

Texas

9–24 April 2006

Participants:

Peter and Paddie Adams
John Bayliss
Brian and Mary Chilcott
Neil Clowes
Roy Evans
Dave and Jan Kingman
Stephen Watkins
Kevin White



Black-capped Vireo

Leaders:

James P. Smith and Peter Lansdown

The birding in Texas is difficult to better anywhere in the USA, especially in spring. This year our upbeat group coped well with some unseasonable heat and an unusual abundance of mosquitoes recording a group total of 307 species, a tally that bettered our totals in both 2004 and 2005. We saw almost all of the local specialties for which South Texas is renowned, plus a few which wouldn't normally be expected, thus boosting the ever-growing list of species recorded on the annual Birdfinders tour to Texas.

Day 1: After the long but direct flight to Houston, a delay with James's inbound flight offered an unexpected opportunity for some birding around George Bush International Airport. Peter escorted most of the group to the local plane spotters' observation deck and was rewarded with Swainson's Hawk, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher and no less than four Upland Sandpipers. What a terrific start to the tour! Once James arrived, we quickly collected our rental vehicles and set off at a decent hour with plenty of daylight to observe birds and scenery along the route. Cattle Egret, Black-crowned Night-heron, Black-bellied Whistling-duck, American Black and Turkey Vultures, Killdeer, Northern Mockingbird and a few roadside Common Grackles were among the species noted as we left the western suburbs of Houston and dusk began to close in. We sped on towards Victoria after a remarkably traffic-free passage through Houston breaking for supper en route. We arrived at the Motel in Victoria only slightly behind schedule for a two-night stay.

Day 2: We were up early and away well before first light. A Northern Cardinal sang in Tivoli as we stopped at a local market for beverages, but it was still dark. The remainder of the pre-dawn drive to Rockport was enlivened when we chanced upon a Short-eared Owl hunting close to the road between Tivoli and Rockport. It was to be the first of a number of 'write-ins' on this year's tour. Heading towards Rockport under ever-lighter skies we began to note our first waterbirds, with excellent views of Brown Pelicans, Laughing Gulls and Forster's Terns all from the moving vehicles. Great Blue Herons and Black-crowned Night-herons flying over the road in Fulton were the harbingers of what was to be an impressive heron list for the day. We arrived at Rockport Harbour eagerly anticipating our 7.00am departure with Captain Tommy Moore out into Aransas Bay on the Whooping Crane boat cruise. It being the first morning of the tour we faced a steady stream of exciting birds as we left our moorings and headed out into the bay. Some familiar species including Great Northern Diver, Black-necked Grebe, Ruddy Duck and Common Goldeneye were noted along with Neotropic Cormorant, Reddish Egret, Tricoloured Heron, White Ibis, Roseate Spoonbill, Mottled Duck, Blue-winged Teal, American Oystercatcher, Wilson's Plover, Spotted Sandpiper, White-tailed Hawk, Northern Caracara and several Seaside Sparrows. Not only did the cruise produce the 'hoped for' Whooping Cranes but we also had close up and personal looks at a Caribbean Flamingo. This

bird was apparently banded as a youngster in the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico leaving no doubt as to its wild origin. After a wonderful morning in Aransas Bay we lunched by the harbour and then headed south over Aransas Pass to spend the afternoon at several rather 'birdy' spots in Port Aransas. At one migrant trap we had our first taste of migration with Swainson's Thrushes, Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Red-eyed Vireos, Nashville and Yellow-rumped (Myrtle) Warblers, Northern Parulas, Yellow-breasted Chat, Summer Tanager and several Indigo Buntings. Just a short drive away, a wetland birding centre complete with boardwalks and an observation deck was even more productive. On arrival, we watched in disbelief as an American Purple Gallinule strutted around in the open on a freshly manicured lawn. Orchard Orioles fed in the flowerbeds, but the marsh was the main attraction where we noted hundreds of waterbirds. Notable amongst these were Least Grebe, Pied-billed Grebe, Green Heron, Least Bittern, American Wigeon, a single Redhead, lots of Sora Rails, Black-necked Stilts, American Avocets, Long-billed Dowitchers, Pectoral Sandpipers and one or two skulking Marsh Wrens. Aerial feeders included several Northern Rough-winged and Tree Swallows, Purple Martins and Chimney Swifts. With evening approaching, we started to head back north to Victoria, stopping at a roadside pullout along the way. Even our last stop of the day continued to produce new birds: we noted several Eastern Meadowlarks and Savannah Sparrows as well as more White-tailed Hawks and Upland Sandpipers. At Tivoli we marvelled at several hundred Cliff Swallows and we spotted a Loggerhead Shrike perched on wires at the edge of town. A very full first day produced a group total of over 115 species!

