

# The Spring 2010 Migration Season – Notes by Species

In this article, we describe, species by species, the very unusual spring 2010 migration season, concentrating mostly, but not quite exclusively, on Neotropical passerine migrants in Sabine Woods. We have reviewed all the reports and sightings submitted to us directly or indirectly, but we have not included unconfirmed rare or sightings of rare or out of normal date range species, nor is their much to add to the reports of the very rare species already mentioned in last month's update or included in the April sightings report elsewhere in this issue. To add to last month's article, we would note that unusually good numbers and diversity of migrants continued this year through the second week in May. We will present the normal tables showing the numbers for all species, including those not mentioned here, in the Brown Pelican this fall. This article is compiled from the reports of many observers, including Steve Dillinger, Gerald Duhon, Terry Ferguson, John Haynes, Steve Mayes, Sherrie Roden and Jana Whittle.

First, we will deal with shorebird migration. We hesitate to try to be too detailed because suitable habitat is not in the same place year after year, and there are great differences in birders finding and accessing suitable habitat. Two species certainly deserve mention because they were seen in unusually high numbers. **Upland Sandpipers** were first found on March 28 when unprecedented numbers in excess of 100 were recorded in west Jefferson County. Although most birder attention was focused on the coast during April, over 30 were seen as late as April 26. The other species of note is **Whimbrel**. A few Whimbrel winter along the Jefferson County shore, and so the species can occasionally be seen in small numbers throughout the winter. What was remarkable were the very large numbers seen from April 26 on wards through at least May 8. Over 700 were counted on April 28 while the number on May 8 was 385. Whimbrel were everywhere there was suitable habitat – damp or wet rice fields, and the numbers seen likely reflected only a fraction of those present over the wider area. On the other hand, **Hudsonian Godwits**, although found, were not seen in the usual number, and we do have any local reports of **Buff-breasted Sandpipers**.

**Blue-headed Vireos**, of course, winter locally in substantial numbers, so ordinarily, it is difficult to determine which are winter residents and which are migrants. The wintering range does extend south well into Mexico, and some we see in spring are certainly migrants. This year, the 25 or more in Sabine Woods on April 27 must almost all have been migrants. Why they concentrated on one day this year is one of the mysteries of migration that we may never solve. The migration of **Yellow-throated Vireos** normally spans from mid to late March to the end of April, and therefore it is relatively rare to see more than one or two on any given day. The 11 reported on April 9 and the 10 on April 18 were both remarkable. Over the last few years, **Warbling Vireos** have been seen more frequently, and this year's numbers were in keeping with that trend, but we have no reports of any after the end of April. **Philadelphia Vireos** used to be much more common in migration than Warbling Vireos, but the tables have been turned, and relatively few were noted this year mostly spread from about April 20 through May 8. The **Red-eyed Vireo** is one of the most common birds over the entire eastern United States, and many passed through from early April to mid-May. Almost as many **White-eyed Vireos** passed through, with the peak a little earlier than the Red-eyed.

Most flycatcher species are both circum-Gulf migrants and late migrants, many species not peaking until well into May. Coverage by birders in May tends to be very limited, so analysis is difficult. **Great Crested Flycatchers** are an exception, passing through in numbers throughout April and the first part of May as well as being considered to be principally trans-Gulf migrants. This year's migration was steady but unspectacular. **Eastern Wood-Pewees** also use the trans-

Gulf route and are usually very obvious on account of their persistent calling in migration. However, passage is over a wide period from early April to late May. The species seemed to peak this year with the April 27-28 influx of migrants. **Eastern Kingbirds** are trans-Gulf migrants, but **Western Kingbirds**, based purely on breeding range considerations, must be expected to be "circum-Gulf" migrants to the extent that individuals move east of 97 ½ degrees west -- the north-south line through the lower Texas coast. Individuals flying direct routes to most of the breeding range in the west will not encounter Gulf waters. This year, however, on the same days (April 24-27) that the area saw large numbers of migrating sparrows, Western Kingbirds were everywhere, mostly in groups of three or more.

