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Warblers and their Amazing Migration

One of the most fantastic cycles of nature involves the lengthy annual migrations of birds, some involving multiple continents and many weeks on the fly. They are joined in the East by the reds of tanagers, the orange of orioles, the blues of buntings and grosbeaks, acrobats like flycatchers and soft camouflages of thrushes.

But the spring belongs to the eastern warblers. They are considerably smaller than their traveling companions above, but no less stouthearted in their ability to migrate. They truly winter all over the New World. Some species, like yellow-rumps and orange-crowns winter across much of the southern United States.

Other warblers fly down the Atlantic in fall to the West Indies and beyond, returning up the Eastern Gulf in spring. Many fly south in fall, across the Gulf of Mexico, and winter in South America, returning the same way in spring. And some like Mourning, Wilson's, Nashvilles and Canadas take a westward route, wintering in Central America before returning back through Texas to their breeding grounds.

These wintering grounds are important for various reasons. First, they determine which route will be taken as each species migrates between their wintering and breeding grounds. This author documented that relationship in my master's work in 1981. If a species breeds in the East (say, New England) but winters much further west, like Central America, it will take a western

course between the two, through Texas.

These "off season" locations are also extremely important to migrant birds because of the stress two migrations and raising off-spring would have on any creature. Having six months to simply forage and rest goes a long way to preparing for the six months of stress and danger that migration and reproduction causes.

There are also opportunities for migrating birds to stage and rest during their sojourn from continent to continent. As the length of light in the day increases in late February, birds in South America move northward toward the Caribbean shores, such as in the State of Falcon, Venezuela. Once there, despite increased hormonal activity, they rest and feed for a while. And they need to, because of what is to come! Their first big leg is to the Yucatan, where I am fond of running birding tours.

They don't all arrive in the Yucatan (or wherever) at the same time, either. Warblers that breed in the Deep South, like parula, Hooded and Kentucky Warblers, are the early birds of spring migration. They may arrive in coastal areas of Yucatan in early March. Then after a time of feeding and resting, they strike out across the Gulf of Mexico northward, right around sundown. Steered by the trade winds, they angle toward the Texas Coast and make landfall around midmorning the next day.

It may be a month later when Canadian nesters like Blackburnian, Bay-breasted

and Blackpoll Warblers launch their flight across the Gulf, finally being moved toward flight by their growing gonads and increased testosterone. They will arrive on the North Shore of the Gulf, most likely in Texas. If fortune favors these bold travelers, they may have enough strength to fly inland a few miles, across George Lowery's "Gulf Coast Hiatus" and delight some Houstonians.

The migration of warblers spans two months or more, from the very early Louisiana Waterthrush to latecomers such as Mourning and Connecticut Warblers. But around the end of April, the vast majority of warblers have arrived and left the Gulf Coast, roughly halfway to their eventual Canadian breeding grounds. Curiously, most nest further north than those buntings, grosbeaks, tanagers, flycatchers, vireos and orioles.

With the waning of the Wisconsin Ice Age, birds living in the Tropics can fly long distances for more daylight, to accomplish the raising of their young. Nowadays, seven species of New World warblers even reach Alaska regularly, and Earth continues to warm. In the vast expanse of taiga, warblers even partition spruce trees so that various portions of them host different species.

Like most of their feathered friends, warblers migrate according to the latitude of their breeding range. This is because it is warm and productive enough in the Deep South for Swainson's, Kentucky and their friends to be about nesting by mid

April, such as the Prothonotary singing his whistled song at Brazos Bend State Park. However, the ground may still be frozen in Central Canada, so those nesters are far behind the early birds.

Birds clearly get exhausted migrating from one continent to another. This is why there is nearly a month-long lag between the peak of the songbird migration on the Gulf Coast (ca. April 20) and that of the northern United States (May 15-20). Between those two times, most birds are buried deep in forests, feeding, practicing their songs, and zonked out. And when they arrive on their breeding grounds, it doesn't get any easier.

Without the rigors of migration, millions upon millions of birds couldn't nest from the northern United States into the Arctic. The flip side seems to be that many thousands perish in the grueling exercise we call migration. But in truth, natural selection is served, as the weak are eliminated while the strong lend their vigor to succeeding generations.

There are over fifty species of wonderful warblers in North America, and like turtles and salamanders, their epicenter is the Appalachians. They are brightly colored with exquisite patterns and bright, musical songs. They fill niches from dry, piney habitats to swamps and marshes. And like our two herpetological vertebrate groups mentioned above, they seem to show humanity what else is possible. We must do all in our power to see them continue.

Early Migrants:



Northern Parula



Hooded Warbler



Kentucky Warbler



Louisiana Waterthrush

Middle Migrants:



Black-throated Green Warbler



Blue-winged Warbler



Yellow Warbler



Tennessee Warbler

Late Migrants:



Bay-breasted Warbler



Mourning Warbler



Canada Warbler



Magnolia Warbler

If you like birds and this paper, you should try Jim's Bird List! It's one or two PDFs a week of Jim's pictures with four lines of commentary. Send request to Jim at galornsoc@earthlink.net

Confusing immature Plumage: A Tern for the Worst...

We have eight species of terns along the Gulf and Atlantic Coasts in the warm season, and telling the adults apart isn't terribly difficult. They are different sizes, they feed in varying habitats along the Coast, they have an assortment of species-specific calls and their bills often reflect their largest differences.

The real problem in dealing with terns is telling the juveniles or winter plumage birds apart. They often lack bill and leg color, and sometimes their markings are different from the adults. Some are even more confusing when in transitional plumage, such as Forster's Tern "teenagers" that look more like Commons in some ways.

So let's look at our eight regular species of terns and flesh them out. First, we'll describe the adults, but we'll also look at the difficult youngsters, along with pictures of them. Field marks may vary from immatures to adults, but other aspects from their ecology to voice patterns remain the same. Paying attention to these "non field mark" identification points is good practice to becoming a more complete birder.

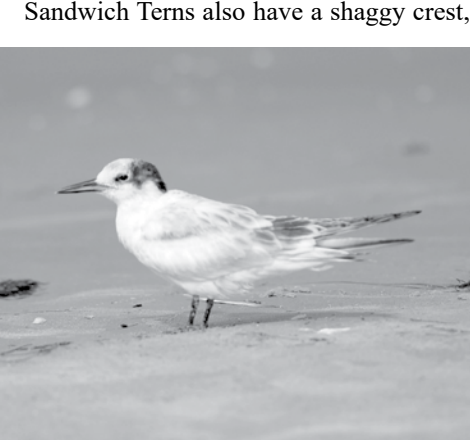
We'll start with the largest terns and work our way down. Caspian Terns are considerably larger than Laughing or Ring-billed Gulls, and have a closely-cropped crest. Adults have a thick, red beak that is more orange in first-year birds. Their scream is a loud, descending call that's hoarse and unpleasant. Caspians are far outnumbered along the Gulf Coast by Royal Terns, but are the only large tern that wanders inland.



Caspian Tern

They breed in the Pacific Northwest and Southern Canada, but also along the Coasts. Neither Sandwich, Gull-billed nor Royal venture inland, and the Caspians are actually worldwide in distribution.