Day 3: As our tour was heading south into the Lower Rio Grande Valley, we prepared for a longish drive and were well south of Corpus Christie before we started birding in earnest. We began with staggering views of a singing Tropical Parula! This was at a spot, which also held Carolina Wren and Scarlet Tanagers. The Sarita roadside rest area signalled our arrival in South Texas proper with Couch's Kingbird, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Green Jay, Black-crested Titmouse, Golden-fronted and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers and Hooded Orioles, whilst the lawns at the rest stop were littered with Great-tailed Grackles and Brewer's Blackbirds. Throughout the journey we had been seeing raptors by the road, most notably Northern Caracara, Harris's, White-tailed and Red-tailed Hawks and several White-tailed Kites. A few members of the group even managed to see three Wild Turkeys from the minibuses as we headed south on Highway 77. After a lunch break in Harlingen, during which Pete and John managed to find a pair of Curve-billed Thrashers in a busy parking lot, we headed for the coast and South Padre Island. Conditions were not particularly conducive for an arrival of migrants. It was hot (about 95 degrees), with a southeasterly wind, but we made the most of our time there. Along the shore we found a Reddish Egret and a couple of Snowy Plovers amongst Sanderlings and Dunlins, and there were good numbers of Black Skimmers resting and giving the occasional fly-past. We enjoyed using the boardwalks at the Convention Center, which provided us with an opportunity to get out into both freshwater and saltwater marshes. Frustratingly we only heard King and Clapper Rails calling, but there were chance sightings of Sedge Wren and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow, neither of which could have been expected. Seven lingering Greater Scaup were seen from the observation deck, as was a Least Bittern. New passerines for our list included Tennessee Warbler, Scarlet Tanager, Lincoln's Sparrow and Blue Grosbeak in the scant scrub patches, and Mary was understandably fascinated by a large, basking American Alligator. The heat of the afternoon had taken its toll and we headed inland stopping for much needed refreshments along the way. We then moved on to spend the evening at a resaca in Brownsville, which gave us sightings of Spotted Sandpipers, Great Kiskadee, Couch's and Tropical Kingbirds, Green Parakeets and Red-crowned Parrots, and beautiful views of two Green Kingfishers. Scanning through several streams of Laughing Gulls passing overhead soon produced another prize in the form of an adult Franklin's Gull, a species that had been seen well the day before in Aransas Bay, but only by a small number of our party. Another wonderfully rich day of birding in Texas had drawn to a close and we headed back north and then west to our comfortable motel in Weslaco for the next four nights.

