

Texas

7–21 April 2001

Participants

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Ringed Kingfisher

Leaders

Vaughan Ashby and Peter Basterfield

A personal account by Martin Tribe

Day 1 We arrived in Houston the afternoon of Saturday 7th April and saw our first birds at the airport – European Starling and Feral Pigeon! We took a short drive down to the van hire place and stood in the hot and humid car park whilst the paperwork was sorted out. We kept our eyes open and saw Snowy Egret, Northern Mockingbird, five Black Vultures and Helen's first lifer – a Great Egret flying past.

The drive towards our first base in Victoria, via one of the soon-to-be-well-known Dairy Queens, added Barn Swallow, our first Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Common and Great-tailed Grackle, American Crow, Loggerhead Shrike, Turkey Vulture (TV), Purple Martin and distant views of four Upland Sandpipers and two close Killdeers. Outside the motel in Victoria we were serenaded by an evening congregation of Great-tailed Grackles.

Day 2 An early start meant we reached Rockport just around dawn, just in time for the famous Captain Ted's Whooping Crane Tour. The sky was overcast and the wind made the sea choppy. This didn't deter the Laughing Gulls from floating on the breeze over the car park. It also didn't deter us as we boarded the boat and took our seats. The boat set off and we strove to see and identify birds through the spray-covered windows. Our first bird was Common Loon soon followed by American Herring Gulls and Double-crested and Neotropic Cormorants. The boat (which had the three essentials of coffee, doughnuts and toilets) headed out along the Intracoastal Waterway and took a right into Copano Bay. It was then that everyone abandoned the seats to stand on either the lower or upper deck. We cruised alongside a flat and open area of marshland and pools and soon saw three individuals of our target species for the area: Whooping Crane. Having seen these birds from a distance the boat moved closer for a better view. As we approached the bird list grew: a Great Blue Heron flew past, a singing Eastern Meadowlark perched on a post, Red-winged Blackbirds and Willets were common, a couple of Northern Harriers quartered the marshes, Royal and

to Gull-billed Terns flew over the boat, and Black-necked Stilt, Spotted Sandpiper, Roseate Spoonbill were seen over or on the marsh. Two Reddish Egrets were seen in flight as was a flock of seven White-faced Ibises. American Avocets and Snowy Egrets put in various appearances as did Caspian Tern, American Coot, Forster's and Common Terns. The boat stopped near three Whooping Cranes (two adults and a juvenile) and we picked up Seaside Sparrows as we watched them. A little further along we saw 10 Whooping Cranes in total – a decent proportion of the world population.

Sadly, the boat had to turn back sometime but the birding didn't stop: Black-bellied Plover, Greater Yellowlegs, a close flypast of five Brown Pelicans followed by an equally close flock of 56 White Ibises. A Belted Kingfisher flashed past, sadly unseen by most of the group, but two Black-bellied Whistling-ducks were seen by all. Also seen were three Northern Shovelers, three Canvasbacks, Semipalmated Plovers, at least five (at different times) Tricoloured Herons, more Common Loons, two female Red-breasted Mergansers, Sandwich Terns, two American Oystercatchers and, on the water, at least 110 summer-plumaged Eared (Black-necked) Grebes. As we entered the harbour there was a nice Black-necked Stilt on the small harbour wall alongside the Laughing Gulls. From the entrance to the car park we added a soaring Peregrine and as we drove along the waterside road we added two Redheads, a close view of Neotropic Cormorant, Ruddy Turnstone and four Mottled Ducks.

Next we drove to Rockport Beach, a peninsula of land comprising mainly car parks and sandy beaches. Our first stop was just past the entrance hut where a few birds sat on the water's edge – two each of Royal, Caspian and Sandwich Tern, a few Sanderling, our first Wilson's Plover, two Semipalmated Plovers, one Least Sandpiper, lots of Laughing Gulls and a Mottled Duck on the water. Further on we could see lots of birds in the distance sitting on the grass that we thought were gulls. They seemed unconcerned by the people walking past them on the beach. Earlier we had asked the leaders if we'd get Black Skimmer and they had just smiled. Now we found that the majority of the birds on the grass were Black Skimmers – about 400 of them! And they were happy to let people get quite close. On the water's edge were Ring-billed and Herring Gulls, plus Willets, while a Least Tern flew past. A Great Blue Heron flew over the water having had enough of the tourists on the beach. Looking out to sea we added three Gull-billed Terns, a male Bufflehead and a Brown Pelican.

Further along the peninsula we found three Savannah Sparrows in deep grass, Snowy, Great and a single Reddish Egret and one Western Sandpiper. A flock of Laughing Gulls and Willets also included Ruddy Turnstone and a single American Golden-plover.

Next we had a short but hot walk to an observation platform to view the island where the egrets and herons nested. We had almost got there when over the CB came the news that there was a Long-billed Curlew back over where we had just come from. We ran back and had good views of this very buff-coloured bird. Back again to check the nesting island we had a male Mallard (rare down here – might be feral!), at least 14 Great Blue Herons, a Tricoloured Heron, both white egrets, and a Reddish Egret. Near here was another sandy area where many birds nested – Royal, Caspian, Forster's and Sandwich Terns, Laughing Gulls and Wilson's Plover.

Next stop was the south end of the bridge crossing from the Live Oak Peninsula to Lamar Peninsula. It was still hot and windy but we added a few more species. Savannah Sparrow was again seen plus a Killdeer doing its distraction display. Four American Oystercatchers fed and made a noise at the water's edge, a pair of Red-breasted Mergansers and a Common Loon were on the water and Barn and Northern Rough-winged Swallows were common overhead. A small island had more nesting terns and we saw, both on the island and flying around, Royal, Forster's and about five Least Terns. Two Black-bellied Whistling-ducks flew past as did Brown Pelican, Great Egret and five Redheads. A short stop for refreshment added a close Eastern Meadowlark and a single, winter-plumaged Long-billed Dowitcher (heavily scrutinized before we agreed on its identification). At the north end of the bridge we added Cliff Swallows, nesting under the bridge.

The drive back to Victoria added yet more species: at various stops we had three male Northern Cardinals, lots of Mourning Doves, three Northern Caracaras (one being mobbed by a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher), 80+ Cattle Egrets, a female Northern Harrier, Eastern Meadowlark, TVs and three Loggerhead Shrikes. One stop added rather distant views of two White-tailed Hawks and we got another (again a quite distant bird) later.

There were four of us who always carried our bins with us. Outside our restaurant for the evening we checked four birds on a telegraph pole and so added Bronzed Cowbird (two male, two female) to the trip list, and, with the loan of our bins, to many people's life lists.

