



# Where to Find the Toughest Birds During the Great Texas Birding Classic

Seventh Edition - Spring 2010

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## **In Phylogenetic Order:**

**Pacific and Red-throated Loons** - rare and very rare winter residents respectively; Offat's Bayou in Galveston has been a site for both species in some years (most recently 2008). Otherwise either could be searched for, but not expected, on any of the deeper bays and large inland reservoirs. In winter 2009 there was a Red-throated Loon at Choke Canyon Reservoir and a Pacific Loon off Port O'Connor.

**Least Grebe** - fairly common but irregular and sporadic at any given site due to sensitivity to seemingly minor changes in water conditions. They are frequently seen at Estero Llano Grande State Park, Santa Ana NWR, and Sabal Palm Audubon Sanctuary.

**Sulids** (all species of boobies and Northern Gannet) - outside chance of spotting one flying offshore from the beaches. However, gannets move out of the Gulf about the time of the Classic.

**Magnificent Frigatebird** - to be watched for anywhere along the outer coast though they are more common on the Upper Coast than the Central or Lower Coast; East Galveston Bay from Smith's Point or Bolivar Peninsula seems to be a consistent area for birds to fly in to roost from fishing grounds offshore. This species is frequently seen from the Bolivar Ferry.



**Glossy Ibis** - uncommon but increasing all along the coast; most frequently seen with White-faced Ibis on the Upper and especially the Central Coasts. Dark ibis cannot be assumed to be White-faced and must be positively identified. Most findable in Calhoun County rice fields between Port Lavaca, Port O'Connor, and Seadrift on the Central Coast.

**Wood Stork** - outside chance of an early bird anywhere along the coast (usual arrival is June). Examine groups of large birds (pelicans, etc.) soaring, especially on the Upper Coast.

**Muscovy Duck** - Lower Coast Only. Truly wild birds are phenotypically pure (no abnormal feathering), have two rings on the bill, are quite wary, and can sometimes be seen along the Rio Grande from Chapeño downstream to about Roma anywhere that the river can be accessed, but particularly from Salineno. Wild Muscovies are magnificent birds and fly strongly long distances up and down the river. Reports of truly wild Muscovies below Roma cannot be verified. Caution: domesticated birds, many with the typical wild phenotype, occur widely through the LRGV.

**Scoters** - all three scoters can sometimes be seen beyond the breakers along (mostly) the Upper coast at spots like Bolivar Flats, Quintana Beach, etc. Some spring flocks in the past have contained all three species. Mid-April groups have been reported off the beach from the abandoned stretch of Hwy. 87 between High Island and Sabine Pass (this requires four-wheel drive as each subsequent hurricane continues to wash more of the road away). Scan the surf whenever the opportunity presents itself.

**Hook-billed Kite** - Lower Coast only. We consider this to consistently be the most difficult of the Valley specialties to get on the Classic due to its normal habits. Hook-billed Kites along the Rio Grande feed exclusively (as far as we know) on white-shelled tree snails. Since their prey is not mobile, they don't have to move around much to feed and since the snails occur only relatively low on trees and bushes the kites don't have to perch up in view in order to find their food. However, Hook-billed Kites are very much



creatures of habit, and once a daily activity pattern is observed, it is pretty predictable. The kites soar for a few minutes most mornings at the time that the warmed air first starts to rise (judge from the very first vultures seen on the wing). This activity may be changed by abnormal weather conditions (high winds, fog, etc.) and may not occur at all on such days. Finding them any other time of the day is mostly a matter of blind luck. If a roosting site is known the birds can often be seen mornings and evenings going to/from it. Hook-billeds inhabit virtually every tract of woodland of sufficient size that lies on or very near the Rio Grande from Santa Ana NWR (possibly further east) upriver to at least Falcon Dam. They apparently will not cross much cleared land and have never been documented north of the immediate vicinity of the river. Being at the right place at the right time is 99% of finding this species and the pace of the Classic makes this very difficult. Recently, birds have been reported from Anzalduas County Park, Santa Ana NWR, and Bentsen State Park.