Day 4: This morning we visited Santa Ana NWR, only a relatively short drive from our motel in Weslaco. We called in very briefly at the Frontera Audubon Sanctuary, which was closed at such an early hour, but we had good views of noisy Plain Chachalacas and Inca and White-winged Doves in the parking lot, with Buff-bellied Hummingbirds coming into the flowers. Santa Ana lived up to its reputation as being one of the premier birding spots in the Lower Rio Grande Valley and during the course of a long morning there we notched up a fine list of new birds for the tour including Brown-crested Flycatcher, Long-billed Thrasher, Blue-headed Vireo, Olive Sparrow and the staggeringly beautiful Altimira Oriole. As if to spoil us, we also had our second Tropical Parula of the trip singing from high in a Spanish Moss-clad oak. Moreover, we experienced some of the famed raptor migration with a nice low take off of Broad-winged (500) and Swainson's Hawks (20) and Mississippi Kites (30). A prolonged watch from Pintail Lakes also gave us distant but satisfactory views of the much sought-after Hook-billed Kite, a Rio Grande specialty, and we saw our first Bronzed Cowbirds at this site. Thanks to a tip off from local staff member Heidi Trudell, we also had great looks at some shorebirds including our first Stilt Sandpipers of the tour and fine views of Long-billed Dowitchers. There was also a resplendent Cinnamon Teal and a skulking Swamp Sparrow in the same area. However, a fair amount of the morning disappeared while we looked in vain for a pair of Clay-coloured Robins apparently breeding near the Willow Lakes. We would have to return for another attempt at those. It was already well into the heat of the afternoon by the time we left Santa Ana and we elected for a mid-afternoon meal, followed by a short rest, before heading back out towards Bentsen Rio Grande SP for the evening. Nowadays, the arrangements at Bentsen are such that we have to walk into the former trailer loop after 5.00pm, and spend all of our time exploring the area on foot. After seeing Green Jays and White-tipped Doves at the feeders, we checked the boat launch area overlooking the resaca where some 50+ American Anhingas had gathered to roost in the dead trees. Again we had no luck with Clay-coloured Robin, in an area which had produced them the year before, but as the evening drew in a very nice party of Mississippi Kites came in from Mexico flying low overhead

looking for roosting spots in the surrounding scrub. Slightly more surprising was a Merlin, which gave a nice, low fly past and ended up being the only one of the tour! The rest of the evening was dedicated to more crepuscular species and the first of these to start calling was Ferruginous Pygmy-owl, several of which were vocal in the dense thickets but were not seen. Elf Owls were heard calling and were seen briefly in flight, though the former nest tree that we used to visit had been blown down in a storm. We actually heard Elf Owls in two different spots but didn't get anything like the views that we'd had in previous years. On the plus side, we did have nice views of foraging Lesser Nighthawks as we waited for the owls, and heard multiple Common Pauragues before eventually seeing one on the levee as we departed from the park. Finally, it has to be said that the mosquitoes were the worst that we've experienced in Bentsen and would ultimately put us off a second attempt at night birding there. On the whole, though, it had been another highly satisfactory day.

Day 5: Our second full day in the Lower Rio Grande began at Sabal Palm Grove Sanctuary. Our drive into the sanctuary had been interrupted by several Northern Bobwhites on the track and then by a spectacular Eastern Coral Snake! It had the feeling of a special day. As we walked the trails in the sanctuary, the bird of the morning was undoubtedly a bold, singing Gray-crowned Yellowthroat. Although this individual is admittedly a bit of a 'stake-out', the species is still a great rarity in the USA and has been recorded only in South Texas, almost exclusively between the Brownsville area and Santa Ana. We were privileged to have such a prolonged and engaging display from this individual and, remarkably, it turned out to be the only warbler that we recorded all day! Further highlights from Sabal Palm included Solitary Sandpiper and great views of Ringed and Green Kingfishers, while the feeders at the visitor centre were typically lively. A mid-morning sojourn onto Boca Chica Boulevard did not produce any Botteri's Sparrows and it was probably still a bit early in the season for them. However, we did find Lark and Clay-coloured Sparrows and more Northern Bobwhites. We continued searching the coastal prairie around Brownsville finding plenty of Cassin's Sparrows but no sign of Botteri's....but a few surprises included Horned Larks, Bewick's Wrens and a Pyrrhuloxia spotted by Jan, who also found a flock of 46 high-flying migrating Franklin's Gulls way out over the prairie. Again we encountered more White-tailed Hawks and White-tailed Kites and we took some time to look carefully at Chihuahuan Ravens as we knew that we'd be seeing Common Ravens later in the tour. Later in the day, we were treated to views of Tamaulipas Crows nest-building in the suburbs of Brownsville, and enjoyed some typically warm southern hospitality from a lady who seemed genuinely thrilled to have the crows nesting next to her backyard. This residential area also hosted Hooded Orioles and a Ruby-throated Hummingbird. Then it was back to Boca Chica where we finished off with a very close Aplomado Falcon, nicely crafted by Mary, who initially noticed it sitting on a side road while the rest of us were checking the telephone poles and fence posts! This species, though not officially 'countable', has been undergoing reintroduction in South Texas since 1989 and is well worth searching for. It had been another long and hot but very rewarding day in the Lower Rio Grande Valley and, after the evening's log call in the motel lobby, the day ended in the best manner possible with a Barn Owl quartering and squealing through the motel grounds!