Day 3 Today we visited Aransas NWR, or as it could be known, "Mosquito Alley". The mosquitoes here were very bad and almost everyone suffered despite liberal use of repellent. En route we stopped at a damp field containing long grass. In the grass were Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs, although mostly well-hidden. A Common Yellowthroat sang from the scrub at the field's edge. The real reason we stopped here was to watch a very nice White-tailed Hawk sitting on a telegraph pole. Also here we had fly-overs by six White Ibis and a Little Blue Heron. Whilst still driving to Aransas an emergency stop added a fabulous White-tailed Kite in a tree quite close to the road and a singing Eastern Meadowlark. Also from the van we saw Brewer's Blackbird, three Northern Caracara, plus the usual Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, Great-tailed Grackles, Loggerhead Shrikes, Cattle Egrets, Brown-headed Cowbirds, TVs, BVs etc. We also had an American Crow which, we were told, was outside its normal range. We also stopped in a small town bordering the sea. Here we had two Inca Doves, Bronzed Cowbirds, Chimney Swift and, surprisingly two pairs of Eurasian Collared-doves.

Finally at Aransas we started by checking a small reedy pool. This held Common Gallinule, American Coot and our first American Purple Gallinule. As we walked along one of the reserve roads we saw a couple of Alligators and not much else. However, things were to get better. As we took a path which overlooked an area of open marsh Helen found a Sora in some thick reedy stuff. This bird was feeding round a large Alligator! The open marsh areas held nine Little Blue Herons (the colour on these birds is fantastic – no book really shows it), a hard-to-see Wilson's Snipe, Killdeer, Least Sandpiper and two Great Blue Herons. We then headed back to the visitor centre and the relief of air-conditioning. No sooner had we got in when we heard there was a Buff-bellied Hummingbird at the feeder. "Which feeder? Where?" Fortunately it was close by and viewable from the inside of the centre. We joined the crowd watching the feeder and saw both male and female Buff-bellied Hummingbirds using it.

Leaving the visitor centre we drove to a place which overlooks open water. Using 'scopes we could see a lot of ducks on the water. After scanning and checking and discussing various birds we identified there were about 1400 Ruddy Ducks in the flock with scattered Redheads and Canvasbacks. The flock seemed to carry on around into a bay so we drove round there. Here we added lots of Lesser Scaup plus at least two, and no doubt there were more, Greater Scaup. At this second stop we also found, amongst the normal Ruddy Ducks, a leucistic bird – an almost white Ruddy Duck, which looked quite peculiar amongst the normal birds. As we drove off we saw a female Javelina who came right next to the van, seemingly not bothered that we were there.

Birding tours are trips that involve lots of sudden stops. Another sudden stop added our first Anhinga, sitting with six Cattle Egrets beside a small pool of water. This bird was in the usual wings-held-open posture. It seemed to become aware of us and walked off wings still held open. It then flew and landed in a nearby tree.

At yet another site we found large pools of water with reedy edges and islands. Here were six Blue-winged Teals, one Cinnamon Teal, five Pied-billed Grebes and a female Northern Harrier. One of the group found an American Bittern hiding in the foliage. After a while it came out and showed very well. Also here we had 15 American White Pelicans flying overhead, as did Neotropic Cormorant, two White Ibises and the usual TVs.

Still eager for more birds we drove to Seadrift and along the 238 Old Seadrift Road. One stop along added at about 30 Upland Sandpipers feeding in a field. En route to the next stop we had 15 Little Blue Herons, one Great Egret, one Roseate Spoonbill, Loggerhead Shrike and Northern Caracara. The next stop, by another smallish pool of water kept us very busy. The most exciting thing about this site was the noise – there were hundreds of noisy migrating Red-winged Blackbirds in bushes and trees at the back of the pool. Amongst them were at least two fine Yellow-headed Blackbirds.

Next to the waders – five Semipalmated Sandpipers, six Short-billed Dowitchers, four or five Lesser Yellowlegs, two Killdeer and six Black-necked Stilts. On a smaller pool behind the main one were two White Ibises and a Roseate Spoonbill.

Our final stop of the day was another field of short grass where again we found Upland Sandpipers. A few metres further on more Upland Sands were seen feeding on someone's front lawn.

Day 4 Today we aimed to drive down to the Rio Grande valley where we planned to stay three nights in McAllen. The drive down added a few species although we didn't get the hoped-for Wild Turkey and Sarita Rest Stop was closed so we couldn't stop there. None-the-less we did get Harris's Hawk, our first Cave Swallows, Hooded Oriole, Scissor-tailed and Vermilion Flycatchers, Bronzed Cowbird and loads of Great-tailed Grackles and migrating cowbirds.

We headed for the famous Brownsville Dump where our first target bird was Chihuahuan Raven, which was soon spotted feeding on the rubbish. It was pretty windy here at the dump, which meant we could all see the white neck feathers of what used to be called White-necked Raven. Also here were hundreds of Laughing Gulls. Amongst these were purported to be a few Franklin's Gulls. After brief flight views we managed to find a bird on the ground. This bird had a noticeably pink breast although the comments of an American birder next to us of 'wow, look at that, that's awesome' etc., seemed a bit over the top – that was until I panned right and saw another Franklin's Gull looking like a pink marshmallow! As we turned to leave a flock of six (Hudsonian) Whimbrels flew overhead.

Next stop we Sabal Palm Audubon Sanctuary - an area of sub-tropical woodland. This is one of the few remaining sites where the once-common Sabal Palm can still be found. On the way to the sanctuary one of the vans developed a problem and soon expired. Fortunately we had made it to Sabal Palm's car park (getting Couch's Kingbird on the way) and so had a good place in which to wait for a replacement to arrive. It was 30°C in the shade here and noticeably hotter in the direct sun. We started birding at the feeding station (in the shade and with seats) and immediately began to see the Mexican species appearing – White-tipped Doves fed on the ground, a Plain Chachalaca climbed a tree about a metre in front of us and a Long-billed Thrasher sang from the depths of the scrub. After some effort we managed to get a few brief views of the thrasher and then we were distracted by the arrival of our first Green Jays and a female, then a male Golden-fronted Woodpecker – all going for the oranges put out by the sanctuary staff. The drinking pool attracted a pair of Northern Cardinals and a Black-crested Titmouse. A second Chachalaca appeared as did Red-winged Blackbird, Great-tailed Grackle and Bronzed Cowbird. There were two hummingbird feeders here and we saw two male (usually fighting) and a female Buff-bellied Hummingbirds.

Once the replacement van had arrived we did a walk around some other parts of the sanctuary. We walked to a resaca (oxbow lake) and were soon watching two Pied-billed Grebes and about ten Least Grebes. Also here was an Osprey in a tree, a single Black-bellied Whistling-duck, four Ruddy Duck, a male Blue-winged Teal and two Mottled Ducks. A drier, wooded area added two pairs of Great Kiskadee, and Common Yellowthroats could be heard singing from various areas around the lakes.

