange vocalisation makes us wonder if they were hybrid birds? Easier to identify was a very approachable Hermit Thrush, a Blue-headed Vireo and our second Yellow-throated Warbler. The middle part of the afternoon was free time. Some relaxed, some birded the grounds. We met up as a group once more and drove a short distance to watch over some feeders inside a pecan grove. Amongst the commoner fare to visit both the seed and the water bath were several Summer Tanagers together with a cracking male Northern Parula, at least three Nashville Warblers and a Bewick’s Wren. Raptors were circling over the clearing and, just as we were about to leave, a superb Zone-tailed Hawk flew low over our heads allowing a full plumage comparison with the abundant Turkey Vultures, the species it mimics so successfully. Following an early dinner, we drove just a few miles to begin our evening with Mexican Free-tailed Bats. Having accessed Annandale Ranch, we parked up and initially watched well over 100 Cave Swallows swirling around the cave entrance. Close by we had our first views of the rather drab Canyon Towhee and

Rock Wren together with the decidedly cute and distinctly photogenic Canyon Wren calling just like a Willow Warbler. Whilst waiting for the bat spectacle to commence, we found several incredibly tame and stunning Black-throated Sparrows – to my mind the most striking member of the family. A Cactus Wren sat up some distance away and as the light began to fade, several Lesser Nighthawks twisted and turned in the sky above us. Then, around 8.15pm bats by the tens of thousands swarmed out of the cave. Over the course of the next hour, the air was filled with a continual spewing out. Indeed there are estimated to be between 10–12 million bats in this colony, the second largest known single population of mammals in the world. As darkness fell, with thousands of bats still emerging, Common Poorwills began calling around us adding to the ambience of an evening never to be forgotten, indeed three lucky observers managed to see two birds flushed by our vehicles from the trackside verge

Day 11 Another clear, bright and very warm day. Much of today was taken up with the drive right across south-eastern Texas to Winnie, our base for the four remaining nights of the tour. Morning birding was restricted to the Neal's Lodge car parks but Cedar Waxwings remained in numbers to whistle us on our way together with single Blue-headed and Warbling Vireos, Hooded Oriole, Vermilion and Ashy-throated Flycatchers. By 4.00pm we were once more in birding mode, driving south to High Island, the principal passerine migrant "hot spot" on the Texas gulf coast seeing our first Common Nighthawk flying in broad daylight en route. It was not without some trepidation that we entered Boy Scout Woods, a little concerned that the weather conditions were hardly conducive for grounded migrants, we were not to be disappointed however. Grey Catbirds were everywhere, we saw at least 50 and at least 15 Rose-breasted Grosbeaks fed in fruiting trees. Several Wood and Swainson's Thrushes and one solitary Grey-cheeked Thrush foraged in the leaf litter. Both Baltimore and Orchard Orioles added a splash of colour. Few flycatchers were seen although we did find Eastern Wood-pewee and our first Eastern Kingbird, whilst warblers were represented by Black-and-white, Worm-eating, Magnolia, Tennessee, Yellow, Hooded, Ovenbird, American Redstart and Northern Waterthrush. As dusk drew in, Cedar Waxwings were again visible and audibly whistling us away to dinner.