Day 6: With everyone in the group still needing to see Clay-coloured Robin, we planned a return visit to Santa Ana; that's after we'd had a fine breakfast courtesy of our hosts at the motel. As we drove south towards Santa Ana, a juvenile Yellow-crowned Night-heron looked almost owl-like as it flew across the road, but couldn't be relocated when we stopped. A little further south, a quick scan of some turf fields turned up no less than 29 Upland Sandpipers and 22 Savannah Sparrows! There was more raptor migration at Santa Ana when we arrived, though the species profile was similar to that observed two days before. We then devoted quite a bit of time to searching for Clay-coloured Robin, which proved much more skulking than might have been expected, but eventually Dave and Steve came up with the goods! The bird was visible only through a narrow window of shady scrub, but eventually about half of the group had views. Other species discovered there included Black-throated Green Warbler, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Brown-crested Flycatcher and Olive Sparrow, and we had more views of Tropical Parula. Much of the rest of the day was spent at Bentsen Rio Grande State Park, which began in a promising manner with Gray Hawk and several Cave Swallows being noted up as we waited for the tram into the park. The afternoon heat took its toll on the birds, and on us, however, though several Verdins were heard but not seen. A male Painted Bunting around the visitor centre was probably the highlight of the afternoon. Further frustration hit home when we tried to visit Anzalduas Country Park on the Rio Grande River, only to find the entire park closed for the Easter Holidays! However, from a vantage point overlooking the flood channel we did see some nice species including nine Least Grebes, a Sora, Spotted, Solitary and Least Sandpipers and a Long-billed Dowitcher. We had our last Luby's supper of the tour and returned to the motel in preparation for an early morning start the next day.

Day 7: Although requiring a very early start, the morning spent overlooking the Rio Grande at Chapeno was simply fantastic with Muscovy Duck, perched Gray and Red-shouldered Hawks, Red-billed Pigeon, Altimira, Audubon's, Bullock's, Hooded and Orchard Orioles, numerous Brown Jays (our main target for the morning), staggering views of Ringed Kingfisher, Purple Martins, Northern Rough-winged Swallows and the big surprise of the morning – a Yellow-headed Blackbird perched high atop some dead snags – all of these being seen before 9.00am! We were heady with success and it all left us with plenty of time to reach San Ygnacio, stopping for a couple of American Kestrels en route. Although it was hot when we reached the sleepy village of San Ygnacio it didn't deter our enthusiasm and we spotted a Western Kingbird before walking down to the Rio Grande riverbank where we had unbelievable views of a singing male White-collared Seed-eater! What an excellent morning it had been, and we wrapped it up with a male Wilson's Warbler and a singing Cactus Wren as we left the area. With mid-afternoon temperatures topping over 100 degrees, the rest of the day

was a struggle but we enjoyed views of Ash-throated Flycatchers at one roadside pullout and close-up views of Lark Sparrows at another. With that, we closed our birding for the day and headed to Laredo for the slowest motel check-in that we've encountered on any tour in Texas. Being Easter weekend, most of the staff had taken time off just when the motel had more business than it could handle! Still, it didn't bother us too much as we'd arrive in plenty of time. We freshened up and went out for a lovely meal and a beer at the Outback Steakhouse.

