

TEXAS

Gulf Coast and Rio Grande Valley

April 22nd – May 2nd

2016



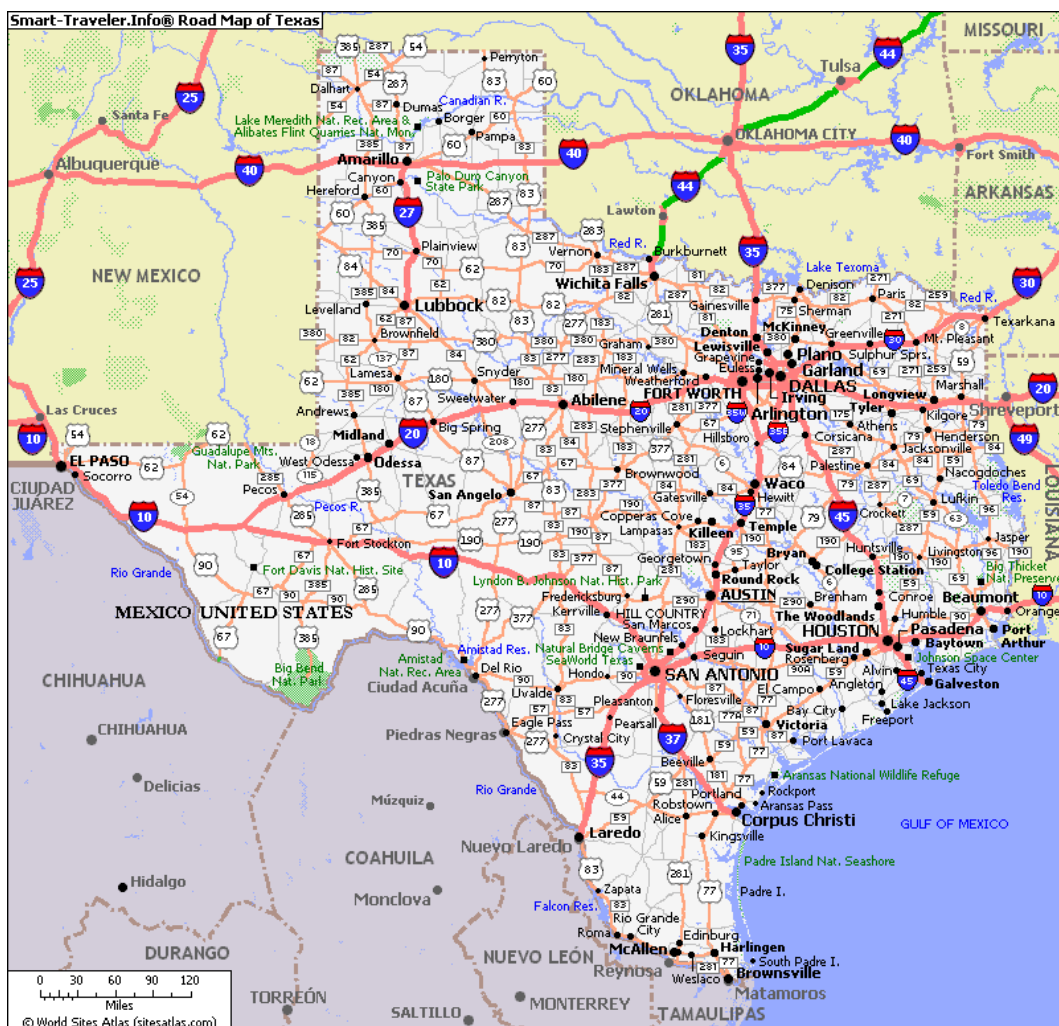
Words by Peter Carroll, Photos by Peter Carroll, George Scott and Jen Steinbach Scott

Prologue

George and Jen paid a visit to Scotland at Christmas 2015, and we met up to discuss where we might go on our bi-annual birding trip in 2016. Our challenge was trying to follow-up three, highly successful trips to South America, with a much-reduced budget, and less time to spare. After some deliberation, we settled on a trip to the Texas Gulf Coast and the Rio Grande Valley, at the height of spring migration. We also decided to save money by doing without a guide or tour company. All three of us were familiar with the birds we would encounter and were keen to challenge ourselves. In addition, George and Jen had visited before, albeit outside of this peak time for birds, so knew the area and its hot spots pretty well.

The final week of April suited us all, so George knocked up a rough itinerary and booked some hotels – adding enough flexibility to allow us to adapt our plans if we wanted to. Flights were arranged to rendezvous in Houston and we were all set.

A veritable feast of warblers, shorebirds and Mexican specialties awaited us.



Winnie and High Island

April 22nd

Our flights arrived roughly on time and we met up in Houston Intercontinental around 13.30. After loading up our upgraded hire car, we set off for our first staging post; the Hampton Inn in Winnie. On the way, we stopped to buy some groceries and I bagged (ahem) my first lifers – a Fish Crow and a soaring Broad-winged Hawk. A White-tailed Kite also floated over our heads as we packed away our purchases. Not a bad haul from a supermarket car park.

The journey along the highway produced a few birds, before we checked in, dumped our bags, and headed for High Island. By 16.00 we were pulling into the car park at Houston Audubon's Smith Oaks Bird Sanctuary. A pleasant woodland and wetland complex that promised to deliver some top notch birding ... and, boy did it ever!



Smith Oaks Bird Sanctuary

In a small glade, some local birders alerted us to a stunning male Golden-winged Warbler and he was quickly joined by a couple of flame-throated Blackburnian Warblers, and a hyperactive humbug of a Black-and-white Warbler.

As we moved on along the trail a short way, our next woodland jewel was a male Hooded Warbler: a real stunner, hopping about on the ground and some low branches. Lifers came thick and fast for me as we progressed with warblers, tanagers and a lot more besides entertaining the thirty or so birders in attendance.



Hooded Warbler

With the light fading almost as fast as our energy levels, we returned to the car, only to find it had a puncture! This was a pain in the proverbial, and meant a planned pre-dawn visit the next day to the Anahuac Wildlife Refuge would have to be put on hold.

Despite this setback, in two and a half hours of birding, we'd seen forty-six species, with eighteen of them lifers for me. We wolfed down a meal at Denny's Diner and put some of the beer we'd bought earlier out of its misery, before retiring to bed.

Punctures aside, we could hardly have dared hope for a better start.



The essentials!

