

Texas – Spring

7–24 April 2024

Participants:

Steve and Bryony Abbott
Helen Berg
Heather Collett
Mike and Rose Frost
Ray Grace
Helen Heyes
Alun Jones
Jill Preston
Howard Waterman



Chuck-Will's-Widow (Ray Grace)

Led by: Vaughan and Sveta Ashby

Day 1 If you're going to try and see a solar eclipse anywhere in the world, rural Texas probably strikes you as the perfect location – images of sunny skies and mostly flat landscapes with wide open vistas and a few nodding donkeys will no doubt come to mind, as they did for us. Unfortunately, as we arrived in Houston and finally secured the correct second vehicle for our trip (a huge Ford Expedition with a cavernous boot that was quickly dubbed The Beast), the weather gods didn't seem to be in any mood to play along. The skies were a worrying shade of charcoal grey and the forecasts for the next few days were pretty bleak. As we drove to our first overnight motel in Fairfield, we passed through a monumental downpour and virtually had to wade to one of our loo and snack stops. Birding from the van in those conditions and after a long flight was pretty much abandoned, and the only birds we added to the trip list on the journey were the ubiquitous Turkey and Black Vultures. Thankfully, by the time we arrived at the motel, the rain had stopped and we were able to do a little car park birding before checking in. The first common birds of the trip were added to the list: one beautiful male Northern Cardinal and a Northern Mockingbird sitting on top of one of the lampposts. After check-in, some chose to venture across the street for a McDonalds; others were just happy to grab an early night in readiness for a big day tomorrow.

Day 2 As the eclipse wasn't due to begin until the early afternoon, and we were only half an hour's drive from our chosen viewing spot, we had a leisurely start to the day. The skies were still overcast, although the rain held off as we got stuck into our first productive birding around the motel. We spent some time watching the cardinals and mockingbirds from the night before, together with a couple of Lincoln's Sparrows, a White-throated Sparrow, Blue Jay, an elusive Carolina Wren and the first of many Great-tailed Grackles.

With a few extra species under our belts, we had breakfast, loaded up the vans and began a lovely, gentle drive through very pretty countryside towards a small town called Mexia (pronounced, as we later learned, Mehia). Well within the path of totality and, we hoped, away from some of the bigger crowds, this was to be our spot to try for the eclipse. En route, in between admiring the verges brimming with colourful wildflowers, we were literally stopped in our tracks by a large bird flying across the road in front of us – it was a Pileated Woodpecker! We pulled the vans off the road and piled out to find it again. This was to be the start of a wonderful little birding spell for us, as not only did we have nice views of the Pileated, but we also picked up our first Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, a Downy Woodpecker, a Red-shouldered Hawk sitting low on fence posts towards the house, several distant Eastern Bluebirds (which we wouldn't see again until right at the end of the trip), our first Brown-headed Cowbirds and an American Kestrel. Our next stop was also at the roadside, this time at a very convenient little paved area next to a drainage culvert that was teeming with Cliff Swallows. After spending some time getting good views of the swallows, our attention switched to other things. The great thing about this particular group was that it contained quite a number of general naturalists interested in a wide range of species in addition to birds. Texas is a really great place for biodiversity, and so we looked at flowers (including the state flower, the Bluebonnet) and insects (including Red Admiral, various other butterflies and a Red Paper Wasp) before our attention was brought back to the birds by a shout of "Raptor!" from Sveta. In an amazing little session, we quickly picked out a fairly distant and scruffy Cooper's Hawk, equally scruffy Broad-winged and White-tailed Hawks and a couple of Red-tailed Hawks. A kettle of eleven White Pelicans was also seen here and, just to round off the raptor haul, Helen B then picked out a perched Crested Caracara on a telegraph pole – our first of the trip. With plenty of time still in hand, we had a lingering lunch and then headed to Mexia. Although dry, the sky was still cloudy and our chances of being able to see the big event hung in the balance. We parked the vans a little distance away from a school, dug out our eclipse-viewing glasses (thanks to Heather for sharing a few extra pairs) and set off to do a little birding before the sky began to darken. After a Loggerhead Shrike on the school fencing, the first bird we came across was a Lark Sparrow perched on a wire across the road. The bird gave great looks, even if it wasn't the most scenic perch! Next up was a mockingbird and a group of White-crowned Sparrows on the grass to the left of the road. As we followed these birds for better views, we heard and eventually saw a White-eyed Vireo in the bushy vegetation at the side of the field. This was soon followed by two Eastern Phoebe, which led us a merry dance until they finally showed fairly well on the porch of a nearby building. With the sun through our glasses now reduced to a slim crescent, the clouds finally began to part and the light slowly faded. Suddenly, our hopes soared that luck was going to be on our side. As we watched, the bird song dimmed (although it never did go completely silent) and the crescent became slimmer and slimmer, until Vaughan suddenly exclaimed, "I can see the corona!". Glasses were quickly cast aside and there it was – a magnificent glowing ring of light against the black sky. A cheer went up from members of the local community standing on their porches, and we all watched in awe for three minutes and 18 seconds (apparently) until the diamond ring effect appeared at the bottom right of the corona. The perfect finale! And so it was that Heather gleefully saw her fourth (or maybe fifth) eclipse and most of us saw our first; hugs and high fives were exchanged and all felt right with the world. The weather had been touch and go right up until the last minute, but we got lucky. I believe it was Steve who

described it as a spiritual experience, and indeed it was; I don't think it's something that any of us will ever forget. With the main event over for the day, we set off on the 158-mile drive to our next overnight destination of Sealy with beaming smiles on our faces and feeling somewhat triumphant. And then we hit the traffic! The sheer volume of cars on every road was quite extraordinary and unlike anything I've ever seen in the USA before. There were numerous traffic police on the road junctions and thousands of people heading out of town in all directions. It was a mighty relief to arrive in Sealy and grab our first Whataburger meal before calling a successful end to the first big day of the tour.

Day 3 Our first stop today was at the Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge. The website openly admits that the last few wild individuals of the Attwater race of Greater Prairie Chicken are kept in a part of the refuge that is not open to the public. That said, it is not impossible to glimpse an occasional bird, and we had other target species here too. After dodging the enormous Carpenter Bees around the entrance to the visitor centre, queueing for the loos and being plied with leftover snacks and fruit from a recent function, we set off to drive the trail. This was not an easy task as a group of 13 in two vehicles! There are precious few places to pull over on the driving trail, so for much of the time, your only real option is to keep moving. We never did see a prairie chicken, but we did have lovely views of many Upland Sandpipers together with a small covey of Northern Bobwhites that kept disappearing into the vegetation. Eastern Meadowlarks and Savannah Sparrows were also much in evidence on the drive, and our van managed to pick out a single distant Grasshopper Sparrow. Back at the visitor centre, we quizzed the volunteers about the rumoured Great Horned Owl and were pointed in the direction of a tree on the Sycamore walking trail. Setting off, our attention was grabbed first by a beautiful Monarch butterfly and then by several stunning Black and Pipevine Swallowtails. We spent some time admiring them and various dragonflies including Red Saddlebags before we arrived at a viewing area for what we thought must be the right tree for the owl. Now you would think that a bird as big as a Great Horned Owl would form a pretty obvious lump even in a leafy tree, but, despite our best efforts, we failed miserably to spot her! Vaughan eventually decided to head back to the visitor centre to make sure this was indeed the right tree; he returned with one of the volunteers in tow. Even with expert knowledge and perfect directions, we still struggled to catch anything more than tiny snatches of a glimpse as the branches parted briefly in the wind. This was definitely a jigsaw bird, and one we would undoubtedly never have found on our own. Parking in a slightly different part of the refuge, we crossed a small bridge and headed down to a lookout over a small lake area. There wasn't very much about apart from the usual Red-winged Blackbirds, but we did pick up a couple of Common Gallinules and probably our closest views of Pied-billed Grebes on the trip. Crossing back over the bridge, we spotted a turtle on a log close to the water – Red-eared Slider was the common consensus. With Rockport still 150 miles away, our next birding was from the vans, and birds picked out along the way included a dozen or so Crested Caracaras low over the fields and numerous Scissor-tailed Flycatchers adorning the fences. We stopped to re-fuel in a place called Edna, and decided to stay for lunch in the adjacent Subway. Our first Laughing Gulls drifted lazily past the windows as we ate. Next up today, as we drew ever closer to Rockport, was a small pull-in beneath Copano Bay Bridge. We parked the vans and walked down to a small gravelly foreshore, where we added a nice little cluster of species to our tally. First up were a number of birds

sitting on posts in the water: Brown Pelicans, Double-crested Cormorant and the soon-to-be-omnipresent Laughing Gulls. On the water's edge, we added Sanderling, Ruddy Turnstone, Eastern Willet and American Oystercatcher, while Turkey Vultures tottered overhead. Steve and Mike picked out Red-breasted Merganser and Greater Scaup further out on the water, and three Chimney Swifts flew over our heads before we clambered back into the vans and headed for the motel. After checking in to our rooms and gratefully offloading the luggage, we set off on the short drive to Rockport Beach Park. Driving past the beachgoers in their swimming costumes, we felt a bit overdressed as we headed ever further down the long road. Just as we were beginning to feel there wasn't much further we could go, we reached a grassy area on which we spotted a large group of our main quarry for this site – Black Skimmer. Without question, this is one of the birds that everybody wants to see on this tour, and once you find their hangout, they are ridiculously easy to see. For the most part, they just sit (or flop comically) on the ground or fly off towards the water; seeing one actually skim takes a bit more time and patience! In a fantastic spell here, we added a rich variety of water birds to our growing list – Snowy Egrets, Great Egrets, Tricoloured Herons, Reddish Egrets and Roseate Spoonbills were all here in numbers. The variety of tern species was also impressive, with Gull-billed Tern, Forster's Tern, Royal Tern and Sandwich Tern all found relatively easily; a small number of Least Terns and a single non-breeding Black Tern were also picked out with a little more effort. To round things off, just as we were preparing to leave, our van had several glimpses of cetacean dorsal fins breaking the water. Clearly some kind of dolphin species, we would only find out later what they were. With another satisfying day's birding under our belts, we had our evening meal and headed off to bed looking forward to our Whooping Crane boat trip around Aransas Bay tomorrow morning.

