

## Trip Report: Spring 2008 in Texas, USA

(David Southall)

Spring in coastal Texas is synonymous with the annual arrival of neotropic migrant warbler, tanager and other species returning to breed in North America after wintering in Central and South America. With one of the main migration routes connecting the Yucatan peninsular to the Texas coastline - via some 18 hours flight on a northerly path across the Gulf of Mexico - Houston is well located for observing this phenomenon. The wave of migrants commences slowly in March, peaks in April and tapers off again as summer arrives in May, with different mixes of species observed as the season progresses.



*Summer Tanager (Boy Scout Woods); Yellow-breasted Chat (Boy Scout Woods)*

Travelling with favourable, southerly tailwinds the vast majority of migrants generally fly beyond the coastal zone, eventually stopping at dusk in more inland woodland and forests, before potentially continuing in the following days their onward journey towards breeding grounds. Even under these conditions, however, some of the migrants - the hungrier, slower, weaker or less pressed for time? - land in the first woodland that they encounter. Accordingly, good concentrations of migrants are often found in the few remaining coastal woodlots along the Texas coast at sites such as High Island, 1½ to 2 hours drive east of Houston, where several pockets of woodland are protected and managed by the Houston Audubon Society and Texas Ornithological Society.



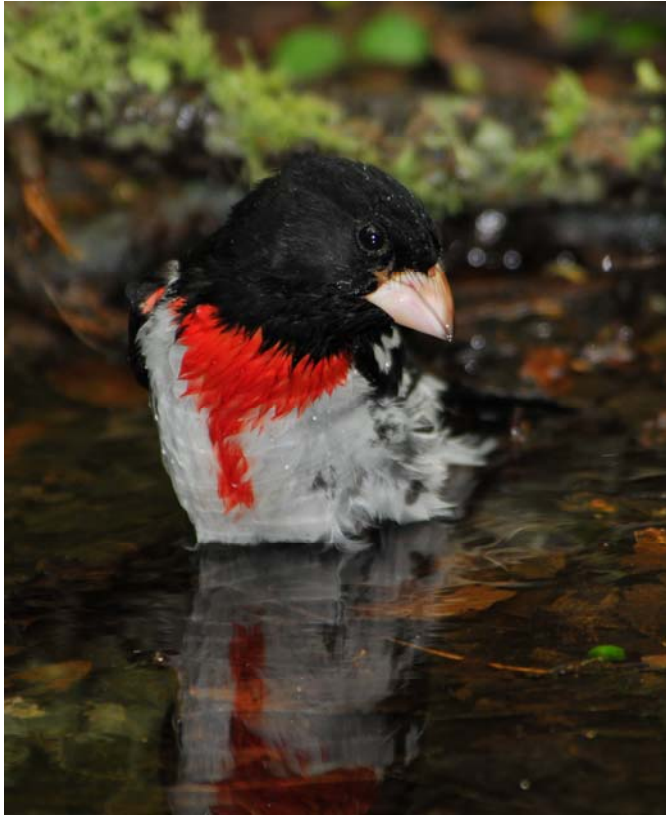
*White-eyed Vireo (Boy Scout Woods); Blue-headed Vireo (Boy Scout Woods)*

Although this marathon open-water crossing by birds typically weighing from only 8g to 30g is impressive enough under the most favourable of conditions, each day's flight departing from Mexico is also subject to the vagaries of wind and weather conditions encountered across the Gulf. Several times during each migration season (about once or twice a fortnight during 2008) cold fronts from the north push down through Texas and offshore into the Gulf, bringing with them rain and northerly winds. Confronted by challenging headwinds, a higher proportion of the birds migrating on those days tend to set down in the coastal woodlots, so locations like High Island can be teeming with migrants recovering from their arduous crossing. These weather dependent days when 'fall-outs' of migrants occur are no doubt feared by the birds themselves, but can treat Texas birders to close-up views of myriad newly arrived migrants as they 'drop' into the trees and bushes around them. Peak days this season included observations of at least 25 warbler species in the few hectares of High Island woodlots! Whilst morning birding in the coastal woodlots offers the chance to catch up with the resident birds plus any migrants who stayed the night before continuing their journey, afternoon birding can often be superior as waves of new arrivals progressively add to the numbers of birds to be found.



*Bob Cat (Smith Oaks)*

This spring, for the first time, Emma and I made several day trips to migrant rich areas at or near High Island during March, April and May to observe and photograph the spring migration. We searched for warblers, tanagers and thrushes at High Island sites such as Boy Scout Woods (complete with its water drips and photographic hide) and Smith Oaks; we watched nesting egrets and spoonbills at the Smith Oaks Rookery (with Night-Herons furtively lurking and occasionally stealing chicks, dipping them in the water and swallowing the lubricated snacks whole, whilst alligators waited patiently below for their chance); and we searched for waders and shore birds along the Texas coastline and mudflats at Bolivar Flats. Due to the travel time from home to High Island we focused most of our trips on peak-time, afternoon birding in the High Island woodlots, sometimes preceded by morning or early-afternoon birding at Bolivar Flats. It should be noted that as a result of other travel and work commitments, none of our trips to High Island coincided with 'fall out' conditions and the associated peaks of migrant observation, so birding was at times slow and frustrating (compared, at least, to our previous experience in Latin America). However our patience over the season was rewarded with beautiful views of many new species, some of which are migrants that we had previously searched for and missed during their low-density over-wintering in Venezuela.