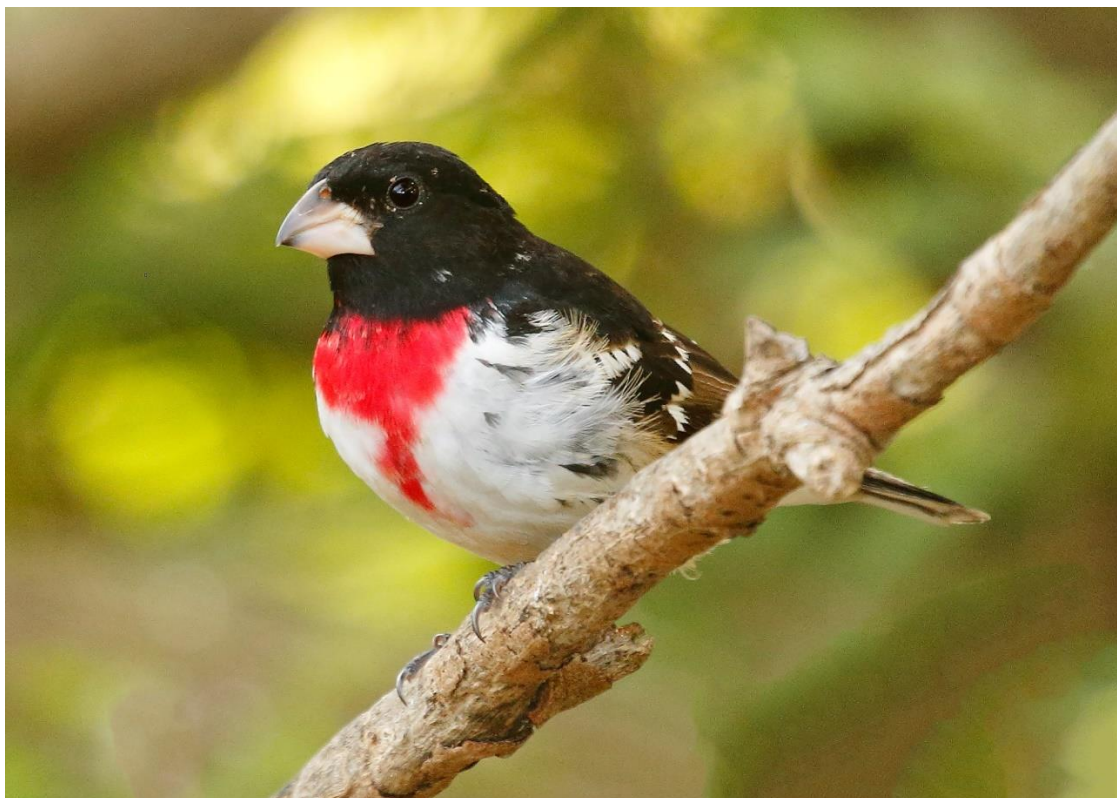
April 23rd

On the way to the rental car depot, we passed a huge flock of Mississippi Kites alongside the road, but getting the car sorted out used up a good portion of the morning. It was a pity but, after some discussion, we agreed to try our luck at the Texas Ornithological Society's Sabine Woods Sanctuary, and some other nearby sites, before heading back to Anahuac for the evening.

When we arrived at Sabine Woods, a long row of cars lined up on the verge indicated the woods would be busy with birders. We hoped that implied it was also busy with birds. And, so it transpired.

As soon as we reached a small pool alongside one of the trails, the quality birds started to rack up. A pair of lemon-yellow Prothonotary Warblers hopped about in a willow drooping over the water, sharing their favoured tree with a few orange-and-black Baltimore Orioles. Jen picked out a roosting Yellow-crowned Night Heron as it snoozed above us, as birds appeared from all sides and angles, keeping us on our toes.

Further along the trail, our next stopping point was also jumping with birds, including a couple of spectacular Summer Tanagers which perched in patches of sunlight and burned their impossible red into our retinas. A Northern Parula sang from a perch as a couple of unassuming Rose-breasted Grosbeaks moved through, and a local birder regaled us with tales of his Scottish heritage.



Rose-breasted Grosbeak

We decided to move on and try our luck deeper into the woods, soon admiring a stunning Indigo Bunting, a skulking Ovenbird, and a Red-eyed Vireo. As we reached the corner of the woods, we found a male Kentucky Warbler creeping about amongst some roots and leaves, but he got away from Jen unseen. She had better luck with the smart Yellow-bellied Sapsucker that came in to check us out. It's a type of woodpecker, with a name that I think sounds like an insult from a Wild West saloon!

It appeared we had stumbled upon a 'fall' of migrants and, as a result, the woods were full of birds resting up and refuelling after long flights across the Gulf of Mexico.



Lunch at Sabine Woods

Eventually, hot, tired and hungry, we also needed to refuel, and headed to the car to have some lunch and decide on where to go next. Sabine had been awesome but, if *it* had that many birds, it suggested other places could be just as good.

With our bellies full, a tip-off from another birder sent us a little way down the road to a tiny patch of habitat which allowed Jen to score back Kentucky Warbler. From there we headed for Texas Point; a headland jutting out into the Gulf of Mexico. It didn't take long after arriving before we began piling yet more birds onto the list. A fly-past Green Heron was quickly followed by a Least Bittern which flew out of a ditch and into some tall reeds and a few waders were flushed from the roadside.

As we neared the end of the point, the road deteriorated, and we decanted from the car. The remnants of the recent floods were apparent, with water levels very high and overflowing the road in places. Out to sea were some American White Pelicans. A Wilson's Plover was feeding in a puddle and a Chestnut-sided Warbler alighted very close to us in a shrub; probably just having made landfall after its long migration across the Gulf.



Tricolored Heron and Common Nighthawk

We drove slowly back down the track and, as we left the point, we came across some very obliging Common Nighthawks, which were resting at the roadside. Feeling very satisfied with the day's list so far, we headed for Anahuac in high spirits.

The refuge at Anahuac is a huge wetland area and we quickly realised we'd only be able to cover a small portion of it, having arrived relatively late in the day. We walked along a boardwalk and bumped into a couple of birders standing by a small pool. They pointed out a Sora Rail, feeding at point-blank range in the shallows, and this was joined by a log-hopping Northern Waterthrush, and a smart Swamp Sparrow in the bankside vegetation. As we headed back towards the visitor centre, we picked up a handsome male Blue Grosbeak.



On the Boardwalk at Anahuac Wildlife Refuge

Being a wetland, as dusk descended, large numbers of waterbirds began to fly in to roost. White-faced Ibis, White Ibis, Roseate Spoonbills, and various egrets and herons wheeled over the marsh. From our vantage point on the observation deck of the visitor centre, we scoped a hunting female Northern Harrier, and a splendid American Bittern landed in a field. It stalked around in that almost comical fashion that bitterns are wont to employ.

As we scanned about, George picked up a striking Yellow-headed Blackbird; a great bird for this location at this time of year, a lifer for me, and a real bonus as far as the trip list was concerned. As the sun set on a magical day, we agreed to get back here early the next morning and see what we could turn up.