Day 4 Well, that was the plan anyway. Unfortunately, our old foes the weather gods were up to their tricks again overnight! In the early hours of the morning, a really heavy thunderstorm passed through the area, which we later heard caused severe flooding and damage in Louisiana and parts of Mississippi. Luckily, Rockport seemed to have survived unscathed, but in its aftermath, our morning boat trip seemed, at best, a long shot. At breakfast in the motel, we tried to drown our anxiety with comfort food in the form of our first Texas-shaped waffles smothered in maple syrup; however, as we boarded the vans, we still didn't have high hopes for today's birding. Arriving at the harbour, the conditions didn't seem, at least to our untrained eyes, much more promising: the water was choppy and a stiff breeze was blowing. Vaughan set off to the check-in area to discover our fate and, remarkably, returned a little later to say that, for now at least, the trip was still on! Our spirits lifted as we birded the harbour area waiting for boarding time. Overhead were masses of swallows: lots of Cliff Swallows, a couple of Tree Swallows, some Northern Rough-wingeds and several Purple Martins. A group of White Ibis and several Black-bellied Whistling-ducks flew over the car park, while the Laughing Gulls were joined by several Ring-billed Gulls and our first Herring Gulls. On the harbour wall, we added a close Great Blue Heron, Sanderling and Ruddy Turnstone. Soon enough, it was time to board our temporary home for the next few hours – *The Skimmer*. We were welcomed aboard by Captain Tommy (back in the day, it used to be Captain Ted; I don't know if they're related!) and his crew member, Sarah. After taking our seats, we sped off out into the channel to see what we could find. The journey out (and back) from the harbour to the reserve was

somewhat bumpy and not ideal for anyone with a bad back; luckily, this part of the journey was made at some speed and we were soon out in the relative calm of the channel. We saw such a bewildering array of species today that it is difficult, with hindsight, to remember which came first. We spent a little time looking over a couple of pools, where we had lovely views of Black-necked Stilt, Blue-winged Teal and a Tricoloured Heron with an extremely bright turquoise bill that Captain Tommy seemed quite taken with. Also here were several Spotted Sandpipers and Eastern Willet decorating the brick channel boundaries. Frustratingly, we heard and kept catching glimpses of Seaside Sparrow, but we never did see it well here – the “hang onto your hats” weather probably played a part in keeping the small birds down, I suspect. Having very much downplayed our chances in his introductory talk, it wasn’t too much longer before Captain Tommy uttered the words we had all been waiting for, “Well, looks like today’s your lucky day folks!” All necks pivoted in the same direction and we caught our first glimpses of the stars of today’s trip and undoubtedly one of the birds of the tour: seven glorious Whooping Cranes. As the boat inched ever closer, the views were outstanding (I’ve now done the boat trip three times and these were by far the closest views I’ve had). We watched in awe as the birds fed and preened in front of us. The group of seven pretty much kept together, and at various times during our visit, they showed signs that they might be gearing up to leave. Who knows, if the bad weather had stayed away the night before, there might have been none left by the time of our trip. Having just about maxed out on the Whooping Cranes, we set off to see what else we could find. Our first couple of Wilson’s Plovers showed on the other side of the channel together with a couple of Black-bellied (Grey) Plovers. Various terns, herons and egrets flew across the channel at regular intervals and, at one point, a Black-chinned Hummingbird whizzed past our ears! The next main stop was at the rookery, which is what the boat concentrates on once the cranes have all left to fly north. Here, we were treated to cereal bars from Sarah as we took in the dizzying number of Great Egrets, Great Blue Herons, Snowy Egrets, Roseate Spoonbills, Tricoloured Herons, Reddish Egrets and both Double-crested and Neotropic Cormorants. Caspian and Royal Terns were much in evidence, with slightly smaller numbers of Forster’s Tern and Black Skimmer. A single Black-crowned Night-heron was also nestled into the colony but wasn’t easy to pick out. Next up was a Lesser Scaup bobbing about on the water before a small sand spit gave us our only views of Franklin’s Gulls on the trip. An Osprey carrying a large fish flew past at fairly close range, and we picked up a couple of Common Loons (Great Northern Divers) behind the boat on the water. In addition to the loons, we had further views of several dolphins, which Captain Tommy reliably informed us were Bottlenose Dolphins – undoubtedly the same species we had seen the night before at the beach. Mystery solved!

After a brief stop at a potential migrant trap, which seemed completely deserted, we stopped to look over a bank into a bigger body of more open water that held mostly masses of Northern Shovelers and Blue-winged Teal. Then there was nothing for it but to brace for the bumpy ride back to the harbour. We were accompanied by Brown Pelicans aplenty as we sped back towards the shore, with one hardy American lady standing out on the lower deck the whole time (and getting thoroughly soaked at least twice!). After spending a wonderful few hours surrounded by birds of the coast, we said our thanks and goodbyes to Tommy and Sarah and headed off for lunch followed by a change of scenery. The afternoon was spent birding Tule Marsh East – a small wetland area in residential Rockport with a boardwalk, ponds and shrubby vegetation. Unfortunately, the cast of bird

characters here was much reduced compared to what we'd just experienced! From the boardwalk, we saw our first Mottled Ducks of the trip and had good views of a group of Black-bellied Whistling-ducks sitting on the grass. A small pond around the back of the reserve gave us lovely views of a Green Anole who spent most of his time upside down on a stem, but periodically inflated his bright pink dewlap, maybe as a warning to us. The pond also proved to be a really good little spot for dragonflies, and we spent some time watching several different species, including Band-winged Dragonlet, Pin-tailed and Great Pondhawks and our first Roseate Skimmers of the trip. Meanwhile, Vaughan and Jill had headed back towards the vans and started, at last, to pick up some new birds. As we caught up, they had already seen Couch's Kingbird and a Golden-fronted Woodpecker. Vaughan had also caught a brief glimpse of a sparrow species and a Brown Thrasher disappearing into a tangle of vegetation at the base of a tree. There was clearly stuff to see here, and we set about catching up. The woodpecker and the kingbird eventually showed fairly well for everybody I think; the thrasher sadly never showed again, and we had to piece together the sparrow ID from the bits various people saw – Song Sparrow. Our evening meal tonight came from the first of many visits to the local HEB supermarket. Much like Whataburger, this chain seems to be almost endemic to Texas, and is highly recommended if you're in the area. Hopefully, this gave Bryony, as a vegetarian, at least a little more choice of something to eat than most US restaurants offer. (It's also the only place in the US where I've managed to find a few pre-packed sandwiches without cheese!)

Day 5 The good news about today was that we were heading ultimately for McAllen, our first four-night stop of the tour; the bad news was that we would have to drive over 300 miles to reach it! As we loaded up the vans and headed in to reception for more waffles, the motel forecourt was teeming with large, winged insects – and Laughing Gulls greedily Hoovering them up. We assumed that these were some kind of flying ant, but the largest size I can find listed for flying Carpenter Ants (the largest ant species here) is half an inch, and these were definitely at least twice that size. So, their ID remains a mystery, but their species might be in serious danger of local extirpation if those Laughing Gulls have any say in it! One hundred miles or so into our journey, we made our first stop at Sarita Rest Area. Primarily, this was a (pretty snazzy) loo and leg-stretch stop, but we couldn't resist a bit of birding as well. The long, parallel verges in between the parking bays held dozens of Brewer's Blackbirds (our only sightings on the trip), and we watched a small party of Hooded Orioles as they flitted around the fronds of two palm trees close to the building. With not much else about, we set off again, heading towards our next birding stop of the day – South Padre Island. After another large chunk of the journey was spent birding from the vans and seeing dozens of Crested Caracaras (which have an incredibly distinctive wing pattern once you get your eye in), we suddenly hit a sensational area for other raptors. Shortly after a majestic full adult White-tailed Hawk cruised past our vehicle, we turned a corner and pulled over the vans as we spotted another bird perched on the wires. We were hoping it might be another White-tailed perched up, but it turned out to be a stunning Harris's Hawk – a new bird for the trip. Amazingly, on the other side of the road we also had a perched-up White-tailed Kite – also a trip tick. South Padre Island is a bit of an experience. It combines some very expensive-looking property with the gaudy seaside vibe of Blackpool and a myriad rental shops hiring out all sizes and colours of golf buggy – even some low-slung versions designed to look like racing cars! We'd heard rumours that

a Mexican Violetear was being seen in a residential area, so that had to be our first stop. At first, we were the only birders around, and wondered if we were in the right place. We set about checking the hummingbird feeders on various balconies, picking up several Ruby-throated Hummingbirds for our efforts. At the back of the garden we were peering through (with the owner's permission, I might add), we picked out a Yellow-breasted Chat, a couple of Orchard Orioles, a Spotted Towhee and an obliging Blue-Grey Gnatcatcher, which showed really well at the base of a tree trunk. Soon, we were joined by several other birders and eventually received information that the best viewing spot was around the block, looking from the other side. We beat a hasty retreat and managed to grab a couple of parking spots in the next street. As we arrived, we discovered that the violetear had last been seen in a bottlebrush earlier that morning by one of the ladies who was still there. Nobody had seen it since, but apparently, it had also been seen in the late afternoon the day before on the same bush. With time ticking, we had a decision to make: did we spend more (possibly fruitless) time here or move on to the convention centre for a guaranteed clutch of new species? We decided to move on and come back later for one last try for the hummer. The convention centre is one of those amazing migration spots where pretty much anything can and does turn up, so it's best to prepare for the unexpected and have an open mind as to which species might be there. We first spent some time around a grassy area with a few spindly trees and a long bank of vegetation behind it. Here, we picked out several Lincoln's Sparrows, a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, our first Warbling Vireos and a number of Black-throated Green Warblers. One visit to the little drinking pond produced a couple of Black-and-white Warblers, Tennessee Warbler, Nashville Warbler, Northern Parula, a Swainson's Thrush and, remarkably, our first encounter with a bird we would later see more of than almost any other on the trip – Grey Catbird. In one of those, "What, in Texas?" moments, we kept hearing rumours of Townsend's Warblers near to the car park and decided that we'd better go and check them out. Sure enough, after a little scurrying from tree to tree, we had fantastic views of one absolutely stunning bird and one in slightly duller plumage. On a roll, we headed back towards the drinking pool to see if the male Painted Bunting reported earlier by an American photographer might have come back in. On the way, we were sidetracked by a small brown bird sitting quietly on a curb at the edge of the car park. Incredibly, it turned out to be a Grasshopper Sparrow! Of all the strange places to see this species, this one has to be right up there; I really hope it found a safer spot to sit in, though! Back at the drinking pool, as if by magic, the lovely male Painted Bunting did, indeed, put in another appearance. Amazingly, this was another species that turned out to be seen in good numbers on this trip, but the first encounter with this kaleidoscopic dazzler is always memorable. Next, despite the searing heat, we ventured out onto the boardwalk for a change of habitat. One of the first birds we found was a Pectoral Sandpiper in a muddy channel just a few feet in front of us. The bird gave fantastic views (at least of its upper body, if not its legs), and we watched it for some time. Also of note in this area were several Black-necked Stilts, a couple of Stilt Sandpipers and good, if brief, views of a Sora in the same channel as the Pec. With time passing, and having just about cleaned up on all the species reported here, we decided to head back to the house with the bottlebrush and try again for the violetear. On arrival, the body language of the small crowd of birders told the story: the bird had not been seen since that one sighting earlier in the morning. We gave it a little more time before deciding that this was one that would have to elude us. I'm not sure the bird ever returned to that area. Eighty or so miles

further down the road, we finally arrived at our next base in McAllen. On discovering that this was the first motel without toiletries in the bathrooms, Howard needed some shampoo, so as we stopped to re-fuel the vans en route to our evening meal, he popped into the garage and picked up what must be in contention to be the most expensive bottle of Head and Shoulders in the world – I believe it cost in excess of \$7! With the vans topped up and a memorable day under our belts, we carried on to the Golden Corral for our evening meal, only to find it closed for construction. Plan B was hastily enacted and we headed to Luby's instead. I think it's safe to say that recollections may vary on this one!