Royal Terns are more slender than Caspians with a shaggy crest, longer, forked tail and beak that is far less reddish than Caspian. They generally fly out deep for their food, but a few feed in Galveston's Ship Channel with Sandwich Terns. Both of those "deep water" terns nest in Galveston Bay, with many thousands of both.



Sandwich Tern, juvenile



Royal Terns, adult and its chick

and they are the same general shape as Royals. However, they are smaller, with a black bill that has a yellow tip. In early fall, the young ones sometimes lack the yellow tip, creating a tough ID for beginners. All four terns we mentioned have black legs, but some immatures may lack pigment for a time.

Young or winter plumage Royal and Sandwich Terns have a white forehead, which becomes all black each breeding season. However, the mighty Caspians have a streaked crown throughout fall and winter, quite different from other large terns. And the Gull-billed Tern loses virtually all the dark pigment off the top of the head, leaving a rather odd-looking, white-headed tern.

Caspians and Royals are permanent residents, although numbers do rise in the breeding season. Gull-billed and Sandwich are scarce in winter, heading toward Central America in mid-fall. A few gull-bills may show up at wildlife refuges in Brazoria County during the winter months, while some Sandwich may appear along Galveston Bay, like on the Texas City Dike. These four above round out the larger half of our eight species of terns.

Gull-billed Terns have a short, thick, black beak in all plumages, a very useful field mark. They are also slightly darker gray on top, and are sometimes picked out flying over dry marsh and prairie, probably hunting dragonflies and grasshoppers. They do not feed along the beach, but curiously nest on them. They're mostly seen around salt marshes and tidal creeks.

Forster's Terns are our most commonly seen tern throughout the year: slender, long-tailed birds seen feeding in shallow fresh or salt water. They make clicking sounds and adults in spring and summer have orange legs, feet and bills, with a black tip. Less migratory, they have little black in their primaries, and quite white below. All four of these smaller terns breed in many places inland.

Common Terns are very similar to Forster's, but only pass through in mid-spring and again in early fall. Adults in spring have red feet, legs and bill, plus the black tip. They also have darker wings and a light gray shadow below, as they incubate their eggs far to the North, where they can absorb some of the sun's light for warmth, during the long days. This is why Arctic Terns are so grayish below.

Immature or winter Common Terns strongly resemble the same plumage in Forster's, but they have a dark carpal bar on their wing which easily distinguishes them. Like their adults, Common Terns share their raspy call and darker wings, plus their dark cap extends to the nape.

Commons are occasionally seen feeding, usually in deeper water than Forster's, and are often headed north within a day or two. The above two paragraphs are extremely helpful in late summer when many head back through, and tern flocks can be challenging. This species stands lower in flocks than Forster's, due to short legs of long-distance migrants.

The diminutive Black Terns are easy to pick out, as they are much darker on top than other terns. Adults are all dark as breeding adults, and completely unmistakable. Young, or those winter-plumaged birds are far less black, especially underneath. They are seldom seen feeding, and like the gull-billed, fish are not listed heavily on their

diet. They eat mostly invertebrates.

Least Terns are even tinier, although adults nesting in places like Bolivar Flats are very noticeable, with their klee klee klee call notes. Adults in spring and summer have a yellow bill, tipped with black, and a white forehead. Immatures have the same dark carpal bar on the wing as commons, and all four immatures and winter-plumaged small terns have black bills in fall and winter.



Gull-billed Tern



Forster's Tern



Common Tern



Black Tern



Least Tern, juvenile

And Skimmers!

One of the most unique bird groups on Earth is the skimmers, and our species, the Black Skimmer, is fairly common on the Upper Texas Coast. Skimmers are not closely related to other birds, perhaps mostly to terns. They are the only birds on Earth with a lower mandible longer than the upper half the bill.

This odd bill not only makes them special, it allows them to feed in a most peculiar way. Skimmers fly very low over shallow water with their long, lower mandible just under the surface. This allows them to flick small fish into their mouth using an involuntary "bill-snap-reflex." They don't even think about it.



Black Skimmers are often seen lying down on the beach, accomplishing two purposes. First, their head and bill are quite heavy, so this allows them to rest their neck, which works hard to feed. Second, it's extremely hot in the warm months with the black top, so laying on the wet sand absorbs heat from their bodies, cooling them off.

That skimmer beak is also very thin, and compressed. The thin nature of it means that if they hit a rock or submerged log, it will just bend, and they go right on hunting. The compressed nature of it allows them to cut through the surface water without scaring fish, since fish can sense water's compression as oncoming predators. This specialized bill is in stark contrast to ducks, which have depressed (flat) beaks.

Skimmer's plumage is awfully black and white, a perfect example of countershading. A fish looking up doesn't see the skimmer, as its white underside blends in with the sky. The black top filters out the ultraviolet rays of the sun, which is why many seabirds like terns have a black cap in the warm months. Many birders don't realize that skimmers gain a black neck on top in summer, increasing their sun protection.

Skimmers, like many waterbirds, are gregarious, often gathering in flocks of well over a hundred. They are quite vocal,



yapping like puppies, especially when disturbed. They are also a very attractive bird, as their red and black bills are really showy. They have really long, narrow wings that allow them to fly stable and snatch up fish.

You might be surprised at the tiny eyes of skimmers, and they are hard to see covered by black feathers. Skimmers don't use their eyes while hunting, as it's done automatically, by feel. This allows them to feed in low light, even at night. That fact means they can feed whenever the tide is right, and they get hungry.

Black Skimmers are one of our latest nesting birds. They don't nest until summer, and often into July. They normally nest on open beaches, away from the water, but as trucks drive everywhere possible, they no longer nest on our beaches. However, Dow Chemical has allowed skimmers to nest protected on asphalt parking lots, and it has saved the skimmer's day on the Upper Texas Coast.



A Bird-Lover's Call to Arms

Every time we turn on the news we see some of the problems facing the World today. The list just goes on and on, foreign, domestic and local. Someone once said, "Being the President is a series of unsolvable problems from dawn till dusk," but this affects us all. I'm sure each one of us has a list of things that keep us awake at night.

Mine is the way many birds and other groups of animals are disappearing off our Planet. They are being extirpated by us, plain and simple. We know the causes and the list is large, but about a half-dozen human-made issues jump out: climate change, deforestation, pollution, domestic cats in the wild, automobile, tower & window strikes and destruction of nesting grounds, like beaches and bay sides.

By far, the two large orders of birds being hurt by our species are the shorebirds and migratory songbirds. But the problem goes far beyond birds, though, as taxa all over the animal kingdom are in freefall. Amphibians are in serious trouble, largely due to poor water quality that inhibits their reproduction. Snakes have practically disappeared in many areas. Marine ecosystems have shut down, wiping out many of the ocean's phyla. Numbers of butterflies have dropped like a rock. And there's plenty more.

So to hearken back to the original paragraph, we have a lot of issues to deal with. But my question is, "What could be more important than losing biodiversity off the face of the Earth?" We are only one species, but we are causing a mass extinction that scientists say is rivaling the environmental collapse sixty-five million years ago, when a comet struck the Yucatan and Earth suffocated in the atmospheric pall.