April 24th

We slept for a bit longer than we should have (and that Jen said we should!) and probably missed our chance to score big with rail species at Anahuac. That said, on the way in, we found a juvenile White-tailed Hawk sitting in a tree and, not far away from that, a beautiful, adult Swainson's Hawk; obliging enough to allow George to get a photo.



Swainson's Hawk

And it wasn't a total bust on the rail front either. As we approached the refuge a King Rail ran onto the road, eye-balled us and promptly ran back into cover!

Once we made it to Anahuac proper, the birds started to be added to day, trip and life lists alike. A few Eastern Meadowlarks rattled from the tops of bushes. It felt like every time we put up our binoculars, we got on a flying American Bittern. We thought we probably had upwards of eight individuals. And here was me thinking that would be a rank outsider to make it onto my life list before arriving in Texas. A Savannah Sparrow caused a little debate as this local race was different to the ones George and Jen were used to back home in Washington, but Savannah it was. This was followed by an incredibly dapper Dickcissel, singing its heart out at the roadside.

Anahuac is a great place to see American Alligators and, as we drove along, we came across a young one, sitting in the middle of the road. Fearing for its safety, and wary of some people's animosity towards them, George jumped out to try and shoo it back into the nearby water. However, he didn't reckon on how feisty the wee beggar would be and he had to hop back as it had a go at him! As me

and Jen killed ourselves laughing, a big burly local came up and must have seemed a lot more intimidating than George as the baby gator complied with his encouragement, and slipped back into a roadside ditch. George got back in the car and, of course, Jen and I didn't say anything remotely disparaging or mocking in regard to what had just happened. (Coughs into hand)



Baby Gator with Attitude!

We racked up almost every waterbird we could hope to see here, before taking a walk out to the pool we'd been to the previous evening. It was much quieter, but we did get a nice surprise when three Cedar Waxwings alighted in one of the trees nearby.

Driving the loop around some more pools produced Moorhen, Pied-billed Grebe, Purple Gallinule and a trio of American Black Terns.



Anahuac Wildlife Refuge

By midday, we had pretty much covered the refuge, and we decided we should try our luck back at Smith Oaks. While we'd been banging them in at Sabine Woods the previous day, we were told it had been almost as good at Smith Oaks. In particular, they'd had several Bay-breasted Warblers, which we all really wanted to see. Amazingly, as we made our way there, and passed the spot where we'd seen the White-tailed Hawk hours earlier, it was still in exactly the same position. It made us worry it might be plastic! It wasn't, of course ... probably.

As it happened, Smith Oaks was much less active than the previous day. Nevertheless, we did see a few good birds we'd already seen, which was hardly a chore, and we added to the list with a superb, perched Yellow-billed Cuckoo and a White-throated Sparrow.

After a spot of lunch, we decided to soldier on, try some of the trails we hadn't explored yet, and visit the rookery that was mentioned on the signage. As the heat of the afternoon increased, bird activity decreased. We did meet a very helpful local birder who gave us some great tips for the next few days of our trip but, bird-wise, it slowed to a stop.

Before we reached the rookery, and with the smell of guano heavy in the air, none of us had particularly high expectations of it. However, we were in for a treat. Surprisingly close up, were hundreds of pairs of Great Egrets, Roseate Spoonbills, Neotropic Cormorants and a few Tricolored Herons. They squawked and gurgled and muttered and croaked; sparring for space, and some of the egrets feeding the ugliest of ugly chicks. It's amazing how unappealing the young of such elegant adult birds are. Down on the bank below, a huge alligator waited, motionless, ready to snatch any chicks that might fall from the nest or grab any unwary adult that didn't notice it sitting there. It really was a fantastic spectacle.



Smith Oaks Rookery



Roseate Spoonbill

Leaving the bedlam of the rookery behind, we looped back to the car via the trails we were yet to try, but picked up little on the way.

We didn't really know what to do next and settled on going to the beach at Galveston to see if we could add some shorebirds and seabirds to the list. It worked a treat, despite getting our first spots of rain of the trip. We added a host of new birds to our various lists.



Sanderling

With a couple of hours of daylight left, we debated what was doable in the circumstances. We settled on trying the other track at Anahuac, where another visitor had seen a bobcat, and which was also supposed to be good for rails. In the end, we had to settle for a smattering of waders.

Tomorrow we'd be leaving the High Island area and heading south towards Port Aransas. It had been an epic two and a half days with 141 species for the trip so far, and my life list boosted by an incredible 58 species already.

Port Aransas and Corpus Christi

April 25th

We set off on the four hour journey to Port Aransas in high spirits. Rattling along, Jen was the only one to get on a Red-tailed Hawk. We remarked that it, and American Kestrel, had been surprisingly elusive, considering how common they usually were. The sun shone and we broke the journey at one of the rest-stops along the highway. George and Jen often stop at these as they sometimes hold good birds. This one produced two lifers for me: Carolina Chickadee and Eastern Bluebird. With a fix of birds and noses powdered, we set off again.

We'd been recommended a small reserve called Linda S Castro, which happened to be on our way to Port Aransas. It was an unassuming place that, despite warnings about minimal signage, we managed to drive past first time. Once ensconced in the car park, we set off around the rather short trail, not sure what to expect but hoping it would deliver.

Right away, on the small lake, we got a couple of drake Redhead ducks, and our first Painted Bunting of the trip. This was one of my most wanted species and it didn't disappoint – literally, like a kid gone mad with a paint set. It was a real highlight of the trip so far.

As we walked along a right-of-way between rows of trees and bushes, a Red-shouldered Hawk sailed low over the gap. Then an unusual song caught our ear and, after a bit of coaxing, we were rewarded with great views of an attitude-filled White-eyed Vireo.

We returned to the lake and a handsome drake Wood Duck appeared from under a tangle of lakeside vegetation. Just as we were about to get in the car and leave, a pair of Mottled Ducks flew in. This was a lifer for me but, to be honest, just about the least exciting duck ever – like a fat, female Mallard with all the features removed. Still, they all count!

We took the world's shortest car ferry ride (two minutes max!) onto the island of Port Aransas and headed for the beach to have some well-earned and well-needed sustenance.



The ferry to Port Aransas



Royal Tern

After sifting through the nice mixed flock of Royal, Sandwich, Least and Common Terns, our beach banquet attracted a crowd of Laughing Gulls, which swirled above our heads like a scene from Hitchcock's *The Birds*!



Laughing Gulls do Hitchcock!

With our hunger sated, and a few gulls kept happy – including one with a gammy leg that Jen took pity on – we visited the tiny reserve known as Paradise Pond. It really is minute, and surrounded by housing, but it had some great new birds. A Ladder-backed Woodpecker was followed by the sweet-singing, but otherwise plain, Warbling Vireo. Then we all caught up with a smart little Black-throated Green Warbler that was doing the rounds of the lakeside vegetation. A real bonus was the Louisiana Waterthrush that hopped onto some waterside branches and twigs, bobbing away like a sandpiper.

