Full Detailed Itinerary - The Upper Texas Coast and Hill Country

Day 1: Arrival in Houston; transfer to High Island

Following an afternoon meet up (1:00pm) at Houston's George Bush Intercontinental Airport (IAH), we will drive directly to High Island for a short introduction to the migrants in town. This involves a 90-mile drive southeast to the coast. The general patterns of spring migration on the Upper Texas Coast mean that birds tend to arrive in the greatest numbers and variety in the afternoons. So, our very first visit we will be "Prime Time". There are three principal songbird sanctuaries on High Island: Houston Audubon's Boy Scout Woods and Smith Oaks Sanctuaries, and the Texas Ornithological Society's Hooks Woods Bird Sanctuary. These are all within a mile of each other, making them easily and quickly combined when needed. The "head of operations" is the kiosk in Boy Scout Woods/Smith Oaks, where Houston Audubon keeps track of sightings, and we'll be sure to drop in there to get our collectable entrance patches, and to find out where is best for us to go. Whatever the news, we are sure to pick up some of our first migrant songbirds, likely to include orioles, warblers, vireos, buntings, and tanagers too. At the end of the day, we will check into our hotel in the nearby town of Winnie, where we will be based for the first three nights of the tour, and the final two nights of the tour again, (with a single night in Jasper sandwiched in between).

Day 2: Anahuac NWR and High Island (including Smith Oaks Rookery)

Having already arrived and sampled some songbird migrants the evening before, we will shift our focus this morning to nearby freshwater wetlands. Anahuac NWR will be our main destination, along with surrounding agricultural areas, like rice fields, which can host "grasspipers" and other freshwater-loving shorebirds, such as Upland and Pectoral Sandpipers, American Golden-Plover, and Whimbrel, while the fence lines and posts provide perches for Crested Caracaras, Eastern Kingbirds, Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, Eastern Meadowlarks, Loggerhead Shrikes, and sometimes Dickcissels. Within Anahuac, our attention will be on the marshes around Shoveler Pond, which host Fulvous Whistling-Duck, Mottled Duck, Purple Gallinule, King Rail, Glossy, White and White-faced Ibises, American and Least Bitterns, Marsh and Sedge Wrens, and Swamp Sparrow. Sometimes the surrounding agricultural landscapes are graced with White-tailed Kites and White-tailed or Swainson's Hawks on the wing overhead. The patterns of migratory flights means that the biggest shift in migrants present in the coastal migrant traps like High Island and Sabine Woods are usually noted in the afternoon, when most of them typically touch down, following their 600-mile journey from the tropics across the Gulf of Mexico. By covering some of the other sites in the mornings, we leave the afternoons free to gorge on the new migrants around town, at the very peak time for international arrivals of migrants, such as warblers, nighthawks, cuckoos, gnatcatchers, hummingbirds, vireos, raptors, thrushes, kingbirds and other flycatchers, swifts, swallows, catbirds, buntings, tanagers, orioles, and grosbeaks. The exact locations for the afternoon migrant birding will be flexible, involving either multiple sanctuaries in High Island (such as TOS Hooks Woods, and HAS Boy Scout Woods and HAS Smith Oaks), or a jaunt further afield to the more easterly-lying TOS Sabine Woods. While we have mentioned High Island as a migrant trap, "trapping" migrants as they look for shelter following their trans-Gulf crossing, but this is not all this small town offers. Smith Oaks Sanctuary also has Claybottom Pond, where large waterbirds are breeding during this season, and deserve at least one prolonged visit during our tour. A U-shaped island provides vital sanctuary for nesting herons, egrets, and spoonbills, and the pond in general is a year-round site for

roosting waterbirds, with official counts of over 10,000 birds recorded on some evenings! The main nesting species are Great and Snowy Egrets, with brightened facial skin in this breeding season, Little Blue and Tricolored Herons, Roseate Spoonbill, and Neotropic Cormorant. There are a series of excellent viewing platforms and a canopy walkway to not only see them up close, but to photograph them too. This is a long-time hang out for local photographers, who come each year to shoot birds wielding sticks for their recently built nests, neighboring nesters fighting with each other, and take in the fine plumes of egrets as they "show-of" during elaborate spring displays. The rookery is inside of the critical oak woodlot, and so typically it is best to search for migrant songbirds first, then finish up at the rookery, post-migrant observations. We will return to the town of Winnie for the night.

