



EAST TEXAS: Gulf Coast and Pineywoods 10–17 April 2018

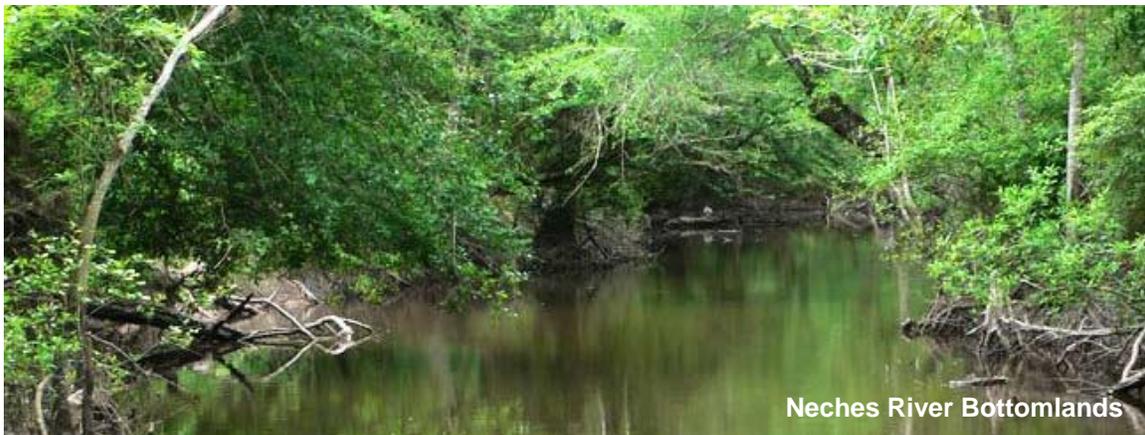
We are excited to return to the Texas Pineywoods as part of our International Woodpecker Conservation Tours. We have visited all corners of the Lone Star State, but our special fondness for the eastern “red” woodpeckers—the Red-headed, Red-bellied, and Red-cockaded—continually brings us back to this forested region. We will spend plenty of time with up to eight woodpecker species in the Texas pine forests, but the trip is about much more than just the woodpeckers. As with our past tours to this region, we combine a few days in the forest with the migration spectacle of High Island and the upper Texas Coast for a world-class birding vacation. Join us in Texas this spring, for this woodpecker & migration spectacle.

Your Host and Lead Guide, Stephen Shunk

TOUR SUMMARY

Our basic tour route for 2018 begins and ends in the mega-metropolis of Houston. After our airport rendezvous, we quickly leave the city and enter rural eastern Texas. Our first afternoon will take us to Brazos Bend State Park, on the Brazos River, where a walk around the productive freshwater swamps should produce an abundance of singing Prothonotary Warblers—and equal numbers of alligators! We will also look for our first woodpeckers, with locally nesting Red-bellied, Downy, and Pileated. Waterbirds at Brazos Bend may include Purple Gallinule, Anhinga, White Ibis, and Black-bellied Whistling-Duck. We will spend our first night just across the river in Angleton, on the broad coastal plain.

After breakfast on our first morning, we will head straight to the Gulf Coast. We will make various stops on our way up the coastline, including the Quintana and Dos Vacas Muertas Bird Sanctuaries, followed by lunch in the busy coastal town of Galveston. After lunch, we will take the ferry across Galveston Bay to the Bolivar Peninsula, birding our way north toward High Island. Time allowing, the afternoon will include visits to one or more of the well-managed sanctuaries at High Island (which is not a true island, but an island of habitat atop a geologic salt dome!).



Neches River Bottomlands

We will spend our next three nights in the tiny town of Winnie, just north of High Island, and our days here will be spent exploring the High Island sanctuaries and nearby coastline. We will hope for a southbound cold front to optimize the viewing opportunities of migrant songbirds. When these exhausted trans-gulf migrants hit a cold front, they ‘crash’ onto the first piece of land they see. More than 20 warbler species are possible, along with dozens of other songbirds, including vireos, orioles, tanagers, buntings, thrushes, and more. Migrating waterbirds also take advantage of the long gulf coastline and the surrounding flats, and we could see more than 20 species of shorebird.