This migration season will probably be remembered for a long time for its spectacular thrush migration. **Wood Thrushes** were seen in good numbers from early April, with about 50 present on April 9. Another large pulse came through April 19-21 -- perhaps April 18-23 would described it more completely – but the species was strangely almost absent on the April 27, "Swainson's Thrush Day." Wood Thrush passage continued through early May as usual. **Swainson's Thrushes** exhibited a spectacular migration. "Normal" for the species is for passage of most between mid April and mid May or a little later. However, 35 were reported on April 9, and very high numbers continued through the first week in May. On April 20, 75 were reported; on April 27, about 100 were present. Taking just the highest report for any given day, more than 500 were reported. **Gray-cheeked Thrushes** are much less common and on average migrate just a few days later than Swainson's. The species was seen in Sabine Woods first on April 11, and then almost every day through early May. Numbers are harder to analyze, because we suspect that many birders stop looking carefully at Swainson's/Gray-cheeked birds after they find one or two Gray-cheeked on any given day, likely reporting all the rest as Swainson's.

Normally, we expect **Blue-winged Warblers** to be among the early migrants late in March. However, this year, it was April 9 before the species was reported. Two were reported on that day, followed by one the next days and one on April 16. Multiple birds were reported in the period April 18-24 with a few birds thereafter. This is one warbler species that was probably less numerous this year. **Golden-winged Warblers**, on the other hand, always in much lower numbers than Blue-winged, were seen on April 20, 21, 22, 24 and on May 2, 4, 6, 7 and 8. The first grouping corresponds to the normal peak passage across the coast, but the second grouping is unusual, perhaps consisting of members of a population of more northerly breeding birds. The breeding range is reported to be continuing to shift northwards.

**Tennessee Warblers** this year exhibited the classical pattern. A few birds were seen in early April, peaking with large numbers around April 24 and tiling off in May. Since **Orange-crowned Warblers** are normally found in some numbers throughout the winter in Sabine Woods, and can be confused with Tennessee Warblers on a quick look, we have been careful to consider only confirmed sightings. The species was seen consistently up to April 20, after which all are presumed to have departed.

**Nashville Warbler** is considered to be exclusively a circum-Gulf migrant, and as such is not expected to pass through Sabine Woods in any numbers in the spring. This year, however, birds were seen regularly April 19 through 28, with a large number (at least 14) present on April 24. This movement was later than the normal peak of migration in the second and third week in April, suggesting perhaps birds from the extreme northeast part of the breeding range in New England and southeast Canada.

**Northern Parulas** have always been the harbinger of spring migration, some probably arriving before there are many birders out

looking for them. The migration window is prolonged, and probably observed in Sabine Woods, where there is not any of the Spanish Moss the Southern populations depend on for nest placement, more easily than almost anywhere else, because the species is a known breeder in central Jefferson County. There was a peak in the first week of April, but birds were observed from mid-March through the first week of May. It seems likely that the Sabine Woods migrants are from the Mexican wintering population rather than the larger West Indian population, but there is little evidence of a double peak that would be expected with the two disjunct breeding populations, one mostly in north of the United States but including Maine, and the other south of about 40 degrees north but including Pennsylvania. Neither range extends much west of 95 degrees west, but the southern range covers the entire southeast United States and some. Birds migrating in early April are not likely to be heading for the northern portion of the breeding range.

**Yellow Warblers** are well known as a late migrant, not usually seen in Sabine Woods in any numbers until the last week in April, continuing on through the third week in May (when there are few observers to see them). This year there was a relatively early push starting April 16, followed by a steady trickle before the torrent started in early May.

**Chestnut-sided Warblers** were late in arriving this year, the first not being noted until April 20. Numbers peaked unusually sharply in the first days of May before dropping off by mid May. **Magnolia Warblers** were also late, with only scattered reports, mostly of single birds, April 23-30. More normal numbers were seen through mid-May in the remainder of the normal peak of the migration window.

