

Birding the Pandemic

By Martin Hagne



Photo by Mike Williams. The Black-throated Blue Warbler is one of the many bird species migrating through Texas on the way to their breeding territories.

Like most everyone else, the staff of the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory have been working from their homes for the most part of six weeks now. Some of our field projects are exempt, so a few of our biologists are able to go out and roam in the wilds, well away from people. I, for the most part, have been working at home and enjoying neighborhood walks.

Many of my friends who are birders or in the conservation field have noticed something while working from home: Wow, there sure are a lot

more birds in our yards and neighborhoods than we ever saw while working away from home! That's not to say that all of a sudden more birds showed up! It means we finally have a chance to explore and watch our own little areas.

I moved to my place a bit over three years ago now. We have amassed a nice list of birds seen from the "patch" here. Around 138 species up until April of this year. However, I had never been able to look around here during spring migration as its one of the busiest times of the year for the GCBO. That changed this year! And while I'm not at all thankful that we are suffering through a pandemic, it did give me the chance to bird the neighborhood.

In just a few weeks and a handful of walks, 16 species of birds were added to the list seen here. All were migratory bird species moving through on their way up north to breeding territories. The "best" bird (most exiting for me to find here) was a female Black-throated Blue Warbler. It is a somewhat rare species to find in migration on the Texas coast. I only got to see her briefly, but enough to identify her.

The upper Texas coast is known for its famous migratory stop over sites. Birders flock here each spring to see tired migrants landing to rest, drink, feed, and hide out for a short while before continuing north. Luckily a few of these sites have been conserved just for that purpose.

However, so many sites have been developed, cleared, or altered over the years that birds are finding far fewer sites to land on along the immediate coast. The few small remnants of woods

in my neighborhood have become smaller just in the three years I've lived here. These sites are absolutely critical for migration! Without them, exhausted birds will simply drop dead from the sky as they search for suitable cover. Sounds dramatic... but it is a simple sad truth.

I'm glad to see what habitat remains in my neighborhood, but truly worried about what the future holds for migratory birds. We have much work ahead. To try to end this article on a good note... this spring's good weather has been good for the migrating birds. Good weather and north winds allowed them smooth flying without struggling against winds, rain and other storm related weather. I'm wishing them all the best of luck and hoping to see them next year... when I'm not stuck in the house!