Day 3: Bolivar Peninsula and Sabine Woods

For the morning, our focus will be the masses of coastal birds that stream through the Bolivar Peninsula at this time of spring. This 27-mile-long peninsula juts out southwest from High Island, culminating at the Houston Audubon Bolivar Flats Shorebird Sanctuary, just shy of the ferry crossing over to the city of Galveston. Bolivar Flats is one of the best shorebirding sites in all of the continental United States and is recognized for its importance as a Globally Important Bird Area, and an International site in the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network. Thousands of shorebirds and other coastal birds winter there, and many of these are still around in spring, while others use the site as a stopover as they move northwards. Thus, there is a heady mix of species, in epic numbers, congregating on the various sites on the peninsula at this time. These places can be like a one-stop-shop for shorebirds, with many species congregated together, excellent for viewing, photography, and learning how to identify the species with the aid of your tour leader. Being surrounded by thousands of shorebirds and waterbirds enthusiastically feeding away, with little regard for your presence, is but one of the great experiences of this trip. One of the most spectacular sights in spring are the hordes of wintering American Avocets, now with rust-colored heads in breeding dress, and often numbering up to 10,000 birds in gigantic flocks feverishly feeding on the edge of the Gulf of Mexico, while gangly Reddish Egrets, American White Pelicans, and Marbled Godwits stand alongside. A staggering 35 species of shorebird are regularly recorded each spring on the peninsula, including American Oystercatcher, Wilson's, Piping, and Snowy Plovers, Red Knot, Long-billed Curlew, and thousands of smaller sandpipers or "peeps". While shorebirds are an inevitable drawcard and focus, plentiful other coastal birds will also entertain us, such as terns and gulls, with nearly twenty species possible, including Black Skimmer, and Black, Least, and Gull-billed Terns. By this time, some of these are settling in to breed, with terns like Royal and Sandwich often seen excitedly mating or passing presents of fish to each other during spring courtship. In the afternoon, we will likely be back on songbird watch, checking out some coastal woodlots in High Island or Sabine Woods for the latest arrivals.

Day 4: Eastern Texas Pineywoods

This part of the state contains an extensive area of pine woods, mixed pine-hardwood forests, pine plantations, lakes, and reservoirs. This day will feel unlike any other on the tour, as we go 100 miles north of our base, briefly breaking our stay there with a one-night stopover in the town of Jasper, in the heart of Pineywoods Country. The avian targets are the specialties of this southern habitat type, such as the endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker, cute little Brown-headed Nuthatch, and the secretive Bachman's Sparrow. The backup cast is no less appealing, Swallow-tailed Kite and Swainson's Warbler both breed locally. Migrating Mississippi Kites are often noted drifting across the skies. Many of these species are at the very western edge of their US ranges here. We'll head out very early, to ensure we arrive at sites like Angelina National Forest for dawn, when Bachman's Sparrows are most vocal and Red-cockaded Woodpeckers at their most active. Later, we will check an area of mixed, swampy woods, where Swainson's Warblers breed in the understory thickets, along with a host of other "southern warblers", including

Prothonotary, Hooded, and Yellow-throated Warblers. We'll also check riparian areas for Louisiana Waterthrushes. This is the attraction of a day in these Pineywoods, getting specialties, but also getting further chances at finding some southern-breeding warblers that may have eluded us on the coast. This rings true for Prairie Warbler too, a tricky coastal species, but easy to find among the young pine plantations near Jasper, as are Yellow-breasted Chats, now no longer considered a warbler, but sitting more suitably within a family all of their own. Other avian attractions include locally breeding Bald Eagles, Acadian Flycatchers, and a host of woodpeckers, including seven species, such as the ever-impressive Pileated and Red-headed Woodpeckers, Wood Ducks, and other waterbirds on the various large lakes and reservoirs that pock the region. A single night will be spent in Jasper, before we head back to the Upper Texas Coast for one final migration push.