With a few birds mopped up at Paradise Pond, we headed over to the Leonabelle Turnbull reserve: another wetland, this time beside a water treatment plant, with a viewing platform and a short boardwalk through some reeds. On the way, we stopped off at a tidal inlet that was swarming with shorebirds and we racked up an impressive haul of species.

At the reserve, we encountered a small group of birders holding vigil beside a couple of waterside shrubs. They'd had a Mourning Warbler there earlier, but it hadn't been seen for some time. We joined the hopeful band and waited, but to no avail. We did get some consolation in the form of a smart, male Western Tanager: a good bird for Texas and not one we expected to see. We gave up on the Mourning Warbler stakeout for a bit to try our luck at the marsh boardwalk and tower.

We didn't get much but there were also a couple of very impressive adult alligators lying in the shallows.



American Alligator

I really thought I was a goner!



Gator Capers

After that lucky escape, we returned to the warbler vigil – but, after a while, it was us and not the warbler who were mourning. We couldn't really complain, though. It had been another cracking day.

We headed into Port Aransas for dinner and a beer but almost made a mess of things when it turned out nearly all the eateries in town were closed. Eventually, we found somewhere and it served micro-brewed beers. It would have been rude not to have sampled them. So I did!

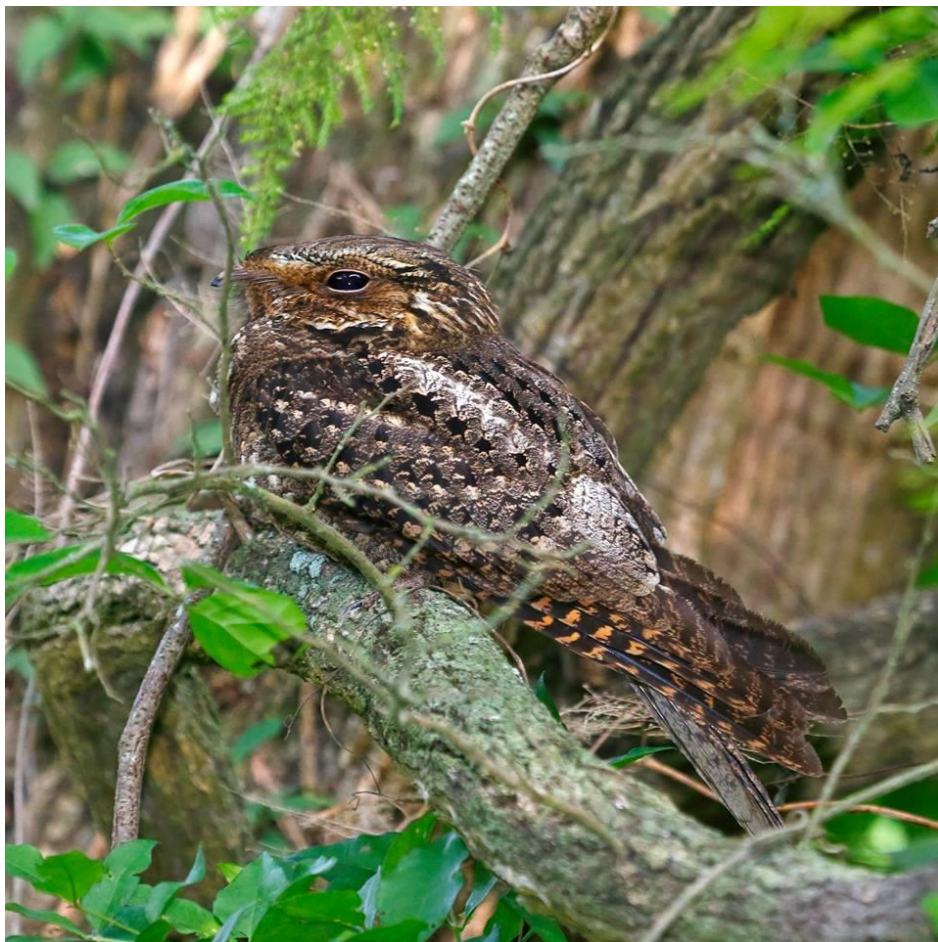


Cheers!

April 26th

While we'd been admiring the Louisiana Waterthrush at Paradise Pond, a young Texan birder had regaled us with tales of seeing some great birds in Blucher Park in Corpus Christi. This hadn't been on our original itinerary but, given how many shore and waterbirds we'd already seen, it made sense to adapt our plans and give it a try this morning. It was windy and overcast, yet hot and humid: a weird combination for a Scotsman to encounter.

The park was, as with so many of the sites we visited, tiny. It made our prospects of finding our target bird appear much more likely. After seeing a couple of Painted Buntings, we bumped into a mother and son who said they'd found a nighthawk species, sitting in a tree, right next to the path. The son walked us the few hundred yards back along the track and pointed out the bird. Immediately, we knew it wasn't a Common Nighthawk. We took out the guide and, with baited breath, checked the nightjars. No doubt about it (and with its presence predicted by the young lad at Paradise Pond), this was a Chuck Will's Widow! It's amazing how many of these nocturnal birds have weird and wacky names, steeped in folklore. This name relates to what the bird's song sounds like. This was yet another bird we only thought we had a slim to nil chance of seeing, but here it was, a few feet away, ignoring us as it snoozed on a low branch. It was one of the top birds of the trip.



Chuck Will's Widow

The rest of the time in the park proved a little frustrating. There were a few already-seen warblers around, and we did add our first Great Kiskadee, but only George managed to get on a Yellow-breasted Chat before it did a disappearing act. After giving it our best shot, we decided to move on to a cemetery that the young lad also recommended to us.



Rose Hill Memorial Park

In the US it's normal to go birding in cemeteries. They are essentially areas of parkland – with graves in them; green patches in the middle of built up areas and, as a result, they often become renowned migrant traps. We sought permission from the office to walk around and then set out, using the roadways that crisscrossed it. We soon found a small flock of warblers with a nice Golden-winged Warbler among them. The woman in the office had said there was a Cooper's Hawk in residence and, after a couple of fleeting glimpses, we eventually got great views of this superb accipiter.

A couple of birders turned up, asking if we'd seen the Bay-breasted Warbler they'd seen earlier. We said no, and eagerly joined them in trying to relocate it. Alas, we had no luck. Another Black-throated Green Warbler and a couple of Lesser Goldfinch were nice but the Bay-breasted was destined to be the warbler that got away.

We decided our best bet was to return to Port Aransas and work Paradise Pond and Turnbull again. We'd done ok there and, at this time of year, anything could turn up. It also meant we'd be back in time to avoid the scramble to find somewhere to eat in the evening.