Day 6 If we weren't fully awake before breakfast this morning, we certainly were on arrival at McDonald's car park. To call it a dawn chorus would conjure up the wrong mental image entirely – the monumental racket coming from the Great-tailed Grackle roost in the ornamental trees was quite deafening, and unforgettable for maybe the wrong reasons. The next stop today was our new friend the HEB supermarket, ostensibly to pick up sandwiches for lunch and an evening meal, but the very first thing we encountered was a large display of shampoo – a bundle of three bottles cost less here than Howard had paid last night for one! What's the name of that law again? Southern Texas hosts a wealth of world-famous birding destinations, and we were about to tackle our first – Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge. Established for the protection of migratory birds back in 1943, this beautiful and special reserve was recently threatened with destruction, as the border wall was intended to run right through the heart of it. After a long battle by conservationists (and probably lawyers), it won something of a reprieve, but its future remains uncertain with an upcoming Federal election. Walking from the car park to the entrance, we were welcomed by another less-than-pretty symphony – the raucous calls of Plain Chachalacas. Seeing one would take us somewhat longer, however. Virtually the first bird we did see here was one that used to be a rare find but that has more recently expanded its range and become considerably easier – Clay-coloured Thrush, a bird that's distinctive by its lack of any real distinguishing features. We spotted a very obliging one in a tree just before the entrance and spent a little time scoping it before heading into the reserve. At the feeding station just beyond the entrance building, we picked out our first teasing glimpses of another of the most sought-after birds of the tour – the stunningly exotic Green Jay. A couple were hopping through the trees here, but much better views were to come over the next few days. We headed out on a trail towards the Pintail Lakes complex and as we crossed a levee, we had good views of a spotty Spotted Sandpiper working its way up a ditch. Soon afterwards, we picked out Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Hooded Oriole and our first Great Kiskadees dotted around the tops of the trees ahead of us. All the while we could hear Plain Chachalacas, but they remained stubbornly out of sight. Our walk around the lakes produced a simply mind-boggling variety of species, most in really good numbers. There were ducks, waders, cormorants, herons and egrets aplenty, and we added White-faced Ibis, Gadwall, American Coot, Lesser Yellowlegs, Solitary Sandpiper, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper and Long-billed Dowitcher to our growing list. We almost didn't know which way to look in case we missed something. Some way along the trail, we found our first Fulvous Whistling-ducks of the trip at the back of the main pool, and then Mike brilliantly picked out a kingfisher sitting in some kind of concrete bunker way ahead of us. It was a beautiful female Green Kingfisher – our first of the trip. With the water birds still coming thick and fast, we then hit a lovely spell for raptors, with good

numbers of Grey Hawks, Broad-winged Hawks and Swainson's Hawks circling in the near distance. Shortly afterwards, we had stunning close views of Cinnamon Teal, and Howard called Least Grebe on a pond up ahead of us. Amazingly, this turned into a raft of Least Grebes and then multiple rafts of Least Grebes! (For perspective, in two previous visits twenty years ago, I'd managed a combined total of three birds! It's good to know that some species still seem to be doing well.) A small number of Pied-billed Grebes and about ten Ruddy Ducks were also here, and we picked out Northern Pintail and American Wigeon on a fallen, semi-submerged tree trunk at the back of the pond. Then we spotted our Green Kingfisher again on a closer and much more scenic perch. The bird flew from a curved branch low over the water up into a leafy tree, and, in trying to describe where it had landed, we inadvertently came across a Belted Kingfisher as well! Having done incredibly well with the water species, we decided to head back towards the centre to see if we could finally connect with the unusually elusive Plain Chachalacas. Back at the feeding station just outside the visitor centre, we added nice views of Bronzed Cowbird as it fed in a small flock of Brown-headed Cowbirds, and Sveta saw an unidentified snake disappear under a rock near the pond. From the feeding station visible from inside the visitor centre, we had lovely close views of White-winged, Inca and White-tipped Doves. Somewhat frustrated that the chachalacas still had not shown, we paused for lunch. A few of us sat eating our sandwiches at the picnic area just to the side of the visitor centre and there, just as we had our hands full, a couple of large brown birds crept hesitantly out of the trees towards us – our chachalacas at last! Not to be outdone, a beautiful Black-crested Titmouse (another trip first) gave us point-blank views in the low-hanging branches right over our heads. Maybe sandwiches are the key! Before our departure, we had one further tip from a US birder, who told us of a bush around the back where he had just seen Buff-bellied Hummingbird – apparently the same bush he'd seen them at the previous year. We speed-walked in the direction he'd indicated and soon arrived at an outbuilding with (thankfully) just one nearby tall bush with spiky pink flowers. Sure enough, in no time at all, there was a Buff-bellied Hummingbird feeding on it. There might only have been one bush, but there were multiple flowers, and the bird flitted constantly among them. We must have made a comical sight trying to keep up with it in our bins – synchronised birding! Noticeably bigger than the Ruby-throats and Black-chinneds we'd been seeing so far, it was a joy to watch and a great way to end our visit. With a phenomenal morning's birding under our belts, and a much-increased trip list, we decided to spend the rest of the day in another nearby reserve: Estero Llano Grande State Park. It was quite a shock to arrive and find all the big ponds completely dry; obviously, the stormy weather around Houston had not reached this far south. Undeterred, we set off to see what we could find. Top of our wish list for this site was Common Pauraque. This bird can often be seen roosting just off the trails here, and if you manage to spot one (easier said than done), the views can be stunning. Walking towards the appropriately named Pauraque Event Center, we stopped to watch Couch's Kingbird and Brown-crested Flycatcher before Mike's eye was caught by something small flitting through a nearby tree. It turned out to be not one but two beautiful Blue-headed Vireos. Soon afterwards, we found a feeding station that gave us better views of some of the birds we'd seen at Santa Ana. A Ladder-backed Woodpecker came ridiculously close as it worked its way around one of the scooped-out logs used as feeders. Also here we had wonderful views of Green Jays and Altamira Orioles out in the open feeding on the oranges, another Black-crested Titmouse and more prolonged views of Plain Chachalaca. It's true

what they say: once you've seen the first one, you can't stop seeing them! We would happily settle for just the first Common Pauraque, and we didn't have long to wait. After spending a little time scanning the leaf litter near to the event centre and watching several American birders wander off disconsolately, Sveta suddenly announced, "I have the pauraque!" Sitting tucked up against the base of a twiggy sapling, it was one of those that you couldn't not see once you'd seen it. We spent some time admiring it and helping as many other people in the vicinity to see it as we could before beating a retreat and heading to the visitor centre for some much-needed ice lollies! It was while we were sitting out on the deck eating them that we found a report of a Flame-coloured Tanager posted on the local sightings board. The site – a place called Quinta Mazatlan – was not one we were scheduled to visit on the trip, but it wasn't too far away and we eagerly pencilled it in for tomorrow morning.

Day 7 Not only was the local McDonalds a great place to damage your hearing first thing in the morning, but it also turned out to be a great place from which to spot Green Parakeets sitting on wires in some of the surrounding streets. A breakfast tick even before we got to Quinta Mazatlan! Ruby Pond, the sightings board had said, so we asked a guy who worked there for directions. He indicated a trail to the left of the road. We must have made it about five yards down that trail before we were completely distracted by a large brown nightjar flying past us in the opposite direction. All thoughts of Ruby Pond were temporarily abandoned as we tried to track the bird through the tangled vegetation. There was no doubting its identity – a Chuck-Will's-Widow – but we never did manage to find it perched. The site turned out to be a little treasure trove, though. A lovely, compact place to go birding, dotted with sculptures of wildlife, you would think there wouldn't be too much to see here, but you would be wrong! During the course of our visit, we had fantastic views of Red-crowned Parrots in the treetops, flyby sightings of further Common Pauraques, our first Olive Sparrows of the trip, a single Collared Peccary (Javelina) crouching furtively at the back of a bushy area, and both Long-billed and Curve-billed Thrashers. It was a thoroughly enjoyable session, and we wished we could have stayed a bit longer, but we had an appointment at the hawk-watch tower at Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park, so Ruby Pond would have to wait until later in the day. If ever there was a birding destination that is not quite what it once was, Bentsen is that place for me. Until 2003, it was a Mecca for Snowbirds – elderly Americans heading south for the winter in campervans to escape the snow further north. Many of them used to congregate in Bentsen and set up a myriad of Heath Robinson, colourful bird-feeding stations that were magnets for all the birds in the area. Olive Sparrows, Clay-coloured Thrushes and all kinds of other local and difficult species could be found and seen relatively easily by wandering up and down the line of feeders. The Snowbirds also acted as an informal birding grapevine, gladly passing on all the latest sightings; the atmosphere was always joyful and welcoming. Sadly, by 2003, in an effort to make the park "more natural", the Snowbirds had been banned, the feeders disappeared (along with the screech-owl nest boxes) and the birds became far trickier to see. Since then, it has also become impossible to drive around the park and you have to depend on shuttles that only stop in a limited number of places, are not all that regular and are often full on arrival. Birder-friendly it certainly used to be; these days I'm not quite so sure. Our first stop today was at the hawk-watch tower. We duly climbed up and met John Kaye, the volunteer on counting duty – the very same guy Vaughan had seen on the 2022

tour and Steve had seen on a visit some nine or so years earlier! Our hearts sank more than a bit when he said it had been a very slow day so far compared to the previous one. He was not wrong. We gave it some time but the birding was painful – a handful of distant dots was the most we saw. For once, even the vultures were few and far between, and the highlights of our visit were a few singing Olive Sparrows off in the distance and a Grey Hawk sitting on a nest in a tree across the water. I couldn't help but feel for John having to stay up there in the blazing heat with not much happening, but he seemed so amazingly dedicated to the task that I don't think he minded a bit. I guess you have to experience the poor days to make the good days more magical. It's amazing how often on a birding tour, something good happens soon after a disappointment. As we sat at the base of the hawk tower waiting for a shuttle bus, somebody spotted a Greater Roadrunner disappearing into the vegetation on a bend some way up the road. As we edged up the road to try to track it down, a group of four Mississippi Kites drifted over the trees in the other direction! Our attention divided, I think most of us ended up with at best a snatched view of each bird. The Mississippi Kites never did put in another appearance, and this particular roadrunner disappeared without trace, but we weren't done with that species just yet. After catching the shuttle and spending some time checking out the location of the Eastern Screech-owl territory for our evening return tomorrow, we came across a second Greater Roadrunner. This bird was much more obliging and we managed to follow it along the edge of the road. Keeping a respectful distance, we had some fantastic views, and then we realised there were actually two birds (a pair maybe?). After watching both for a few minutes and following them around a corner onto a minor road, which we later discovered had restricted access to the public (oops!), one bird disappeared into a nearby maintenance yard, but the other stayed and put on a bit of a show. It ended up by preening itself in a tree – the only time I've ever seen a roadrunner that high off the ground! Two years ago on this very trip, Vaughan and Sveta had failed to find a roadrunner anywhere, despite everyone's best efforts; today, we'd already had three individuals. It was undoubtedly the highlight of this visit to Bentsen. Next up was a stop at Kingfisher Overlook – a viewpoint over a bend in an oxbow lake called La Parida Banco. Here, we had further views of both Belted and Green Kingfishers, and Steve and Mike had their first views of Anhinga on the trip. Our only other mission before leaving today was to recce the Elf Owl "tree" (actually a telegraph pole), again with a view to our return visit tomorrow evening. Suitably clued up, and with part of the border fence looming ominously over one side of us, we walked back to the car park and set off for pastures new. Today was Rose's birthday, and I can't think of a prettier place to spend a part of it than the National Butterfly Center, right next to Bentsen. We sat in the car park munching sandwiches and some delicious birthday cake (thank you Rose and HEB!) before heading through the visitor centre/shop and out into what would turn into one of my favourite destinations of the whole tour. Ostensibly, we were here to try for the Audubon's Oriole that had been visiting the feeding station and giving, so we were told, amazing views. However, there was so much more to see here. We began by walking past several flower beds that were teeming with exquisite Queen butterflies. Once we could drag ourselves away, we headed down a trail towards the feeding station and came across a very special species that only just makes it into the US – Texas Tortoise. We watched transfixed as this sweet little creature crossed the track in front of us, lifting its legs high with each step, as if to avoid the worst of the ground heat. As we arrived at the feeding station, we began chatting with an American photographer with a