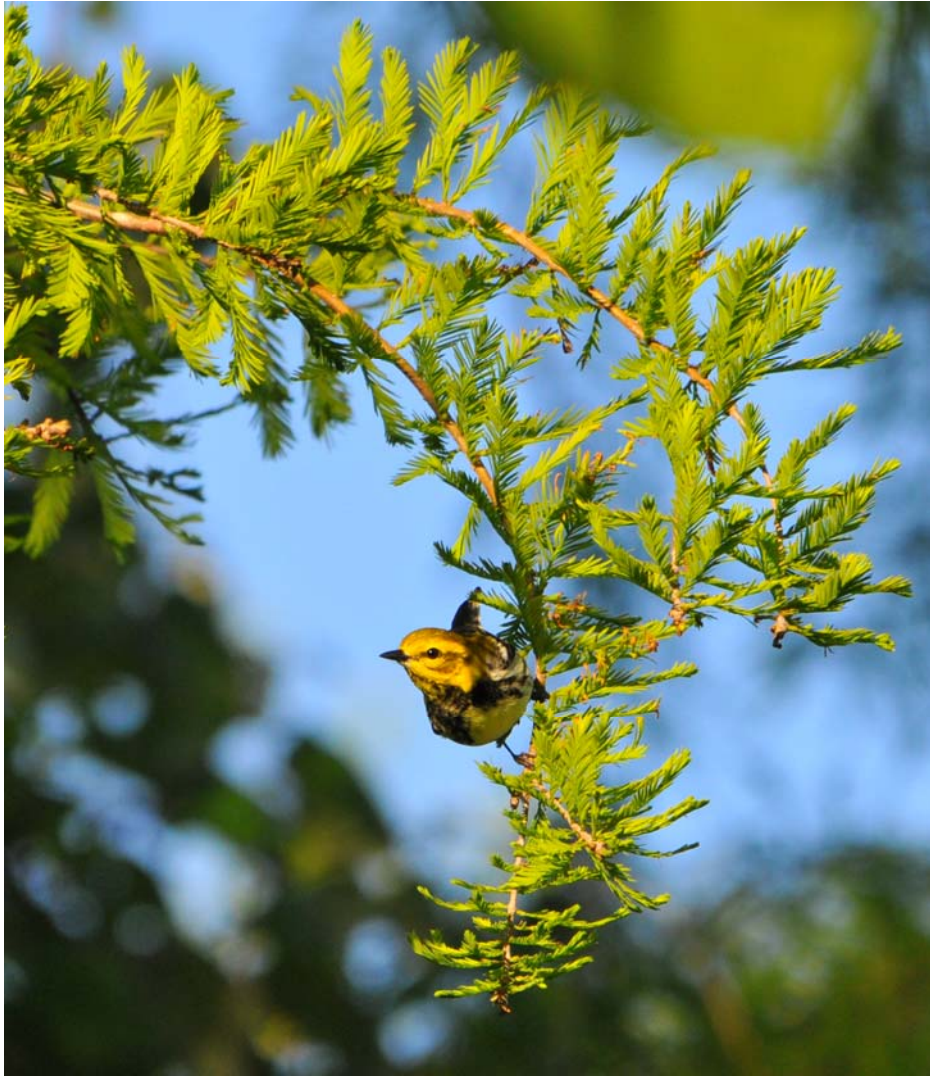


*Rose-breasted Grosbeak (Boy Scout Woods); Northern Cardinal (Boy Scout Woods)*

For those interested in more details of this season's observations at High Island, I recommend checking out <http://www.birdinghighisland.com> which in the 'Bird News' section includes a daily blog chronicling the 2008 migration season. This site is one of the beneficial outcomes of a new, symbiotic alliance between Tropical Birding/Birding America and Houston Audubon Society (HAS) through which Tropical Birding provided several professional guides as volunteers for free guided walks around HAS's High Island and Bolivar flats sites, an observation tower, a reference library and even free coffee to visitors. In return, Tropical Birding was well positioned to access thousands of potential new clients passing by the front door of their information centre (adjacent to HAS' Boy Scout Woods entrance) and interacting with their volunteer guides on the daily walks.