During my lifetime, I have seen birding go from about a half-dozen folks I knew in my home city of Tallahassee, to large groups of birders all over the Country and beyond. Many of them are bird listers, who keep a life list, and maybe yard list (I am both of

those). Others keep daily lists, county lists, state lists, monthly lists, and the list goes on. Just thinking about them makes me listless.

Also burgeoning is the number of bird/wildlife photographers, especially as amateurs. I have spent several thousand dollars on camera equipment, which I use for my nine books published, this and other newspapers, my GOS PDF emailed bird list, and my own personal enjoyment. And other people have varied interests which involve birds and the outdoors, beyond listing and photography.

But we all have one thing in common: Our World is disappearing. Lists will get shorter, there will be fewer birds to photograph and our Planet is slowly but surely heading toward those futuristic movies where there is no more natural environment: It's all laid waste. Do we honestly think that the massive drops we have seen in numbers of birds over the last quarter-century will suddenly stop? Or more wildly, reverse themselves?

I am speaking, first of all, to the leaders of the birding community: Greg, Alice Ann, Julie Ann, Karla, Richard, Mort, Sue, Martin and Robin. We have got to make our people aware of what is at stake. It's not just the poster species like Red Knots and Polar Bears. It's many dozens of species across the animal kingdom, and we need to educate and act locally to guard as much as possible the futures of these fellow Earth creatures.

But everyone reading this needs to do their part. Keep fresh water in the bird bath and healthy, fresh bird seed in the feeders. Keep the killer kitties inside (and maybe they won't get run over!). Support conservation organizations and ask them what they are doing for our Nation's wildlife. And what we really need? Vote for, and publicly support the candidates who are interested in the well-being of the environment.

We cannot continue in the direction we are going. We cannot continue to see losses of biota at the same rate. Nor will the birds.

GOS Trips this Spring

Scarcely back from the Yucatan's March Trip, Jim and the GOS will sponsor several terrific activities for birders and photographers. Our top experience in bird migration is April 15-18, where Jim will take participants all over the Upper Texas Coast in the van, seeing close to 200 species of migrant songbirds, shorebirds and much more. The Spring Songbird Seminar is \$400, or \$125/day.

After FeatherFest, which is largely April 19-22, Jim and the GOS begin the Spring Shootout for photographers, April 23-26. Like the preceding activity, all destinations on the UTC will be visited, from Brazoria County east to Sabine Woods. Shooters should get well in excess of a hundred species of birds photographed well, plus other animals.

A brand new and very exciting experience is being offered this year, as Jim and the GOS will be taking birders all over the Lake Erie area, to some of the most famous birding sites in the Country. From 15-25 May, we'll visit sites like Magee Marsh, Ottawa NWR, Crane Creek State Park and others on the South Shore, then drive around to Point Pelee and Long Point Bird Observatory in Canada. \$1500 covers van and hotels.

Lastly, a wonderful trip for birders and shooters will be 7-10 June, around the North End of the Great Salt Lake, just north of Salt Lake City, Utah. Huge numbers of birds, (including owls!) will be seen and easily photographed. This \$600 trip covers your lodging, Jim as your guide and van.

More information may be gotten by e-mailing Jim at galornsoc@earthlink.net or the GOS website, galvestonbirders.org. Jim and the GOS is running three Saturday birding trips this spring to see the migration. The first is May 14 to Sabine Woods, a world class area for songbird migration. Two weeks later we'll take our annual trek to High Island and the Spoonbill Rookery the 28th, which will include Anahuac NWR.

Galveston Audubon Spring Dates

The Gull encourages you to attend the final meeting and Saturday field trip with Galveston Audubon this spring. March 15 is their meeting, always followed by their Saturday field trip, March 17.

They meet in Rosenberg Library just off Broadway, between 23rd and 24th, with the meeting starting at 7 pm. For more information, e-mail the President: Greg Whittaker gwhittaker@moodygardens.org.

For those who are unfamiliar with GCAS, this is a wonderful organization with terrific leadership. Greg Whittaker is the President, a long-time biologist at Moody Gardens. Alice Ann O'Donnell, who directed UTMB's Clinic for many years, is the representative to Houston, and Julie Ann Brown, our Director of FeatherFest, is the Secretary.

Also Join GCBO!

Gulf Coast Bird Observatory is an outstanding institution of ornithological research and public environmental education. Martin Hagne is the new Director, with long-time and excellent biologist Sue Heath who knows everything. Now they have been recently joined by Robin Bjork, adding to GCBO's research thrust. If you want to learn more about birds and be a part of active conservation, we at the GOS heartily recommend you check out these Brazoria County friends.

Gulls n Herons

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Vireos: Dull Cousins of the Warblers

Most spring songbird migrants are brightly colored and boldly patterned, making them among the easiest of birds to identify. Tanagers have their red, orioles have their orange and buntings their blue, plus warblers have all kinds of colors. But the vireos are just plain drab, mostly from olive to brown. Let’s take a look at this family, all comprised of birds in the genus Vireo.

Vireos have a cylindrical beak with a hook on the end, useful for pulling caterpillars out of leaf clumps on the ends of limbs. Flycatchers also have a terminal hook, but they have a flat bill for catching flying insects, and the hook kills the fly. But the former forages in canopies while the latter flies out to grab bugs. So flycatchers are certainly more visible than foraging vireos.



Red-eyed Vireo

Decades ago, the Red-eyed Vireo was the most abundant bird in North America, breeding in about every forest in the Continent. In October of 1953, the night of a foggy cold front, nearly twenty thousand birds struck the WCTV Tower (CBS) north of Tallahassee, and a whopping half the victims were Red-eyed Vireos! They are not so abundant today, due to forest fragmentation, but they are still abundant back East, and across the Northern US to Western Canada.

This is a typically drab vireo species, but the head has markings which identify it. The cap is gray, contrasting to the olive back, with a black border and a white stripe over the eye. Adults have the red eyes, as

they forage in dark canopy cover, and the red eyes help them see in low light spots. Their song is lugubrious, seemingly repeating the same tired phrase for hours on end. They also have a “meow” call note.



White-eyed Vireo

White-eyed Vireos are also quite abundant, but in scrubby habitat, rather than the deep woods of the red-eyed. Most leave the Continent in winter, like the red-eyed, and both are rather early returning spring migrants. White-eyeds have a sharp, syncopated song, with an accented first note. Adult has a white iris, but immatures are brown, like the preceding species. They also have wingbars, like the next two species, but not red-eyed.

The Blue-headed Vireo is the only member of the family that winters in the East. They nest from the Great Lakes, WNW



Blue-headed Vireo

across Canada. They were once called Solitary Vireo, but that became a superspecies which was divided into Blue-headed, Cassin’s and those very gray Plumbeous Vireos. These and the next species make harsh scolding calls that help find and identify them in the forest. All three in this “solitary” group above have bold, white spectacles that facilitate identification.

Yellow-throated Vireos nest all over the East, but not out West at all. They are easily the most colorful vireo, both with a large patch of yellow below and yellow spectacles. If the yellow were removed, they would look very much like the solitary group above. This oak tree species can actually be mistaken for male Pine Warblers, which have a pretty thick bill. This vireo tends to be high in the canopy.