huge lens, who had been there most of the morning. He kindly described the behaviour of the Audubon's Oriole for us – pointing out the tree that it usually appeared in first and its habitual direction of flight. A little while later, there was an excited muffled call from somewhere just behind the tree described. Thinking someone had found the oriole, we scuttled round, only to find that it was another new bird for the tour – Groove-billed Ani! It didn't hang around for long before it flew, but it was long enough. Now we were on a roll. Suddenly, an oriole appeared in the tree the photographer had indicated. It perched briefly before flying through the feeding station area. We managed very excited fleeting views and grabbed some quick photographs before we realised that this was the hybrid Altamira x Audubon's Oriole that was also in the area. Initially a bit crestfallen, we didn't have to wait much longer for the star bird to appear for real. In a somewhat surreal moment, the genuine Audubon's Oriole suddenly appeared on a seed-filled log at ground level just a few feet in front of us! Before too much longer, the hybrid bird was back as well, and both of them gave point-blank views for a good few minutes, which felt like they passed in slow motion. The Audubon's Oriole then flew up into a nearby tree and continued to show for a little while longer before finally disappearing. The American photographer assured us that he'd never seen it show like that before. Sometimes the birding gods smile on you! With phenomenal views of the star bird under our belts and a bonus lifer in the ani, some of us decided to head back in the direction of the visitor centre. I'm not sure which trail we picked, but it turned out to be an excellent choice! First of all, we re-discovered not one but two Groove-billed Anis in the trees above us. This time they stayed a little longer and gave us some lovely views through bins. Next, as we were watching them, we realised there was a tree stump in front of us that had been smeared with something sweet to attract butterflies. Before long, the butterfly that Heather had most wanted to see, and the one gracing the front of all the leaflets – the jaw-dropping Mexican Bluewing – appeared right in front of us on the stump. It was joined by another gem – Empress Leilia. I'm sure if we had been able to stay at the site for another couple of hours, we would have found even more treasure (and I might have to add a return visit to my bucketlist), but time was pressing on and we still had to return to Quinta Mazatlan to try again for the tanager. We regrouped in the visitor centre, where we had a whip-round and bought a lovely commemorative tote bag for Rose's birthday before heading for the vans. On the way, we all finally caught up with the Wild Turkey that Howard and Heather had spotted earlier, as he strutted across the manicured lawn. Back at Quinta Mazatlan there was clearly something afoot. The road was packed with vehicles and there were dozens of people milling around in their finery. Initially, we thought there must be a wedding taking place, but as we headed to the entrance, worrying that we might be denied access, we spotted several mortarboards and decided it was more likely some kind of graduation ceremony. One of the guards at the entrance kindly allowed us in for half an hour, so we wasted no time in heading straight for Ruby Pond. Sadly, there was no sign of a Flame-coloured (or any other) Tanager, but we did see both Painted and Indigo Buntings at the back of the pond, our first House Finch of the trip and a fairly obliging Nashville Warbler working its way through the bushes. Our all-too-brief time up, we fought our way back through the growing crowds and headed back to the motel for an evening meal in our rooms, or in the case of our van, the second little soirée in the lobby before the bird log.

Day 8 We hadn't been to a prairie since Attwater, so it was about time for a return visit. This morning we headed to a lovely place called Palo Alto Battlefield National Historical Park, but not so much for the history as the natural history. Fortunately, we arrived just as a man in a van was opening the gate for the day, so we were the first people in, which may have helped our quest somewhat. Our key target here was the audibly distinctive but visually fairly nondescript Cassin's Sparrow, and we didn't have long to wait. As we walked a little way along the trail, we started to hear the unmistakable stalling song, and then we caught our first brief glimpses as one bird sat on the top of a small bush. Within a short space of time, we had fantastic views of two or three birds as they flitted between perches in bushes and on top of Prickly Pear cacti. After a while, we picked out a Lark Sparrow in the same area, and some of the group later had wonderful views of these further along the trail. We spotted Eastern Meadowlarks on the opposite side of the track to the sparrows before the man who had opened up earlier came walking along carrying a huge shovel. Curious, we asked him what on earth it was for and were told that the park held a population of Nilgai, a large antelope species native to the Indian subcontinent that had escaped from a nearby ranching project. Copious amounts of their dung across the footpaths were not very welcome and this poor guy had the unenviable task of clearing everything up! I guess it must have been a wonderful workout, but I'm not sure I envied him doing that repeatedly in those temperatures. He then gave us a long talk about the battle between the Mexicans and the Americans in 1846 before we decided it was time to move on again. Back in the vans and on our way out, we suddenly spotted another Greater Roadrunner – a wonderful find, as Alun had missed the ones at Bentsen the previous day. In his talk about the battle, the guy with the shovel had pointed to part of the reserve and mentioned Old Port Isabel Road. Immediately, my ears pricked up, as I knew (courtesy of some YouTube videos prior to the trip) that somewhere along that road was a viewpoint for Aplomado Falcon, so we were somewhere in the vicinity. Sure enough, our next stop was at the entrance to the (closed for the day) Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. From the entrance, we picked out the platform that these falcons are frequently seen on. With the naked eye and even through bins, it almost looked like the platform was empty, but with the aid of scopes, we were able to see two birds before they flew off into the distance. The views could have been better, but there was no mistaking them. Our luck with twitches had not been great so far this trip, but it wasn't going to stop us trying again. Next up was a long-staying Crimson-collared Grosbeak at Frontera Audubon Center. This being a Sunday, the centre was only open between 12pm and 4pm, not the greatest time to go birding, especially in a hot state like Texas; however, we sat eating our sandwiches in the car park, eagerly awaiting 12pm. On the stroke of 12, we headed towards the entrance, where we were stopped by an American birder who asked us if we'd seen the Southern Lapwing yet. This bird was a recent find and one we hadn't even known about, so Vaughan spent some time taking down directions to a nearby golf course in readiness for a visit later. In the centre, we were handed a map by the lady behind the counter, who kindly circled the areas where the grosbeak was usually seen. Apparently, she had heard the bird fly over earlier that morning (before the place was open, and quite possibly when we were eating our sandwiches in the car park). We set off in the direction shown on the map, but to say that this turned out to be a disappointing site would probably be a bit of an understatement. Notable additions to our list here were our first Wilson's Warbler and our first Eastern Wood-pewee in a small creek where two American guys were sitting. At a feeding station,

we also had nice views of some now-familiar species like Golden-fronted Woodpecker and Inca Dove, this time joined by a Fox Squirrel. Apart from that the birding was tough, but if you were into mosquitoes, it was fantastic! We quickly dubbed the place “Mosquito Alley”. To be fair, on a different day, with opening hours more conducive to good birding, our experience may have been completely different, but we never did see or hear any sign of the grosbeak, and nor did anybody else we spoke to during our visit. And so to the Llano Grande golf course in Mercedes. We parked the vans on a dusty track and set off to try and find instructions as to the whereabouts of the lapwing. This turned out to be incredibly frustrating, as everyone we spoke to said something different – it was on the first big pond; it was a 20-minute walk away; it was between two ponds out on a fairway; it was somewhere near the clubhouse! Bewildered, we began by scanning the first big pond, which would have made life nice and easy. Sadly, although we had assorted herons, egrets and waders, there was no sign of the lapwing. With one location checked, we headed out in the blazing sun to try and track down the right one. Wandering somewhat aimlessly around an unfamiliar course, trying to respect the golfers and (unsuccessfully) pin down the exact location of the bird from other birders, we did at least pick up some lovely views of Long-billed Curlew and Whimbrel. However, after an exhausting and strength-sapping yomp in the heat of the day, eventually we decided that this was madness and headed back to the vans feeling somewhat deflated, and almost certainly dehydrated as well. After two successive dips with the grosbeak and the lapwing, we needed to finish the day on a stronger note, and we did. With our recce information gathered from the previous day, we headed back to Bentsen for a spot of owl hunting. First up was the Elf Owl pole, and it was on the way here that the walk across the golf course finally caught up with me. I didn’t think I could manage to stand waiting for the owl to emerge, so I reluctantly headed back to a bench at the centre to sit and wait for the group. Luckily, I had already seen Elf Owl and the subspecies of Eastern Screech-owl that was here, so I didn’t miss any lifers; nonetheless it was a bit sad not to be there. Instead, I sat and watched a couple of beautiful Buff-bellied Hummingbirds visiting all the red flowers near my chosen bench while the group waited for dusk and the owl way down the track. Now the usual Elf Owl routine goes something like this: watch the empty hole; watch the empty hole; watch the empty hole; start to wonder if there really is an owl in there; watch the empty hole a bit longer; oh look, there’s a face; watch the face; try to look at the detail in the face to make sure it really is an Elf Owl; blink; gone! It’s always a joyous experience to see this diminutive little bird finally appear in the hole, even if you wish you could see a bit more of it. I’m reliably informed that on this occasion, the dismount to the routine was a little different in that a second bird came up to the one in the nest and the two flew off together. Awww! With one of the target species safely ticked off, all attention then turned to the other – the McCall’s subspecies of Eastern Screech-owl. By this time it was dark and I had returned to the van in the car park. After the departure of the Elf Owls, virtually all the parked vehicles disappeared and there were just ours and three or four others left, with regular circuits also being done by Border Patrol cars. Having seen the Elf Owls, Ray decided to come back and check I was OK, which was much appreciated by me but less so by him, as he then missed the second spectacle of the evening. After successfully ticking the Elf Owls, the group walked a little further into the park, trying to avoid the few remaining other birders who were seemingly on the same mission. Quarter of an hour or so later, the screech-owl obligingly put in an appearance and, on the second attempt, Vaughan managed to get it in

the spotlight so that everybody who was there could see it. Amazingly, the bird then came even closer, giving pretty spectacular views just above head height! Ray and I didn't need to ask whether they'd seen it, as they all arrived back at the vans grinning from ear to ear!

Day 9 En route to our next overnight destination of Laredo, we spent most of this morning looking across the Rio Grande into Mexico. Our first stop was at Salineño, where the water was incredibly high and part of the track Vaughan and Sveta had walked along two years ago was completely cut off. We walked away from the water and up along a tree-flanked track running parallel to the river, where we caught a few flashes of an Audubon's Oriole passing through the foliage and our only views of Bullock's Oriole on the trip. After a while, the vista opened up and we had a clear view right across the river, albeit with limited space for a group of 13 people to stand. Having reached a deep side channel cutting across the trail that we couldn't cross or go around, we were forced to stop and scan. Almost instantly, Vaughan had views of our main target species for today – a young male Morelet's Seedeater sitting on the edge of the reeds. Sadly, as the track was fairly narrow and we were, by necessity, well strung out along it, only Heather was close enough to see it before it disappeared. We kept scanning the reeds to see if the bird would return, and our hopes lifted a few times until we realised that the movements we were now seeing were caused by Common Yellowthroats and hidden Great-tailed Grackles. A couple of Ospreys repeatedly flew up and down the river, and they were soon joined by at least two Ringed Kingfishers, which would perch briefly on the other side of the river or on the twiggy vegetation mid-channel before disappearing up- or downstream again. At one point, somebody called a Red-billed Pigeon flying along the river behind one of the kingfishers, but sadly I think only a few of the group managed to get onto it. Soon afterwards, we had some of our best views of Green Kingfisher on the trip, as a beautiful male came and posed for us on a rock at the back of the side channel. Finally at this stop we had some flyby Mexican Ducks, our only sightings on the trip, which gave us just long enough views to identify them before we decided to make our way back to the vans. The journey to our next stop at Chapeño took us down some smaller roads through some really lovely chaparral habitat and we stopped a couple of times en route. The first, unplanned, stop was for a stunning Scaled Quail sitting on top of a stubby fence post; we watched this delightful little bird from the vans without daring to venture out in case we spooked it. It seemed odd to have just one bird rather than a group, but we never did see any others. About ten minutes later, our second stop was alongside a scrubby bank, which we did wander up and down for a short time. This resulted in good views of a lovely Pyrrhuloxia, some stunning Scissor-tailed Flycatchers (for once in a natural setting and not on a barbed-wire fence at the side of a road) and our first sighting of a perched Black-throated Sparrow. The birding from Chapeño is very similar to that from Salineño, in that it just gives another open view of the Rio Grande from a little further along. Just to prove the point, an Osprey also cruised up and down the river here – it could even have been one of the same birds! Also here, we saw our first Black Phoebe perched on the twiggy vegetation out in the channel, and our first Western Kingbirds fluttering over the same area and obligingly showing their white outer tail feathers. Our collection of interesting other species also grew here, with fantastic views of American Rubyspot damselfly, a good-sized Texas Indigo Snake swimming out into the river and Black-and-Yellow Mud Dauber Wasps in the mud on the edge of the

water. As we ate our sandwiches in the vans, a Common Ground-dove landed briefly on the shingle between us and the river, and Ray photographed a Checkered White butterfly in the sunflowers to the left of the vans. We had one last chance to find Morelet's Seedeater for most of the group – Zapata, the site of my one and only view of what was then White-collared Seedeater back in 2001. A less likely place for a rare bird it would be hard to imagine – it's a rather large reed-filled pond, now at least half dried up, in a small local park. Despite the unlikely prospects, we set off towards the end that still contained water and walked the little trail around it. In the trees lining the edge of the water, we watched a few Nashville Warblers passing through and picked out a lovely Ruby-crowned Kinglet, before we suddenly heard the seedeater, and it was close! Low and behold, a stunning male sat high in a dead tree just a few yards in front of us, singing his little heart out. He didn't stay long, but I think most people had great views through bins. With the temperatures as high and sapping as they were by this stage of the trip, it was a miracle really that we hadn't succumbed to the lure of ice cream more often over the last few days! Today, with no further birding stops scheduled and our key target species nailed, we decided to celebrate in the local Dairy Queen. Various sundaes and Blizzards were ordered, and Vaughan asked if he could put his phone in their freezer for a bit to cool it down! Suitably refreshed (and the phone seemingly behaving again), we whizzed through the last 50 miles or so to the Days Inn at Laredo followed by an evening meal at the Golden Corral.