**Yellow-rumped ("Myrtle") Warblers** are, of course, a staple part of the local wintering passerine population, and thus difficult to analyze. In addition to the birds that winter locally, many winter further south, and pass through in spring. Reports indicate large numbers, many times the wintering population, in Sabine Woods from about March 22 through about April 13. The population on April 10 was estimated at 100. Smaller numbers were seen through April 24.

**Black-throated Green Warblers** usually pass through with small numbers as early as mid to late March and many more throughout April and the first half of May. This year, apart from a report of two on March 31 none were reported until April 7, then numbers were very modest, except on April 24 (13) and May 2 (30).

**Blackburnian Warblers** have seemingly become more common in recent years. Normally peaking during the last two weeks of April and the first week in May, increasingly, more are being seen earlier and later. The first bird seen this year was on April 4, but it was April 19 before the next was reported. As with several other species this year, there were good numbers in the first week in May and additional reports through May 15.

**Yellow-throated Warblers** exhibit a relatively long migration window, starting as early as the second week in March and continuing through the first week in April. Area wide analysis thereafter is somewhat clouded by the fact that the species breeds in wooded areas down to the shore. Yellow-throated Warblers were reported at Sabine Woods through April 20, with one stray bird on May 8.

**Prairie Warbler** is regarded as very rare on the Texas Gulf coast in spring. Wintering nearly exclusively in the West Indies, the presumption is that birds nesting in East Texas, and there are many, work their way east from the Florida panhandle. This year, the species was detected in Sabine Woods every day from April 4 to April 10, with two birds confirmed on April 7.

**Palm Warbler** is not particularly uncommon as a wintering species in southeast Texas, so analysis of migration is difficult. To a great extent, the species occupies moist open areas in winter, and birds in Sabine Woods in spring are likely to be in the course of migration. The Western subspecies (*palmarum*) is much more common than the Yellow (Eastern) subspecies (*hypochrysea*) both in

winter and in migration, and this was reflected in the birds seen this spring. However, not all reports distinguished between the two subspecies, and full separate analysis is difficult. Analysis of migration patterns away from the coast suggests that normal departure from the wintering grounds is the middle two weeks of April. Birds were reported in Sabine Woods from April 3 through April 27, with seven – an unprecedented number – recorded on April 13 and again on April 16. The majority were Western birds but there was often one Yellow subspecies present, and two on April 3.

**Bay-breasted Warblers** are well known as having a very sharp peak in their migration timing in very late April or very early May. This year, they were a little late, with the first report on May 2, then a little less concentrated with two peaks (May 4 and May 8/9) and stragglers through May 16.

Most **Blackpoll Warblers** are believed to migrate in Spring from South America through the West Indies and Florida. However, some do migrate through Texas, probably circum-Gulf. The numbers seen at Sabine Woods vary from year to year, with the peak in the last week in April. This year was not an outstanding year for the species, but there were several April 16-20, with single birds through May 2 and on May 16/17.

This year will likely be remembered for some time for the showing of **Cerulean Warblers**. More than two Ceruleans on a single day is most unusual, so April 19 and 20, again April 24 and yet again May 2 made for exciting birding with up to six present. Most of these birds were males that were not shy.

**Black-and-white Warblers** are normally one of the commonest migrants throughout the spring and for most of this season, this was true, but they were few seen between April 10 and 17.

Early **American Redstarts** did not appear this year, but the species was adequately represented through most of its normal heavy migration period in the last week of April and the first half of May. There were not any days with really large numbers as often happens, however.

We have become accustomed to expecting a "**Prothonotary Warbler Day**" in March even though the peak migration period is the middle two weeks of April. Perhaps it is just when there is a good showing on a March day, there are very few other warblers to look at! In any case, there were six or more present on March 18, but there were more than that most days in the April 16-20 period. Overall, there was a good showing of this species this spring.