After our migration experience at High Island, we will head north through the bottomlands of the Neches River—once the realm of the magnificent Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Our base for the next three nights will be the town of Jasper in the heart of the Texas Pineywoods. Here we will focus on seven species of resident woodpeckers, along with other specialty birds of the riparian and bottomland forests. The spunky little Red-cockaded Woodpecker will be a top priority, with at least a couple chances to watch this charismatic bird. Each morning and evening, Red-cockaded family groups leave from and return to their “cluster” of cavity trees, never quietly and always exhibiting a broad array of entertaining antics.

In addition to the Red-cockaded, we should see plenty of Pileated, Red-headed, and Red-bellied Woodpeckers, and the surrounding forests support a number of unique songbird populations, which will easily distract us from our woodpecker watching. Nesting warblers include Pine, Prairie, Prothonotary, Hooded, Kentucky, and Swainson’s Warblers. We will seek out Bachman’s Sparrow in the grassy forest understory and Brown-headed Nuthatch squeaking overhead. The Neches River hosts nesting Swallow-tailed Kite, and we may see flocks of migrating Mississippi Kites.

On our final day, we will make our way west and south toward Houston, with birding stops along the Trinity River and one more chance to watch Red-cockaded and their cousins in the pine forests. After lunch on the outskirts of Houston, we will return to the airport by noon for 2 p.m. or later departures.

DAILY ITINERARY

The itinerary below is subject to spontaneous changes throughout the tour. Our daily plan will depend on the weather, tides, local bird reports, and our success at finding certain species. We will do our best to optimize the prime birding times and concentrate our time in the best quality habitats. We appreciate your flexibility while we expect the unexpected!

Sunday, Apr 10—Meet at Houston International Airport (IAH) at 2 p.m. Afternoon birding at Brazos Bend. Dinner and night in Angleton.

Monday, Apr 11—Birding and travel along the upper Texas Coast, from Quintana to Galveston, plus the Bolivar Peninsula and High Island. Dinner and night in Winnie.

Tuesday, Apr 12—All day birding High Island and Bolivar Peninsula. Dinner and night in Winnie.

Wednesday, Apr 13—All day birding High Island and the coastal plain. Dinner and night in Winnie.

Thursday, Apr 14—Birding through the Big Thicket and into the Pineywoods. Dinner and night in Jasper.

Friday, Apr 15—All day in the pine forests and bottomlands. Dinner and night in Jasper.

Saturday, Apr 16—All day in the pine forests and bottomlands. Dinner and night in Jasper.

Sunday, Apr 17—Birding our way eastward, returning to IAH by noon for 2 p.m. or later departures.



OUR FOCAL WOODPECKER SPECIES

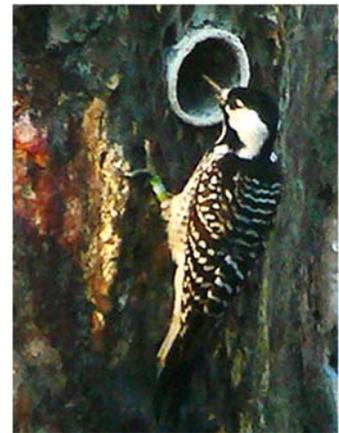
RED-HEADED WOODPECKER, *Melanerpes erythrocephalus*

The handsome Red-headed Woodpecker is listed as “Near Threatened” by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The Red-headed could also “boast” at being listed at some level of concern in more states and provinces than any other woodpecker in North America. As a weak excavator and a fly-catching specialist, the Red-headed Woodpecker requires a very specific habitat prescription, with plenty of snags and an open canopy. The human behavior of removing snags from the landscape puts the Red-headed at a disadvantage for nesting substrates, and several factors have resulted in closed canopies throughout much of its range. Here in Texas, this species comes close to the southeastern limits of its range.