Yellow-throated Vireo

Two similar species are the Warbling and Philadelphia Vireos. The former ranges across the northern United States & up Western Canada, while the latter is further north, across Southern Canada. This is why Philadelphia migrates later than Warbling; It nests further north. Both go to the Tropics for the winter.

Telling these two apart is tricky. Philadelphia Vireos are, on average, more yellowish below, with Warbling more off-white ventrally. The face on a philly is also demarcated, with a dark line through the eye, below the light supercilium. Warbling is about as plain as any songbird in North America. Beware of the variation in some phillies, as washed out, pale individuals resemble Warbling, and can be tough to separate.

A smaller species that frankly resembles a kinglet more than its own family is the Bell’s Vireo. They sing like mad but can be hard to

see, as they are shy and retiring. Those in the Ohio River Valley (eastern population) are fairly colorful while those in the Desert Southwest are among the four “pale gray” vireos. On the Texas Coast, either race may be seen, with the majority of records in late August and early September.

Two tropical species are rare in the southern portion of the Continent. Black-whiskered Vireos occur in the mangroves of the South Florida summer, and seem to sing from every direction. They are quite similar to Red-eyed Vireo, but for the dark line down the cheek. Strong southeast winds have blown this species to Texas on occasion, so watch for that black line on vireos in late spring, with warm, southerly winds.

Also similar to the red-eyed is the Yellow-green Vireo, colored like its name implies. The green top and yellow venter brings to mind a female Painted Bunting, while the head is much more like the red-eyed. This is another tropical bird that strong southerly winds can deliver from the Tropics, so don’t take bird IDs for granted along the Gulf Coast, especially Texas.

The last species of this family in or near the east is the Black-capped Vireo, a rare species which is almost never seen outside of its narrow Texas breeding and migration range. It and the Golden-cheeked Warbler, another Central Texas breeder, have been decimated by cowbird parasitism, with their numbers dropping precipitously.

Watch for vireos and see how ponderous they are, slowly working through trees, and working the ends of limbs. They’re more chunky than warblers but far less colorful, with the hook on the bill that pulls caterpillars out of crevices. Most have nice songs and elegant cups in which to lay their eggs. There’s a lot to like about vireos!



Bell's Vireo

Are you a Plover Lover?

Quite a few birders have certain species or groups that are special to them, including owls and Osprey, loons, warblers, hummers, avocets, night-herons and the Black Skimmer. But there is a few that really appreciate the plovers, those feisty little soldiers that seem to own our beaches and demonstrate certain behaviors with clarity and enthusiasm of purpose.

First, you have to learn to identify plovers from sandpipers. Plovers have shorter beaks than most ‘pipers, due to their picking up food off the surface of the beach. Sandpipers have longer bills as they probe deep for worms and such. Curiously, this led to plovers evolving larger eyes for visual acuity. Interestingly, both can feed nocturnally, as plovers can see under low light on account of their larger eyes, while ‘pipers don’t need to see at night, as they are simply probing.

Plovers are divided into two distinct groups, and scientists have separated them by their genus names. Larger plovers in the World, like our black-bellies and goldens, are in the genus Pluvialis. They are twice the size of our smaller genus, Charadrius, which include our Semipalmated, Piping, Snowy and Wilson’s Plovers. The Killdeer is technically in the latter group, but shows characteristics of both genera.

The Pluvialis plovers nest in the Far North’s Arctic Tundra, and therefore take on a black underside to absorb the 24-hour sun’s rays low on the horizon. Their smaller cousins the Charadrius nest in disparate areas of the Continent, some eking out a living in spite of development and cats. The larger size of the Pluvialis helps them retain heat in the cold Arctic, a phenomenon called Bergmann’s Rule. The black undersides absorb heat to incubate their eggs faster in the abbreviated Arctic summer.

The diminutive Charadrius plovers almost always stay within the borders of our North American Continent, with Semipalmateds reaching the Arctic and Wilson’s sneaking down into Central America in winter. But the two large Pluvialis species nest in the Arctic and many fly far down the South American shores, with goldens to the tip. In the Old World, those Pluvialis do the same thing, like to Australia.

Here in Texas, we only get goldens in early spring, and they are sadly in winter plumage. Curiously, they stop along the way to the Arctic and molt-migrate into breeding colors. Black-bellies are here from late summer through the winter, and nearly as sad is that they don’t get their lovely breeding colors until late April, right before they leave for the Far North. Some return in their breeding plumage in August, but it soon molts away.

Telling the goldens as they pass through Texas is not too hard. They are more terrestrial than the shore-loving black-bellies, and should appear a bit browner. Their head and bill seems smaller, and usually adorned with a darker crown and light supercilium. But the real clincher is that they lack the black “wing pits” so conspicuous on all black-bellies the entire year.

The Charadrius plovers present more of a challenge, although knowing your primary colors is half the battle! Semipalmated is the widespread, common small plover, present all year except briefly in mid summer. They

have a darker back than their lookalikes and a complete ring the entire year. Their flesh-colored legs are much like Piping, the similar species with a much paler back.

Snowy Plovers are similar to Piping except for their grayish legs, so individuals sitting behind clumps (out of the wind) need to stand up before they can be safely identified. Wilson’s Plover, which breeds here and visits from spring through fall, has a thick, black bill for crunching fiddler crabs. Their entire population is under 7000; Piping are threatened and snowies back East are endangered, so Charadrius needs plenty of attention to avoid their extinction.

The real wild card of the plovers is the bombastic Killdeer. Adorned with two rings and a beige rump patch, the kill-deer call announces their presence and sometimes scares ducks away from disgruntled hunters. They are comfortable enough with our species that they sometimes nest on our lawns and driveways, and are known by locals as a “kill-dee.” On occasion, they will respond to potential predators by “feigning,” where they pretend to be crippled, flopping along the ground to attract predators away from their eggs or young.

Like so many groups of birds, plovers have neat secrets and behaviors that make them special, and cause us to want to know them better, so that we can help them!



Black-bellied Plover



Piping Plover



Semipalmated Plover



American Golden Plover



Snowy Plover



Killdeer



Killdeer baby



Wilson's Plover

Local Researcher works to Help nesting Shorebirds

American Bird Conservancy (ABC) partners with local bird organizations along the Gulf of Mexico to implement their Gulf Beach-nesting Bird Conservation Program. The program seeks to advance conservation efforts for beach-nesting bird species such as Wilson’s Plovers, Snowy Plovers, Least Terns, and Black Skimmers. These species have low and/or declining populations due to a mix of human influenced threats (e.g. coastal development, off-road vehicles, pets) and natural threats (e.g. storms, high tide events). Though their camouflaged eggs and chicks help protect them from natural predators, they are almost invisible to an unknowing beachgoer. Therefore, our program works with partners to help protect important nesting sites, as well as interact with beachgoers and educate them about the birds they share the beach with. We implement physical protection for the birds by posting temporary signs and fencing around nesting sites during the nesting season (mid-March - August). We also monitor the nesting sites to understand how the birds are doing, and we also conduct on-the-ground educational activities, both on site and at outreach events. In the Galveston area, we’ve been working with Audubon since 2012 implementing our program’s protection, monitoring, and outreach measures at two important beach-nesting bird sites - Bolivar Flats Shorebird Sanctuary and East Beach.