Finally, we drove to a spot in Brownsville and set up the scopes to watch a large white tower. Having got ready for a long search in the afternoon heat and blazing sun we were surprised and delighted to look to our right and have excellent views of our target birds – two Tamaulipas Crows. This may not sound exciting but the views we had were the best Vaughan had ever had (and the easiest) and the crows were surprisingly different in appearance and jizz to other crows. The bill shape was very angular and the blue sheen to the feathers could be seen. We expected just another crow but got a species that'll make it onto the top ten birds of the trip!

Day 5 Today we aimed to visit Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park and Anzalduas Country Park. We started early at Bentsen with two Couch's Kingbirds and a male Altamira Oriole in the car park. We were waiting for the park to open and so we restricted to hanging around the car park for a few minutes. Other birds seen here included White-winged Dove, American Kestrel, two Sharp-shinned Hawks, 20+ Broad-winged Hawks, two Swainson's Hawks and two Great Kiskadees. We headed into the park and walked a few of the roads and paths. The 'snowbirds' (birders who stay in the park in winter and set up feeder stations) were mostly gone but a couple of feeding stations were active but quiet. We did get Indigo Buntings at some feeders. Overhead we added Cooper's Hawk, Cedar Waxwing and Chimney Swift. Helen found a singing Long-tailed Thrasher in a roadside tree showing well. Plain Chachalacas could be heard everywhere. A target bird was Northern Beardless-tyrannulet. I found a small flycatcher in a tree about 30 metres away which soon flew closer and turned out to be the target bird. Plain Chachalacas were also seen again as were Green Jay, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Inca Dove, White-tipped Dove and Tufted Titmouse.

At about midday (very hot!) we stood in an openish area of tarmac scanning the skies for raptors. Northern Beardless-tyrannulet was heard and Couch's Kingbird and Golden-fronted Woodpecker seen. An Osprey flew overhead as did a Northern Harrier. Then I happened to look in a direction I hadn't been paying much attention to and saw a slow-flapping bird coming towards us following the road. I thought it looked peculiar, then two or three of us shouted together 'Hook-billed Kite'. The bird found a thermal and circled above us gradually gaining height until it was almost invisible.

After this success we headed for Anzalduas Country Park. This area can be very popular with the locals and is best visited early. The trees are almost festooned with Spanish Moss. Vaughan's excellent local information meant our first bird was a Grey Hawk on the nest. The bird looked very hot and sat with its beak open. Occasionally, we could hear its mate calling from the woods. We had hoped to see Tropical Parula and Clay-coloured Thrush here. Unfortunately, this year, there were no reports of Tropical Parula at any regular site. We did have hope for the thrush though. We spread out into the park, covering a large area, most of which is grass under trees. The automatic watering systems were in action often catching the unwary. We did not catch up with the Clay-coloured Thrush (apparently a pair was nesting in the park) but we did see two Cedar Waxwings, one Black-bellied Whistling-duck, Couch's Kingbird, Great Kiskadee, Plain Chachalaca, Great-tailed Grackle, Tufted Titmouse, Brown-crested Flycatcher, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher and an Osprey.

Next stop was McAllen Sewage Ponds. Because it had been a very dry winter and spring most of the pools were dry and birdless. However, the trip was still worth the effort in the hot afternoon sun. Telegraph posts held Harris's Hawks and a Swainson's Hawk flew over. A stop by a dry field alongside a small stream yielded Mourning Dove and our first Common Ground-doves (four in all), plus a Great Blue Heron, a Snowy Egret, one Gull-billed Tern and a female Northern Harrier. We did manage to find one area of water on the banks of which we had 11 Killdeers, 33 Black-necked Stilts, and two Lesser Yellowlegs. A bit later in McAllen we found two, then four, Green Parakeets.

We ended the day back at Bentsen for the specialities. The usual species were seen or heard: Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, White-winged Dove, Plain Chachalaca, Great Kiskadee, Long-billed Thrasher plus Northern Beardless-tyrannulet. Nearby, whilst crowding round a feeder site we managed to get brief views of Olive Sparrow – more heard than seen. Near the Elf Owl tree, waiting for it to appear, we had Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks, Lesser Nighthawk and White-tailed Kite. The Elf Owl stuck its head up and almost out a couple of times, enough for all to clearly see the face pattern. Then it was fast drive along a short bit of road to a box purported to hold an Eastern Screech-owl. Just as we arrived, in almost total darkness, the bird flew from the box. We really saw only a silhouette. Finally came the obligatory night-time drive/crawl around the roads of Bentsen hoping for Common Pauraque. A couple of flashes of something were seen but nothing (from my view) definite. The other people doing the same crawl had the same lack of success. We decided to come back for another go next day.

Day 6 We started the day again at Anzalduas Country Park, still hoping for the Clay-coloured Thrush. The usual birds were again seen, including the nesting Grey Hawk. We again spread out over a great area searching for these elusive thrushes and were greatly excited when we heard whistles blowing to call us over to a treeless part of the park. Everyone congregated around three or four people to find out what had been seen. It wasn't the thrush but it was a lifer for most of us in the form of five American Pipits. This species winters in Texas but is usually gone by early April so we were lucky, and pleased, to see them.

After visiting Santa Ana we went back to Bentsen that evening for another 'Pauraque-crawl'. First we revisited the screech-owl box and the bird showed well, peering out of the box without being concerned about our presence. With Common Pauraques calling in the distance it felt very tropical. I happened to look up towards the top of the tree that held the box and noticed something sitting there. I tried to quietly tell everyone that there was an owl on the – a light shone it is showed it to be an Elf Owl! This bird showed fantastically well – so much better than a view of a bird just peering from a nest hole – we even heard it calling. We then had another unsuccessful but very enjoyable drive around Bentsen and headed back to the motel.

Day 7 We started the day with five Swainson's Hawks heading north, an American Purple Gallinule and a Brown-crested Flycatcher. As we watched the flycatcher Trevor excitedly whispered 'There's a raptor over here'. We all looked skywards only to be told something like 'No, on the ground, right in front of us, in front of that bush'. I looked and couldn't see anything but Trevor was most insistent. A small movement to the left and I could see the bird: it was

a young Harris's Hawk with a dead Eastern Cottontail rabbit. The bird had rabbit intestines wrapped around part of its head! It was only about two metres away from us! We moved closer and it seemed determined not to lose its prey and just either glared at us or tried to drag the rabbit into deeper scrub. We all (including a group of school children) watched the bird moving slowly away then left it alone.

As we walked through the woods we had Black-crested Titmouse and Golden-fronted and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers, and plenty of singing Olive Sparrows. At one point Vaughan and I suddenly got on the same bird and shouted 'Clay-coloured Thrush. The bird of course flew but not too far and it and its mate proceeded to show well a few metres away from us in a tree where they appeared to have a nest. The miss at Anzalduas became just a dim memory as we watched these surprisingly-attractive birds.

