

The Migration Season So Far (reprint from April 2010 Brown Pelican)

This has undoubtedly been one of the most unusual migration seasons. Here we present a brief synopsis of the good days and the not-so good days. In the next issue, we plan to review the major Neotropical migrant species and how they appeared this spring (which for many species was far from normal). Then in August or September, we will present our usual compilation of spring migration sightings and numbers. For the most part, all we can report on is the songbird migration, because there are currently very few shorebird areas with suitable habitat that are readily accessible.

We have no reports of significant number of migrants along the coast until about the middle of March. The weekend of March 13/14 brought probably the first real signs of migration with Northern Parulas in particular in evidence.

The first real front during the spring migration season passed through during the weekend of March 20/21 and brought a reasonable number of migrants into the coastal woodlots, including good numbers of Prothonotary Warblers. The second cold front of the season passed through late on March 27 but did not produce any surprises. As expected for late March, there were Northern Parula, Louisiana Waterthrushes, Hooded Warblers and Black-and-white Warblers around. This front was perhaps more notable for shorebirds, and there were unprecedented concentrations of Upland Sandpipers in west Jefferson County and high numbers of American Golden Plovers.

A front failed to reach the coast before dissipating April 2/3, but the warbler list contained 13 species on each day, with Northern Parula again the most numerous. Both Nashville Warbler and Prairie Warbler were among the warblers seen, presaging a season with incredible numbers of circum-Gulf migrants usually very hard to find in the spring. The first tanagers of the season appears, along with good numbers of Indigo Buntings. April 4 brought a few more "good" birds, including a Blackburnian Warbler and Palm Warbler, another circum-Gulf migrant. Migrant numbers decreased over the next two or three days, but species diversity remained good, with 14 and 15 warbler species being confirmed most days.

A front came through on the night of April 7 with strong north winds behind it, but birds seemed to just pass through and continue on during the following day. The front continued deep into the Gulf, and may have been responsible for unusual migration patterns in the days that followed. On a day when winds were northerly and quite strong over most of the Gulf, large numbers of migrants arrived in Sabine Woods during the afternoon of April 9. The most likely explanation is that these birds, on encountering the front, headed west to reach the central and lower Texas coasts, and then proceeded the next day to fly round the coast to their original planned landfall point. If they did, it would be very unusual daytime migration over land. Many of these birds were apparently still there April 10, and were joined by larger birds, including many Thrushes.

For the next few days, the wind flow across the Gulf changed to easterly, but with disturbances moving off the lower Texas coast across to Florida, numbers of migrants reaching the coast were modest until April 16, when birds began arriving in numbers around 2 p.m. Eighteen species of warbler were confirmed. The only explanation for this heavy flight must be that there was a build up of birds on the Yucatan (on account of bad weather there) that all left when the weather cleared. Bad weather in the Yucatan is the only reasonable explanation for the lack of migrants on April 17, as numbers increased again the following day slowly decreasing thereafter. April 21 through 27 were all days with good and increasing numbers of birds and impressive species diversity, with several days with over 25 warbler species. Thrushes, especially Swainson's Thrushes were exceptionally numerous from about April 26 on. April 24 through 27 brought another unusual pattern. There were Western Kingbirds everywhere along the coast, and high numbers of Lark, Chipping and even Clay-colored Sparrows.

April 28 was perhaps an average day for late April, while April 29 and 30 were on the slow side. Migrants picked up in number on May 1, and May 2 and May 3 were exceptionally good days. The species diversity began to decrease and, while still excellent on May 3, that was Yellow Warbler day with an estimated 50 present. May 4 was Bay-breasted Warbler Day, while May 5 was Gray Catbird day! Flycatchers were beginning to pass through in numbers by May 5.

Golden Triangle Audubon Bird Alert -- May 9, 2010

Spring Migration is now beginning to wind down, but the first week in May has produced very good birding in Sabine Woods with many species being seen. Mourning Warblers have been seen almost every day, often bathing at the drip. Although there was a good selection of species on all days, in terms of numbers, several days were dominated by one species. May 4 was Bay-breasted Warbler day (or at least of first such day), May 5 was Gray Catbird day (with at least 200 present) and May 6 was Yellow Warbler day. The cold front on May 8 brought in about 20 warbler species, in what may be the last great day this spring. Full details will be published in the Spring Migration Count report in due course. But there will still be a few days with significant numbers of songbird migrants, and groups like the flycatchers just reaching the peaks days of passage.