On our return to Paradise we bumped into Larry, from Shetland, who we'd spoken to at Turnbull the previous day. He gave us tips to visit a reserve called Charlie's Pasture, and a beach area with a large flock of terns. He also told us there were a couple of Blackpoll Warblers around the pond. This was one of the warblers we'd missed a couple of times, but it was also a lifer for George and Jen, being a bird much more commonly found in the East of the US than the West where they lived. It took a bit of patience but, eventually, one of them showed well for us all. However, it was otherwise very quiet, so we decided to give Charlie's Pasture a try.



Paradise Pond

The pasture consisted of a long boardwalk crossing a flat saltmarsh area. It didn't look all that inviting initially, but it turned out to be great. The waders came incredibly close to the boardwalk, habituated to people and mostly unfazed by our presence. As a result, we racked up a nice list of shorebirds, including the superb Snowy Plover and some rather less distinctive, but still nice to get, Western Sandpipers.

As a Peregrine Falcon powered overhead, sending panic through the ranks, we began to feel the pace and the heat of the day. We headed back to the car for some lunch and to avail ourselves of the basic visitor facilities. On the way, a Merlin, carrying prey, shot through the dunes, giving only the briefest of views.



Charlie's Pasture

In the car park, a small bush became a flycatcher magnet. At one point it held four Western Kingbirds, two Eastern Kingbirds and a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher within a few inches of each other!

Refuelled and re-enthused, we visited the beach Larry had mentioned. A large, mixed flock of several hundred terns loafed on the sand, or patrolled the surf. Larry had said he saw a large flock of Caspian Terns here but we'd not had any, so we tried further along the beach and eventually got onto one of these hulking beasts. With the wind making standing on the beach a bit of a chore, we opted to return to Paradise Pond and Turnbull.



Least Tern

Paradise produced two new species for the trip (and one lifer for me) – a couple of Pectoral Sandpipers and a Bronzed Cowbird – but Turnbull proved to be very quiet.

Although I only added four lifers today, we were still thoroughly satisfied with our highest day total so far. However, we were pretty tired, so we had an early dinner and an early night. Tomorrow we'd be moving on again.



Harlingen, Laguna Atascosa and South Padre

April 27th

Several hours drive south of Port Aransas is the world-famous reserve at Laguna Atascosa. We were heading there to start adding some of the specialities Texas is famous for, and which can be nigh on impossible to see anywhere else in the US. With such a long way to go, we also broke this journey at a rest stop, witnessing the rather comical courtship display of a male Bronzed Cowbird when we did.

The heat was already building by the time we reached the approach roads leading to the reserve but we went on to see a lot of good birds.

First up was a pair of Harris's Hawks, using the roadside wires and telegraph poles to hunt from. These were quickly followed by our first Green Jay – a simply stunning bird that wouldn't be out of place in the Amazon or South East Asia.



Green Jay

At the reserve itself we took a walk along one of the trails near the visitor centre, adding Long-billed Thrasher and a very obliging Olive Sparrow. There were a few White-tipped Doves around and we saw our first Plain Chachalacas. There had been a Crimson-collared Tanager reported around the reserve in the past few weeks, so we tried our luck at the spot the ranger told us it was regularly seen. We were out of luck but we did see a dust-bathing Wild Turkey and a singing Great Crested Flycatcher.

Making our way back to the car, we had a close encounter with a showy Carolina Wren, and then George picked up a Greater Roadrunner creeping along a pathway on the other side of some feeders. It's almost impossible not to say 'Meep! Meep!' whenever you see one of these fantastic birds – even if they bear little resemblance in real life to the pink cartoon version.

Unfortunately, due to people managing to run over and kill two Ocelots in recent weeks, the park had taken the decision to close the driving loop we'd planned to take. We understood the decision but it was a let-down as it could have held some good birds. Nevertheless, we needed lunch, so we made our way to a lookout spot near the main lagoon and stuffed our faces. While we did so, a Common Ground Dove shot past at a rate of knots.

At a bit of a loss as to what to do next, we plumped for trying South Padre Island. It was about an hour's drive away and, as we came into Port Isabel, Jen remarked that she'd love to see some Skimmers. As if by magic, her wish was granted! In a small inlet, by the main road, there was a large flock of resting Black Skimmers. We pulled into a car park on the shore and had a closer look. A few other species kept them company but the most surprising of these was a Common Loon! We certainly weren't expecting to see one of those.



Black Skimmer

When we reached South Padre, we made our way to the World Birding Centre. Having paid our fee, we walked the boardwalk across the marsh, without adding anything new.

However, we did notice a small influx of Western Kingbirds and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, flying in off the sea and landing in the bushes. Migration in action, right in front of us.



The boardwalk at the World Birding Centre

From the Birding Centre, we moved down the coast a little way to the Convention Centre; also famous for migrant birds. Parked up and back on foot, we noticed a small number of birders taking photos of something in some shrubs and fruit trees. We asked what they were looking at, and the answer was a male Cape May Warbler. A little stunner it was too.



Cape May Warbler

We tried and failed to see another Mourning Warbler before acting on the advice of a helpful lady and trying a small area called Sheep's Head for a Black-throated Gray Warbler that had been hanging about there.

Another birder was there when we arrived and although he couldn't conjure up the warbler, he did help us get onto a Philadelphia Vireo.

Tired and hungry we drove to Harlingen and had dinner, a frozen margarita and some beers.



Margarita anyone?

McAllen and the Rio Grande Valley

April 28th

We tried Sheep's Head again first thing in the morning but we still couldn't get the Black-throated Gray Warbler to show. It also seemed quieter than the night before and, after an hour or so, we decided to try the Convention Centre again.

There was a lot less activity here as well, so we walked out along the boardwalk to try and see the family of Least Bitterns that were reportedly showing incredibly well. It didn't take long before an adult landed right next to the boardwalk, and then for the young to come looking for food. It was only seeing them so close up that made us realise just how small these birds actually are.



Least Bittern

This experience was somewhat soured by the only rude and obnoxious birders/photographers we encountered anywhere on the trip, but we ignored them and moved on, leaving them to stew in their pointless anger and boorishness.

After a delicious breakfast at a local Mexican diner, we headed down the coast towards the reserve at Sabal Palms. This promised a few new birds and some interesting habitat.

The heat and humidity at the reserve were intense. After checking in at the visitor centre, and paying our dues, we made our way to the feeding station. It didn't take long before a beautiful little Buff-bellied Hummingbird showed up and, after a little more patient waiting, it was joined by the joyously colourful Altamira Oriole.



Altamira Oriole and Buff-bellied Hummingbird

The reserve sits right on the banks of the Rio Grande and it's possible to look across the river into Mexico. There's a very droll sign relating to this as you enter the reserve, but Donald's wall is really going to spoil the view here!