Day 12 For the most part, today was overcast with a freshening southerly wind and temperature reaching the late 70s by early afternoon. We started off at Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge. The reserve is in two parts and we began close to the coast overlooking the extensive saltmarshes. In the sedge and reedy margins, we managed to entice at least two Sedge Wrens into view. Far easier were Seaside Sparrows which perched up in some numbers. We were hoping (very optimistically) to find a calling Black Rail. This is the area known as Yellow Rail Prairie where the renowned rail walk takes place – but the silence was deafening. We did however find two Clapper Rails and a particularly confiding and photogenic Least Bittern, whilst a couple of female Northern Harriers quartered the fields. Whilst the weather did not seem conducive for grounded migrants, the sight of numerous Eastern Kingbirds together with single Orchard Oriole, Blue and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks feeding on tall reed fronds was more than a little unexpected. The rest of the morning was spent in the freshwater portion of Anahuac. Looking out over some wet fields, we found our first American Wigeon and Dunlin together with good numbers of both Pectoral and Stilt Sandpipers, three Wilson's Phalaropes, a couple of Gull-billed Terns and many Long-billed Dowitchers all with their heads tucked under their wings. We then drove slowly around the perimeter road. Both Fulvous and Black-bellied Whistling-ducks flew back and forth, we found several more Least Bitterns, watched a flyover American Bittern, a couple of Soras crept along the reedy margins, we played and seek with a fast running King Rail and watched rather docile looking American Alligators of varying sizes. All the while, Black-necked Stilts and White-faced Ibises were forever on view. Back at the HQ, many Cliff Swallows were using the roof of a new building as a nest site. About 30 miles east of High Island lies Sabine Woods nestled close to the Louisiana border and due south of the industrial monstrosity that is Port Arthur. It is a known migration "hot spot" managed by the Texas Ornithological Society. Here we spent the entire afternoon that started off at pace, went into a quiet lull for an hour or so and ended on a real high. The woods have a network of trails and many of the group went off to "do their own thing". Between us we found 19 species of warbler and four species of thrush. As we entered, we quickly found our first Chestnut-sided Warblers of the tour together with a few Scarlet Tanagers, a fly past Yellow-billed Cuckoo and a Downy Woodpecker feeding young in a nest hole. It was obvious that there had been a reasonable fall of Grey Catbirds, Eastern Kingbirds, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Painted Buntings and Orchard Orioles but it was our final hour long

session, watching over the pond and water drip in the north-west corner with bright evening sunlight coming over our shoulder that will long be remembered. A number of species came into bathe including a magnificent adult male Golden-winged Warbler, which at one point was splashing about in a bird bath together with male Painted Bunting, Magnolia and Hooded Warblers and Common Yellowthroat. We also enjoyed extended views of Kentucky and Blue-winged Warblers, a pair of Northern Parulas and our first Swamp Sparrow of the tour. Elsewhere in the woods we found several Swainson's and Wood Thrushes, a few Veery and a particularly approachable Grey-cheeked Thrush together with three Worm-eating Warblers and single Swainson's and Bay-breasted Warblers. As the evening drew to a close, more Baltimore and Orchard Orioles and Indigo Buntings dropped in. The return hour long drive to Winnie was uneventful save for a few Roseate Spoonbills flying over.

Day 13 A pre-dawn start saw us driving east and then north in poor visibility towards the Angelina National Forest beyond Jasper. The sun quickly burned off the mist and fog to leave a glorious sunny day, the warmest of the tour to date with temperatures in the mid-80s. The Boykin Springs area is managed mainly coniferous forest with controlled fires keeping the undergrowth in check. Here, we spent several hours walking the forest tracks. Patrick, clad in full Foreign Legion attire, quickly brought our attention to one of our main targets – a male Bachman's Sparrow. We watched several of these range restricted birds singing from snag tops or small saplings usually around 1–2 metres off of the ground whilst high in the canopy Pine Warblers were continually trilling away. Seeing them initially involved a case of severe neck ache but over the course of the morning one or two foraged lower in the foliage. Later in the morning we were able to entice in a roving party of tiny Brown-headed Nuthatch, here at the western extreme of their range. We had hoped that accompanying these quickly moving flocks would be our other main quarry, Red-cockaded Woodpecker however, despite intense searching it was just not to be. As we returned to our vehicles, an immature, possibly second year, Bald Eagle took to the thermals circling around our head for some while before slowly drifting west. Following lunch in a typically quaint rural Texas eating house, we drove to the Jasper Fish Hatchery. Several Eastern Bluebirds perched up on over-head wires and both Red-shouldered and Red-tailed Hawks drifted over. This was by far the hottest part of the day and quite understandably birding brought frugal results. By walking the edges of the ponds, careful not to disturb any of the reported Cottonmouth snakes that were allegedly on site, we did find the most unexpected bird of the day – a female Hooded Merganser, which had been keeping loose company with a small flock of Blue-winged Teals. A Solitary Sandpiper accompanied a Greater Yellowlegs on one drying out pond but the only other species of note was a foraging Tufted Titmouse roving in a distant hedge. Back under the canopy of trees surrounding the HQ, a Red-headed Woodpecker chased a Red-bellied Woodpecker around our heads and it was then time to drive further west to our final birding site of the day. Martin Dies Jnr State Park is a real example of extensive southern US swamp forest surrounding a large lake. On the drive in, a Pileated Woodpecker flew alongside the second bus. At the prime overlook point we found at least eight much sought after Swallow-tailed Kites circling around the far shore together with perhaps as many as 60 Mississippi Kites. In the trees around the car park a noisy bunch of Carolina Chickadees were certainly making enough of a racket for us to believe a predator was in the area but, perhaps they were just bickering amongst themselves. By now it was approaching 5.30pm and with a 100 mile plus drive back south we thought our birding day was over. As has been proven so often this tour, the best was left to last. At one point where the forest road bisected a portion of the lake, Prothonotary Warblers were calling loudly. Over the course of the next 30 minutes we watched three of these stunning warblers at extremely close range crisscrossing the road, singing away. To my mind, their former name "Golden Swamp Warbler" is so much more appropriate. But still it wasn't finished as James noticed an Acadian Flycatcher calling away from the tree-tops and then just as we were getting back into the buses, a superb, confiding and approachable Yellow-throated Vireo appeared, singing away and keeping us engrossed for yet another twenty minutes. The long drive back was broken up by our first experience of the Golden Corral eating house chain – an inexpensive buffet of both choice and proportions none of us had ever seen, before a late evening return to Winnie.

