

Monitoring Birds at Padre Island National Seashore Romey Swanson

Before famously designing Central Park in New York, Frederick Law Olmsted wrote [A Journey through Texas](#) describing his saddle pack journey through the new state. In the book he describes the coastal prairies as a “real sea of wet grass. A dead flat (that) extended as far as the eye can see”. This landscape has changed dramatically since that time. Agriculture is now king where development hasn’t yet crept. But there are remnants of coastal prairie akin to those bygone times scattered throughout the landscape. Padre Island National Seashore (PINS) is one of the few examples open to the public.

In an effort to monitor changes through time, the national park service is working to systematically collect information on the presence and abundance of birds. Gulf Coast Bird Observatory (GCBO) and PINS have partnered to repeatedly monitor over-wintering and breeding birds at 32 points along the island. My involvement as a field biologist began in January this year and I just concluded a series of surveys documenting winter birds of the island’s grasslands. The work was incredibly tedious and a challenge unlike most surveys I have worked. Since most grassland birds are shy, secretive, and mostly silent, this survey required intense area searches meant to flush birds from the grassy depths. The searches were made challenging by the thick matt of thigh-high grasses and sedges often tangling every step.



Despite the exhausting nature of these survey, my efforts were rewarded with a wonderful observations of birds. *Ammodramus* sparrows, particularly Grasshopper and Le Conte’s, were the most common birds I observed. This group of secretive sparrows are so similar in appearance that proper ID requires a combination of behavioral cues and luck; however, a bird sometimes has to be generically reported as “A. sparrow”. This survey was a frustrating study of the *Ammodramus* group and particularly their habit of flushing and immediately diving back into the carpet of grass. At one survey site, I was afforded a good binocular look at one of these sparrows before it dived back into the grass. This look allowed me to see several field marks that keyed out a Henslow’s Sparrow (another type of *Ammodramus* sparrow) which I thought was a wonderful surprise. Savannah Sparrow, Sedge Wren, and Marsh Wren rounded out the list of birds I regularly saw on the survey.

In addition to the more common birds, I had a few amazing observations. On the first day of sampling, I had a Black Rail burst up from underfoot much like a lone dark quail. Anyone familiar with this extremely

secretive bird can imagine my surprise and confusion as I watched this awkward stubby-winged bird flush, fly 15 erratic yards away, and then dissolve back into the grassy tangle. A few days later I had an Aplomado Falcon pointed out to me by a beach birder. The falcon had alighted on a shade shelter in the early morning light and allowed us all wonderful views of its regal glory.



Later that same day, another bird of prey made a surprise appearance. A gorgeous Short-eared Owl confusedly jumped from its ground roost and then landed just a few feet away snapping its head back and forth as if trying to process the offense of my disturbance. After a moment, the owl collected its wits and glided away over the prairie allowing me the opportunity to admire its quiet elegance and beauty.



These surveys will continue in the spring when we'll survey breeding birds of island grasslands. In the meantime, check out www.moderntexasnaturalist.com for more wildlife observations from Padre Island National Seashore.