**Swallow-tailed Kite** - keep an eye on the sky anywhere for this uncommon migrant. The species nests in low numbers in Texas, but adults can be found soaring usually around mid-day over hardwood bottoms in the extreme southeast corner of the state (e.g. Newton and Orange Counties). Try looking high from bridges over the lower Sabine, Neches, or Trinity Rivers. A Texas Partners in Flight survey found two reliable sites: behind the Walmart in Liberty, Texas, and the Trinity River bridge on Hwy. 90 between Dayton and Liberty.

**Gray Hawk** - Lower Coast only. Birds are present at most sites on the Rio Grande in small numbers. Currently a pair is regularly seen at Anzalduas County Park. Two pairs are in Bentsen State Park near the head of the Rio Grande hiking trail and near the entrance station. They are also regularly seen at Frontera Audubon and Estero Llano Grande State Park.

**Scaled Quail** - Lower Coast only. Listen for these at first light in short, arid thorny scrub in the uplands upstream from Rio Grande City. They may sometimes be seen during the heat of day in the shade of shrubs in Falcon State Park around the camping/picnic areas.



**Yellow Rail** - usually widespread up and down the coast in proper habitat (damp coastal prairies, not marshes) but very difficult to find. Hurricane Ike inundated much this species' habitat on the Upper Coast and there are indications that they are not being found at traditional locations. It is not known whether wintering birds call at night before departing but this would certainly be the easiest way to find them. Otherwise appropriate habitat must be worked on foot in an attempt to flush them, which is difficult even where they are fairly numerous on the Upper Coast.

**Black Rail** - there is a resident population virtually all along the entire coast but it seems to be very local. Whether these are augmented by migratory wintering birds is not known. This species has had the same impacts from Hurricane Ike as Yellow Rail and finding them may be difficult. Indianola on the Central Coast may be a good alternative to the traditional Upper Coast sites. Locating singing (which can occur by night or day) birds is the only way to find them for the Classic since no tape playback is allowed. Caution: mockingbirds are excellent mimics of Black Rails.

**Jaegers** - scan out as far as possible beyond the surf. Pomarine is fairly common offshore, Parasitic is uncommon to rare, and Long-tailed is extremely rare and would require thorough documentation.

**Red-billed Pigeon** - seen flying along the Rio Grande and often perched on snags from Falcon down to at least Fronton. Most commonly reported from Salineno.

**Monk Parakeet** - established on Upper Coast only; recent and rare invader or escapee to other two sections (not countable there unless documentation is accepted by judges - see checklist). There is a colony at Beechnut and Boone Road in west Houston, one on West Belfort near Stella Link, and along SH 146 between Kemah and San Leon along the west shore of Galveston Bay. There is also an active colony at Ave A and Groce in Freeport.



**Green Parakeet** - Lower Coast only. Resident populations occur in Brownsville, Harlingen, McAllen, and Weslaco, and probably the smaller Valley towns as well. A major roost staging area occurs in Brownsville near the international bridge in the palm trees at the former Ramada Inn on Elizabeth Street (now a dormitory for the University of Texas at Brownsville) and another at 10<sup>th</sup> and Dove in McAllen. Otherwise, pairs are spread across towns with nests in dead palm trunks. These are not as time-of-day specific as are Red-crowned Parrots.

**Red-crowned Parrot** - Lower Coast Only. Also occurs in the towns mentioned above. Members of this genus, *Amazona*, fly early in the morning and late in the afternoon to and from feeding areas. During the middle of the day, they feed quietly and are very difficult to locate. Best located in flight when calling, which is frequently. Learn the voice because a number of escaped species of *Amazona* parrot have been reported in the Valley, especially in Brownsville, and distant flying birds may be difficult to identify visually.

**Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl**- Lower Coast Only. The almost no-miss location is the San Miguelito Ranch 10 miles north of Raymondville, but requires prior notification. Contact Leticia Tijerina at 956-369-3118 or e-mail [buny55@aol.com](mailto:buny55@aol.com). There is a fee for access to this site. This species occurs widely in oak woodlands on the large, private ranches along Hwy. 77 between Raymondville and Sarita but birds are very unlikely to be found from the highway and special arrangements must be made with the ranches for entry. Recently a few birds have been in Bentsen State Park where they are best located by voice at dawn or dusk.

**Elf Owl** - Fairly common from Santa Ana NWR upstream to the limits of the Lower Coast region. Territories are very small. Bentsen State Park is traditionally a good place to find them, though they inhabit most similar sites. Santa Ana is not open for night visitation. The gate at Bentsen is closed between 10 pm and 7 am. Check on this.



**Buff-bellied Hummingbird** - is very local on the Central Coast and more widespread on the Lower Coast section. Some specific sites are private homes in Victoria with feeders/flowers, the demonstration garden in Rockport plus private homes there with feeders, the Sabal Palm Sanctuary in Brownsville, Brownsville residential areas with flowering plants/feeders, the Valley Nature Center and Frontera Audubon, both in Weslaco, the headquarters area of Santa Ana NWR and Laguna Atascosa NWR at flowers and feeders, the headquarters area of Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park, the oak woodlands on the large ranches along Hwy. 77 between Sarita and Raymondville at flowering *Erythrina*, Turk's Cap, and epiphytic bromeliads, and feeders and flowers in Sarita.

**Black-chinned Hummingbird** - occur in inland locations in the Central and Lower Coast sections, but are not common or widespread. Any feeders or attractive flowering plants in these areas may attract migrants. Santa Ana NWR headquarters and Anzalduas County Park are regular sites. Feeders or flowers north of Berclair and around Choke Canyon State Park on the Central Coast are good places to check.

**Ringed Kingfisher** - Lower Coast only (regularly). The largest kingfisher on resacas, lakes, etc.; much more local northward. Finding this species shouldn't be a problem.

**Green Kingfisher** - Widespread on the Lower Coast and local at southern sites on the Central Coast, but less common and much more inconspicuous than other kingfishers. Almost any body of freshwater with overhanging vegetation can have these. Frontera Audubon in Weslaco on the Lower Coast is generally a reliable site. Also check Brownsville resacas, Pintail Lake at Santa Ana NWR, and Sabal Palm Audubon Sanctuary in Brownsville.

**Red-headed Woodpecker** - local, mostly well inland, on the Upper Coast. Areas with extensive, large dead trees in the Jones S.F. near Conroe are sites where the species has been reliable in the past. Also found at the entrance to Magnolia Ridge Park, Tyler County, in Sandy Creek Park, Jasper County, in and around Silsbee, Hardin County, at Bear Creek Park in west



Houston, and in Dickinson, Galveston County, in the area bounded by I-45, Benson Bayou, Hwy 517 east and Deats Road.

**Hairy Woodpecker** - widespread but uncommon at inland sites on the Upper Coast, the farther inland the better. Huntsville State Park, near Boykin Springs campground in the Angelina National Forest and Sandy Creek Park on Lake Steinhagen are places where the species can sometimes be seen.

**Red-cockaded Woodpecker** - Upper Coast only. The Jones State Forest off I-45 near Conroe is a reliable and the most southerly site. They occur in the Boykin Springs area of the Angelina National Forest northwest of Jasper. Don't look towards the Big Thicket National Park for this species or the Gore Store Road north of Silsbee (these were former sites). Several groups exist along the entrance road to Boykin Springs campground and the unpaved road to the left at the fork just before the campground. There are at least two well-marked groups just west of the entrance to Ebenezer Park by the Lake Sam Rayburn Spillway.

**Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet** - Lower Coast only. Anzalduas County Park, Santa Ana NWR, and especially Bentsen State Park near the restroom at the northeast entrance to the Acacia loop.