As we reached the reed-fringed lakes we began to get birds more associated with water: Soras were heard as was Common Yellowthroat. On the water were five Neotropic Cormorants, five Anhingas, including some juveniles, American Coot, two Mottled Duck, seven Blue-winged Teal, four Pied-billed Grebes while two Forster's Terns hawked over the water. Nearby trees held three Altamira Orioles and Great-tailed Grackles. Both Great Blue Heron and Great Egret flew over the lakes. A smaller lake, with a greater edging of reeds, yielded singing Marsh Wren, our first Green Heron, two pairs of Ruddy Duck and Moorhens. Another even smaller pool added Belted Kingfisher flying past and an adult and a juvenile Yellow-crowned Night-heron. A third lake, by far the largest, was quiet except for a pair of Green Kingfishers flying away from us and a rather distant hovering White-tailed Kite.

Back where the Marsh Wren was singing an attempt was made to actually see the bird. As she searched the reeds Helen found a close Least Bittern – least is a good word for this bird – for a bittern it's tiny. Behind us at this point was another reedy area where we found a Sora swimming across an open patch.

A bit of a walk was called for now as we headed into the woods again aiming for an area of much shallower water. This area had lots of birds: our first Fulvous Whistling-ducks (30+), Black-necked Stilt, Short-billed Dowitcher, Solitary, Least and Pectoral Sandpipers, two male Cinnamon Teals, Northern Pintail, two Mottled Ducks, a pair of Gadwalls, two White-faced Ibises and a Little Blue Heron.

Day 8 Another hot day beckoned and we headed north-east up route 83 to Laredo getting Harris's hawk and Northern Caracara en route. First stop was Chapeño, a feeder site next to the Rio Grande where a local kept bird tables to attract birds and birders. There are three main target birds to get here and we began excellently with one of them in the form of a huge female Ringed Kingfisher sitting on a nearby post – a very impressive bird. Great-tailed Grackles and Red-winged Blackbirds were, of course, abundant, feeding on the tables and we soon added a male Bullock's Oriole to the list as it flew past. Two Altamira Orioles got people going for a minute but we soon realised they weren't what we were after. Laughing Gulls, White Pelicans, Neotropic Cormorants, two Double-crested Cormorants and a 'Mexican' Duck flew up or down the river and a couple of Gull-billed Terns fished nearby. New birds for this site kept coming with White-tipped Dove, a male Northern Cardinal, four Great Egrets, Green Jay and Brown-crested Flycatcher. Plain Chachalacas could be heard calling from the Mexican side of the river and Bank and Barn Swallows flew east following the river's course. To view area best we had to leave the 'scopes a little behind us creating what looked like a display for an optics shop. The next target bird then put in an appearance in the form of two adult and a juvenile Brown Jay. All three showed well and the yellow in the bill of the juvenile was seen clearly. There was still one local speciality to get yet and panic struck when Pete Basterfield came over the CB with the news that he, up the hill where no-one else was, had an Audubon's Oriole in his 'scope and that we wouldn't be able to see it from where we were! Tripod and 'scope in hand I charged up the hill, led only by Trevor and we both scrambled for a view through Pete's 'scope. Jill and Helen arrived next but the bird had flown. After a few minutes of depression another Audubon's Oriole was located, then another, so all had good views.

Next stop was Falcon Dam, which dams the Rio Grande. As we drove to this area we picked up a Greater Roadrunner and the usual Turkey Vultures. The car park was very hot (it got over 100°F later on) as we scanned downstream towards the reeds and open water. From this vantage we found a sitting Green Heron and soon another flew across the water, Red-winged Blackbirds, Least Grebe, a Spotted Sandpiper on the edge of the dam itself, Couch's Kingbird, Ladder-backed Woodpecker and singing Cactus Wren. Now we began the hard march downstream in search of the very elusive Red-billed Pigeon. We saw very little on the way down except a couple of Red-tailed Hawks and a Bullock's Oriole. We finally reached an area where the shrubs became trees. I looked into a group of trees and bushes

and announced I had a Red-billed Pigeon in full view but deep in the tree. Unfortunately it quickly flew but was eventually seen by most people although usually in flight. Vaughan had kept quiet another bit of specialist knowledge and suddenly we were watching a Common Pauraque flying around us and through the trees. Soon there were two Pauraques flying around us, sitting down (becoming instantly invisible) then flying again. We soon left so as not to disturb these birds too much. The walk back yielded an excellent Red-shouldered Hawk plus singing Olive Sparrow and Bewick's Wren. As we drove out of the area a quick stop to check a bird on a wire added a male American Kestrel to the list.

Zapata was our final birding spot of the day and we wanted only one bird – White-collared Seedeater. On arrival we found, contrary to most other places we had been, there was too much water to take the usual path so we had to walk around the other side. After a hot and windy (but quite short) walk we heard a song which was unfamiliar to Pete or myself. As we looked quizzically at each other Vaughan came on the CB to say he'd just had a female seedeater. Back we tramped only to find it had flown. We wanted to go back to our mystery singer and when we did we soon found an in-the-open singing male White-collared Seedeater.

Day 9 Another early start had us heading north from Laredo up I35 then off onto highway 83 towards Carrizo Springs. Our first stop was a colony of Cave and Cliff Swallows flying around under a road-bridge. There were quite a lot of corpses on the ground under the bridge but no obvious cause of death was seen.

Next stop was an area of scrub and bushes stretching away into the distance. I don't believe we intended to stop but the second van did when they found a male Lark Bunting. We (the leading van) then stopped and disembarked to get a view of the bird. Our viewing angle wasn't good but eventually we all saw the bird between two fence posts. It was a first-year male and not a black adult male. As we watched this bird I heard a singing male Cassin's Sparrow and from the other side of the road came the scratchy song of Bell's Vireo. We could also hear Olive Sparrow singing here. Strung out in a line along the roadside was scanned the bushes and found Curve-billed Thrasher, more Cassin's Sparrows, showing very well, and a quite close Grasshopper Sparrow. A highlight for pretty well everyone (my favourite was the close Cassin's!) was a somewhat distant but still clear male Painted Bunting – a strange-looking mass of colour against a grey sky. Also here we had Ash-throated Flycatcher, Cactus Wren and Golden-fronted Woodpecker.

Carrying along the highway we were picking up Chihuahuan Ravens, Harris's Hawks and Pyrrhuloxias on the telegraph wires and poles. We stopped whenever something good was spotted. This way we came across Eastern Meadowlark, Couch's Kingbird, Northern Cardinal, two male Bullock's Orioles, an out-of-usual-range male Audubon's Oriole, two Greater Roadrunners and a male Blue Grosbeak. Although there was no water visible we also had a Green Heron fly across the road. At one point someone asked Vaughan if one can get gamebirds here. This resulted in slamming on the brakes and urgent questioning, followed by quick reversing after which we all watched a couple of close Scaled Quails – a bird which has become very hard to find this far east in Texas.