Mexico from the Banks of the Rio Grande

We enjoyed our walk around the rest of the reserve, and the palms that gave the reserve its name were truly spectacular. However, it produced nothing we'd not already seen. By the time we got back to the car, the heat had become brutal, so we thought we should make for the coast and see what a change of scenery might turn up.



Sabal Palms

As we were driving along, we noticed a few hawks soaring by the roadside. George and I managed to get back the Red-tailed Hawk Jen had seen previously. Again, we remarked on how hard it had been to add one of the commonest raptors in the whole of the US – and that we still hadn't seen an American Kestrel.

The beach at Boca Chica was windswept and the sea was rough. We did see a nice little flock of Red Knot, but little else to write home about.



Boca Chica and the Gulf of Mexico

Heading back towards McAllen, which would be our base for the next few days, we stopped in at the State Park at Resaca de la Palma. Unfortunately, it was closing for the evening and although we walked the trails we could access easily on foot, we didn't see that much.

When we reached McAllen, we checked into the hotel and were delighted to find that they offered free drinks and food to guests between 5pm and 7pm. With free beer at stake, we freshened up in record time and reconvened in the bar area to partake of this very generous offer.

Today had felt like hard work. We'd covered a lot of ground, but racked up our lowest day list so far, and I'd only added three lifers. Despite that, it had been another good day overall and we were itching to get birding in an entirely new kind of habitat.



Cheers!

April 29th

Today we'd be venturing into the renowned State Park at Bentsen, right on the border with Mexico. Parked up, we crossed a drainage channel, flanked by army trucks and Border Patrol vehicles, but also being used as a nest site by some Cave Swallows. Then, after getting some gen from the staff at the visitor centre, we headed into the park.

At a small nature centre, we received the exciting news that there was a reliable evening stake-out for an Elf Owl, just next to the entrance gate we'd come through.

We took our time, sauntering along in the broiling heat, but it was quiet, and bird activity minimal. On a side-trail, we were suddenly serenaded by a pack of Coyotes which sounded very close by. We decided that, although they weren't usually a threat to humans, it might be good to arm ourselves with a couple of heavy sticks – just in case. Of course, we didn't need them, and the ghostly howls were the only indication they were ever there.

I happened to comment that the trails looked like good Roadrunner territory and let out the obligatory 'Meep! Meep!' Amazingly, one instantly appeared! We laughed like drains at the comic timing of it and decided that all we had to do if we ever wanted to see one was to invoke the call of its cartoon cousin.



Meep! Meep!

We carried on, heading for the hawk-watching platform. At this time of year, hundreds of thousands of raptors migrate over the park and a team of volunteers log them as they pass. The team told us it had been a slow morning, with only Turkey Vultures passing in sizeable numbers.

These guys and gals were really sharp-eyed, picking out high-soaring raptors that were little more than dots at first. But, they were also a font of knowledge regarding the birds in the park and the surrounding area, and gave us some great ideas for the next couple of days. With raptor movement slow, we thanked them heartily and moved on. However, after a couple of rather quiet hours in the heat we decided to leave the park.



Estero Llano Reserve

Back on the road, we drove to a reserve called Estero Llano. It had good visitor facilities, and it was picturesque, but all we added to our lists here was a pair of roosting Cinnamon Teal; although a couple of nesting Black-necked Stilts were nice to see.



Black-necked Stilt

We went back to the hotel, freshened up, had a quick free beer, went out for a bite to eat, and then headed back out to Bentsen to see if we could add some night birds to our list. This would turn out to be one of our best experiences of the whole trip.

We arrived at Bentsen at about 19.30. We'd been told the world's smallest owl was roosting in an old woodpecker hole, in a telegraph pole, and would appear shortly after sunset. When we got there, two young guys were already staked out; camera set up; waiting for the big moment.



Waiting for an Elf

Probably only a birder would get it – standing about for ages, in the semi-darkness, waiting for a tiny bird to show itself briefly. But, it was worth it. The Elf Owl appeared around 20.15, stuck his head out of the hole, looked about, and then dropped out and away into the surrounding scrub, never to be seen again. Until tomorrow evening that was; but, not by us.



Elf Owl (not our one, but this photo is more or less to scale – that's how small it is!)

While watching the midget owl, we'd heard an Eastern Screech Owl calling in the background, so we set off down the trails, hoping to add a few more night-birds to our list.

As I took a pit-stop at some roadside bushes, I heard the call of an Eastern Whip Poorwill. This nightjar is a migrant through this area and we were not too hopeful of connecting with it. However, this one sailed right over my head, swung round past George and Jen further up the road, and then landed. When I caught up with them, we all watched it for a few seconds on the ground before it took off again, calling. Magic!

All the time we'd been enjoying the Poorwill, we'd been hearing the screech owl calling away and, as the nightjar flew off, George thought he got a glimpse of an owl as it shot across the road. But, despite searching with our torches, we couldn't relocate it.

Our walk was time-bound by park regulations and, after searching the nest sites we'd been told about for the screech owl (again without success), we turned back.

As we walked in the pitch darkness, it occurred to Jen that we should probably be careful about snakes. She decided to shine her torch ahead of us onto the road. Lucky for us she did. There, in the middle of the tarmac, directly in line with where we were about to walk, was a Western Diamondback Rattlesnake! It was a stunning creature, but we gave it the respect it deserved, slowly and quietly walking around it: a genuinely thrilling moment.



Western Diamondback Rattlesnake

A few metres further on, George stopped us and pointed out a tarantula, scurrying across the road in front of us! Awesome!



Tarantula

We rounded this amazing walk off with a giant toad the size of a half brick. Four species of nightjar, two species of owl, a rattlesnake, a tarantula and a giant toad!! I mean, come on, people. It was incredible!

We went back to the hotel, celebrated with a couple of beers and crashed and burned. As buzzing as we were from what we'd just seen, the pace of the last eight days had been relentless. We decided the next day would have to be an easier day, with less walking, less driving and less time spent in the midday sun.

April 30th

With a relatively late start at around 09.00, we acted on some advice from the hawk watchers at Bentsen and went to visit the Texas Audubon reserve at Frontera. This turned out to be another scrap of habitat in an urban setting but it was lovely; peaceful, cool and shady, and full of good birds.

We added both Warbling and White-eyed Vireos and then, on a small pond, found a female Green Kingfisher. An obliging Yellow-billed Cuckoo sat in some pond-side vegetation and then it was time for us all to catch up with a couple of birds only one of us had seen previously. A handsome Yellow-breasted Chat was followed by a smart little Blue-headed Vireo. This latter bird proved to be one of Jenny's favourites of the trip. At one of the feeding stations we finally caught up with a couple of cracking, tiny Inca Doves. I've always thought the dove family is under-appreciated by most birders and includes some truly stunning birds.