Shorebird migration really has two interesting phases. In late March a number of species begin passing through. Then in May and even into early June, a number of other species reach peak migration. On the migration count on May 8, there were literally hundreds of Whimbrel in west Jefferson County. Every moist or wet field had its complement. Other prominent species included White-rumped Sandpipers, Stilt Sandpipers and Pectoral Sandpipers. Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs and Wilson's Phalaropes continue to pass through. Early Hudsonian Godwits were seen. It is not really worthwhile to attempt to

specify exactly where the best fields are, because they change literally from day to day. There are many more rice fields in cultivation this year, and the best approach is to look for fields that are being drained but still have an inch or so of water or less. As long as the fields are still significantly moist, preferably with a few pools here and there, they are well worth checking. We should note that it often requires a binocular scan to see the birds. If you are new to west Jefferson County, the following roads are often among the most productive; South China Road, McDermand Road, Thompson Road,, Lawhon Road, League Road, Johnson Road, Aggie Drive and Ebner Road. In addition to the shorebirds, you can expect to see Dickcissels, Scissor-tailed Flycatchers and Eastern Kingbirds. Relatively few raptors remain in the area, although you might find Swainson's Hawks or one of the very few Red-tailed Hawks and Northern Harriers that remain. Crested Caracaras are now resident in the area.

There is one other location which is shorebird heaven right now, and that is Cattail Marsh, but you have to be prepared to walk! Although the Marsh is "closed" for a prolonged rehabilitation, individuals may request permission to enter the area to bird, and it will usually be granted upon signing a liability release provided the construction activities permit. Park outside Cattail Marsh in Tyrrell Park and walk in to the office just inside the gate. Request permission there. However, currently, the water is all being routed through cells 4 and 8 – see the map at [Cattail Marsh](#). Upon entering the Marsh, turn left along the levee and then take the first major levee to the right. Proceed to the levee that separates the center cell (#3) from the far cell (#4). That is a distance of just over one mile. You can walk the levees round cell #4(1.6 miles total!) and then it is another one mile back to the entrance. On May 8 and 9, cell #4 was teeming with shorebirds; White-rumped Sandpipers (maybe 1000), Stilt Sandpipers (perhaps 500 or more), Great and Lesser Yellowlegs, Dowitchers, Wilson's Phalaropes, Least Sandpipers as well Fulvous Whistling-Duck, Blue-winged Teal, Mottled Duck and even two pairs of Mallards. There are Tricolored and Little Blue Herons, both Night-Herons, White and dark Ibis. On May 8, John Haynes had a Ruff in this cell, but it was not relocated the next day. That doesn't mean it wasn't there, given the numbers of birds present, and the extensive vegetation that creates many places that cannot be viewed, but Ruffs on the Texas coast do not have a history of staying around. A Glossy Ibis was in the cell on May 9.

During the Migration Count, John Haynes had three Swallow-tailed Kites – apparently one juvenile and two adults over the Natural Wetland to the south of Cattail Marsh that serves as the final stage of treatment before the water is discharged into Hillebrandt Bayou. (If you are in Cattail Marsh, you can walk to the pump house in the southwest corner and then over the bridge to the wetland, but it is a long, long walk.) These three kites were seen again May 9 (from a much greater distance) from the levee along the west edge of cell #4. The kites are early migrants some arriving early in March, and likely early nesters, but this still represents an early date for a fledged juvenile. John Mariani reports seeing an adult Swallow-tailed Kite over Rogers Park in Beaumont on May 9. There was also a very early Wood Stork circling over the same general area. (Wood Storks in our area are usually considered to result from post-breeding dispersal. This bird represents an extremely early bird for this area, although the species does nest very early. It is possible this is a bird whose breeding attempt failed.)

A sighting of interest was an adult Bald Eagle over Highway 73 just east of the Veolia plant on May 9. The bird flew across the road and perched in a small tree on the south side of the road.

With thanks for reports from Gerald Duhon, Terry Ferguson, John Haynes, John Mariani, Christine Sliva and all participants in the Migration Count.

John A. Whittle

Golden Triangle Audubon Bird Alert – May 17, 2010

In keeping with the unusual nature of this spring migration season, migrants have been frequenting Sabine Woods with surprising diversity of species throughout the month. Blackburnian, Blackpoll, Bay-breasted Warblers were seen May 15/16 along with the more expected Redstarts, Chestnut Sided and Northern Waterthrush. Empidonax flycatchers are passing through, as well as Olive-sided and Great Crested Flycatchers. There are still many Swainson's Thrushes in the woods. There is still a flock of about 30 Cedar Waxwings hanging round the woods, and there is a flock still frequenting the Lamar area of Beaumont. There was a Couch's or Tropical Kingbird, actually showing more of the field marks characteristics of Tropical (long thinner bill; gray back) at the end of the paved section of the road in McFaddin NWR on Sunday.

John A. Whittle