We were aiming for a high point in the road where there is a water tank for cattle to drink from. Here the land was a bit more open. We found three female and a male Lark Bunting and had a flock of at least 30 Lark Sparrows briefly fly up and a White-crowned Sparrow. We all managed to see at least three Clay-coloured Sparrows and two Red-tailed Hawks. Crossing the road to where the water tank was we came across another pair of Scaled Quails coming to drink the water. A scan around yielded yet another male Audubon's Oriole, seeming to indicate a range expansion in this area. We walked down a sandy path getting a Black-throated Sparrow and again hearing Cassin's Sparrow. A sudden shout saw us all freeze as a swarm of bees came close past! Both Ash-throated and Vermilion Flycatchers were seen as was a lone Swainson's Hawk on a large radio mast.

Heading onto Carrizo Springs we got more of the usual roadside birds – Harris's Hawks (nesting on telegraph poles), Chihuahuan Ravens, Scissor-tailed Flycatchers and an out-of-range Northern Caracara. At a garage in Carrizo Springs we found a male Brewer's Blackbird on the forecourt, a pair of displaying Scissor-tails, and I spotted a kingbird on a wire. Most people had gone off shopping but I wanted to see the outer tail feathers of this bird because it looked wrong for Couch's. Sure enough, white outer tails were present and so we had to hunt down the others to tell them of the Western Kingbird on the wire.

At a brief stop by a roadside rest area we had five more Lark Buntings, an Ash-throated Flycatcher and 30+ Cliff Swallows collecting mud for their nests.

We reached Neal's Lodges at Concan and were well and truly onto the Edward's Plateau. Outside the main office and shop are some feeders and we soon had our first Ruby-throated Hummingbird of the trip. Also around here were House Finch, White-winged Dove, a heard only White-eyed Vireo, Eastern Phoebe and Northern Rough-winged Swallow. After getting settled into our rooms we all gathered again for a walk down to the river. Bronzed Cowbirds were seen on the way and a male Black Phoebe was found calling from a bush overhanging the Rio Frio. We followed the leaders around a path to a wooded hillside. Here we had singing two Olive Sparrows, a Black-chinned Hummingbird, a Yellow-breasted Chat and the star of the area, a singing male Black-capped Vireo. It wasn't very close and so couldn't be heard but it could be seen excellently through a 'scope. Turning 180 degrees in response to a loud song we had our first Carolina Wren, seen well and quite close. On the walk back we added Lesser Goldfinch to the trip list. Around the back of the office is a path alongside a bushy/wooded area and a feeding station. To end the day we got a male Hooded Oriole, Lincoln's Sparrow and Black-throated Sparrow. Just as we began the walk back Pete came on the walky-talky with news of a Spotted Towhee at the feeding station. Helen, David and I started running, met Trevor on the way to breathlessly shout 'Spotted Towhee'. Trevor joined the run to the feeders. We got there in time to see the bird well but it had moved away by the time the rest had arrived. It's always worth running!

Day 10 Today we went to Lost Maples – named after the Big Tooth maples which grow there and is a good place to see the Texas endemic Golden-cheeked Warbler. Lost Maples is a valleyed area with heavily-wooded hillsides and rivers running through the valleys. As we drove in we had two Chipping Sparrows on the road. We parked in a car park at 1800 feet elevation and took the East Trail towards the ponds. This trail follows Can Creek. Along the way we got Ash-throated Flycatcher, Common Raven, Inca Dove, Eastern Wood-pewee, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Blue-grey Gnatcatcher and heard Golden-cheeked Warblers. None seen though. As we progressed we added White-eyed Vireo (finally seen rather than heard), Carolina Chickadee, some nice male Summer Tanagers, Northern Cardinal, Red-tailed Hawk and Rufous-crowned Sparrow. Another singing Golden-cheeked Warbler was heard, this time seemingly a lot closer. After some searching David tracked it down and we all had good 'scope views of this fine and much-wanted bird. A little way further down the track another male was found, more distant across the river this time, but showing well. As this bird was being watched we also came across an Acadian Flycatcher and a pair of nesting Yellow-throated Vireos. When we reached the ponds we stopped for a search of the area. A singing Canyon Wren was soon found, although singing from a bush rather than the expected rock face. This was followed by Eastern Phoebes, nesting in holes in the cliff face. Everyone was watching the phoebes except me who was a little way away looking in the opposite direction. A bird flew down onto the path in front of me and as I looked at it Townsend's Solitaire came instantly to mind! Not very likely this far east (they winter in west Texas). I shouted at the others to get over here and all rushed over – of course, the bird flew off. My identification was, to be honest, not believed. Fortunately the bird was relocated and confirmed as a Townsend's Solitaire. I was very happy. As we watched this area we also had a female Spotted Towhee and a Red-eyed Vireo. Carrying on along the path we came across a pool used by some birds as a drinking pool. The birds flew from a pathside bush down to the water and back. Here we had Orange-crowned Warbler, Nashville Warbler and Wilson's Warbler whilst Red-shouldered Hawks flew and called overhead. On the walk back we saw three Western Scrub-jays, a Black-and-white Warbler and a Cooper's Hawk.

After returning to the lodges and a quick rest we headed to the famous Frio Bat Cave. A quick stop to see if anything was about yielded poor views of a Zone-tailed Hawk for a few of us. Just below the bat cave (which is on top of a small ridge) we did a walk about. Vaughan found a Canyon Towhee followed by two Black-throated Sparrows and a pair of Black-tailed Gnatcatchers and two young. We also heard and saw singing Rufous-crowned Sparrow. A flock of about 400 Cave Swallows flew around over the ridge. Whilst waiting for some bat cave activity a Great Horned Owl was reported. We rushed to the scene and found the bird sitting on a slope in the open. As we watched this a Canyon Wren appeared and sang from a wrecked jeep and then two Rock Wrens arrived and eventually came very close. Finally the bats started coming out of the cave and streaming off over the Texas countryside. There were three or four Red-tailed Hawks diving into the bat groups and taking easy dinners. We watched the bats come out for well over an hour and they just kept on coming. It was impressive to see long streams of bats against a thunderhead cloud full of lightning.