**Worm-eating Warblers** have always been an expected species any day in April. This season, there was a slow start in early April, and true to form, no reports in either March or May. But on April 20 there may have been 75 present, with probably 50 the next day. The rest of the month was less spectacular.

**Swainson's Warbler** is always difficult to see (and they almost never call during migration). Multiple birds were seen on April 19 and one or two on at least four other days in the third week of April.

**Ovenbirds** are not the easiest birds to find, as they move very quietly across the leaf litter under the trees. Normally reasonably common the last three weeks in April, this year was no exception with good numbers April 16-28, including as many as 20 on April 27. May 2 was a spectacular day for migrants of all kinds, but 18 Ovenbirds is worth noting. There were reports through May 17.

Accurate waterthrush identification comes with experience, the way the bird moves its tail being one of the most reliable and easily observed features. While we have learned to be skeptical of "late" **Louisiana Waterthrushes**, this year, there were some thoroughly verified sightings from April 18 through April 28. Whether most of these sightings were a single bird either considering spending the summer or unwilling to continue for not very obvious physical reasons, we do not know. There were reports of one to three birds many days between March 13 and the end of the month, and on through about April 12. The "normal" migration window for **Northern Waterthrushes** is the last three weeks in April, and the first week in May, and we have reports from April 2 through May 17.

(continued on page 7)

## Spring Migration Season *(continued from p. 4)*

A peak number of 25 or so occurred on April 24 when many the birds were unable to find any un occupied shoreline and were to be found anywhere in the woods.

**Kentucky Warblers** were a good deal more easily found than usual this spring. Unusually, none were reported in late March, and only one or two in the first week in April, but thereafter were seen in good numbers. Upwards of 75 were present on April 20, with 25 the following day.

Many years, we do not see any **Mourning Warblers** during spring migration, probably partly because the species is a circum-Gulf migrant. But this year was different. We were surprised when one was seen briefly in the dense underbrush on April 24 and the same bird or others on April 26 and April 28. The normal period for passage of this species is the first three weeks of May. Incredibly enough, the species was then seen in Sabine Woods on each of the first eight days of May, often a male bathing in full view. On several of these days, there were multiple birds present; including four on May 2 and May 3 and two on May 4.

**Hooded Warblers** are usually almost the commonest and easiest-to-see warblers in Sabine Woods. The normal migration window is from the last week in March through about the end of April. The first report from Sabine Woods this year was March 22, perhaps a little later than normal. The species was then seen in throughout April and the first 10 days of May, with peak numbers of perhaps 25 on April 20 (when it was atypically greatly outnumbered by Kentucky and Worm-eating Warblers).

**Canada Warblers** cannot be expected before the last week in April, and often we don't see any until May. This year the first reports were from April 24 (two birds) and April 27 (an unprecedented – for the spring – 15 birds). Reports of the species continued through May 9, but somewhat surprisingly, none were reported later in May.

This was probably not an outstanding year for **Yellow-breasted Chats**. The first report – a little late – was April 17, but there were good numbers towards the end of April, with ten reported April 27 and seven the following day.

It was probably about an average tanager year, without any large numbers on any one day. This species and **Rose-breasted Grosbeaks** seemed not to stay in the woods as long as usual, probably reflecting the lack of mulberry and hackberry fruit.

**Indigo Buntings** were very much normal, while this was a good year for **Painted Buntings**. At least 16 were present on April 16, while upwards of 40 were seen on April 24. Most of these were males, and many of them bathed in full view.

Although most sparrow species winter along the Gulf coast, there was one migration related event this year without precedent. On April 24 and continuing through about April 27, there were large numbers of migrant sparrows along Highway 87 and along Clam Lake Road in McFaddin NWR. **Lark Sparrows** and **Chipping Sparrows** were present in flocks, but there were also a few **Vesper Sparrows** and more than a few **Clay-colored Sparrows** reported.