Frontera Audubon

Lunch in the car park was taken in the company of a Chestnut-sided Warbler and a Yellow Warbler. Today was turning into a real scorcher, with temperatures climbing over 100F. All the time, we were serenaded – if you can call it that – by Plain Chachalacas. They really do make the most incredible din, and I could imagine if you lived near a colony, their cacophony of calls would soon become tiresome!



Plain Chachalacas

Our next port of call was the old Port Isabel Road. As we slowed to a crawl on the dirt road, a few sparrows were on the verge. They turned out to be the impossibly smart Lark Sparrow. This has to be one of the most handsome species in this family. A little further on we had a nice selection of waterbirds at a large lake, but the views were distant and much of the lake out of view, so we moved on.

I was scanning ahead and told Jen to stop the car as I was sure I'd got on one of our target birds. We got out and there, on a small tree, in the middle of a field, was a pair of Aplomado Falcons. These are truly stunning birds, being re-introduced to Texas after a long absence. The birds were close to one of the nesting boxes they've been provided with, which offer protection from predators.

With that beauty in the bag, we moved on slowly, listening for sparrows and other birds as we went. After Jen got us onto a small group of Fulvous Whistling Ducks on a pond, we tried in vain to entice either Cassin's or Botteri's Sparrows into view in the surrounding fields. We could have persevered but, with the heat now truly intense, we decided to stick to our plan to take it a bit easier today, and called it quits.

After a wee siesta, we also made life easy for ourselves by having a couple of free beers and eating from the free buffet in the hotel. We were determined to catch up with that pesky screech owl that had managed to pretty much avoid us the night before, so we were going back to Bentsen.

We didn't wait for the Elf Owl this time and, instead, headed straight to where George had (maybe) seen the Eastern Screech Owl. As soon as we arrived at the spot, we could hear it calling. Then, we had one fly like a rocket from a tree inside a park maintenance compound. It disappeared into the trees and promptly started calling again. Job done, but George noticed another bird, emerging from a nest hole in the tree. In the poor light, Jenny and I struggled to get on it before it also flew and gave us decent views.

A Dutch guy, living in Florida of all places, joined us and we were amazed at how nonplussed he was to add Common Pauraque, on the ground only twenty metres away, to his life list. He gave us a tip for the next day and then said his goodbyes. We had achieved our target and, as a Great Horned Owl hooted in the background, we called it a night.

May 1st

Hard to believe, but today was our last full day of birding in Texas. Suitably recharged, we were up for hammering as much as we could out of what time we had left.

We were up early and on the road to Falcon State Park by 07.00. On the way, we took a quick detour down to an area on the banks of the Rio Grande called Salineno.

Unfortunately, it was a rather uninspiring setting, and we felt unsure about leaving the car unattended there, so we decided to go on to Falcon SP.

It was turning into another scorcher. As we walked the trails, dodging the thorn scrub as we went, we got great views of the scarce Bullock's Oriole, a Black-throated Sparrow and a couple of Ashy-throated Flycatchers. Overall, though, the park was quiet and we struggled to add much else. After a couple of hours, we made our way back towards the Rio Grande and the reserve at Roma Bluffs. As we were leaving the park, a cracking pair of Northern Bobwhites scurried across the road in front of us.

The visitor centre for the Bluffs was closed, so we couldn't get all the info we needed to make the most of the reserve. We did go to the lookout across the Rio Grande and met a couple of birders looking for Cave Swallows. They, as so many before them had, gave us some more great tips for local birds. We had some lunch in the baking sun, and then set off again.



Roma Bluffs Lookout on the Rio Grande

Our next stop was to try again at Salineno; reassured by the guys we'd spoken to, and with a better idea of where to look for the birds. Once at Salineno, we set out along the river bank, but we struggled to find much. The heat here was just too intense, so we cut our losses and made for Starr County Park.

The park had been abandoned as far as we could see. The tracks were rough but passable with care. Almost as soon as we entered, we came across a singing Cactus Wren, on the top of a thorny bush, right next to the track. A little further on, we found a small flock of sparrows. We could see that a few of them were obviously Chipping Sparrows but, despite our best efforts, we couldn't find any other species amongst them.

We took a different track and trundled along, scanning the trees. In front of us, on the track itself, an object appeared. At first glance, it looked like a stick or a branch. It was, in fact, a male Red-billed Pigeon, possibly anting on the ground and sticking its wing out at a weird angle! It shuffled to its feet and flew off, joining a female in a tree beside the road. It was a handsome bird and one of my highlights of the trip.



Chihuahua Woods Preserve

On the return journey to McAllen, we made one last stop at Chihuahua Woods Preserve. This reserve also seemed neglected and care-worn. The trails were a bit overgrown and we didn't connect with many birds there at all. We did get pretty close to some rather smelly, but fun, Javelinas (Collared Peccaries). Another cool find was a stick insect, sitting on a

cactus, which I only noticed because I was standing on the one spot for a few moments, if you know what I mean.



Stick Insect

It was time to throw in the towel. We had an early rise and a long journey back to Houston the next morning. We went back to the hotel, packed up our stuff, and then went out for a really nice Mexican meal, complete with frozen Margaritas and Mexican Flag Nachos!



Nachos and Margaritas

May 2nd

So, this was it. Time was up. We were heading for Houston and our flights home.

The trip back was pretty uneventful bird-wise, apart from one, small, flooded, field somewhere outside Houston. In between naps, I glanced out of the window and saw a large wader, which I thought might have been a Long-billed Curlew. We wanted to round off the trip with one more new bird, so Jen turned us about and we went back to look.

As it happened, it wasn't a curlew I'd seen, but there was one, last, new bird for the trip and a lifer for me to boot – Hudsonian Godwit. That took us to 237 species for the trip, and we were over the moon with our efforts. I'd managed to add 116 lifers. George and Jen both got 15 each, which was pretty decent given they'd been to Texas before, and how big their US lists already were.

Reluctantly, we said our goodbyes on the shuttle bus at Houston International and headed off to opposite sides of the world.

It had been an epic trip – right up there with any of our South American adventures of previous years. We all agreed that the self-guiding and self-finding of the birds had been incredibly rewarding, and was something we should do again. Texas was a great place to travel around while birding, and great value for money, but I'm not convinced the places we visited would be hugely appealing to the general tourist. The food was great, the hotels were comfortable, and people were super friendly. There were some nice beaches, and quaint towns, but the countryside was often flat, marshy and featureless: great for birds and wildlife but not very scenic or architecturally impressive.

Weather-wise we'd been lucky. We narrowly avoided some pretty fierce storms and floods that hit High Island after we moved on from there and, in general, rain was minimal and didn't interfere with our activities much. The heat in the south was pretty intense at times and there was plenty of insect life to contend with, but it never got too bad to carry on. For birders, this is a dream destination.



Adios Texas, and we'll see y'all again soon, y'hear!

