

Hidden Bird Life in the Coastal Marshes **by Martin Hagne**

The habitats of the coastal areas along the Gulf of Mexico are diverse with wildlife, and bird species in particular are very abundant. From the ever-present gulls to the much less noticed wrens, the ancient looking Brown Pelican and the tall and stately Great Blue Heron. Just a bit further inland lives a whole different group of birds such as the raptors and songbirds. This huge species diversity is due to the several “layers” of habitat types that starts with the ocean at the Gulf and moves inland from there.

It goes something like this: the ocean waters of the Gulf of Mexico, the beach shoreline, the sand dunes, the coastal marshes and wetlands, the coastal prairies, and eventually the bottomland forests. The coastal marshes and wetlands, coastal prairies, and bottomland forests are also intersected by numerous bayous, sloughs, and rivers adding more habitat types. No wonder our birdlife is so diverse.

One type of habitat that is less known is the coastal marshes and wetlands. Unless you are a biologist or you birdwatch, hunt, or explore, there is not much reason to visit such places. They may even look uninviting, and most are privately owned and off-limits. But in them live many bird species that thrive in these harsh environments.

As you move inland, the salty coastal environment is eventually mixed with fresh water from the bayous, rivers and rainfall. Here the habitat changes into the freshwater marshes with ponds and winding bayous. The freshwater and slight elevation change allows for an entirely different plant life to thrive. The dominant species are smooth cordgrass and sea ox-eye daisy. Others include sedges, rushes, grasses, and small woody shrubs.

As hostile as this environment seems, many bird species call it home. These are often very secretive birds, never leaving the confines of the marshy land and very thick plant life which they use for cover. With a little luck and knowledge, you can spy some of the following species.

Sedge Wrens and Marsh Wrens are some of the tiniest birds here. They sport cryptic brown plumages and flit deep in the grasses, at times landing in the open for a brief glimpse. As with most of these coastal marsh birds they are best detected when they call or sing. There are several species of rails here also. In sized order they are King, Clapper, Virginia, Sora, Yellow, and Black Rail as the smallest. The last two are super hard to find as they are the most secretive. Very few birders ever get to add them to their life list of birds seen.

A few sparrows also call these places home. Nelson’s Sparrow and Seaside Sparrow are about as cryptic as wrens and behave much the same. Once again, the call alerts you to their presence. One warbler, the Common Yellowthroat, is fairly common in these environs and it can be seen along the edges near water at times. Even with it being common and quite colorful, it can be hard to find due its cryptic and skulking behaviors.

These are just a few of the many bird species that thrive in the coastal marshes, which just shows how diverse such habitats are. With increasing development, we humans are encroaching into these “bad lands” along the coast. As we study these birds at the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory we see less and less suitable habitat for them, and it’s important to conserve large tracts of these lands for our avian friends, and all the other important creatures, living an already tough life.