Day 10 At check-in yesterday, we'd been promised a big breakfast in the lobby this morning, and this was certainly the most extensive free breakfast of the trip. Alongside the return of the Texas-shaped waffles last seen in Rockport, we had non-psychedelic cereal, yogurt, toast, scrambled eggs, sausages, American biscuits, juice, coffee and mini muffins. As a means of setting yourself up for a journey of 155 miles or so, you could do worse!

Just as we were loading up the vans and preparing to leave, Ray photographed his only moth species of the trip – a stunning White-tipped Black on one of the bushes close to Reception. I don't remember seeing it in real life, but I wish I had! Most of the day was spent travelling at a fairly leisurely pace along Highway 83 towards our base for the next three nights – Neal's Lodges in the Texas Hill Country. Several stops were made on the journey, and our first was just after an underpass on the road, where we pulled over the vans and watched a swirling mass of mostly Cave Swallows – our first of the trip. With care, we were able to scope some of the birds on nests. Next up was an unplanned roadside stop to watch our first Chihuahuan Raven of the trip as it disappeared over a fence up ahead of us! We hoped it might return, but the only other raven we saw was a Common. Also in the lovely little layby we'd stopped in, we watched and photographed what we were informed by some local environmental students was a Texas Soldier Beetle. This little yellow insect is common in Mexico but only just creeps into the US, mostly in Texas but also very occasionally in New Mexico. This one showed well on a cornflower (*centaurea*) species and was another welcome addition to our general wildlife list. As we were running a little ahead of schedule for our check-in time, we stopped at a holiday spot on the way to Neal's with a view to having a walk around the area to pass a bit of time and see if we could pick up any new species. Our visit was very short-lived, however, as Vaughan soon returned from having a chat with the owners, who wanted a staggering amount of money per person just to let us wander around for half an hour. Needless to say, we declined! On the way out, we stopped the vans briefly in the gateway to admire a couple of perched-up

Vermilion Flycatchers. Neal's Lodges provide a lovely, calm oasis in the midst of what can, at times, feel like a hectic trip, with so many places to visit and so many species to try and see. Here, the wildlife is literally on your doorstep and you can pause to catch your breath and recharge. We arrived in time for lunch, and after finding our cabins and dropping off the luggage, we had a little free time before a later orientation walk. Everyone will have different memories of the birds around their own cabins; for us, it was a Bewick's Wren picking up nesting material in a tree to the right of our porch, and the masses of Barn Swallows trying to build nests under the roof. One bird kept returning to the same twig in the tree just in front of the porch and singing his little heart out; it didn't seem to matter whether we were sitting out there or not. This afternoon's leisurely orientation walk was mainly to make sure that we could find the laundry room (much used during our visit!) and the restaurant, but you can't leave out the birding completely. We walked past the restaurant and picked out our first Ruby-throated and Black-chinned Hummingbirds at the feeders, while Ray photographed a lovely Queen butterfly on the mistflower in the nearby flowerbeds. As we wandered around the back of the restaurant and down some steps towards another batch of cabins, we stopped in a really productive little area, where we first had good views of Summer Tanager, then a stunning overhead Yellow-throated Vireo (one of the commonest birds heard throughout our time here). Next came our first views of arguably the star bird of our visit, or certainly one of them. As we watched the vireo, we could hear a parula trilling nearby. After a little while, I believe it was Howard who spotted a bird returning briefly to the same branch before vanishing again. This happened several times before we realised the bird was building a nest. As we watched, a second bird joined the first on two or three occasions. Our views were brief and extremely patchy, and at first I mistakenly identified them as Northern Parulas. On further thought overnight, this did not sit well with me at all. I read up on Sibley's description of the songs of the two species, which he describes as virtually indistinguishable, and tried again to patch together the snatched views I'd had so far. I couldn't come to any other conclusion than that these were Tropical Parulas. Over the next couple of days, this would be verified by some incredible images taken by Alun and Sveta – from the speed of the birds, I still have no idea how they managed to get them! Returning to our cabins before the evening meal, Ray and I had a stunning Black Phoebe sitting on the cabin sign for the two cabins next door to us. It would be a fairly regular visitor to this area over the few days of our stay – hopping between the sign, the concrete picnic table and the little tree close to our door. As we prepared for bed that night, the Barn Swallows were still twittering outside.

Day 11 No birding visit to the Edwards Plateau would be complete without looking for the star attractions of the area: Golden-cheeked Warbler and Black-capped Vireo. Both of these were on our wishlist as we set off after breakfast this morning for Lost Maples State Natural Area. As luck would have it, we arrived just before it officially opened for the day, so we were unable to pick up our entrance passes and head into the reserve straight away. I say "as luck would have it," because literally the first bird I heard as we stepped out of the vans was Golden-cheeked Warbler! I set off across the grass next to the visitor centre in the direction of the song and, sure enough, within a few minutes we'd found the first of our targets in record time. We watched two of these gorgeous little birds flitting between the first tree and a second, slightly more distant one for the rest of the time until Vaughan was able to go into the centre and pick up our passes. After such an incredible start, we set

off with a good deal of optimism! Parking the vans in a car park close to a little hide, we had a quick check of the feeders, where, besides a couple of White-tipped Doves, some of the group had brief views of a Rufous-crowned Sparrow before we set off on our walk along the trail down towards the river. On the tree-lined first part of the trail, we had stunning views of a perched-up Yellow-throated Warbler, which sat right at the top of a tree, facing us and singing. Also along this stretch of trail, we had our second target bird for the morning – a lovely Black-capped Vireo. In keeping with the habits of the species, it was a little “now you see it; now you don’t”, but it was wonderful to have picked up both key birds relatively easily and quickly. Anything else from here on was a bonus.

Crossing a very shallow (and narrow) part of the river via stepping stones, we rounded a corner of the trail and heard a Canyon Wren singing. This wonderful little bird then put on a show, perching first on top of a chunky fallen log just a few yards in front of us and then flying back to sit in a little crevice on the rock face. While we were watching the performance, we also had our first Common Whitetail dragonflies, an Orange Sulphur butterfly and a beautiful Variegated Fritillary. In fact, this site turned out to be a wonderful place for butterfly lovers (is there a term equivalent to “birder” for people who watch butterflies?). Within the next twenty minutes, Ray photographed a stunning Juniper Hairstreak on Antelope Horns Milkweed – much like our own Ragwort, a plant that is toxic to livestock but that plays a vital part in the lifecycle of the Monarch butterfly. This was followed by another Pipevine Swallowtail and a Celia’s Roadside-Skipper, both feasting on Prairie Verbena. Back to the birds, and a little further along the trail, close to a stone with an engraving about remembering loved ones, we picked up lovely views of a Carolina Chickadee plucking food from a lichen-covered branch, with a Blue-grey Gnatcatcher and a Black-crested Titmouse in the same tree. It was also here that Heather picked up her reputation as the Spotted Towhee whisperer, as she found I think her third one of the trip on the other side of the trail! In another lovely part of the reserve, we picked up another Golden-cheeked Warbler, which eventually showed really well in a juniper, and our butterfly list increased again with a stunning Gulf Fritillary – one of those species where the underwing is way more attractive than the upperwing. Back at the car park, we spent some time looking out for Scott’s Oriole, which apparently had shown well here on a previous trip, but it was not to be this time. We contented ourselves by watching a Carolina Wren flit in and out of the hide, where it was building a nest behind one of the ID pictures. Also here was a slightly worn Two-tailed Swallowtail butterfly on a large Texas Thistle – to give an indication of the size of the flowerhead, the swallowtail was accompanied by a Gulf Fritillary, a possible honeybee and another unidentified skipper species! Not quite done yet, our final couple of birds in a wonderful first part of the day were a group of Clay-coloured Sparrows in some twiggy vegetation at the far end of the car park area and our first Ash-throated Flycatcher. The latter must have picked the ugliest perch in a beautifully scenic reserve – a wire next to a telegraph pole covered in various cables and adorned with some kind of rusty metal casing. At least it made directions easy! After a thoroughly enjoyable and productive visit, we headed back to Neal’s and decided to take the vans around to the new RV site, where a few bird feeders had been set up. Here, we had nice views of a couple of Vermilion Flycatchers and another handful of Black-chinned Hummingbirds, while a couple of Lark Sparrows foraged around the edge of the hosepipe drip. We also heard our first Bell’s Vireos singing (if you can call it that) repeatedly from the scrub over the road behind us. This unmistakeable scratchy jumble of notes (slightly

reminiscent of a sylvia warbler) would turn out to be another commonly heard sound of the area. With a bit of free time this afternoon, some of us decided to head back to the parula site and try to get some clear views. As we arrived, our hearts dropped a little as the nearby cabins now seemed to be occupied and somebody had set out a row of seats directly below the tree with the nest. Luckily, with a little perseverance, we had some further glimpses of the female bird coming back to the nest, and Alun managed to take a picture of the underside, proving conclusively that it was indeed a Tropical Parula. Last up before the evening meal (and further visits to the laundry room) was a return visit to one of the feeding stations at Neal's, where the usual suspects of House Finches and Brown-headed Cowbirds were joined by a very obliging Black-throated Sparrow and several more Clay-coloured Sparrows. We rounded off the day on the way back from the evening meal with a stunning male Lesser Goldfinch feeding on the grassy verge just after we crossed the main road. We didn't see many of these during the trip, which is a shame as the Texas race with the black back is incredibly striking, but this one was a joy. He didn't seem to mind our presence at all and was still there as we walked away.