Day 11 We started the day with a short drive to a spot nearby, which was farmland and grass fields. Here we had the target bird which was Eastern Bluebird plus saw or heard at least six Grasshopper Sparrows, plus at least eight Lark

Sparrows, a singing Field Sparrow, two male Vermilion Flycatchers, four Savannah Sparrows, White-winged Dove and a male Ruby-throated Hummingbird. Back at Neal's we again did the walk which started behind the office and shop. First bird was a young male Scott's Oriole followed quickly by a male Hooded Oriole. A Bewick's Wren was tracked down followed by Black Vultures, Lesser Goldfinch and White-winged Dove. A Bell's Vireo was heard and also tracked down, and further along the path was a bush with at least six Chipping Sparrows in it. An open muddy field and its surrounding grassland added another four or five Grasshopper Sparrows, Savannah Sparrow, Lark Sparrow and our first Vesper Sparrow. The fence wires held Scissor-tailed Flycatcher and Blue Grosbeak and an American Pipit was found feeding in the field. The walk back again gave us Black-throated Sparrow. Next it was down to the river for a walk through the woods along the river bank. We found a natural calm pool with bathing House Finch, Lesser Goldfinch and Northern Cardinal. A little way along we had another Black Phoebe, Purple Martins and two male Summer Tanagers. I really wanted to see a bird I'd heard singing since we had arrived, although only in one place. It didn't take long to find a fine male Yellow-throated Warbler – a seriously good-looking bird. Further along the river we came across a 'spotted' Spotted Sandpiper. Later we watched two male Yellow-throated Warblers getting very fractious over territories.

Just before we were due to leave we did another trip to the Black-capped Vireo site but did not see or hear the bird. We did get great views of a singing Yellow-breasted Chat plus a pair of Bushtits, a Ruby-crowned Kinglet, a White-eyed Vireo eating a moth and I wandered off and found a nice singing Olive Sparrow showing quite well.

We then made the long drive to Baytown, east of Houston. Not much was seen on the way but one van did lose a bit of edging around the windscreen necessitating a stop for duct tape and a quick bit of creative glazing by Giles. We did see a few species on the way including 40+ Cattle Egrets, a flock of 16 White Ibises, and the usual Scissor-tails, Loggerhead Shrike, Northern Mockingbirds, Great-tailed Grackles, BVs and TVs, plus another Western Kingbird, and five American Crows – our first for a while. We also had our first and only Canada Geese flying over I10.

After checking in at the motel we drove to White Memorial Park. En route we had American Kestrel, Great-tailed Grackle, Little Blue Heron, Great and Snowy Egrets and, of course, TVs. Today was overcast and cool and the park didn't look too inviting at 4pm. However we gave it a go and were soon rewarded with a huge-looking Pileated Woodpecker flying across in front of us and obligingly landing in a tree so we could see it properly. Blue Jays could be heard and occasionally seen flying through the woods and whilst we were in the park a Little Blue Heron, a Tricoloured Heron and a Great Blue Heron flew over. A Cattle Egret was found feeding on the grass. Soon someone spotted another woodpecker which turned out to be a Red-bellied Woodpecker. We saw two of these birds which were soon joined, which caused some fights, by two Red-headed Woodpeckers. Also here we had our first Baltimore Orioles (two males and a female in total) and a singing Pine Warbler. Back at the motel we checked the grackles and found both Great-tailed and Boat-tailed Grackle, the latter being new for the trip.

Day 12 The drive to High Island took us past lots of farmland. One field of short grass was worth a stop. We had five flying Upland Sandpipers, lots of (Hudsonian) Whimbrels, an American Golden Plover, Killdeer, about 60 Tree Swallows moving through, two Green Herons, Eastern Meadowlark and Lesser Yellowlegs and a few Savannah Sparrows. Continuing the drive we added a few Eastern Kingbirds (scattered but common), Red-winged Blackbird, and a Belted Kingfisher by a pool of water. We visited some flooded rice fields although the birds were in the fields that were damp rather than under water. Here we saw a few waders: Black-necked Stilt, Least Sandpiper, Killdeer, Semipalmated Plover, American Golden Plover, Black-bellied Plover, Lesser Yellowlegs and Whimbrel. Also here we saw a Coyote.

In the midst of a huge marshland there is High Island. High is a relative term – at least it's higher than the surrounding marsh (on a salt dome) and so large trees can grow there. We intended to drop into Boy Scout Woods (Louis Smith Woods) on High Island for a twenty minute quick check to see if there was anything about. This was at 9.10am. The next time I looked at my watch it was 3.10pm – six hours later – we were still there! We had barely got a few metres from the entrance and we were watching two very close Prothonotary Warblers! These birds were at times close enough to touch! Also from here we saw a great male Rose-breasted Grosbeak. After watching these top birds we went to the seats overlooking the drinking pool and sat down, still with huge grins on our faces. The dripping hose and pool was good at attracting birds – we had two Brown Thrashers, a Grey Catbird, a female Hooded Warbler and a Louisiana Waterthrush. Suddenly word arrived of 'Blackburnian at The Cathedral'! Off we hurried and quickly got the bird. Another 'stonker' on the list. We hung around The Cathedral for a while getting Red-eyed Vireo, Eastern

Kingbirds and lots of Scarlet and Summer Tanagers. A Black-and-white warbler was found then a Golden-winged Warbler! Orchard Orioles moved through the trees and Yellow-breasted Chat, Yellow-billed Cuckoo and Eastern Wood-pewee were all located and admired.

Risking a move away from The Cathedral we had a very close male Black-throated Green Warbler (feeding right over our heads!). Then we heard a singing Northern Parula, alerted our colleagues and soon found the bird showing well (of course!). A bit further down the path a fine male Hooded Warbler showed excellently. We then walked further around the wood adding Ovenbirds and Wood Thrushes feeding on the ground under the bushes – all seen well after some effort. Then a female American Redstart literally dropped from the sky into a tree nearby. A Kentucky Warbler was reported and it took about an hour to track it down – we were always in the wrong place, most frustrating to say the least. Once we had found the bird we could smile again – until the next lifer was called! I left the group for 'a call of nature'. As I did the necessary, hands busy, a bird flitted into view, visible only from where I stood. Sacrificing all I grabbed my bins and looked at it. Frantic zipping followed and I called to the others that I'd just had a fine male Magnolia Warbler. We spread out to search for it again. I again found the Kentucky Warbler and flitting above it turned out to be the Magnolia Warbler. Frantic whispering and gesticulating finally meant all saw the bird well. A huge relief. Back at The Cathedral things were still being found. A couple of Tennessee Warblers moved through, then a Chestnut-sided Warbler showed well. A Worm-eating Warbler was found – very mobile and hard to see but we all got it well in the end, and an Orange-crowned Warbler. Nearby was a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, well hidden on a tree trunk. Nearby we had Indigo Buntings and a Swainson's Thrush. At the drinking pool we had a lone Common Grackle and a male Ruby-throated Hummingbird drinking from the dripper! Back near the van we found a strange-looking male Blue Grosbeak still in first-year plumage.