*Swainson's Thrush (Boy Scout Woods); Tennessee Warbler (Boy Scout Woods)*



*Black-throated Green Warbler (Boy Scout Woods)*



*Hooded Warbler (Boy Scout Woods); Black-and-white Warbler (Boy Scout Woods)*



*Immature Summer Tanager (Boy Scout Woods); Blue-headed Vireo (Boy Scout Woods)*



*Magnolia Warbler (Boy Scout Woods)*



*Immature Blue Grosbeak (Boy Scout Woods); Scarlet Tanager (Boy Scout Woods)*



*Canada Warbler (Boy Scout Woods)*



*American Avocets in breeding plumage (Bolivar Flats)*



*Marbled Godwit and American Avocets (Bolivar Flats)*



*Short-billed Dowitchers (Bolivar Flats)*



*Sanderlings (Bolivar Flats)*





*Great Egret grooming breeding plumage (Smith Oaks); Great Egret feeding chicks (Smith Oaks)*



*Roseate Spoonbill in breeding plumage (Smith Oaks)*

## 1. Trip Bird List<sup>1</sup>

(Confirmed personal sightings only for DJS – excludes birds heard only unless otherwise indicated; in order of appearance on the plates of The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Eastern North America)

First location where species seen: A=Anahuac NWR; BF=Bolivar Flats; H=Houston; HI=High Island (Boy Scout Woods, Smith Oaks etc.); JSF= Jones State Forest

Pied-billed Grebe (A)	Semipalmated Sandpiper (BF)
American White Pelican (BF) *	Western Sandpiper (BF) *
Brown Pelican (BF) *	Short-billed Dowitcher (BF) *
Anhinga (HI)	Gull-billed Tern (BF)
Double-crested Cormorant (HI)	Royal Tern (BF) *
Neotropic Cormorant (BF) *	Sandwich Tern (BF)
	Common Tern (BF)
Great Blue Heron (A)	Forster's Tern (BF) *
Great Egret (HI) *	Least Tern (BF) *
Snowy Egret (HI) *	White-winged Dove (H)
Reddish Egret (HI) *	Mourning Dove (H)
Little Blue Heron (HI)	Inca Dove (H)
Tricolored Heron (HI) *	Yellow-billed Cuckoo (HI)
Cattle Egret (HI) *	Barn Owl (HI)
Black-crowned Night-Heron (HI)	Ruby-throated Hummingbird (HI)
Yellow-crowned Night-Heron (HI)	Belted Kingfisher (HI)
White Ibis (HI)	Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (HI)
Roseate Spoonbill (HI) *	Red-headed Woodpecker (JSF)
Wood Duck (JSF)	Downy Woodpecker (HI)
Mallard (A)	Red-cockaded Woodpecker (JSF) *
Northern Pintail (A)	Pileated Woodpecker (JSF)
Northern Shoveler (A)	Eastern Phoebe (HI)
Blue-winged Teal (A)	Eastern Kingbird (HI)
Black Vulture (H)	Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (HI)
Turkey Vulture (H)	Loggerhead Shrike (HI)
Northern Harrier (BF)	Warbling Vireo (HI)
Red-tailed Hawk (H)	White-eyed Vireo (HI) *
American Kestrel (H)	Red-eyed Vireo (HI) *
Common Moorhen (A)	Yellow-throated Vireo (HI)
Gray (Black-bellied) Plover (BF) *	Blue-headed Vireo (HI) *
American Golden-Plover (BF)	Blue Jay (HI)
Killdeer (H)	Carolina Wren (HI)
Semipalmated Plover (BF) *	Ruby-crowned Kinglet (HI)
Piping Plover (BF) *	Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (HI)
Snowy Plover (BF) *	Eastern Bluebird (JSF) *
Wilson's Plover (BF) *	
American Avocet (BF) *	
Willet (BF) *	
Marbled Godwit (BF) *	
Long-billed Curlew (BF) *	
Ruddy Turnstone (BF)	
Sanderling (BF) *	
Red Knot (BF)	

<sup>1</sup> First sighting ever for DJS; \* = photo available from trip

Swainson's Thrush (HI) \*  
American Robin (H)  
Gray Catbird (HI) \*  
Northern Mockingbird (H)

European Starling (H)

Tennessee Warbler (HI) \*  
Blue-winged Warbler (HI) \*  
Northern Parula (HI)  
Yellow Warbler (HI) \*  
Chestnut-sided Warbler (HI)  
Magnolia Warbler (HI) \*  
Blackburnian Warbler (HI)  
Black-throated Green Warbler (HI) \*  
Yellow-rumped Warbler (HI)  
Pine Warbler (JSF)  
Black-and-white Warbler (HI) \*  
American Redstart (HI) \*  
Prothonotary Warbler (HI)  
Worm-eating Warbler (HI)  
Common Yellowthroat (HI) \*  
Northern Waterthrush (HI) \*

Louisiana Waterthrush (HI)  
Canada Warbler (HI) \*  
Hooded Warbler (HI) \*  
Yellow-breasted Chat (HI) \*

Scarlet Tanager (HI) \*  
Summer Tanager (HI) \*  
Blue Grosbeak (HI) \*  
Rose-breasted Grosbeak (HI) \*  
Indigo Bunting (HI) \*  
Painted Bunting (HI)  
Northern Cardinal (HI) \*

Baltimore Oriole (HI)  
Orchard Oriole (HI)  
Eastern Meadowlark (HI)  
Red-winged Blackbird (H)  
Common Grackle (H)  
Great-tailed Grackle (H)  
Boat-tailed Grackle (HI)  
Brown-headed Cowbird (HI)  
House Sparrow (H)  
House Finch (HI)

Combined total: 119, with 47 confirmed "first time ever" species for DJS ...



*Gray Catbird (Boy Scout Woods)*