Day 8: We journeyed across the desert north of Laredo heading towards Carrizo Springs. By making a series of stops along Highway 83 we discovered some exceptional birds. We recorded Scaled Quail, Greater Roadrunner, Cactus Wren, Pyrrhuloxia, Vermilion Flycatcher, multiple Audubon's Orioles, Bell's Vireo, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher giving breathtaking views and a bonanza of sparrows: Lincoln's, White-crowned, Savannah, Grasshopper, Vesper, Clay-coloured, Lark, Black-throated, Olive and Cassin's Sparrows. James counted no less than 17 Ash-throated Flycatchers lining the route. After a lunch-break in Carrizo Springs we arrived at Neil's Lodges on the Edward's Plateau in mid-afternoon with enough time to check in and get straight back out for some birding. The trails and feeding stations at Neil's Lodges provide excellent opportunities for relaxed on-site birding and some of our party had amazing views of Greater Roadrunner and all of us had great views of Canyon Towhees and Chipping, White-throated and Rufous-crowned Sparrows. Black-chinned Hummingbirds buzzed around the feeders and four Pine Siskins shared the sunflower seeds with the much more numerous Lesser Goldfinches. After an early supper, we narrowly missed a Rufous-capped Warbler coming in to bathe at a feeding station behind Cabin 61. Although there was plenty of activity at the feeding station, including Spotted Towhee and Long-billed Thrasher, the earlier than usual appearance of the warbler was a blow, though a male Painted Bunting did lift our spirits. We retired to our comfortable cabins for the daily checklist.

Day 9: We had an early home-cooked breakfast lined up, along with packed lunches ready for a fairly full day. Our destination was Kerr Wildlife Management Area, but our journey out there was pleasantly interrupted by good views of five Wild Turkeys by the road and multiple Common Ravens. A Vermilion Flycatcher and fly-over Cedar Waxwings in the parking lot at Kerr was evidently a good omen and we ultimately had our best views yet of Black-capped Vireo, our main target of the morning. But the oak savannah there also offered other species of interest and we had good views of Ruby-crowned Kinglet and Field Sparrow; in fact the air was full of the sweet song of the latter. Pleased with our success we decided to head on towards Lost Maples State Park, even though we knew it would be getting towards the heat of the day when we arrived. Along the way, we discovered our first Eastern Phoebe of the tour. We could hardly believe our luck when we arrived at Lost Maples State Park visitor centre, because no sooner had we paid the entrance fee than a glorious male Golden-cheeked Warbler began singing right next to the tour buses! He offered excellent views, with a female appearing soon afterwards, again giving staggering views. After that we were a little lost for what to do but headed into the park anyway for a picnic and a scan for raptors. We found Broad-winged and Red-shouldered Hawks, but no sign of the hoped for Zone-tailed Hawk. We also saw Carolina Chickadee and Western Scrub-jay. With temperatures climbing towards 100 degrees it was time to head back to Neil's, calling at a picturesque river crossing for Black Phoebe, which duly appeared. Along the way we were lucky enough to have a Zone-tailed Hawk glide low in front of the lead bus. By pulling off the road, we were all able to enjoy excellent views of this smart raptor as it soared and then glided overhead in a spring when there appeared to be very few around. It was well over 100 degrees by the time we were back at the cabins, time perhaps to relax and get out of the sun for a while. That said, some of our group ventured out finding a roosting Eastern Screech-owl and another Greater Roadrunner. A visit to the Edward's Plateau wouldn't be complete without a trip to the Frio Bat Cave where, later in the day, we had the place to ourselves and enjoyed an evening with millions of Brazilian Free-tailed Bats leaving the roost and departing into the Texas night. Some of the bats were being picked off by marauding Red-tailed Hawks, and both Cooper's and Sharp-tailed Hawks were in attendance. About 300 Cave Swallows gathered overhead, calling excitedly as dusk rolled in but a Say's Phoebe around the cave at dusk was a big surprise and Mary in particular enjoyed watching a skunk that was poking around in the bat cave. As we left we listened for, and heard, Chuck-will's-widows, and Roy was able to confirm hearing a distant Common Poorwill. On the drive out we encountered numerous Armadillos and Racoons, but sadly no nightjars of any kind sitting on the roads.