You can help beach-nesting birds by following these easy steps to help make the beach a safer place for birds:

- “Fish, Swim, and Play from 50 Yards Away.” If the birds vocalize frequently or fly away, you’re too close. Move yourself or your boat further away to avoid disturbing birds.
- Obey areas posted with signs and fencing that designate nesting locations on beaches and islands.
- Keep pets leashed at all times.
- Don’t feed gulls. This can lead to unnaturally high numbers of gulls, which then eat other birds’ eggs and chicks.
- Dispose of fishing line and tackle properly. Birds can become entangled and die.
- Spread the word!

To learn more, visit American Bird Conservancy’s website: helpgulfbirds.org

Submitted by Kristen Vale

From Jim: Thank you, Kristen, for your research on our friends shown to the left. Thank you Sue, for your research on the oystercatchers, and to all scientists who learn enough about our birds that we may protect them effectively. And thank you to all birders who respect birds and give them space, who clean their bird baths, and keep their cats indoors.

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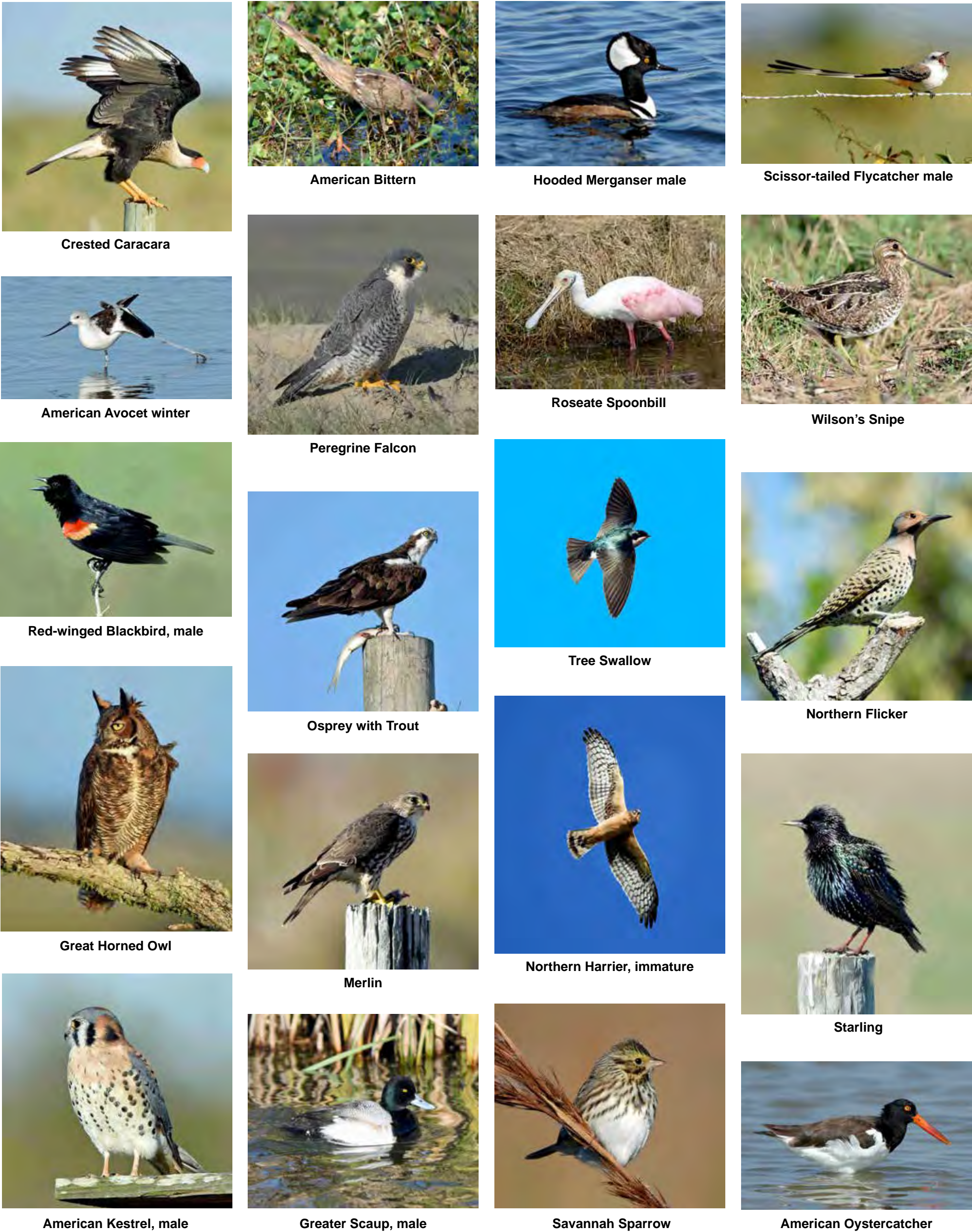
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Colorful Birds from the Fall 2017 Migration

High Breeding Plumage: Colorful Shorebirds!



Be on the List!


If you want to receive free, low-resolution bird pictures with commentary, like these from Jim Stevenson, just send an e-mail to galornsoc@earthlink.net and you'll be placed anonymously on the "GOS list".




Who is the Galveston Ornithological Society and What do they Do?

North American Trips Jim Conducts

- *South Texas in January along Rio Grande
- *West Texas and Big Bend N Park in March
- *Great Salt Lake and Great Plains in May
- *Alaska's Kenai, Arctic, and Nome in June
- *Arizona's cool Mountains in late August
- *South Florida and the Keys in November







Service Projects of the GOS

- Removing invasive Tallow Trees
- Planting fruiting trees for Birds
- Keeping San Luis Mangrove-free
- Distributing this free Newspaper
- Petitioning for environmental laws

GOS Spring Activities in Galveston area:

- All day Saturdays before FeatherFest
- Four days Volunteering for FeatherFest
- GOS's Four days of Bird Photography
- Four days of UTC Land and Waterbirding
- Early May Saturday trip to the Big Thicket
- Free open houses in the Migration at Jim's





GOS Books and other Stevenson Publications

- Birdlife of Galveston [all Island animals]
- Woodcrafting for Birds and Wildlife [Co-authored]
- Birds and Mammals of the Alaskan Summer [A few left]
- Jamaica, Queen of the Air [Fictional Red-tailed Hawk]
- Wildlife of North Florida [Jim's former home]
- Quest for 5000 Birds [world travels]
- Beyond Teaching [High school science]
- Wildlife of Galveston [First book; sold out]

----- Be sure to read about the GOS Bird List!

The Fabulous Color Changes of our High Arctic Shorebirds

Many birds change color during the year, with most returning to their original plumage at the end of the year where they started. Some also change during the progression from juvenile to immatures and then adults. Some birds have adult females that permanently resemble immature birds, as these more subtle hues protect them while incubating. Plus, females don't court males, so bright colors are unnecessary.

