



# Winging It

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## The Road to Lafayette: Birding in South-central and Southwestern Louisiana

BY JAY V. HUNER AND MICHAEL J. MUSUMECHÉ

Southern Cameron Parish has been Louisiana's premier migration birding locale for decades, and the Louisiana Ornithological Society (LOS) has held its fall and spring meetings there for many years. Vagrants such as Black-whiskered Vireo can usually be counted on to add to the excitement of the meetings. In 2005, the devastation caused by Hurricane Rita forced LOS to cancel its fall meeting and to relocate both 2006 gatherings to Grand Isle, a barrier island with coastal oak forest immediately south of New Orleans on the eastern side of the state.

By late March of 2006, access to southern Cameron Parish was no longer restricted, and Louisiana birders began to return to the area in their former numbers. Though some sites had been heavily damaged by the hurricane surge, the springtime vegetation was greening up. Certain resident birds, however, seemed difficult to find, and some species were obviously present in only low numbers. Encouragingly, birders found that spring migrants still appeared in good numbers when conditions were "favorable" for fallouts, and it is clear that southern Cameron Parish continues to represent a desirable destination for birders during migration. The 2007 Convention of the American Birding Association, to be held in Lafayette, will offer a

unique opportunity for birders to experience firsthand the resilience of nature in this fascinating landscape, and to enjoy the migrant birds that rely so closely on these crucial habitats.

Year-round birding opportunities abound in south-central and southwestern Louisiana, a fact well known to the region's birding cadre but still a secret to birders from out of state. The region is located east of the Sabine River in the shadow of southeastern Texas's world-famous beaches, coastal woods, marshes, and piney woods. A comparison of big day efforts and birding festival lists in each state shows that roughly the same numbers and species of birds appear on both sides of the political boundary. Coastal Cameron Parish, in extreme southwestern Louisiana, boasts a list of more than 350 species, a large proportion of the state's total.

### *Cheniers and Coastal Plain*

Louisiana's coastal cheniers are ancient oak-covered beach ridges that offer some of the best migration birding in the northern Gulf of Mexico region. Beyond the coastal marshes and cypress-tupelo swamps, over half a million acres of agricultural wetlands produce rice and crawfish and provide habitats attracting waterfowl, Wood Storks, Roseate Spoonbills, ibises, herons and egrets, coots, rails, gallinules, gulls, terns, grebes, and shorebirds. Some of the finest shorebird activity in the region occurs in these shallow

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Cameron Parish, Louisiana. Photo © Dave Patton.

moist habitats in April and May and again in July and August.

As one moves northward from the coastal prairies, the hilly, pine-dominated Gulf Coastal Plain offers additional birding opportunities. Depending on the time of year, specialty birds such as Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Brown-headed Nuthatch, and Bachman's and Henslow's Sparrows can be located. A well-planned Big Day could include a start in the Alexandria area in mid-state or the Leesville area to the west near the Texas border, where pinewood specialties can be sought. The trip could continue southward towards Cameron's beaches and cheniers, through agricultural fields and wetlands and cypress-tupelo swamps along the area's rivers such as the Calcasieu, Mermentau, and Sabine. Such a Big Day adventure could generate around 200 species.

### ***Bottomland Hardwoods***

South-central Louisiana birding takes one east from Texas to the Atchafalaya Basin, North America's last major bottomland hardwood forest. Roads through the area offer excellent opportunities to bird in the Indian Bayou (federal) and Sherburne wildlife areas between Lafayette and Baton Rouge, including Sherburne Wildlife Management Area (state), Bayou Des Ourses (federal), and Atchafalaya National Wildlife Refuge (federal). Spring and summer specialties here include Wood Stork, Swallow-tailed Kite, and Swainson's Warbler.

Along LA 975 between I-10 and US 190, the diversity and concentration of breeding neotropical songbirds is so great that the area's annual Breeding Bird Survey usually falls in the top ten of those in all of North

America, a distinction recognized by the annual Neotropical Songbird Tour held in mid-May. "Neotrops" found in this vast area include Yellow-billed Cuckoo; Acadian and Great Crested Flycatchers; White-eyed, Yellow-throated, and Red-eyed Vireos; Wood Thrush; Northern Parula, American Redstart, Common Yellowthroat, Yellow-breasted Chat, and Prothonotary, Swainson's, Kentucky, and Hooded Warblers; and Indigo and Painted Buntings, among many others.

Another annual event, mid-July's Wood Stork Festival, brings birders to the South Farm complex on the east side of the Sherburne wildlife area. This unit consists of shallow impoundments that, when drained, attract thousands of wading birds, including Wood Storks and Roseate Spoonbills, along with a wide variety of migrant shorebirds. A Ruff was reported here in July 2006. Festival bird lists run to 75-85 species, including Swallow-tailed Kites and numerous songbirds in adjacent riparian areas.