**Empidonax Flycatchers** - Acadian and Least Flycatchers are likely to have arrived by the Classic dates on the Upper and Central Coasts. This year's dates are sufficiently late in the season that Yellow-bellied, Alder (especially), and Willow Flycatchers are possible. The latter species may be more likely on the Lower and southern Central Coast segments.

**Black Phoebe** - Lower Coast only. Black Phoebes are present on the Rio Grande at Anzalduas County Park south of Mission and at the Old Hidalgo Pump House south of McAllen. Also along the Rio Grande at Salineno and seen from the overlook at Roma.

**Rose-throated Becard** - Check the Rare Bird Alert for this elusive species.



**Bell's Vireo** - a migrant might be found anywhere, but is more likely on the Central and Lower coast sections. Breeding birds have become scarce and very local at inland locations. No specific sites are known but this species prefers relatively dense thickets of short trees and shrubs and sings persistently throughout the day, which greatly helps to locate them when present.

**Brown Jay** - Lower Coast only. This species has radically declined in the last few years and there have been no recent reports.

**Tamaulipas Crow** - Lower Coast only. Another species that is in severe decline and there have been no sightings in the last few years.

**American Robin** - an uncommon breeder in wooded residential areas of towns in the forested areas of the Upper Coast (e.g. Beaumont, Houston, Jasper, Silsbee and smaller communities).

**Clay-colored Thrush** - Lower Coast only. This species is widespread with multiple birds frequently seen at Bentsen State Park, near the visitor center at Santa Ana NWR, in Anzalduas County Park, at Frontera Audubon, and near Salineno and Roma along the Rio Grande.

**Black-tailed Gnatcatcher** - Lower Coast only. Uncommon and inconspicuous resident of short, arid scrub on gravelly hills near the Rio Grande from about La Joya upriver to the limits of the lower coast region. Good places to check are the uplands at Santa Margarita Ranch and just north of Zapata.

**Tropical Parula** - Check the Rare Bird Alert for this elusive species.

**Prairie Warbler** - fairly common but very local breeder at inland sites on the Upper Coast in young pine plantations but many will be too young or too old. The exact location of good sites changes from year to year due to the continuing maturation of the young pines. Check (by listening) at plantations with pines in the right age category. Unlike most of the other eastern



warblers, this species is very difficult to find in migrant traps along the coast.

**Swainson's Warbler** - fairly common and widespread breeder in moist bottomland woodlands at inland sites on the Upper Coast, but skulking and sometimes hard to see. There are a great many sites where this species is regular including the Jesse H. Jones County Park near Houston's Hobby Airport, Village Creek State Park, Tyrrell Park in Beaumont, along the road to Massey Lake at Silsbee, and Boykin Springs in the Angelina National Forest. They are also found in medium age pine plantations with dense growth that are a little further along than those that support Prairie Warblers. Gore Store road north of Silsbee is a good place to listen for this species.

**White-collared Seedeater** - Lower Coast only. Recently there has been a territorial pair at the small city park by the public library in Zapata. Other birds are found in Phragmites cane stands along the Rio Grande at San Ygnacio though this site was flooded during the 2008-2009 winter and may not be reliable any more. To reach them, walk down to the banks at the foot of Washington Street. Also Phragmites stands below the scenic overlook on Hwy. 83 six miles north of San Ygnacio usually host a few pair, but they are more distant.

**Bachman's Sparrow** - Upper Coast only. Found in two types of habitats: (1) very young pine plantations (like Prairie Warblers) where the ground cover is mostly knee high grass, and (2) the grassy understory of Longleaf Pine "flat woods" (open stands of Longleaf Pine with very little hardwood understory). The popular area along the Gore Store Road north of Silsbee still has a few Bachman's Sparrows after the clear cutting of most of the Longleaf Pine. Other places to look for this species are along Hwy 69 about a mile south of the headquarters of the Big Thicket National Preserve and on the opposite side of the road. The Sundew Trail in the Hickory Savannah Unit of the Big Thicket (also on Hwy 69) is also a good place.