Most plovers and sandpipers change from winter to summer, or what scientists call the basic and alternate plumages, respectively. Most of these changes are slightly more attractive to our eyes, but a few are simply bombastic. In general, large and small sandpipers and small plovers go through modest changes, but some of the medium-sized shorebirds become simply gorgeous the second half of April. The majority of them are High Arctic nesters, actually reproducing further north than Alaska! Let's see a few:

Ruddy Turnstones return from the High Arctic still in their amazing breeding regalia, but soon molt into a brown and white existence, displaying strong raptive markings. These allow them to hide in the open on rocks, so long as they stand still when predators fly by. Their stout bill allows them to pry into bivalves, their favorite food.

Dunlins also molt into their spring garb in April, although they are completely into their winter plumage when they finally return in October. They were once aptly called red-backed sandpiper for the breeding, or alternate plumage. They also have black bellies like the two large plovers, so they can absorb radiant energy of the sun – low on the Arctic's horizon – while incubating their eggs.

Red Knots are scarce but very beautiful in their red plumage they take to the High Arctic. Their color resembles dowitchers a bit, but they have short bills and forage for creatures in the sand like Coquina. Their numbers have been decimated by the taking of Horseshoe Crabs to bait lobster traps, so sightings have dropped considerably.

Sanderlings are very common from our Country's beaches down thru South America, from early fall to late spring. However, at the latter time, they shockingly lose their

dull whitish color and molt into a brown coat that resembles anything but a Sanderling. This species returns in late summer, often still in alternate plumage, but soon molts it off.

American Golden-Plovers are extreme migrants, wintering in the southern portion of South America. They mostly arrive from their austral wintering grounds to the Texas Coast, then right up the Great Plains. They often stop in places such as Montana to "molt migrate," then continue with fresh, beautiful plumage to the Far North.

Black-bellied Plovers winter from the United States Coastline down through the Tropics, before joining the goldens on their trans-continental flights to the Far North. Both are completely black below, like their counterparts in the Old World. As plovers, they have shorter bills and larger eyes than 'pipers, plus rather bulbous heads.

Dowitchers gain their reddish hues in April like the turnstone, with long-bills being more reddish than the orangish short-bills. Most have returned to their plain gray plumage when they return in late summer, with long-bills settling for the winter in freshwater and the short-bills opting for tidal habitats. They are Subarctic or Arctic, but not High Arctic.



Black-bellied Plover winter

How to Predict Success in the Spring Migration

In the interest of full disclosure, let me state for the record that accurately predicting how many songbird migrants will drop in on any given day is often an exercise in futility. Did numbers of birds actually leave the Yucatan the night before? Were there winds which blew them further to the east, making Louisiana happy? Or west, making Corpus Christi celebrate? Will southeast winds encourage them to fly over the Coast and into the Houston area? It's just really hard to say.

The majority of our spring migrants do arrive from across the Gulf from Yucatan, but there are a whole host of variable that steer them our way. Or not. But on any given day in spring, there will at least be *some* birds that arrive from over the Gulf, most of whom left the Yucatan the night before. In average conditions, they will begin arriving midmorning, unless delayed by unfavorable winds or rain.

The quantity and quality partly depends on the date. It's hardly worth looking for birds until the second half of March, and then be ready for a few southern nesters like parulas, some swallows, some "yellow" warbler or two, and any of several other southern birds that happen to drop in that day. You will also see species like yellow-rumps and orange-crowns which have wintered around here, and are preparing to depart. And also, a few from further down the Texas Coast, easing their way northeast, before heading north.

Cold fronts with north winds and rain can greatly increase numbers of birds, or sometimes decrease them, based on when the wind shifts and the rains hits. It is best when we get the least amount of west winds when the front is passing. In early April, southern nesters will be more common, with upwards of a dozen species of warblers possible. Swallows will become more common in the air, ruby-throats will be hovering at Lantana, and a few winter residents will suddenly pop up. With the increased numbers of shorebirds, seeing over a hundred species in a day becomes possible. Spring migration will build each day toward a crescendo.

Mid April is when the real numbers of

spring migrants cranks. Both species of buntings, grosbeaks, tanagers and orioles comprise the "Great Eight" that fills the bushes with red, blue, orange and other-worldly brilliance. While we wait for real numbers of warblers, it is delicious seeing these other colorful songbirds, plus interesting flycatchers and vireos.

The spring migration peaks around the 20th of April, and the warblers descend from the Tropics. Oh, my. And if that date sounds vaguely familiar, it's FeatherFest! We should have our best FeatherFest for warblers, ever! And that's not to mention the gaudy group of sandpipers on the top right of the centerfold. I've always found it interesting that Earth Day was unwittingly selected in the peak of the spring migration!

With each passing day, the birds of the day will be various Canadian-nesting warblers, on their way to stopping off around the Great Lakes. The Great Eight will become mostly females, and some of our best species like Empidonax flycatchers and olive-sides excite groups of birders. Flooded rice fields take on sensational birds like Hudsonian Godwits and Buff-breasted Sandpipers, and daily lists of birds often top 150.

By the beginning of May, the bird migration is on the wane. But there are still great birds around, and year in and year out, some of my best records were in May, rather than April. One excellent opportunity, for photographers as much as bird listers, are the mats of Sargassum that float in and covers the beaches. These provide huge numbers of stranded marine animals from fish to tiny invertebrates, and those colorful shorebirds are tame and very photogenic. Kids from 5 to 80 will be astounded at the interesting little creatures found within the "seaweed" if netted and examined before landing.

By mid May their migration is mostly a memory, a time for us to take care of all the chores we rightfully put off when the warblers were here. Or we can hop a plane and go to the South Shore of Lake Erie, right as all those warblers are arriving and staging. It's true, you can actually experience the spring bird migration twice, and absent the myriads of shorebirds, experience the magic all over again.

Red-tailed Hawks: Lord of the American Skies

Buteos are the large, bulky, soaring hawks we see sitting on telephone poles and floating in the air, and a surprising amount of the time, they are Red-tailed Hawks. This species occurs from Alaska, through Canada and the Lower 48, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, all the way down to Panama.

Red-tails are as variable as they are widespread. Most are brown on top and off-white below, with a belly band that's variable in intensity. Only the adults have a red tail, as it's brown with narrow bands in young birds. But one race up North is nearly black and another in Southern Canada is extremely light. Quite a few western birds are melanistic (black) with a red tail (as adults).

One reason red-tails are so successful is how catholic their diet is. In winter, they catch mammals like rats and small rabbits, whose meat lasts a warm-blooded animal like a hawk for a day or two. They also catch birds when they can, maybe surprising large species on the ground. They cannot catch most birds aerially like falcons and accipiters do, as they are just too bulky.

During the warmth of the breeding season, red-tails delight in overpowering snakes and other terrestrial lower vertebrates. Their tarsi are protected by having no flesh and heavy scalcation, so they are impervious even to the bites of venomous snakes. They will even feed on carcasses killed by traffic, and occasionally suffer the same fate in so doing.