Full Species List

1. Common Loon
2. Pied-billed Grebe
3. Least Grebe
4. Double-crested Cormorant
5. Neotropic Cormorant
6. Anhinga
7. Fulvous Whistling-Duck
8. Black-bellied Whistling-Duck
9. Wood Duck
10. Mottled Duck
11. Mallard
12. Northern Shoveler
13. Blue-winged Teal
14. Cinnamon Teal
15. Redhead
16. Red-breasted Merganser
17. Ruddy Duck
18. Plain Chachalaca
19. Northern Bobwhite
20. Wild Turkey
21. Brown Pelican
22. American White Pelican
23. American Bittern
24. Least Bittern
25. Great Blue Heron
26. Great Egret
27. Snowy Egret
28. Reddish Egret
29. Tricolored Heron
30. Little Blue Heron
31. Cattle Egret
32. Green Heron
33. Black-crowned Night-Heron
34. Yellow-crowned Night-Heron
35. White Ibis
36. White-faced Ibis
37. Roseate Spoonbill
38. Turkey Vulture
39. Black Vulture
40. Northern Harrier
41. White-tailed Kite
42. Mississippi Kite
43. Cooper's Hawk
44. Harris's Hawk
45. Red-shouldered Hawk
46. Broad-winged Hawk
47. Swainson's Hawk
48. White-tailed Hawk
49. Red-tailed Hawk
50. Osprey
51. Crested Caracara
52. Aplomado Falcon
53. Merlin
54. Peregrine Falcon
55. Purple Gallinule
56. Moorhen
57. American Coot
58. King Rail
59. Sora
60. Black-bellied Plover
61. Piping Plover
62. Semi-palmated Plover
63. Snowy Plover
64. Wilson's Plover
65. Killdeer
66. American Oystercatcher
67. American Avocet
68. Black-necked Stilt
69. Greater Yellowlegs
70. Lesser Yellowlegs
71. Solitary Sandpiper
72. Willet
73. Spotted Sandpiper
74. Hudsonian Whimbrel
75. Hudsonian Godwit
76. Marbled Godwit
77. Ruddy Turnstone
78. Red Knot
79. Sanderling
80. Dunlin
81. Pectoral Sandpiper
82. White-rumped Sandpiper
83. Baird's Sandpiper
84. Western Sandpiper
85. Least Sandpiper
86. Stilt Sandpiper
87. Long-billed Dowitcher
88. Wilson's Snipe
89. Wilson's Phalarope
90. Laughing Gull
91. Ring-billed Gull
92. Herring Gull
93. Caspian Tern
94. Royal Tern
95. Sandwich Tern
96. Common Tern
97. Forster's Tern
98. Least Tern
99. Gull-billed Tern
100. American Black Tern
101. Black Skimmer
102. Mourning Dove
103. White-winged Dove
104. Collared Dove
105. White-tipped Dove
106. Inca Dove
107. Common Ground-Dove
108. Red-billed Pigeon
109. Yellow-billed Cuckoo
110. Black-billed Cuckoo
111. Groove-billed Ani
112. Greater Roadrunner
113. Great Horned Owl (HO)
114. Eastern Screech-Owl
115. Elf Owl
116. Common Pauraque
117. Lesser Nighthawk
118. Common Nighthawk
119. Chuck-will's-widow
120. Eastern Whip Poorwill
121. Chimney Swift
122. Buff-bellied Hummingbird

123. Black-chinned Hummingbird
124. Ruby-throated Hummingbird
125. Belted Kingfisher
126. Green Kingfisher
127. Red-bellied Woodpecker
128. Golden-fronted Woodpecker
129. Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
130. Downy Woodpecker
131. Ladder-backed Woodpecker
132. Eastern Wood-Pewee
133. Eastern Phoebe
134. Ash-throated Flycatcher
135. Brown-crested Flycatcher
136. Great-crested Flycatcher
137. Eastern Kingbird
138. Couch's Kingbird
139. Western Kingbird
140. Scissor-tailed Flycatcher
141. Great Kiskadee
142. Loggerhead Shrike
143. Red-eyed Vireo
144. Warbling Vireo
145. White-eyed Vireo
146. Blue-headed Vireo
147. Philadelphia Vireo
148. Blue Jay
149. Green Jay
150. Chihuahuan Raven
151. Fish Crow
152. Purple Martin
153. Northern Rough-winged Swallow
154. Bank Swallow
155. Tree Swallow
156. Cliff Swallow
157. Cave Swallow
158. Barn Swallow
159. Black-crested Titmouse
160. Carolina Chickadee
161. Verdin
162. Bewick's Wren
163. Marsh Wren
164. Carolina Wren
165. Cactus Wren
166. Eastern Bluebird
167. Veery
168. Swainson's Thrush
169. Gray-cheeked Thrush
170. Wood Thrush
171. Clay-colored Thrush
172. Gray Catbird
173. Northern Mockingbird
174. Curve-billed Thrasher
175. Brown Thrasher
176. Long-billed Thrasher
177. Starling
178. Cedar Waxwing
179. Tropical Parula
180. Northern Parula
181. Orange-crowned Warbler
182. Tennessee Warbler
183. Golden-winged Warbler
184. Nashville Warbler
185. Yellow Warbler

186. Chestnut-sided Warbler
187. Magnolia Warbler
188. Cape May Warbler
189. Cerulean Warbler
190. Blackburnian Warbler
191. Black-throated Green Warbler
192. Blackpoll Warbler
193. Prothonotary Warbler
194. Black-and-white Warbler
195. American Redstart
196. Ovenbird
197. Louisiana Waterthrush
198. Northern Waterthrush
199. Kentucky Warbler
200. Common Yellowthroat
201. Hooded Warbler
202. Yellow-breasted Chat
203. Summer Tanager
204. Western Tanager
205. Scarlet Tanager
206. Pyrrhuloxia
207. Northern Cardinal
208. Rose-breasted Grosbeak
209. Blue Grosbeak
210. Indigo Bunting
211. Painted Bunting
212. Dickcissel
213. Olive Sparrow
214. Black-throated Sparrow
215. Chipping Sparrow
216. Seaside Sparrow
217. Savannah Sparrow
218. Lark Sparrow
219. White-throated Sparrow
220. White-crowned Sparrow
221. Swamp Sparrow
222. Eastern Meadowlark
223. Brown-headed Cowbird
224. Bronzed Cowbird
225. Yellow-headed Blackbird
226. Red-winged Blackbird
227. Common Grackle
228. Boat-tailed Grackle
229. Great-tailed Grackle
230. Bullock's Oriole
231. Baltimore Oriole
232. Hooded Oriole
233. Orchard Oriole
234. Altamira Oriole
235. House Finch
236. Lesser Goldfinch
237. House Sparrow

(HO) = Heard Only