RED-COCKADED WOODPECKER, *Picoides borealis*

Thanks to the U.S. Endangered Species Act, we probably know more about the Red-cockaded Woodpecker than we do any other woodpecker in the world. A few hundred years of logging in our southeastern pine forests originally put this species in peril, when we cleared millions of acres of very specialized habitat for this spunky little woodpecker. The USFWS first listed the bird as “Endangered” in 1970, and we have subsequently spent many millions of dollars studying this woodpecker’s lifestyle and habitat requirements. Recognizing its need for fire-maintained mature pine forests, intensive management and recovery efforts have led to stable populations throughout the southeastern U.S. Like the Red-headed Woodpecker, the Red-cockaded is listed as “Near Threatened” by the IUCN.



IVORY-BILLED WOODPECKER, *Campephilus principalis*

Unfortunately, we will not get to see the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, but we will stand in places where the species once thrived: among the riparian bottomlands of our southeastern forests. The seasonal flooding of the slow, winding rivers in eastern Texas created rich swampland that hosted modest numbers of this majestic bird. John James Audubon even reported the Ivory-bill as “very abundant” on Buffalo Bayou, which today snakes it way through downtown Houston. We will see plenty of other birds along the Neches and Trinity Rivers, but we will have to use our imaginations to picture the primeval forest that once stood where they fly today. The debate continues about whether or not the Ivory-bill persists anywhere in the southeastern U.S. Despite this ambiguity, the USFWS maintains the species as “Endangered,” and the IUCN lists the bird as “Critically Endangered” in the U.S. and Cuba.



DAILY ACTIVITIES

Most of our East Texas birding is done on foot, with many short walks and a few longer walks, all on generally flat terrain. We typically follow well-established trails or walk on open beaches, with much of the birding in public parks and private preserves.

Birding at High Island sanctuaries can be challenging at times, with small birds frequently skulking in the underbrush or flitting high in the trees, but many of the birds are easily viewed at eye-level. Water-birding is typically very easy, with flocks of sandpipers, terns, and wading birds spread across the mud flats. Most woodpeckers will be easily seen in the open woodlands.

As with any group outing, birders with more advanced skills will be able to find and identify more of the anticipated species, while those with less experience will delight in the abundance of 'life-birds' throughout the tour. This tour may even be fine for some beginners, but they should be prepared for the abundance of birds and new information. Your guide, Steve Shunk, is a patient, professional educator, and he will work diligently to help each participant learn bird sounds and visual identification, as well as general natural and cultural history of the region.



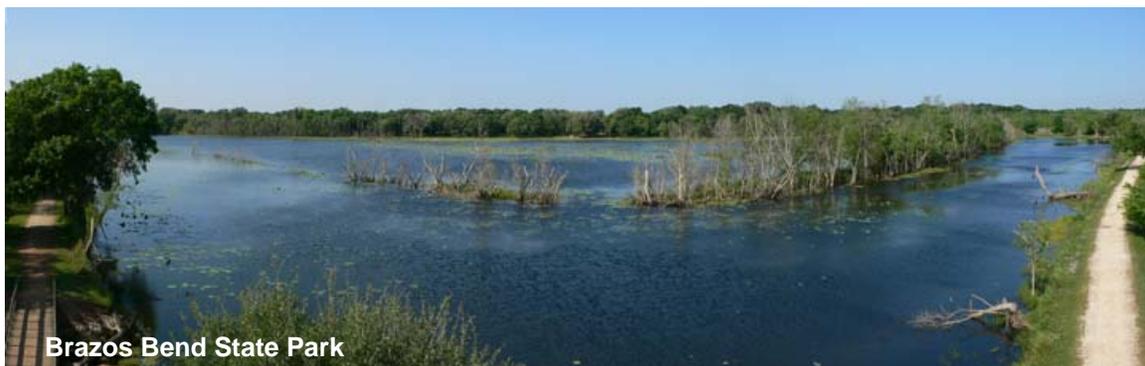
This tour is for moderately active people in good health. Our guides are certified first aid providers, although at times we may be a couple hours from the nearest urban medical facilities. Every day will involve considerable walking, and we may hike a total of two or three miles per day. We will do our best to cater each day's activities to the ability level of the group. To take advantage of cooler temperatures and the height of bird activity, we will usually start birding early each morning, with breaks or meals in the heat of the day, often birding until sunset.