Day 5: Eastern Texas Pineywoods to High Island

After some final time during the morning around Pineywoods country, we will make our way south back to the coast, and High Island, in time for afternoon migrant arrivals.

Day 6: Winnie to Houston for DEPARTURES

After breakfast and some brief, final birding, we will head west back to Houston, dropping off those who choose not to join the Hill Country Extension (the usual drop-off time is around 10:30am-11am). Folks who are continuing on the extension, shall drive west to Kerrville for the night.

Tour Extension 1

Day 1 (day 6 of the main tour): Houston to Kerrville

On this day we head west from the Upper Texas Coast, passing through Houston as we do so (and dropping non-extension participants off at the airport), and heading directly for Kerrville, our base for one night. There should be enough time to stop for some roadside birds, such as Golden-fronted and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers, and Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay along the way.

Day 2: Kerr WMA, Lost Maples, and the Rio Frio Bat Cave

This might well rank as one of the best days of the entire tour. We'll start out among the oaks and junipers of the Kerr Wildlife Management Area, on the Edwards Plateau of the Hill Country. Within patchy oak habitat, the Black-capped Vireo occurs, and where there is nice mix of oak species and Ash Juniper, is the prime breeding environment for the Golden-cheeked Warbler. These will of course, be our main target, but within the same area, we may also find other trip additions, like Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Orange-crowned Warbler, Black-crested Titmouse, or Bushtit.
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Later in the morning, we will head out to one of the Hill Country's most beautiful birding settings, Lost Maples State Natural Area. The scenic limestone hills and canyons of this wonderful, protected area are sprinkled with Ashe Junipers, Mesquite, Bigtooth Maples, Laurels, and Prickly Pears. It is home to 9 species of vireo (including Black-capped, Bell's and Hutton's), 6 species of oriole, (including Scott's), and is a good site for breeding Louisiana Waterthrsuh. There are also some feeders on site. Lost Maples' bird list exceeds 250 species, so we'll have plenty to look at, both in terms of birds and surroundings, which will be in sharp contrast to the flatlands of the Upper Texas Coast which we saw on the main tour.
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We'll spend the end of the day observing one of the greatest wildlife experiences in Texas: the late afternoon emergence of 10 million or so Mexican Free-tailed Bats, from their cave at Rio Frio, near the town of Concan. (We will be positioned in the open, outside their lair, which is also home to Cave Swallows). As the bats head out for the night, raptors feverishly descend on them, excited by a sky packed with prey. Zone-tailed, Red-tailed, Red-shouldered, Swainson's and Harris's Hawks have all been noted here preying on the bats, along with American Kestrels and Peregrine Falcons. The surrounding landscape is also home to Canyon and Rock Wrens. It will ensure an epic end to a landmark day! The night will be spent in the nearby town of Uvalde, 20 minutes from the caves.
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Day 3: Uvalde and Concan to Houston

Our final day of birding will involve checking two nearby areas, Uvalde and Concan, before making our way back east to Houston. Uvalde offers hints of the Texas of the Rio Grande Valley further south, with wetlands and wooded areas holding species like Great Kiskadee, Green Jay, Audubon's Oriole, Vermilion Flycatcher, and Green Kingfisher. Other notable local species include, Northern Bobwhite, Couch's Kingbird, Black Phoebe, Curve-billed and Long-billed Thrashers, Olive Sparrow, Cactus Wren, and Pyrrhuloxia. Concan is very different, the feeders and surrounds offer species like Black-chinned Hummingbird, Ash-throated and Brown-crested Flycatchers, Verdin, Lesser Goldfinch, Lark and Black-throated Sparrows, Canyon Towhee, and Canyon Wren. Occasionally, Tropical Parula is also found in this area.

After a final bumper morning of the tour, we will head back to Houston for the final night of the tour.

Day 4: DEPARTURES from Houston

This is merely a departure day, so you are free to depart when you like, there is no birding on this day. You will be transferred to George Bush Intercontinental Airport by way of airport shuttle from our hotel. Breakfast on this day is the last meal of the tour (unless you leave before they start serving this).

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