Also on High Island is a place called Smith Oaks Nature Sanctuary. This is much larger than Boy Scout Woods so the birds can be spread over a wider area. However, it's still always worth a visit in migration time. We reached Smith Oaks at about 3.30pm. Pretty soon, at the edge of the car park, we were watching a pair of Blue-grey Gnatcatchers and listening to a singing Northern Parula. In the same tree we had brief views of a Downy Woodpecker. There are lakes here but we limited ourselves to the woods. However, we did get some water birds fly overhead: Roseate Spoonbill, Double-crested Cormorant, Tricoloured Heron, Little Blue Heron and Snowy Egret. As we headed into the woods we came across another singing Blackburnian Warbler. In the wood we found a small group of birders who directed us to a high and well-hidden spot in a tree. In the 'scope we could see red-phase Eastern Screech-owl, which was very rufous indeed. Also in the wood were Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Eastern Kingbird, Summer Tanager, Yellow-throated Vireo, Baltimore and Orchard Orioles and Red-eyed Vireo. Another Yellow-bellied Sapsucker was found climbing a tree and two more Prothonotary Warblers out in an appearance. We gathered in a woodland glade where there were lots of birds feeding on a berry bush. They were mainly Indigo Buntings but we also saw Tennessee Warbler, a female Red-winged Blackbird, a Veery, and, the highlight, a male Cerulean Warbler. We also found a Great Crested Flycatcher just as we were leaving. That evening, around the restaurant, we watched a Common Nighthawk flying around the street lights, considerably calling to confirm its identity.

Day 13 Next day we were back at High Island, again at Boy Scout Woods, where visited Purkey's Pond area (back by the entrance and the drinking pool). The fall was over and many birds had moved on but we did get a female Scarlet Tanager, a male Summer Tanager and a male Rose-breasted Grosbeak plus a pair of Indigo Buntings, a Yellow-breasted Chat, three Grey Catbirds and a female Prothonotary Warbler. Back in the woods we found Wood Thrush, as ever under the bushes and hard to see, two White-throated Sparrows, Blue Jay, Red-eyed Vireo, male Hooded Warbler and Eastern Kingbirds. Many people had a lifer in the form of a male Blackpoll Warbler moving quickly through a tree. There is another pond here, surrounded by reeds. Here we picked up Green Heron, Marsh Wren, Red-winged Blackbird, Great-tailed Grackle, Eastern Kingbird and a pair of Northern Cardinals. Helen spotted a nice male Orchard Oriole in a tree and someone found an American Purple Gallinule at the edge of the reeds. Finally here a Mottled Duck flew past. Back again in the woods we relocated the Kentucky Warbler and at least two Worm-eating Warblers all of which showed very well and again saw the Louisiana Waterthrush.

We also visited a series of pools Vaughan knew of. They were away from the wooded areas on an oilfield and as we drove in an Osprey flew nearby. The pools are surrounded by about ten 'nodding donkeys' diligently pumping oil from the depths. We hadn't seen Stilt Sandpiper and this might well have been our last chance. All I can say is 'well done Vaughan'. As we reached the pool we saw 13 Stilt Sandpipers feeding in the water, later joined by another 13 individuals. Also here were Short-billed Dowitchers, a single Long-billed Dowitcher, Black-necked Stilt, Western

and Semipalmated Sandpipers and a Sanderling. There was a group of terns and gulls sitting on a beach comprising Royal, Caspian, Common and Sandwich Terns plus Laughing and Ring-billed Gulls. One Laughing Gull showed white mirrors in at least four primaries giving us reason to check it carefully but we eventually concluded it was a slightly aberrant Laughing Gull. Further along the beach we found Spotted Sandpiper and behind the gull/tern group were Semipalmated, Black-bellied and Wilson's Plovers. Then it was back to Boy Scout Woods where we sat on the 'bleachers' scanning the drinking pool and area. Migrant birds were still around and we saw male Summer Tanager, Worm-eating Warbler, a first-year male Painted Bunting (very subtle and beautiful colours on this bird), male and female Indigo Buntings, looking fantastic when in the sun, Brown Thrasher, a first-year male Orchard Oriole, Swainson's Thrush, Grey Catbird, two female and two male Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Red-eyed Vireo, Blue Jay, Northern Cardinal, Common Grackle and a Ruby-throated Hummingbird. Then it was down to The Cathedral for Black-and-white Warbler, Worm-eating Warbler (a total of four individuals seen today, sadly one with a large lump on its chin), a female Scarlet Tanager, and male and female Summer Tanagers. We were part of a group that had gone ahead of the others and when Vaughan joined us he said he'd just had a Blue-headed Vireo. We've hadn't yet seen Blue-headed Vireo! But a minute or so later the Blue-headed Vireo reached The Cathedral and showed beautifully. The understory held the now daily-seen Kentucky Warbler and a male Hooded Warbler was again seen. A Wood Thrush was also under the bushes and a Belted Kingfisher flew over the trees. As we walked back to the vans we heard news of a Common Nighthawk down the road. We arrived at a small grassy car park by a baseball ground and there in the middle of the area was a Common Nighthawk. Frantic shouting managed to stop someone reversing over it! It sat there happily for a while then flew off towards Boy Scout Woods, calling loudly.

Day 14 Today we visited Anahuac. This is usually better in winter when the ducks and geese spend time here but we were still hopeful of some good birds. En route we saw five Great Egrets, a Roseate Spoonbill, 300+ White Ibises, 200+ Cattle Egrets, five Snowy Egrets and one Great Egret. At Anahuac it was very exposed and very windy. We had 30 White Ibis fly overhead at the Visitor's Centre as well as Purple Martins, two Loggerhead Shrikes, a Northern Mockingbird and some security guards (more of them later). At The Willows we had a Downy Woodpecker and an American Alligator. The bushes by the stream across the road held a nice singing Common Yellowthroat and a Green Heron flew in to show well. Eastern Meadowlark could be heard singing and two Black-necked Stilts flew over. Tree Swallows sat chattering on the telegraph wires and two American Kestrels and two Northern Harriers flew over the nearby fields. Other flyovers included Roseate Spoonbill, Killdeer, 10+ Lesser Yellowlegs, 40+ Whimbrels and five Greater Yellowlegs. Two Scissor-tailed Flycatchers danced on the wind over some bushes.

We had agreed to put in an appearance back at the Visitor's Centre which was being opened by a Congressman, hence the security people. We were there to show the 'important' people that foreign birders come to this spot and that it should be preserved and not turned into a shooting range or oilfield.

We then drove around Shoveler Pond, not getting out due to the presence of lots of very large American Alligators! Various stops gave us a Sora, Boat-tailed Grackle, three Green Heron, two Little Bitterns (and a nearby Common Moorhen which was larger than the Least Bitterns!), Tricoloured Heron, American Coot, Willet, Neotropic Cormorant and a female Orchard Oriole.