**Botteri's Sparrow** - Lower Coast only. Fairly common but local in saline coastal prairies from about Riveria south to Brownsville, mostly east of Hwy. 77. Ideal habitat has lots of *Spartina spartinae* (commonly called "zacahuiste" or salt grass) with scattered small mesquite bushes, yuccas, cacti, etc. for singing perches. Perhaps the densest population is found along Hwy. 186 within 10 miles of Port Mansfield, but smaller colonies exist at Laguna Atascosa NWR, east of Brownsville along Boca Chica Road, west of Port Isabel, and near Riveria.

**Black-throated Sparrow** - Lower Coast only. Common in areas of short, arid scrub on uplands from about La Joya upriver to the limits of the Lower Coastal section. This species is best found at dawn when many are singing before sunrise. They can be hard to find during the heat of the day. Falcon State Park and the Salineno cut-off road are good sites for them but they are widespread in proper habitat.

**Seaside Sparrow** - normally common in salt marshes (especially *Spartina patens* marshes) on the Upper and Central coast sections however many sites on the Upper coast were severely damaged by Hurricane Ike. Very local on the Lower Coast due to limited habitat. Formerly good places to look were Anahuac NWR, Texas Point, and the entrance road to Bolivar Flats on the Upper Coast. The status of this species at these sites is unknown at this point. Yacht Basin Road along the Bolivar Peninsula has had positive reports since the hurricane. Also look in the marshes behind the Gulf beach at Matagorda, near Port Lavaca and Magnolia Beach, at Aransas NWR, and at Newcombe Point near Rockport on the Central Coast.

**Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow** - found in the same places that Seaside Sparrows are found, but this species is much less conspicuous, rarely perching up on marsh grasses. By mid to late April these sparrows may be singing before departing northward. When responding to pishing or squeaking, this species usually sneaks up through the dense grasses, peek out at the observer, and, apparently satisfied, slips back out of sight. Formerly the best spots were the taller reeds and grasses at Boliver Flats and



marshes along Yacht Basin Road on Bolivar Peninsula. Currently, the best place for this species is probably Crab Lane in Surfside.

**Le Conte's Sparrow** - there are usually a few still around, mostly on dry coastal prairies with good stands of tall bluestem grasses (*Schizachrium* and *Andropogon*). They are usually found by walking through areas of this kind of grass and watching for the sparrows to flush just ahead, fly weakly over the grass, and drop back down out of sight. Upon alighting they usually run rapidly on the ground and are rarely seen where you saw them disappear.

**Varied Bunting** - Lower Coast only. A scarce and local species in short, arid scrub on gravelly hills near the Rio Grande from, about La Joya upriver to the limits of the Lower Coast section. Also sometimes found on Padre Island as a rare migrant. Has bred in dense scrub along the first several hundred yards of the Bayside Tour loop road at Laguna Atascosa NWR. San Margarita Ranch, and the gravel road a few miles north of Roma.

**Hooded Oriole** - Lower Coast only. This species is making a modest comeback in the lower Valley. Look for it in the oak woodlands or palm groves on the large, private ranches along Hwy. 77, at the rest stop south of Sarita, or in the Kingsville area. Also, look in residential areas where there are many palms. Try the Sabal Palm Sanctuary near Brownsville and the Los Ebanos Preserve (Hwys 77 and 100 north of Brownsville) upriver to about Rio Grande City to the limits of the Lower Coast section. Check also in the towns of Rio Grande City, Roma, Zapata, and San Ygnacio.

**House Finch** - A few at feeders in Beaumont residential areas (probably in other towns as well) on the Upper Coast. Also west of the town of Jasper (Jasper County) 4-5 miles at the Texas Highway Department Building on SH 90. Otherwise uncommon at extreme inland localities (E. Bee County north of Berclair and in or near Choke Canyon State Park on the Central Coast. Recently seen in the Starr County Park near Falcon Dam.

For more information on finding birds and access to the Texas Rare Bird Alerts (RBAs), try the TexBirds archives at:



<http://listserv.uh.edu/archives/texbirds.html>