Day 12 Today was our only full day spent birding at Neal's, and it didn't disappoint. After breakfast, we set off to explore some of the trails we had not yet visited, armed with Vaughan's 30 years of knowledge of the site and its birds. The Bell's Vireos we'd heard yesterday soon began to show themselves, and we must have seen and heard dozens during the course of our walk. Also giving better views was a lovely Ash-throated Flycatcher, who sat on a variety of much more scenic twiggy perches this morning. A productive little patch then gave us less-than-ideal views of a Canyon Towhee sitting with its back to us. Sadly, it never did cooperate fully, but at least we saw it. This was soon followed by a lovely male Blue Grosbeak, who looked absolutely resplendent against the grey and green foliage surrounding him. Blending in a bit more was an Eastern Cottontail rabbit, who sat obligingly for us for a couple of seconds before bounding away through the scrub. Not surprisingly, Neal's is also a great place for invertebrates, and during the course of our walk, Heather pointed Ray in the direction of a species of walkingstick insect on the side of a cabin. We also had Question Mark butterfly and, nestled in the sunny yellow flowers of the Prickly Pear cacti, yet more Pipevine Swallowtails, Orange Sulphurs and Lyside Sulphurs, with their striking yellow wing spots. Perhaps the most frustrating bird of this part of our walk was one that Howard picked out briefly and tried to describe. As we'd seen more Bell's Vireos than anything else, his bird was initially dismissed as another one, but when it reappeared, we had a bit of egg on our faces – it was a Verdin, and the only one of the trip! We spent some time in the area, desperately hoping that it would give itself up, but it was incredibly skulky and I don't think the whole group ever did see it. In the same scrubby habitat, we picked up Orange-crowned Warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat, a few Eastern Phoebes, a couple of Yellow-rumped Warblers (few and far between on this trip) and another Spotted Towhee, which appeared just after Howard had asked Heather when she was going to find one! We spent a little time close to some of the most expensive cabins on the site – thankfully not occupied at that time. Here, we had views of a Rufous-crowned Sparrow foraging on a patch of ground dotted with small rocks and low scrubby bushes. We returned briefly to the feeding station from yesterday, where our friendly Black-throated Sparrow put in yet another appearance, and then Steve suddenly called "Look up; look up!" as a Zone-tailed Hawk cruised majestically over our heads and off

into the near distance. Just as we thought we had peaked, we wandered into a more open scrubby area where the Merlin app intriguingly picked up the song of a Black-capped Vireo, which none of us had noticed. We decided it was worth hanging around, just in case. It was a great call – within just a few minutes, we had a beautiful male hopping about in the scrub right out in the open just a few metres away! If the views yesterday at Lost Maples had been typically patchy, these were just extraordinary, and at this point (with more species to come), this became my bird of the trip. To round off a thoroughly enjoyable morning, the last bird we encountered on our way back to our cabins for an early lunch was a lovely male Purple Martin sitting on the side of a Purple Martin nest box. It looked like there was a female already nestled in the box. As this was our last day here, Ray and I took advantage of the lunch break to take a few snaps of the cabin and the Vermilion Flycatcher sitting in the tree just outside our door. As we headed down to the restaurant feeders to take some pictures of the hummingbirds, there seemed to be a gathering of some of our group heading back towards the parula site. We tagged along and had some lovely views of Chipping Sparrow, Summer Tanager and Carolina Chickadee before we reconnected with the parulas. The row of chairs was still there, but thankfully not being used, so the birds were able to go about their business in peace. With patience, we were able to get some further views of both birds and a couple of photos that showed more than just the belly! Satisfied with our views, a group of us then decided to head down to the river, where Helen B had reported seeing a Mourning Cloak (Camberwell Beauty) butterfly. This sounded irresistible, so Ray, Jill, Howard and myself set off to see if we could find it. As we scoured the rocks, we found more Question Marks, a Funereal Duskywing and had another Green Kingfisher fly down the river towards the road bridge. And then, I spotted it on the far bank of the river – Mourning Cloak! It was a pretty immaculate specimen and it sat there for quite some time, periodically opening and closing its wings and showing really well. I believe that by the time we left, most members of the group had seen it on separate occasions. Heartbreakingly, we would be leaving Neal's in the morning but we had one final spectacle to experience to send us on our way on a high. After an early evening meal, we set off to the Frio bat cave with some time to spare before the crowds arrived, so that we could fit in a little birding before the big event began. As we wandered around the car park area, the first birds I picked up were a pair of Painted Buntings low down in the scrub. During our time at this site, we probably had good views of four different birds – three males and one female – mostly perching up and singing for us. Next came probably *the* target bird species of this evening. As we scanned the scrub, watching a male Painted Bunting, we picked out a bird hopping around further away. It turned out to be a Cactus Wren, which then turned into two Cactus Wrens! They never came particularly close, but the views through bins were still lovely, their speckled plumage harmonising beautifully with the rusty browns, greens and greys of the vegetation. Without further ado, it was time to sign in and head up the hill to the main viewing area for the cave. As we listened to the talk by the guide and got our bearings, we had a very obliging Canyon Wren sitting on the end of the pipe near to the cave entrance. The closer you got to the entrance, the more you could smell the ammonia from the droppings. And then, silently, it began: the emergence of millions (10 to 12 million according to the guide) of female Mexican Free-tailed Bats, all of which had come to this cave to give birth and raise their young. They filed endlessly out over the hill and off into the night to hunt – a beautiful dark ribbon of life meandering over our heads. If you've never witnessed it before (or even if you have), it's a mesmerising

event. Apparently, it takes three hours for the whole colony to leave the cave, and as they kept coming, the setting sun painted the sky in increasingly rich shades of orange, pink and mauve, setting off the silhouetted bats to perfection. As always at such places, the harsh realities of nature are also evident, as raptors gather to pick off some of the bats as they head out to feed. On this occasion, we had Harris's Hawk and Red-tailed Hawks both diving into the flock and taking their pick. However, the overwhelming feeling as you come away is a reaffirmation of life and a connection to it. It's always a glorious way to end a stay in this lovely part of the world.

Day 13 If the journey from Rockport to McAllen had seemed long, it was nothing compared to what lay ahead of us today. The price we had to pay for the lovely peaceful vibe of the last few days was a 330-odd-mile journey in convoy along I-10 through the bustling madness of first San Antonio and then Houston to reach our last motel of the trip in Winnie. Only a masochist would describe it as fun! By necessity, the birding today was all from the vans, and our daily columns on the checklist looked a bit pitiful: among the usual suspects, groups of Cattle Egrets and the return of Laughing Gulls were about the highlights! Lunch today also saw the return of an old friend, as we stopped at the Whataburger in Sealy. Instantly, we picked out our motel and familiar places and roads from our stay on the second night of the tour. We had to stop ourselves heading on to Rockport as the next port of call! Arriving safely in Winnie, we checked into the motel and then headed for somewhere quick and easy for the evening meal. As the town pretty much consists of one long street, there isn't a whole lot of choice, unless you want to brave the locals' favourite – Tia Juanita's Fish Camp. This had come highly recommended by a birder earlier in the tour, but to be honest, it looked a bit noisy and hugely overcrowded – a bit like the highway we'd spent most of the day on. We opted for the relative tranquillity of the Dairy Queen, where we were each given one meal and seventeen meals' worth of ketchup sachets!

Day 14 On arrival at this point in the tour, there's always a temptation to head straight to the High Island sanctuaries and start looking for migrants. However, as most of them travel overnight and don't make landfall until early afternoon, time can be better spent elsewhere in the mornings. This morning we headed for Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge, and it wasn't long before we saw the results of all the stormy weather the region had endured this spring. The water levels in Shoveler Pond were so high that, whereas on previous visits I've seen some massive alligators hauled out on muddy banks, this time there simply weren't any banks to haul out on! If the alligators were not quite as showy as usual, the birds (at least the taller ones) were still thankfully there in some numbers. We drove around the trail, adding our first Purple Gallinules of the trip, several Yellow-crowned Night-herons (both adults and juveniles), brief glimpses of Least Bittern and an even briefer glimpse of a flyby American Bittern, some wonderful close-up views of Boat-tailed Grackles in the reeds right by the side of the road and our first Eastern Kingbirds. Also present, of course, were many old friends from earlier in the trip including Tricoloured Heron, Black-necked Stilt, Roseate Spoonbill, Neotropic Cormorant, Blue-winged Teal, Snowy and Great Egrets, American Coot, Savannah Sparrow, Long-billed Dowitcher and oodles of Red-winged Blackbirds. Having unwittingly driven around the loop at least twice before realising we were going around again, we decided to have a bit of a change of

scenery. After admiring the Cliff Swallows building nests on the outside of the welcome building, we parked the vans and set off to walk the Willows and Hackberry Trails. Bizarrely, given the water levels elsewhere, these seemed to be incredibly dry and we thought this might turn out to be a pointless exercise. For a while, that was indeed the case – the place seemed completely devoid of birds. Then, we started to come across mulberry trees and our luck changed. At first, we just had Catbirds, Orchard Orioles and a couple of Summer Tanagers eating the berries. However, as we rounded the final bend before reaching the vans, it was obvious that Sveta was onto something. Hurriedly catching up, we were treated to stunning views of an absolutely beautiful male Cape May Warbler in his full breeding garb, also feasting on mulberries, at head height in front of us. An uncommon sight in Texas, this was a delightful surprise. As it still wasn't quite 11am, we decided to walk a couple of the boardwalks, just to see if we could get some further views of the bitterns, or at least close-up views of some of the birds we'd seen from the vans. Sadly, we didn't see either bittern again, but we had some lovely views of Black-necked Stilt, several juvenile White Ibis, a lovely close White-faced Ibis and our closest encounters with alligators, several of which came right up to the edge of the boardwalk. After taking advantage of the facilities and indulging in a bit of retail therapy, it was time to make our first foray into migrant chasing at High Island. It's fair to say that 2024 was a strange migration year; maybe it was a result of El Niño or climate change, who knows? However, while watching a YouTube video posted several weeks after we came home, I heard a local Texan birder who films the migration every year say that they only really started to see birds coming through on 20th April this year. Today was 20th April and as we crossed the bridge onto High Island, we had no idea that we were arriving literally on the very day the birds started to show up! As we sat on the bleachers at Boy Scout Woods, eating our sandwiches and waiting for Vaughan to collect our entry patches (this year showing a Palm Warbler), we could have been forgiven for thinking that if this was a relatively good day, the rest of April must have been shocking! The most we managed was a couple of Baltimore Orioles and a male Scarlet Tanager bathing in a little side channel to the right of Purkey's Pond. Other than that, the place felt eerily empty, and it was upsetting to see a place I've visited many times in the past when it was bustling looking so deserted. I guess that must be how it looks for the rest of the year outside the migration season. However, we were hearing some better information coming from a place called Hooks Woods, just a little way from Boy Scout Woods. Reports were flying around of a Black-throated Blue Warbler and a possible Black-whiskered Vireo having been seen there today. It was a no-brainer, and we hot-footed it to Hooks Woods, along with seemingly every other birder in the area! There were dozens of birders hanging around in the road outside the entrance gate. Apparently, this line of trees was where both the warbler and the vireo had been seen. We spent some time in the scrum, picking out Rose-breasted Grosbeak and a couple of Red-eyed Vireos, which caused a ripple of excitement for a minute or two. A couple of Blue Jays were spotted a little further along the road towards the houses. Then, suddenly, someone found the Black-throated Blue Warbler. With that many people all shuffling for a view, it was tricky to find a clear angle on it, and the bird was moving all the time, but I think that, eventually, we all had some kind of a view – some probably better than others. We tried to put some American birders onto it as well before we heard rumours of a Worm-eating Warbler inside the reserve at the little pond. Most of us scurried off and, sure enough, as we arrived at the viewing benches, there in front of us was the most obviously fresh

arrival I've ever seen. The poor soul was sitting motionless on the edge of the pond, looking for all the world like it was about to keel over. We were seriously concerned for its welfare but it did soon start to shuffle towards the running water. After sitting on a wet rock in the shade for a while, it seemed to perk up a bit and started preening itself. Still apparently too weak to fly up into the trees, it slowly worked its way around the pond, giving us incredible views but showing exactly how punishing the flight across the Gulf of Mexico is for these tiny birds. We wandered around the reserve, checking out the line of drips, each behind its own blind, and picking up Tennessee Warbler, Nashville Warbler and nice views of a female Northern Cardinal trying to build a very ill-advised nest in a tiny tree near to the drinking pond. Having stayed out on the road for longer than the rest of us, Steve and Mike were also lucky enough to see the Black-whiskered Vireo. The Worm-eating Warbler was still entertaining us when suddenly, arguably the most extraordinary bird of the trip appeared just ahead of us. It was a Dark-eyed Junco, and not just any old Dark-eyed Junco, but the Grey-headed race! This bird breeds in Nevada, Utah and Colorado, and winters way to the west of the Gulf Coast of Texas; what on earth it was doing here is anybody's guess! Shortly after we saw it and Vaughan managed to grab a photo in case one was needed for a record, we bumped into a friend of Vaughan's, who gave us some useful information about a site for King Rail. This was a species we hadn't seen and it sounded like a fine way to round off the day. After a bit of a drive back towards Anahuac, we found the designated road easily enough, but as we cruised along scanning each ditch, all we could see were the heads and beady eyes of alligators staring back at us. We even had a big one cross the road in front of the vans. It looked like the heavy rains and full ditches might have scuppered any chance we had of the rail, but as we would be coming back this way before the end of the tour, we tucked it away as another site to re-visit. For our evening meal tonight, we thought we'd have a change of cuisine. We found a little Vietnamese diner where the food was lovely, albeit all served in polystyrene takeaway boxes and with plastic cutlery. (Note to anyone thinking of doing the tour: it's well worth bringing any reusable cups and cutlery you have – over the course of seventeen days, you could probably save several kilograms of plastic here!)