Day 14 Our last day's birding and for the main part it was bright, warm but never hot and with a blustery wind. We spent the entire morning at the Bolivar Flats Audubon Sanctuary. This large peninsula is accessed from a road running parallel with the shoreline. Halfway along, a wet field on the inland side held a lone Upland Sandpiper

feeding amongst the more expected Black-bellied Plovers. Where the road stops, the tracks continue over packed sand for some way, well above the tide line. Along the water's edge, Sanderlings scampered to and fro as only Sanderlings can do and Least Terns were ever present and in considerable numbers. We timed our visit just right, on a rising tide. Over the course of the next few hours, amongst the large number of commoner shore and seabirds, we watched both colour phases of Reddish Egrets dancing in the shallows and found our first Wilson's and Piping Plovers (three of us also saw a lone Snowy Plover). Amongst the Brown Pelicans were two white cousins and amongst the numerous Laughing Gulls, a lone Franklin's was a pink beacon of light. We found our only Red Knots of the tour and a lone, rather pale-mantled Peregrine sat upon a dead tree stump. All the while hundreds upon hundreds of American Avocets, all in full breeding plumage, were continually being pushed higher into the bay by the rising tide. Behind the shoreline is an extensive area of tidal salt-marsh. Here, we were able to entice in up to five Nelson's Sparrows, definitely one of the prettiest of the American sparrows. Lunch was taken at Stingree Restaurant, upon the earnest request of Patrick who had been a patron before the tour commenced. In fairness the food was excellent although the service was extremely slow. The balcony overlooked a tidal creek and in between courses, Paul picked out a much prized adult female Magnificent Frigatebird, whilst several breeding plumaged *surinamensis* Black Terns flew upstream. We hoped to spend our final afternoon finding grounded migrants in both Boy Scouts Wood and Smith Oaks on High Island. It was hard going – indeed there were more birders than birds. We did find single Bay-breasted, Magnolia, Tennessee, Yellow and Chestnut-sided Warblers. A few Black-and-white warblers entertained "nuthatch fashion" and we finally caught up with Red-eyed Vireos – usually one of the most commonly seen migrants. However for many, the most exciting sight was of a metre long Cottonmouth or Water Moccasin snake at pretty close range. This is a highly venomous pit-viper. The large size indicated a male and it obviously didn't appreciate our presence. It continually opened its mouth in aggressive display mode showing the white inner flesh giving rise to its name. On several occasions it also rattled its tail vigorously. The final couple of hours were spent overlooking some reedy pools along Southern Oilfield Road, a new site for Birdfinders. We had heard of a White-rumped Sandpiper being found there earlier in the day – we found three. Also present were several stunning breeding-plumaged Stilt Sandpipers, four Soras crept along the reedy margins whilst three male Wilson's Phalaropes scuttled around with a number of Least Sandpipers. Out on the open water, three Gadwalls swam around with 16 Fulvous Whistling-ducks whilst over the far shore, Sean saw an adult Lesser Black-backed Gull.

Day 15 Departure day and after our final species review and a brief illustrated presentation by the evergreen Patrick, which left James speechless, all that was left was the 100 mile drive to the airport and our various goodbyes. The tour was over. In total we had found 302 species and heard one more. I really would like to thank every one of the participants not only for their energy and sharp birding eyes but, above all, their good humour throughout – as a tour, it was a real pleasure to be a part of.

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