Day 10: With most of our target birds achieved on the previous day, we could afford a little more time for birding around Neil's Lodges. We spent a good part of the morning birding along the river, where we found Hermit Thrushes and had excellent views of several Yellow-throated, Orange-crowned, Nashville and Black-and-white Warblers and a Wilson's Warbler. White-eyed Vireos showed especially well, and scanning high upon the cliff sides we found a Canyon Wren behaving much like a Wallcreeper would in Europe! There was also a very nice Green Kingfisher on the river. We drove just a short distance down the road to Garner State Park, where we saw several Golden-cheeked Warblers and a smart male Audubon's Yellow-rumped Warbler, rather different in appearance to the Myrtle Yellow-rumped Warblers that we'd seen thus far on the trip. With thoughts of Rufous-capped Warbler still on many folks' minds we headed back to Neil's Lodges, leaving the agenda open for the rest of the day. There is no better place to relax than Neil's but, despite this and the 105 degree temperature that afternoon, quite a few of our party decided to stake out Cabin 61 once again! Although some very good birds were seen, including Painted Bunting and Rufous-crowned Sparrow, the Rufous-capped Warbler was a no-show despite the gallant efforts of many to try and see it.

Day 11: It was with some sadness that we enjoyed our last home-cooked breakfast at Neil's Lodges. Such bird-rich places where one

can feel so relaxed and have all the facilities on site are rare, and we always appreciate the exceptionally warm welcomes offered to us by Mari-Anna, Becky and June. We also said our good-byes to the most obliging of Eastern Screech-owls which had remained faithful to the same oak trees outside the cabins for the last three days. But before the tour moved on we made a last stop at Cabin 61, just in case the Rufous-capped Warbler should put in an appearance. It did not. But we did have a Yellow-breasted Chat and a pair of Bushtits moving back and forth feeding young in a nest. As we drove out towards Sabinal there was also a nice Blue Grosbeak singing from a wire over farmland by the road but, after that, it was pretty much 'pedal-to-the-metal' all the way, passing through San Antonio and on to Houston, which we reached by midday. We got turned around by some nasty road works in Houston and the two minibuses very nearly got separated, but thankfully the two-way radios helped, as did Neil's excellent navigational skills! By early afternoon we were at Woodlands on the north side of Houston and, after a break for lunch at Subway, we drove the short distance to W. G. Jones State Forest. With development ongoing all around this small woodland it seemed an unlikely woodpecker hotspot but, after slow, hot hour in mid-afternoon, the tempo picked up and we were eventually rewarded with excellent looks at our main targets – Red-cockaded Woodpecker and Brown-headed Nuthatch. Once seen, the birds put on an excellent show and there were other goodies in this woodland too, perhaps the most spectacular being the gaudy and noisy Red-headed Woodpecker of which we saw about four. As if that wasn't enough, we also found Red-bellied and Downy Woodpeckers, with other new woodland birds for the tour including Eastern Wood-pewee, Eastern Bluebird, Yellow-throated Vireo (great views), Pine Warbler (6+), Tufted Titmouse and Blue Jay. After a short break for refreshments, we drove around the north side of Houston avoiding the city altogether and arrived in Baytown about an hour later. It had been one of the longest drives of the tour with about 420 miles covered in all.