Red-tailed Hawk krider's



Red-tailed Hawk immature



Red-tailed Hawk



Red-tailed Hawk adult worn



Harlan's Red-tailed Hawk




Red-tailed Hawk albino



Red-tailed Hawk melanistic


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Red-shouldered Hawks (adult left, immature right) are the slimmed-down forest version of red-tails, somewhat accipiter like with reddish barring and a more slender build. They are common around woodlands and noisy with their descending cries. Immatures are brown with even streaking below and a weakly banded tail. Red-shouldered eat birds and mammals in the cool season but warm up to frogs, snakes, lizards and even occasional fish and large insects when the weather gets hot. Adults are reddish barred below.



Broad-winged Hawks (adult left, immature right) are the long-distance migrants of the eastern buteos, pouring over the Smith Point Hawkwatch Tower in early fall by the hundreds. They nest in heavy forests, being especially fond of reptiles and amphibians. Adults of this stocky species are vaguely barred while immatures have blotchy barring, not even like red-shouldered. Adults are gray on the back, as opposed to the brown dorsum on red-tails and red-shouldered. Overhead, their tails appears short but have long wings.

Birds from Earth’s Four Corners

Many birds have been “North American” for an extremely long time, seen by John James Audubon and anyone ten times that far back. But not all our birds are originally ours, as some come from almost any direction you can point. Some have been crazy-successful and others have died out, and while most were natural, we sadly introduced some, too.

We’ll start with the Northwest. During the last period of glaciation, the Wisconsin Ice Age froze the Bering Straight over, and huge mammals walked over to Alaska on the ice and colonized North America. Less talked about were the birds that accompanied Great Pleistocene Mammals, such as certain of the finch family.



Red Crossbill

Many of the finches with conical bills were American originally, and they can be told by their squared-off, longish tails. But some have shorter, notched tails and they belong to the Fringilidae, imports from Asia

during the colder periods of history. They include exciting, northern birds like rosy-finches, odd crossbills, cold-loving redpolls, some larger finches that were also red, the ridiculously tame Pine and Evening Grosbeaks, the lovely little goldfinches and the Pine Siskin.



Black-bellied Whistling-Duck

Just as those fringilids came over from the Northwest, in the Old World, many other birds have moved northward, out of Mexico and Central America. Whistling-ducks are a good example. While most waterfowl are North American in origin, Black-bellied and Fulvous Whistling-Ducks arose in the New World Tropics, and have made tremendous inroads in North America. They and their fellow immigrants may be aided by climate change, being more comfortable in a warming North America.

We humans unwisely introduced species as we colonized America scant centuries ago. The House Sparrow, European Starling

and Rock Pigeon were released in New England and have spread across the Americas, nearly as popular as the Black and Norway Rats we inadvertently introduced off ships. This seems to be a Caucasian pastime, as the British also did so when colonizing New Zealand and other lands.



Purple Swamphen

Africa has chipped in, increasing our biodiversity with birds like the Egyptian Goose and Purple Swamphen. Both of these are Florida imports, but they will likely spread across the Country, much like the Eurasian Collared-Dove has done in the last quarter-century. This is in stark contrast to the Cattle Egrets that migrated across the Atlantic Ocean from Africa and colonized the Americas.

Along with the collared doves, other Asian birds have been introduced with the hand of man. Right here in Houston, the Red-whiskered Bulbul stops amateur birders in their tracks, looking like nothing they have ever seen. Perhaps the most famous of the Asian birds introduced to America was the Ring-

necked Pheasants released in 1881 that now cover much of the Country. Other game birds from Asia, such as the Gray Partridge, followed.

Not as many birds have made it here from Australia, but one is both in the wild, as well as in many homes. It is the Budgerigar, a small, slender, long-tailed parakeet that can be many colors in captivity. Introduced into St. Petersburg, it has spread to many cities, and it has been followed by Monk Parakeets in many states, and many more species of this family in Florida, California, Texas and other states.

As the earth continues to warm, untold numbers of birds will move away from the equator, and colonize new areas in an attempt to survive the ecological changes that are already happening. This will create enormously complex ecological problems for the birds and other animals on our Planet. This is why it is so critically important that we come to grips with this incredibly important issue. From the top down.



Budgerigar

Top Ten Sandpipers of the Spring Migration

Shorebirds are made up of many sandpipers, a few plovers, avocets, stilts, oystercatchers and phalaropes. True to their name, they are most often seen along lake shores, around salt water, in ditches, alongside marshes or in swamps. Most are fast fliers, delectable to predators, long migrators and sometimes tough for newbies to identify.

Sandpipers are incredible diverse, from huge curlews with amazingly long bills down to tiny peeps with bills hardly visible. Most are gray to brown in the winter and only a few improve on that in breeding condition. Plovers are well marked but hardly colorful, and may be studied in more detail on page 5.

Oystercatchers, stilts and avocets are large and strongly patterned with black, white and gray, sometimes with legs that seem colored by a little girl and her crayons. [Or a boy and his spray paint!] The bills of these three are pretty impressive, too, from straws for sucking up plankton to knives for opening bivalves and other marine animals.

But today, we go for the hard to find species here on the Upper Texas Coast, during the spring migration. These may be “rare” birds, or species in only a certain habitat. They may just be seen at one point in the migration, or a particular weather condition. They have to be a regular, annual migrant through our area, though, and reasonably possibly for anyone to find: Some place, some time and some how.

Ten is Whimbrel, curlews generally seen in Texas during the spring migration, late March into mid May. They have a shorter bill than wintering long-billed and sport dark stripes over the crown. This species is usually either seen near salt marshes, where they catch their favorite food, fiddler crabs, or on grassy areas where they dig for worms. In late spring they also become very common in rice fields, perhaps a staging ground.

Nine will be the Wilson’s Snipe, the long-billed winter resident game bird that makes a living pulling up worms from several inches down. Once called common snipe, they are now just an American bird named for the late great Alexander Wilson. Watch for them alongside ditches and lakes after early spring cold fronts.

Eight would be the Stilt Sandpiper, found from mid-April to mid-May. They seem to bend way over on account of their long stilt-like legs. Notice the barring underneath, unusual for small sandpipers. Their bill is longish with a droop on the end, and cinnamon ear patches seal the identification. Migrates along shorelines with Lesser Yellowlegs and Wilson’s Phalaropes.

Seven drops in from mid March through mid April, the Upland Sandpipers, and are often seen associating with golden plovers. The quivering call notes are often heard, especially pre-dawn. Notice the large eyes of a visual forager and the short bill that once had them classified as plovers. Like the name implies, they avoid wet areas.

Six is the Red Knot, found on high surge beaches where they forage for Coquina shells in the sand. This species has been badly hurt populationally by the harvesting of Horseshoe Crabs, now thankfully outlawed in some states. Watch them follow the outgoing wave, then get chased back up the beach by the next wave. They also practice the “sewing machine” action that Sanderlings so often do.

Five brings us White-rumped Sandpiper, and it brings them very late! Some get here in late April, but I have seen as many as five thousand on May 5 on Pelican Island! This is a large peep with a streaked breast that’s easier to ID in the air. The white rump cannot be missed and its insect-like flight call is unique in the bird world.