Depending on group size, we will either travel in a large passenger van or a minivan. In either case, we will leave ample room for each guest to have his or her own window in the vehicle. If we drive a large van, we will use a step stool for easy entry. This is a non-smoking tour. We will stay in non-smoking rooms and eat in non-smoking areas.

CLOTHING & EQUIPMENT

Warm to hot temperatures and high humidity predominate in East Texas, but the daily weather can be quite changeable. We may experience thunderstorms, light rain, fog, and extended periods of sun, all in one day. You should be prepared to be outside, away from the vehicle or other shelter, for a couple hours at a time. Please pack conservatively to allow room for all our gear, but do not compromise your ability to be comfortable in a wide variety of conditions out-of-doors.

Biting insects will occur in some areas, and we recommend that you take the proper precautions. Recent rains could cause us to encounter enough mosquitoes to add an additional level of challenge to the birding experience, and you may need chemical repellent or bug resistant clothing. You should also be prepared to protect yourself from the sun, as we will spend many hours outdoors on most days.



We recommend that you bring your own binoculars and favorite field guide. A spotting scope will also come in handy, especially on the beaches, although we will have at least one scope available for the group. We also carry an extensive birding library for reference and learning.

We encourage you to take photos as souvenirs, but this is not a photography tour. If you wish to focus on photographic opportunities, we ask that you remain sensitive to the group's needs and the tour schedule. Ensuring that everyone gets their binoculars or scope on a bird will take precedence over shooting photos. That said, photo opportunities are outstanding at High Island in particular, and you are welcome to haul along any camera gear you can tolerate carrying. You might at least want a small camera to capture some of the region's unique habitats.

LODGING, MEALS & REFRESHMENTS

We will spend one night in Angleton, three nights in Winnie, and three nights in Jasper, all in comfortable motels. We will forward details on specific lodging facilities as we get closer to the tour date. If you are traveling with a birding partner or are willing to share a room with another birder, we will do our best to place you in a double room. Early registrants will be the first ones placed with available roommates. If we are not able to match you with a roommate, you will be responsible for the single tour rate.

Your tour fee includes all meals from dinner on Tuesday, April 10, through lunch on Tuesday, April 17. We will eat in restaurants that appeal to a wide variety of food preferences, but it may be difficult to accommodate the most restrictive diets. If you maintain such a diet, remember that appropriate foods may not be available at restaurants or rural stores. To prepare for these contingencies you may wish to bring foods that will meet your needs.

Most breakfasts will be held early to allow us an early start to our birding day. Some will be continental-style while others will be complete meals. We will eat most lunches in restaurants, and lunch will occasionally be our largest meal of the day. We may also snack through lunch in anticipation of an early dinner. In addition to restaurant meals, we provide food and beverages, with plenty of water, in the field. One of our goals is to keep you pleasantly fueled and hydrated to help you get the most of the long birding days. The survey included in your registration materials asks your dietary restrictions and preferences. While we cannot honor every food and drink request, the more detailed your response, the better we can serve you on the road.

TRAVEL LOGISTICS & TOUR FEE

We will meet all participants at the Houston Hobby (or Houston Intercontinental, if requested) at approximately 2:00 pm, Tuesday, April 10. Specific pickup time and location will depend on individual itineraries. We will return to Houston no later than noon on Tuesday, April 17, to allow plenty of time for 2 p.m. or later departures.



Roseate Spoonbill