Next we aimed to visit the famous Bolivar Flats. However, there were places to visit on the way and we started out at some more flooded fields near Winnie. (Different fields flood each year so local knowledge is required to find the best ones). From the roadside we picked up a male Northern Harrier, lots of Willet, singles of Greater Yellowlegs and Solitary Sandpiper, Whimbrel, eight Semipalmated Plovers, 100+ Short-billed Dowitchers and 14 'long-billed' Dunlins. Next stop, still at this flooded area but up a track, we added a Belted Kingfisher in a tree and seven American Golden-plover. I was very happy to find a couple of Buff-breasted Sandpipers, soon followed by people finding a Peregrine sitting on a mud ridge in a dry field and a female Dickcissel in a distant bush. The latter meant we had to do a quick march back down the track for a better view and we watched this bird sitting next to the now-moved Belted Kingfisher. Another flooded field, some miles further on, held loads of Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, a few Pectoral Sandpipers, Dunlin, Willet, Whimbrel and two pairs of Blue-winged Teals.

Our next stop was along the Bolivar Peninsula at a place called Rollover Pass. This is an area of mudflats and shallow saltwater and held Black Skimmers, Forster's, Royal, Common (one only), Sandwich (one Sandwich Tern had a very pink breast) and Least Terns. Marsh terns were represented by Gull-billed Tern and a single Black Tern, plus Willets, five Marbled Godwits, a few American Avocets, American White and Brown Pelicans, Sanderlings, Western

Sandpipers, Black-bellied and Semipalmated Plovers. On the water there were two female Red-breasted Mergansers. Great Blue Heron and Snowy Egret were also seen. Our next stop was at an area of marsh and some mud. Whilst scanning the marsh, which was actually a huge area of long grasses, heads of Willets could be seen plus a lone Long-billed Curlew and, when they flew, Seaside Sparrows. A female Northern Harrier flew over the marsh and the occasional Lesser Yellowlegs flew up from the deep grass. After some effort we all managed to get views of one of the target birds, Clapper Rail. Some stayed for better views whilst others of the group went in search of Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow. Unfortunately we had no luck with that bird but we did see another Clapper Rail plus Green Heron and Wilson's Plover.

Finally we reached the end of the peninsula – the famous Bolivar Flats. We had seen this on video but that didn't really show the enormity of the spectacle we were about to see. We walked along the sandy beach to the first pools. I stopped to 'scope the birds and the first thing I saw was a Piping Plover! These birds were easy to get here and there were quite a few around. After that we just spent the time in amazement. All I can do is list what we saw – you have to be there to really experience the sheer numbers and variety of birds. Waders first: a pair of Wilson's Plovers, Red Knot, Dunlin, Sanderling, Western Sandpiper (loads), Semipalmated Sandpiper, Willet, Marbled Godwit, Ruddy Turnstone and, what a sight, about 8000 American Avocets! Larger waterbirds were represented by both pelicans, Tricoloured Heron, Snowy Egret and Roseate Spoonbill. Terns were present in their thousands: Least, Royal, Forster's and Caspian. Also around were Black Skimmers, Laughing Gulls and a few Blue-winged Teal.

Later that day, at about 4.30pm we arrived at Yellow Rail Prairie at Anahuac. One needs permission to 'walk' this area which we had and we intended to form a long line of people to quickly walk through the grass in an effort to encourage some activity from any hiding Yellow Rails. We did have some problems: the grass was much deeper than in previous years making walking through it very difficult and the ground was drier than usual which is not good for the rails. We started with about 15 people, which soon declined to 7 or 8 as the going got too tough. Soon there were just five of us left and we were determined to give it our best. At one stop I saw two ducks flying in the distance and shouted 'Black Duck'. Alas, they were a bit far away and disappearing fast. Tramping through the grass felt like walking miles through terrain that didn't want to be walked through. And we didn't get any rails – they were no doubt faster than us running along the ground ahead of us! We did see a few sparrows, mostly Seaside Sparrow, which aren't supposed to be found in away from saltwater, plus a single Le Conte's Sparrow. Later we added two Sedge Wrens. Both the latter birds were lifers for me. Finally, as we drove along the track my earlier identification was vindicated when two Black Duck flew from the road, around the van and landed behind us, again on the road.

Day 15 Sadly, we had now reached our final day and were flying out in the early evening. However, there were still birding opportunities and the plan was to head for W.G. Jones State Park. En route two (at least) of us saw a bird on a lake (from a road bridge where we couldn't stop) which we were sure was a large grebe. Paula thought it was a Western Grebe as did I – another rarity in this area but alas we'll never know. Arriving at the park we parked and got out the 'scopes. Helen saw two birds in the top of a tree which Rob and I then 'scoped and together shouted 'Brown-headed Nuthatch'. This brought everyone running! Apparently these birds are hard to see but fortunately no-one had told them and they showed well in various trees nearby. Also in the car park were a pair of Eastern Bluebirds.

Having had a superb start we followed instructions provided by the rangers and headed for a cluster of trees apparently containing a group of Red-cockaded Woodpeckers. As we walked through the pine wood we heard and saw two or three Pine Warblers, Blue Jay and Carolina Chickadee. At a certain spot we set up 'scopes and all watched a hole in a tree with a blue band at the base. After a few minutes, when everyone had stopped looking in the right direction and were now watching another two Brown-headed Nuthatches, I glanced into my 'scope and shouted 'It's out – woodpecker coming out' as a Red-cockaded Woodpecker put in its first appearance. People dived for their 'scopes, some seeing the bird briefly and others saying nothing was in sight. It was then we realised there were two trees with blue bands around them! Fortunately the woodpeckers, which, as hoped, were Red-cockaded, came back and showed well. Then Pete came on the walky-talky with the news that he had got Red-cockaded Woodpecker! Ours having seemingly disappeared we all headed off to Pete's location. The birds showed well here as well and we also had White-eyed Vireo, Yellow-breasted Chat, Pileated Woodpecker, TVs and BVs and a Red-tailed Hawk.

There was really only one more bird we hoped to get in Texas and this was our last chance. Helen and I decided to head back to the van where the trees wouldn't obscure the view of the sky and wait for raptors to fly over. We got back and waited and were soon joined by four of our group who said they had shouted and whistled and been generally

apoplectic trying to get everyone's attention as a Mississippi Kite had flown over them, a bird new for the trip. So, we had about an hour before we had to leave for the airport – time to check everything that flew past. We got Red-tailed Hawks, a Red-shouldered Hawk and a Cooper's Hawk. Carolina Wren and Hooded Warbler sang from the nearby woods. No Kites. The rest of the group returned and we took group photos. Time to leave. Then a cry. 'Mississippi Kite'. There was one about 40 metres away heading for us, then turning and disappearing behind the trees. Once the bird had gone a big cheer went up, fists were thrust into the air and general hugging was occurring all round. A superb way to end a superb trip.