Four is the beautiful Wilson’s Phalarope, with the female far outclassing the male’s drab looks. Both sexes have a needle-like bill and both are equipped with lobed toes with which to spin and dab in the water for insect larvae. These are present in low numbers beginning almost mid April and sometimes ending with large numbers in early May. Females take a harem of males.

Sandpipers: Water Warblers

In the spring migration, everyone loves warblers. We are even running a trip, primarily, to see warblers around Lake Erie. Warblers have clear songs, nice color and the diversity is enough to make a bird lister tear up. Their niches are terribly interesting, there’re small identifiable groups & genera with much in common, and like the ‘pipers on the left, some are really special to see.

Warblers and sandpipers have a lot in common. Our smallest waterbirds are sandpipers, some of our most colorful waterbirds are also pipers, some like Lesser Yellowlegs sing and the diversity is astounding. Groups and species of pipers have certain niches similar to warblers, and each provides many species on a good day’s list of birds.

Yet between them there’s a difference. Warblers have great diversity, as do sandpipers, but the pipers also have huge disparity. The smallest ones are like drab little sparrows on the “ground” [beach], probing and poking for tidbits. But the largest ones are mighty curlews and godwits, with bills like lances, bending in all directions. And there are all sizes in between, with Dunlins (page 7) and Sanderlings just larger than peeps to Willets just smaller than godwits and curlews.



Red Knot



White-rumped Sandpiper



Wilson’s Phalarope female



Baird’s Sandpiper



Hudsonian Godwit



Buff-breasted Sandpiper



Willet: Now two Species

Many sandpipers do not lack for color, as seen in the smattering on the top right of the centerfold. Others like those very large ones are unicolored, but emanating soft, lovely colors as they stride through fields and pastures. Some like phalaropes practice strange reproductive patterns where females select a harem of males (polyandry) while others like snipe and Spotted Sandpiper opt for polygyny. Collectively, both are polygamy.

Those snipe, dowitchers and woodcock have very long, straight bills with a tendon down the upper mandible, connecting the tip to a muscle in the forehead. When they flex the connection, it allows them to close their beak tip on worms far below the surface of the substrate. Indeed, no family of birds has

Quite the opposite, some like turnstones have short, stout bills like wedges, used for forcing invertebrates out of crevices or busting up barnacles and other encrusting organisms off rocks and wood. And turnstones (page 7) have even developed a ring, much like plovers, which acts as a ruptive mark, breaking up the form of the bird, allowing it to “hide” from predators in plain sight.

Sandpipers can easily feed nocturnally with their probing bill, most migrate extremely long distances (Arctic to Antarctic), some like phalaropes have lobed toes like coots and grebes, several have brilliant white flash colors in their wings to lure predators from their bodies, some breed further north than Alaska, and complexes like peeps and dowitchers can make birding a challenge.

Sandpipers are a separate family from plovers, as the latter has a short bill for surface feeding, big eyes for night hunting, a larger, more bulbous head and often a chur-ree up-slurred note, reminiscent of a pewee. Stilts and avocets are also in their separate family, named for their bills curving up, and oystercatchers also have their own family, named for their “blood eye.”

My favorite sandpipers are those preferring pastures & fields, cleverly called grasspipers. Upland Sandpipers (left) may be the poster child for this group, but they include Baird’s, Buff-breasted (both left) and Pectoral Sandpipers (etc.), Hudsonian Godwits (left) and curlews, Killdeer, golden plovers and occasional surprises. In spring they may be found especially in the flooded rice fields, like those in Chambers County, from 124 to Anahuac NWR.

Encounters with the Elusive Rails

Rails seem like perhaps an unlikely cross between a chicken and a bittern, a primitive skulker of muddy marshes. In their family exists more common birds like gallinules, moorhens, coots and the Sora, but it's the rails – or “crakes” in other continents – that really test the patience and mettle of us birders. And they are well worth it!

Curiously, in this area, we are most familiar with the species that has the most restricted habitat: The Clapper Rail. Relatively quiet and fairly unobtrusive for most of the year, clappers suddenly become quite bold in April, much like their close cousins. Emboldened with testosterone, they parade across roads and conspicuously march along shorelines, as all fear of our species has been biochemically abandoned.

Any road through a healthy saltmarsh will do, such as Sportsman's Road on Galveston's West End, or Frenchtown Road, left immediately upon driving off the Ferry on Bolivar. It's a bit of luck, as you never know when one will pop out, but within an hour you are almost sure to see these brown devils sneaking and racing, depending on their mood at that exact millisecond.



Black Rail



Clapper Rail

Freshwater marshes, such as are found in our three National Wildlife Refuges, are the domain of the King Rail. They are more richly colored than clappers, but their ranges really don't overlap much. In brackish water you can sometimes see either, or more likely, hybrids, and even the calls of hybrids can be a mixture of quality. And during late spring, when visiting San Bernard, Brazoria or Anahuac Refuges, it is not unusual to spot one or hear their raucous call.

These two rail species are classic examples of divergence, occurring when a superspecies splits into two or more populations, on account of habitat, geography, reproduction or any of several reasons. No doubt, some ancestral rail that occupied both freshwater marshes and saltmarshes became genetically different enough in the two habitats that they stopped breeding together and speciated – became separate species.

A smaller rail which can live in either marsh habitat is the Virginia Rail, which resembles a small King Rail, somewhat. While our first two species have the dimensions of a chicken, Virginia Rails are more the size of bantams. They are quite colorful with a



Purple Gallinule , Mom and Chick



King Rail

conspicuous gray face. They're probably in the process of speciating, as the ones out West are dark gray. Unlike the two large rails, these arrive from the North in fall and leave in spring.

Two very small rails live in our marshes, the Yellow Rail in fresh and salt habitat, and the diminutive Black Rail in saltmarshes. Some organizations like Refuges run bug-gies over rail habitat to flush them out for birders, a practice some question. Both species have short bills and other countries call them “crakes.”

Smaller rails immediately make us think of the Sora, a short-billed “crake” that's commonly found in marshy areas with shallows in which to wade. They announce their presence with a loud “eek,” or descending eeks.

Much more plump than the “skinny as a rail” previous birds is the trio of two gallinules and the coot. They each have a different status in our area, some are game birds, one has had ridiculous name changes and none are likely in gifted classes for birds.

Purple Gallinules are summer residents in the Lower Deep South, living largely on lily pads and eating both plant and animal material. Adults have lovely purplish to bluish

plumage. Amazingly, they cross the Gulf, aided by the energy-efficient myoglobin in their dark meat. These last three species have yellow legs.

Common Gallinules have had their name changed to “moorhen” and back and probably should have stayed as moorhen. They climb vegetation less than Purple Gallinules and swim a lot, but have no webbing or lobed toes. We get many more of these in the winter from up North, and some of our summer breeders have multiple generations.

American Coots are scarce breeders in the southern portions of the US, but range through the West almost to Alaska. They and the two gallinules will leave the water and poke around for food along the shores. Their white bill contrasts to the candy corn beak of the gallinules. Their lobed toes allow them to swim fairly well.



Virginia Rail



Sora



Common Gallinule



Yellow Rail

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