Day 15 Sometimes in life, and it seems in birding, you have to go through a painful experience to reach a more positive place. Today was one of those days! In order to reach Sabine Woods, our birding destination for the whole of today, we would have to drive through the monstrous dystopian hellscape that is the Port Arthur oil refinery complex. The largest such complex in North America, there seems no end to the mile after mile of ugly twisted grey pipes, chimneys belching out steam and smoke, huge tankers and small waterways running through it all. As you drive along, you can't help wondering what on earth they may be contaminated with and what you might be breathing in. It is about as depressing a place as I think it would be possible to find on the whole planet, and if ever there was a poster child (or whatever you call the reverse psychology version) for renewables and a greener planet, Port Arthur should be it! This being another Sunday, the sheer number of birders at Sabine Woods today was something to behold. Everyone, however, seemed smiley and optimistic; the oft-heard refrain was, "You picked a good day to come." We certainly hoped so. Our first stop was at a tangled thicket, where we picked up a few Hooded Warblers and a nice Blue-winged Warbler. Many of the American birders seemed preoccupied with seeing a Lawrence's Warbler (a hybrid between Golden-winged

and Blue-winged) which had also been reported in the area that morning, but this wasn't really a priority for us and we never did see it. Moving on, more warblers started to trickle in. Black-and-white Warblers were fairly common, as were Hooded Warblers. We picked out the odd Black-throated Green Warbler, a few Blackpoll Warblers, and soon Steve spotted the only Blackburnian Warbler of the trip in a distant leafy tree. Jill then found a lovely male American Redstart fanning his tail and showing his orange flashes. We paused for a while in a wonderful location for thrushes, where we picked out Veery, Swainson's, Gray-cheeked and Wood Thrushes in quick succession. These birds were seen regularly in this area throughout the course of the day. Also here, we had some frustrating views of a Chestnut-sided Warbler. It's another one where I think everybody had some kind of view, but not necessarily the best. A first visit to Howard's Water Feature (no, not our Howard!) produced lovely views of a Green Heron on the pond behind all the chairs and a Raccoon sitting in a tree, nonchalantly clutching a branch and sensibly staying well out of the way of the hordes below! Not long afterwards, as we were wandering a little aimlessly, we came across a group of photographers obviously focused on something. Our jaws dropped collectively when we saw what they were looking at – a Chuck-Will's-Widow perched on a small twig right out in the open just a few feet in front of us! It had its back to us, but its head was turned to the side and we could see its beautiful beady eye and even its rictal bristles. In a split second, this bird became my bird of the trip and remained that way right until the end. It stayed there on the same perch all day – really unusual behaviour for this species, as we'd discovered at Quinta Mazatlan earlier in the tour – and was seemingly completely unfazed by all the attention. hilariously, given the bird's position, an American lady, standing in exactly the same spot as the photographers, asked if somebody could use a laser pointer to show her where it was. I wish I could have photographed some of the looks she received in response! After lunch, we wandered into another little twiggy copse teeming with Rose-breasted Grosbeaks. Also in this area we found Eastern Wood-pewee, Great Crested Flycatcher and our first Common Grackles of the trip. From about two o'clock, a group of us hit a fantastic purple patch at one of the drips. It started with a Common Yellowthroat and quickly developed. In a magical two and a half hours here, we had a constant stream of Black-and-white Warblers, Indigo Buntings, Northern Parulas, Hooded Warblers, Tennessee Warblers, Orchard Orioles, Baltimore Orioles, Summer Tanagers, Scarlet Tanagers, Yellow Warbler, Grey Catbirds, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Kentucky Warbler and Wilson's Warbler coming in to bathe and drink from the pools, often at the same time. A Northern Waterthrush also crept through the leaf litter to the side of the drip. We could also hear Magnolia Warblers in the area, but they never did come down to the water. It was a really special experience and the sort of thing you imagine when you think about coming to High Island for the migrants. It seems we had, indeed, picked a good day to come! In a last hurrah before we had to tear ourselves away, we headed out to a more open area with dry grasses, young trees and a small, semi-dry stream. Here, we quickly found a Yellow-billed Cuckoo sitting in some twiggy vegetation at the back of one of the trees, and a couple of Louisiana Waterthrushes working along the muddy banks of the stream. Two new birds for the trip – the perfect way to end our visit.

Day 16 Once in a blue moon you have a birding experience where every piece of the puzzle just falls seamlessly into place and you have to pinch yourself to make sure it's

really happening. A non-birder present would get the impression that this birding lark's a doddle! Our visit to Yacht Basin Road this morning was one such occasion. As we arrived, another birding group was already there, but seemingly about to leave. A few of their party were huddled at the side of the road watching a small, greyish bird sitting up in the grasses and singing. It was a Seaside Sparrow, and after our poor, snatched views with Captain Tommy earlier in the trip, this was a much more satisfying look altogether. Before the other group wandered off and got back into their vans, they gave us information on some of the other birds they'd seen – the Clapper Rail had been showing well; up the road a little way were singing Sedge Wrens; down the road and close to a road sign was a vagrant Chestnut-collared Longspur! It was all music to our ears, and it wasn't long before the aforementioned Clapper Rail put in an appearance. It darted across the road and then spent most of the time we were there working its way up the edge of the watery channel on the right-hand side of the road. A more obliging and visible rail it would be difficult to imagine. As we followed the rail along the channel, we began to hear Sedge Wren song, so that became our next target. Sure enough, as we approached a small tree set back a little from the road, we spotted movement in the right-hand branches. It was our singing Sedge Wren – the second new bird for the trip and the third excellent sighting within just eight minutes! Not content with one sparrow species, we tried for a second – Nelson's Sparrow, the main reason we'd come here. We were soon treated to some fantastic views of this lovely little golden sparrow poking its head above the similarly golden reeds. For five minutes or so, we watched entranced as one bird and sometimes two sat up singing and checking us out. With all the expected species ticked off spectacularly in incredibly short order, the only thing left was to try for the unexpected one! We wandered back down the road, past a very confiding Eastern Willet and towards the road sign the other group had mentioned. It took a little while for us to connect but, sure enough, we were soon watching a slightly washed-out but nevertheless unmistakeable Chestnut-collared Longspur as it foraged at the side of the road. In typical longspur fashion, it did have a habit of disappearing into the grass for a while, but it always seemed to pop back out on the edge of the road. I do hope it managed to stay safe. Our short stop here had produced four fantastic new birds for the trip and much better views of Seaside Sparrow, and it still wasn't yet 9 o'clock in the morning! We positively bounced back into the vans, feeling like today was going to be a good day. Continuing our long drive down the Bolivar Peninsula, we passed a veritable pick 'n' mix of assorted sizes, shapes and colours of beachside properties on stilts. All of them seemed to be in much better condition than the ramshackle assortment of somewhat neglected cuboid huts I remembered from previous visits. I still find it strange that the houses are so high above the water level that you'd end up with leg muscles like Chris Hoy from repeatedly climbing up and down, but the expensive cars are parked at ground level beneath, as if it doesn't really matter if they get swept away! At the end of the peninsula was our next stop for today: the extraordinary and unforgettable Bolivar Flats. It's a strange juxtaposition of shorebird sanctuary and oil tanker parking bay! If you kept your eyes firmly to the right as you walked down the beach from the car park, you could be forgiven for thinking that this place was simply a wonderful haven for nature. The minute you turn your gaze to the left, however, the nature is set against the muddy brown waters of the Gulf of Mexico and a backdrop of oil industry infrastructure for which Texas is famous. On today's visit, we had barely left the vans and hadn't even started the walk down the beach when Sveta called a White-tailed Kite. It was hovering a little way back over the vegetated

dunes and never really came close to us, but it was lovely to see one in flight after the perched one we'd seen on our way to McAllen. As we began the walk down the beach, the birds were still fairly low in numbers; there was an occasional Least Tern, one or two Ruddy Turnstones, a few Sanderling, but nothing to suggest that the place merited its reputation as a premier birding destination. We came across several small sharks lying dead in the sand as we passed; the carcasses looked pristine and there was nothing to suggest that they had been predated. I do hope they hadn't been poisoned by who knows what out in the Gulf, or casually discarded by local fishermen. After walking along an almost deserted beach for some time, you begin to wonder whether you picked a really bad day to come. Then, with no warning, you round a bend and are taken aback by the sudden increase in birdlife – on both sides! Behind a roped-off breeding area on the beach and in pools in front of the dunes, we had beautiful, dainty Least Terns guarding nests, Wilson's Plovers, Semipalmated Plovers, impressive numbers of Piping Plovers, Semipalmated, Least and Western Sandpipers, Dunlin and Short-billed Dowitchers. Up ahead of us, a couple of Red Knot were picked out in scopes, while two stunning Snowy Plovers scurried across the sand in front of us and into the safety of the roped-off area. Out on the sea, we had incredible mixed flocks containing White Pelicans, smaller numbers of Brown Pelicans, Laughing Gulls, Herring Gulls, Ring-billed Gulls, one Lesser Black-backed Gull, a few Black Skimmers, Royal Terns, Sandwich Terns, good numbers of exquisite Black Terns and smaller numbers of Common and Caspian Terns. Earlier in the tour, Jill had asked me whether we were likely to see American Avocet on this trip. Not wanting to spoil the surprise too much, I'd simply said yes, but not until the last section at the coast. Now we watched great ribbons of thousands of these glamorous birds in breeding plumage as they marched in line through the shallow water, methodically sweeping their beaks from side to side in search of prey. They're rarely really close here, but the sheer numbers are mightily impressive. I hope it was worth waiting for, Jill! With a memorable morning's birding behind us, we set off back to the High Island sanctuaries in the hope that migrant numbers had picked up since our visit a couple of days ago. Lunch at the bleachers in Boy Scout Woods suggested otherwise – the place was every bit as quiet as before. With things so flat, there was nothing for it but to try the one place we hadn't yet visited – Smith Oaks Sanctuary, and at least that had a rookery to look at if all else failed! The canopy walkway at Smith Oaks is new since my earlier visits, and it's a mightily impressive way to get a little closer to some of the migrants flitting through the trees. Our first pause was at the lookout over Smith Pond, where we encountered just a few of the myriad herons and egrets that call this place home. While it was lovely to watch these species again, our real focus was on the smaller migrants, so we headed back towards the trees to see if this morning's birding luck might continue. Almost the first bird we came across was a beautiful Black-billed Cuckoo, sitting on a branch at eye level in front of us. The walkway really helped here, as this bird would have been up over our heads had we been at ground level. As it was, we had fantastic views of the second *Coccyzus* species of the trip. We spent some time at the rookery (well, it would be rude not to), watching Great and Snowy Egrets, Roseate Spoonbills and Tricoloured Herons flying back and forth across the water with nesting material, and picking out our first real sightings of Anhinga on this trip. Sadly, they never did sit out on logs fanning their wings for us; this time, they were unusually skulky – darting into cover the minute they'd crossed the water. Again, as we backed up from the viewing area, we hit a lovely little spell in the trees at the sides of the walkway. Almost