Day 12: The days on the northeast Texas coast are often filled with big day lists (over a hundred species per day) and the anticipation that just about anything can show up at anytime! Choosing the itinerary for a day can have mixed blessings, since there are so many good birding locations and relatively little time to squeeze them all in, especially when the woods at High Island have a magnetic draw for most birders. In the morning, we headed for Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge, a really excellent spot with a big reputation for wetland birds and some sizeable American Alligators! It did not disappoint, for here we found Fulvous Whistling-ducks (63), American and Least Bitterns, Clapper and King Rails, American Purple Gallinule, Yellow Warbler and a welcome opportunity for the rest of our group to catch up with many Boat-tailed Grackles. On the approach road to the refuge, gatherings of shorebirds included good numbers of Hudsonian Whimbrels and, while James and Peter tried to pick out a Long-billed Curlew, we were later to find out that most of the rest of the group had been watching a lone Glossy Ibis in the same rice fields. It had been a good morning and we decided to head over towards High Island and Boy Scout Woods to check the migrant situation and to catch up on the local bird news. On arrival things seemed slow: birders sat quietly on the 'grandstand' overlooking the pools. It was clear that migrants were going to be thin on the ground but, after picking up Northern Waterthrush, Veery, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Summer and Scarlet Tanagers, Brown Thrasher and Baltimore Oriole we began to feel better. By dividing our efforts, several of our group members also had nice encounters with two skulking warblers – Kentucky and Hooded Warblers. Then news on the notice board at the Houston Audubon kiosk changed the course of the afternoon: several high-quality wood warblers had been reported from a little-known sanctuary in High Island at Eubank Woods. The mosquitoes were quite fearsome there, but Birdfinders, along with a number of other groups of birders, were able to enjoy excellent views of Golden-winged, Cerulean and Black-throated Green Warblers as well as a Philadelphia Vireo and numerous Tennessee Warblers and American Redstarts. Bright male Rose-breasted Grosbeaks were in these woods as well, but a couple of Acadian Flycatchers provided more subtle identification challenges and drew a large crowd. At that point we elected to leave and head for the north side of Winnie where, thanks to a tip-off, we finished off the day with a truly exceptional gathering of shorebirds. Notable amongst these were eight American Golden Plovers, 17 Hudsonian Godwits, 1300 (!) Hudsonian Whimbrels, a Baird's Sandpiper and 25 Buff-breasted Sandpipers. Sedge Wrens sang from the rank grasses by the edges of the fields and a flock of 16 Dickcissels lifted up giving their astonishing buzzy calls and disappeared into the grasses once again. It was a marvellous end to a very full and rich day of birding on the Upper Texas coast with 115 species recorded as a group. We ate supper at a local seafood restaurant in Winnie and headed back to Baytown for the daily log call.

Day 13: The day dawned dull and cloudy, but it didn't matter much to the tour since we were already committed to an early morning start for the long drive to Silsbee in the Piney Woods north of Beaumont. Passing through Beaumont the rain seemed to be getting heavier and heavier and by the time we reached Silsbee it was a real deluge. After breakfast in Silsbee itself, it seemed that our only hope was to go to our chosen site for Bachman's Sparrow and wait for a clearance in the weather. Thunder, lightning and more rain followed in the next hour and it was with extreme reluctance that we decided to give up. It appeared that the only thunderstorm on the Upper Texas Coast was moving from Houston eastwards, and was at its most intense over Silsbee. It was not our day! We made a decision to head southeast and check out the migrant hotspot of Sabine Woods, hoping that the storm may have induced a fall-out of migrants. The calls of Fish Crows greeted our arrival at Sabine Pass and a Sora ran across an empty parking lot! The weather, in a perverse twist, turned out to be calm, sunny and even hot. Even more impressive was the number of birders' cars at the sanctuary entrance, surely anticipating some big arrivals too. Migrants were actually desperately few in Sabine Woods and just about all the birders were looking for just one bird: a Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher! This southern flycatcher is generally only seen regularly in the USA in southeast Arizona and, with less than twenty state records for Texas, this individual was getting plenty of attention from local birders. During our visit it was very elusive and only a handful of our group managed to see it. But compensation came in the form of Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Great Crested Flycatcher, Grey-cheeked Thrush, Veery, Indigo Bunting and many Orchard Orioles. On the

drive out from Sabine Pass we noted several Common Nighthawks foraging overhead in the middle of the day. We could also see that last year's hurricane season had wreaked havoc on this part of the coast. With very few passerines evident at Sabine Woods, it seemed timely for our 'must' visit to Bolivar Flats, actually a fairly long drive from Sabine Pass. However, White-tailed Kites greeted our arrival at the sanctuary at Bolivar Flats, which, as always, provided us with a superb spectacle of waterbirds and shorebirds. It was also remarkably free of other birders, which may have contributed to the exceptional views that we had of Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows, several of which were singing at very close range. We viewed Wilson's, Piping and Snowy Plovers, Marbled Godwits and four immaculate Wilson's Phalaropes at very close range. We even had a 'peep-sweep' with wonderful comparisons between Semi-palmated, Western, Least, White-rumped and Baird's Sandpipers. There were also several Reddish Egrets and eight species of tern - Gull-billed, Caspian, Royal, Sandwich, Common, Forster's, Least and our first Black Terns of the trip. While the rest of us had our eyes glued to scopes, Jan had the foresight to look up on occasion, spotting and calling out "frigatebird!!" In fact, two Magnificent Frigatebirds cruised over the beach for a while before they headed over towards Galveston. Two Buff-breasted Sandpipers worked the public beach as we drove out, concluding another fantastic day on the Upper Texas coast.