In the Morgan City area to the south, where the Atchafalaya Basin meets the Gulf, several hundred pairs of breeding southern Bald Eagles are present from October to April. These magnificent raptors can be seen throughout the day from LA 70 along the shores of Lake Palourde. The nearby Brownell Memorial Park is the focal point of the Eagle Festival held each year in early February.

### ***Lafayette***

Lafayette is an hour's drive to the west of Morgan City. Birders who visit in February can take advantage of opportunities to see a surprising variety of wintering hummingbirds, including Buff-bellied, Black-chinned, and Rufous/Allen's Hummingbirds, all of which occur regularly. In the last few years, Broad-billed, Anna's,



Wood Storks. Photo © Michael Musumeche.

Calliope, and Broad-tailed Hummingbirds have also turned up each winter. Several years ago, a Green Violet-ear attracted several hundred visitors to a backyard feeding station.

Nearby, birders can visit The Nature Conservancy's Cypress Island Preserve. Locals refer to the site as Lake Martin, which is the name of the central lake in the preserve. One of the destinations for this year's ABA Convention, this fine area hosts over 200 species of birds each year. It has been the site of a large heronry with thousands of waders, including Roseate Spoonbills, nesting as close as 15 yards from the public road on the preserve's south-east side.

### *America's Wetland Birding Trail*

America's Wetland Birding Trail ([www.louisianatravel.com/explore/outdoors/birding/](http://www.louisianatravel.com/explore/outdoors/birding/)) brings together a number of outstanding birding venues in south-central and southwestern Louisiana. Particularly interesting are routes through agricultural areas and wetlands in Vermilion and Jefferson Davis Parishes, from Abbeville westward to the Jennings area. Over 300,000 acres of crawfish ponds and rice fields attract large numbers of wintering waterbirds to take advantage of the abundant aquatic prey. This is especially convenient for birders without boats to visit the rapidly vanishing adjacent coastal wetlands.

Notable species found here include Black-bellied and Fulvous Whistling-Ducks, Mottled Duck, Bonaparte's Gull, and Short-eared Owl. Other birds that can be found in impressive numbers during spring and fall migrations include plovers, stilts, avocets, yellowlegs, Whimbrel, godwits, Willet, Ruddy Turnstone, Dunlin, Long-billed Dowitcher, and Wilson's Phalarope. Curlew Sandpiper and Ruff have been reported irregularly through the years, along with an occasional Little Gull.

When visiting sites along America's Wetlands Birding Trail or the Creole Nature Trail, birders must be aware that there are no established viewing areas, so birds must be viewed from road shoulders and turnoffs, most of which are entrances to private property including agricultural fields, oil field facilities, and other private property. All private property in Louisiana is "posted," whether signs are present or not, and may be entered only with the permission of the landowner.

### *Lacassine and Cameron Prairie NWRs*

Continuing westward from the Jennings area, most birders will opt to take LA 14 toward Cameron and Lake Charles. Immediately past Lake Arthur, birders arrive at Lacassine National Wildlife Refuge. The Lacassine pools are huge, shallow impoundments adjacent to coastal marshes that host thousands of waterfowl each winter. These riparian areas can be great sites for wintering songbirds, with regular reports of Vermilion Flycatchers, and for neotropical migrants during migration. Lacassine was spared the fury of Hurricane Rita's surge, making it a very popular birding

venue during the winter of 2005-06. From mid-spring through summer, birders can be assured of finding Purple Gallinules at the pools.

Past Lacassine NWR, LA 14 intersects LA 27, and travelers can turn south toward the coast and Cameron Prairie NWR. Like Lacassine, Cameron Prairie was also passed over by Rita and has remained an excellent birding site. The Pintail Drive auto-birding trail is well worth a visit, as is the museum at the refuge's nearby headquarters. Birders should be on the lookout for Sandhill Cranes on the drive to the refuge during the winter months and watch for Crested Caracaras throughout the year on Pintail Drive.

South of Cameron Prairie NWR, at the community of Creole, LA 27 intersects LA 82, the coastal route from Abbeville to Cameron; from here, go east to Grand Chenier or west to Cameron. In the past, birders often took LA 82 from Abbeville through the coastal marshes to Cameron. The storm surge from Hurricane Rita, however, swept up to and across LA 82 from just



Purple Gallinules. Photo © Michael Musumeche.

west of Abbeville all the way to the Louisiana-Texas border. Businesses and homes were swept away, flattened, or heavily damaged. Salt water severely damaged agricultural wetlands and brackish and fresh marshes. Habitat damage was exacerbated because salt water remained for many weeks; to make matters worse, a persistent drought meant that there was no flushing freshwater flow.

Happily, significant rain events began again in the fall of 2006, and have continued into early 2007. The natural flushing this rain has provided has resulted in noticeable improvements to the valuable fish and wildlife habitat of Cameron County.

*Jay Huner retired in 2005 as Director of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette's Crawfish Research Center, where his studies included the interaction between waterbirds and agricultural wetlands. A retired biology teacher, Mike Musumeche has conducted population studies over many years of birds in agricultural/wetland habitats.*