simultaneously, we had a Yellow-billed Cuckoo and Sveta found a beautiful Philadelphia Vireo, which showed well for some minutes together with a Warbling Vireo. On the other side of the walkway and down on the ground, an Ovenbird was picked out, but I'm not sure everyone managed to connect with this one before it disappeared behind some purple flowers. With nothing new showing from the walkway, we decided to try our luck on some of the trails through the woods. Rather like Boy Scout Woods, it was pitifully quiet on the warbler front, and we can only hope that this year, most of the migrants just carried on without stopping. The only alternative is a catastrophic decline in numbers that doesn't bear too much thinking about. Our walk along the trails did produce further lovely views of thrushes, including Wood Thrush, numerous Swainson's Thrushes, a Grey-cheeked Thrush and a Veery. We also all caught up, finally, with Ovenbird and added some more Kentucky and Hooded Warblers to our trip tally. As we used the facilities at the car park before moving on, a number of raptors flew over, including a Peregrine and a Red-shouldered Hawk, which we spent some time describing to the volunteers staffing the welcome tent. There was still a little birding time left, so we decided to try our luck again at the best site we'd been to this year for warblers – Hooks Woods. It came to our rescue again! Almost as soon as we closed the entrance gate behind us, we had a Blackpoll Warbler disappearing into the foliage. It was quickly followed by a stunning male Cerulean Warbler working through the trees right above our heads. We spent quite some time watching this gorgeous little gem of a bird before making our way back to the drinking pond area. Here, I'm delighted to say that we found a very active Worm-eating Warbler working the big trees – I like to think it was our exhausted friend from a couple of days ago, fully recovered and feeding up before carrying on. Mrs Cardinal was also still resolutely trying to build her nest in the spindly tree, while we soon picked out a female Cape May Warbler and a couple of Red-eyed Vireos in the big mature tree. It was while watching these birds that arguably the star of this visit put in an appearance – a wonderful male Bay-breasted Warbler. The bird was, to begin with, fairly obscured and high, but it gradually came lower and showed right out in the open several times for us. Another species that's not often seen on this tour, as it's one of the later migrants to come through, this was a fantastic note on which to end today's birding. Something that did give some pause for thought, however, was the Gulf Coast subspecies of Western Ribbonsnake, which suddenly swam across the little pond and paused at the far side. The light made its reflection really clear, and it quickly became “the two-headed snake”. Their prey is usually aquatic – frogs, newts, small fish etc. – but I'm so glad it was here today and not when the Worm-eating Warbler was trying to recover. If the snake can take prey as big as a frog or toad, I wouldn't have put much money on the chances of the poor warbler in the condition it was in! For our last evening meal of the tour, we returned to the little Vietnamese diner and virtually filled the place. It was nothing fancy, but the combination of good food and good company, together with trying to work out who all the historical figures on the wall mural were, made for a satisfying way to round off a good day.

Day 17 And so dawned the final day of our tour. On previous visits, the return flight had always been in the early afternoon, leaving a fairly tight schedule into which to fit the last couple of special birding sites before heading for the airport. This time, our flight was not until much later, giving us a few more precious hours to use to our advantage. Given our success there over the last few days, it seemed only sensible to return to Hooks Woods for

one last hurrah. Even before we got through the gate, we picked out Bay-breasted Warbler in a big tree on the grassy area near the houses. This soon became multiple Bay-breasted Warblers; we had at least three birds in the end, and I like to hope that one of them might have been our friend from the previous evening. The female Cape May Warbler was also still around, and we had some stunning, if brief, views of a male Black-throated Blue Warbler at a drip. Back at Boy Scout Woods, we had one last delightful surprise as we walked down the road to the entrance – a perched Common Nighthawk on a horizontal branch high above our heads. Apparently, this bird (or another of its kind) had been in this very location on the previous tour, but it had not been present this time until today. Once inside the reserve, I decided to spend a little time out the back in the open area where I'd spent many an hour looking out for a passage Swallow-tailed Kite in the past. I'd never succeeded previously and my luck was no better today, but several of us did wander along the boardwalk, picking up a sizeable flock of Indigo Buntings in all plumages on a high, twiggy bush. They were joined by a single female Painted Bunting. The only other thing of note we saw was an obliging Eastern Cottontail, munching happily at the side of the track in front of us. Tearing ourselves away from High Island, there was nothing for it but to begin the final lap of our tour. As we were heading in that direction, we decided to give the King Rail site one last shot on our way past. Sadly, the water in the channels was every bit as high and the rail every bit as invisible as on our previous attempt, so we headed on to White Memorial Park for a few key species. This site had an altogether different feel to anywhere we'd visited so far. Obviously designed by humans and not nature, it consisted mainly of a large manicured grassy area with trees dotted around in fairly regimented order. It was more reminiscent of a very open plantation than a park, and, on arrival, it had the same eerily quiet feel as a plantation. However, if this place was good for anything, it was good for woodpeckers! After a short walk, we heard our first one – it turned out to be a beautiful Red-headed Woodpecker that landed high on the short, stubby stump of a branch on a conifer. Not long after this bird flew, another woodpecker took its place on the same stump – this time a Red-bellied Woodpecker! On a bit of a roll, we picked up a few American Crows (a bird we hadn't seen for much of the trip) and then found a species that we were hoping to see at our next destination – Pine Warbler. Never still for very long, a small number of them led us a bit of a merry dance for a while, but eventually, I think we all had pretty stunning views of this bird. We were still smiling after adding it to the list when Steve suddenly called, "Bald Eagle! Look at the wings; nothing else soars like that." It was distant and flying away from us, but it was a remarkable and unexpected find. With a spring in our step, we sauntered back towards the vans. On the way, we spotted a couple of young Eastern Bluebirds with an adult, several Carolina Chickadees and a lovely male Summer Tanager, who looked very different perched in a conifer. Our efforts this morning had added five new birds to the trip list. This called for lunch, and we stopped for one final time at a Whataburger on the way to W.G. Jones State Forest, our final birding destination of the tour. Not content with five new birds for the last day, we were determined to end on a high and add a couple more. It didn't take us very long. Almost as soon as we hit the trail through the stands of Loblolly and Shortleaf Pines, both of our target species appeared in quick succession – Brown-headed Nuthatch and Red-cockaded Woodpecker! The nuthatches stayed stubbornly high in the trees and were definitely a challenge for the neck. The Red-cockaded Woodpeckers, by contrast, were just extraordinary. Although we were probably seeing the same four or five birds moving from tree to tree, they seemed to be

everywhere, and completely unbothered by our presence. We watched as they chipped away at the flaky bark, sending pieces of it flying off in all directions. As we followed the woodpeckers and the nuthatches through the trees, we found more Pine Warblers, although the views were nothing like as close as we'd had at the park earlier. Also here were some gorgeous Eastern Bluebirds, sitting on top of their wooden nestboxes and looking stunningly bright against the dark forest backdrop. They say all good things must come to an end and, with time ticking, there was nothing for it but to brave the madness of Houston traffic once more and head to the airport. After covering well over 2000 miles and clocking up a group tally of 283 bird species, our race was run. We departed Houston on 23rd April just before the bad weather we'd experienced on parts of the tour ramped up even further. In the first few days of May, the town of Conroe, the nearest town to W.G. Jones State Forest, was part of a large area just north of Houston to be hit by severe flooding. We can only hope that everyone and everything – including the woodpeckers, bluebirds, nuthatches and warblers – managed to stay safe. A huge thank you must go to Vaughan and Ray for their sterling efforts in driving all those miles, and to my fellow participants for their excellent eyes and good company throughout. Thank you to Jill, Howard and Alun for the pleasure of your company in The Beast, and special thanks to Jill, Howard, Mike, Rose and Steve for their kind responses to my queries while writing this report. Finally, I'd like to thank all the general naturalists on this trip for opening my eyes (and I suspect those of others) to the wider beauty of nature beyond just the birds. My future trips will undoubtedly be significantly richer, more colourful and more biodiverse as a result of this one.

Helen Heyes

List of dragonflies and butterflies seen on the tour

Dragonflies & Damselfly

Great Pondhawk (*Erythemis vesiculosa*) – several at Tule Marsh
Pin-tailed Pondhawk (*Erythemis plebeja*) – 1 at Tule Marsh
Eastern Pondhawk (*Erythemis simplicicollis*) – 2+ at Tule Marsh
Common Whitetail (*Plathemis lydia*) – several at Lost Maples
Black Setwing (*Dithemis nigrescens*) – 1 at Chapeño
Band-winged Dragonlet (*Erythrodiplax umbrata*) – common at Tule Marsh
Blue Dasher (*Pachydiplax longipennis*) – 1+ at Tule Marsh
Red Saddlebags (*Tramea onusta*) – 2 at Attwater plus several elsewhere
Roseate Skimmer (*Orthemis ferruginea*) – 2 at Tule Marsh plus several elsewhere
Common Green Darner (*Anax junius*) – Tule Marsh and widespread
American Rubyspot (*Hetaerina americana*) – 1 at Chapeño

Butterflies

Monarch (*Danaus plexippus*) – 1+ at Attwater plus a small number elsewhere
Queen (*Danaus gilippus*) – fairly widespread, Butterfly Center, Neal's etc.

Eastern Black Swallowtail (*Papilio polyxenes*) – widespread
Eastern Tiger Swallowtail (*Papilio glaucus*) – 1 seen
Spicebush Swallowtail (*Papilio troilus*) – widespread
Two-tailed Swallowtail (*Papilio multicaudata*) – 1 at Lost Maples
Giant Swallowtail (*Papilio cresphontes*) – 2+ seen
Pipevine Swallowtail (*Battus philenor*) – widespread
Polydamas Swallowtail (*Battus polydamas*) – 1 at Lost Maples
Common Buckeye (*Junonia coenia*) – 2 seen
White Peacock (*Anartia jatrophae*) – 2+ seen at Frontera Audubon Center
Clouded Sulphur (*Colias philodice*) – several seen
Orange Sulphur (*Colias eurytheme*) – several at Lost Maples
Cloudless Sulphur (*Phoebis sennae*) – 1 at South Padre Island
Lyside Sulphur (*Kricogonia lyside*) – several at Neal's Lodges
Little Yellow (*Eurema lisa*) – widespread
Gulf Fritillary (*Agraulis vanillae*) – several seen, Lost Maples etc.
Variegated Fritillary (*Euptoieta claudia*) – 2 seen at Lost Maples
Great Spangled Fritillary (*Speyeria cybele*) – 1 at Tule Marsh
Phaon Crescent (*Phyciodes phaon*) – several seen
Red Admiral (*Vanessa atalanta*) – at least 3 seen
Painted Lady (*Vanessa cardui*) – 2+ seen, including at Salineño
Mourning Cloak (*Nymphalis antiopa*) – 1 at Neal's Lodges
Juniper Hairstreak (*Callophrys gryneus*) – 1 at Lost Maples
Oak Hairstreak (*Satyrium favonius*) – 1 at Lost Maples
Celia's Roadside-Skipper (*Amblyscirtes celia*) – 1+ at Lost Maples
Question Mark (*Polygonia interrogationis*) – several at Neal's Lodges
Bordered Patch (*Chlosyne lacinia*) – at least 1 at Butterfly Center
Mexican Bluewing (*Myscelia ethusa*) – at least 1 at Butterfly Center
Empress Leilia (*Asterocampa leilia*) – 1 at Butterfly Center
Funereal Duskywing (*Erynnis funeralis*) – 1 at Neal's Lodges
Checkered White (*Pontia protodice*) – several at Chapeño and Neal's Lodges