Day 14: We were up early this morning and away by 06:15 to meet our leaders for the infamous 'Rail Walk' at Anahuac NWR. The leaders, both refuge staff, briefed us on the procedure and then it was out onto the coastal prairie, prime habitat for wintering Yellow Rails. In some respects, we were lucky to make the last rail drag of the season, but our luck wasn't going to stretch too far. Watching the rail drag take place was quite a spectacle, as 50 or so birders charged across the marshes being pursued by some of the biggest swarms of stinging mosquitoes you've ever seen! Birders peeled off the back of the group and slowly gave up, leaving a core group of about 25, many of which were from Birdfinders! Very few birds were flushed, though plenty of Seaside Sparrows could be seen and a Common Nighthawk flew up from the prairie. However, no Yellow Rails were seen. Some of our group chose not to try the rail walk for various reasons and were compensated by views of several singing Sedge Wrens visible from the track. We finally birded our way out of Anahuac, picking up a nice singing Marsh Wren on the way, and headed north towards Liberty, where we were lucky enough to have a Pileated Woodpecker fly across the road and then to get invited into the yard where they were nesting. Southern hospitality once more! Soon afterwards, Peter in the second bus spotted one of the highlights of the trip - two wonderful American Swallow-tailed Kites soaring over the woodlots and farmland. The views were prolonged and the birds put on the most exceptional show. We also had several Red-headed Woodpeckers along the same road. The afternoon was spent at High Island, with visits to both Boy Scout Woods and Smith Oaks Sanctuary, where we were hoping to catch the remnants of a fall-out from the previous day. By working both sites for most of the afternoon, we ended up with a pretty impressive selection - Common Nighthawk (14), Great Crested Flycatcher, Gray Catbird (15), Veery, Gray-cheeked, Swainson's and Wood Thrushes, Blue-winged, Tennessee (10), Yellow-rumped (Myrtle) (6), Orange-crowned, Magnolia (2), Black-throated Green, Bay-breasted (2), Blackpoll (2), Black-and-white (7), Kentucky and Hooded Warblers (4), plus Northern Parula (3) and Northern Waterthrush (2). Kevin was the only one lucky enough to see an Ovenbird, but the undoubted highlight was a Black-whiskered Vireo discovered that afternoon at Smith Oaks Sanctuary. After spending some time swatting mosquitoes and gazing up into some huge oaks, just about our entire group was rewarded with a view of this Texas rarity. It was yet another first for our Birdfinders list and only about the twentieth state record of a species that normally summers only in Florida. With that we headed back to Baytown, celebrating with our last evening meal at the Outback Steakhouse, and a weary log call in the lobby of the motel.

Day 15: After yesterday's long day, we took advantage of a relaxed start to the last morning of the tour by visiting a nature centre close to the airport. As it happens, low lying fog may have hampered any attempts to go out earlier, and it was just beginning to clear nicely when we arrived at Jesse Jones Nature Center. Though a little on the quiet side, this nice little sanctuary amidst the suburbs of Houston did give us great views of Pileated Woodpeckers excavating a nest hole, two Prothonotary Warblers, several Acadian Flycatchers and a plethora of snakes in the swamps. Thank goodness for those boardwalks! With Neil upfront navigating for the final leg of the journey, we arrived at the airport in good time for our respective check-ins and the long journey home. With 2675 miles driven and 307 species recorded, the tour had been really excellent with everyone on the trip contributing to our success.