

# Birding Texas and winter birds of the Pacific Ocean

Texas and Washington State are two diverse regions of the United States for wintering wildfowl and other species. We have combined the two states to ensure the maximum number of wintering birds from the High Arctic and Canada. Our tour starts with a visit to Rockport. The variety of habitat from mudflats to scrub and shallow waters attracts a huge variety of birds. Our main target is the internationally threatened Whooping Crane. We then move on to another hot spot at Galveston Island where the first northward bound shorebirds congregate. We should see Marbled Godwit, American Avocet and a selection of rails and grass-loving waders. Anahuac Reserve is close to Galveston, another area for winter birds. We should see a fine selection of wildfowl, waders and the localised race of Seaside Sparrow. Brazoria County is an excellent region for wintering Snow Geese, Sandhill Crane and birds of prey. After our stay in Texas, we head northwest to Seattle and Washington State. Winters here are mild due to the nearby Pacific Ocean. Concentrations of divers, seaducks and raptors can be impressive in Puget Sound adjacent to the Olympic Peninsula. We search for specialities including White-billed Diver, Gyr Falcon, Snowy Owl and Rock Sandpiper. The coastline of Washington State often has unusual species present in January. We also visit the Skagit River delta and nearby Cascade Mountains. A visit is also planned to Point Roberts and Reifel Bird Reserve which are situated just over the Canadian border.

**Day 1:** We have a flight to Houston in Texas. On arrival we transfer to Rockport for a three-night stay.

**Day 2:** The motel in Rockport is set amid a stand of oaks interspersed with scrub attracting wintering birds. Species regularly occur here include Mourning and Inca Doves, Vermilion Flycatcher, Bewick's Wren, White-eyed Vireo, and Painted Bunting. After breakfast we travel to Kingsville, located south of Corpus Christi. Kingsville offers us several specialised species of coastal Texas. Our first birding destination is a recreational park offering some exceptional birds of woodland and scrub. Resident species include Harris's and White-tailed Hawk, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Great Kiskadee, Green Jay, Long-billed Thrasher, Pyrrhuloxia and Orange-crowned and Yellow-rumped Warblers. A nearby golf and country club often has Greater Roadrunner, Ladder-backed Woodpecker and wintering Couch's Kingbird and White-eyed Vireo, Lincoln's and Vesper Sparrows. On our return to

## Dates

Saturday January 7th - Saturday  
January 21st 2023

Leader: Mark Finn

Group size: 8

Birds: 210-230

Rockport we can check Oso Bay in Corpus Christi. A boardwalk provides easy access and views across the bay for egrets, herons and shorebirds. We can expect close views of Black-winged Stilt, Willet, Marbled Godwit, Long-billed Curlew, Long-billed Dowitcher and Stilt, Western and Least Sandpipers, Roseate Spoonbill and Reddish Egrets.

**Day 3:** An early start is necessary today as we take a boat trip into Aransas Bay. This area holds all but a few of the world's remaining Whooping Cranes. Other species present include Brown and American White Pelicans, Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead,



### Striated Heron

Laughing Gull, Forster's, Royal and Caspian Terns. When we return from our boat trip, we explore Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. The entrance road often has Couch's Kingbird, Common Ground-dove and Green-tailed and Eastern Towhees. There are several trails within the refuge. The Rail Trail attracts American Bittern, Least and Pied-billed Grebes, Olivaceous Cormorant, Anhinga, wildfowl, Sora and Clapper Rails. The trail winds through lightly wooded areas with wintering Hermit Thrush, Eastern Phoebe, American Redstart, Black and White Warbler, White-throated Sparrow and Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers in residence. As we travel around the refuge, dykes and sloughs may reveal the presence of American White and White-faced Ibis and shorebirds. Resident species at Aransas include Red-tailed Hawk, Wild Turkey, Inca Dove, Black-crested Titmouse, White-eyed Vireo and Eastern Meadowlark.

**Day 4:** Before leaving Rockport we check coastal locations for wintering shorebirds. We should locate Snowy, Piping and Grey Plovers, Long-billed Curlew, Short-billed

Dowitcher and American Avocet. Black-necked Grebe, Brown and American White Pelicans, Redhead, Canvasback, American Wigeon and Black-bellied Whistling-duck are often offshore. Later in the morning we stop at Port Lavaca. En route we pass prairie-like habitats with American Kestrel, Crested Caracara, Loggerhead Shrike, Chipping, Field, Fox, Swamp, Song and White-throated Sparrows. Port Lavaca itself has a raised boardwalk above a salt-water marsh which eventually gives views over the Gulf of Mexico. Several interesting species are present including Clapper and Virginia Rails and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow. Offshore waters have Laughing and Ring-billed Gulls, Forster's Tern and Common Goldeneye. Later in the day, we travel along the Gulf of Mexico to Galveston for a two-night stay. On arrival we check out West Galveston Island, an area of mudflats and grassland. This is a good place for Long-billed Curlew, Clapper Rails and a wide range of wildfowl and shorebirds.

**Day 5:** We start today with a ferry crossing to the Bolivar Peninsula and Rollover



**Red-breasted Nuthatch** *Photo: Simon Papps*

Pass, an excellent site for shorebirds and terns. Our first birding stop is at Port Travis where the short grass may hold American Golden Plover, American Pipit and Purple Martins. The entrance bushes sometimes harbour Northern Parula and Grey Catbird. Rollover Pass is an exceptional place for waterbirds including Reddish Egret, American Avocet, Grey and Piping Plovers, American Oystercatcher, Black Skimmer, Bonaparte's and Laughing Gulls, Royal, Caspian and Forster's Terns. The beach itself may have Horned Lark and, in isolated trees, White-tailed Kites. High Island usually comes to prominence during April but we can check for early migrants. We may find Louisiana Waterthrush, Field Sparrow, Carolina Wren, Brown Thrasher, Brown Creeper and Ruby-crowned Kinglet. Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge is our final destination today, one of the best birding spots in coastal Texas. The refuge is primarily managed for wintering ducks and

geese. On previous visits we have recorded Great Blue, Little Blue and Tricoloured Herons, American Bittern, White-fronted and Snow Geese, Green-winged, Blue-winged and Cinnamon Teals, Lesser Scaup, Sandhill Crane, Sora Rail, Belted Kingfisher and Swamp Sparrow. An area of rice fields may have wintering Pectoral, Western and Least Sandpipers plus hundreds of Boat-tailed Grackles.

**Day 6:** Today we start with a visit to Surfside, a noted haunt of shorebirds and terns. We can expect American Avocet, Kentish Plover, Caspian and Royal Terns. Brazoria National Wildlife Refuge, an area of marshes, grasslands and spartina grass, is nearby. We have a chance of finding the rare Masked Duck in among the commoner wildfowl. Wetlands here attract waterbirds including Yellow-crowned Night-heron, Tricoloured Heron, Blue-winged Teal, American White and White-faced Ibis,



### American Kestrel

Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Short and Long-billed Dowitchers and Marbled Godwit. Adjacent reedbeds may provide us with Common Yellowthroat and Sedge Wren whilst the grassy verges often have Palm Warblers and Sprague's Pipits. Surrounding fields are home to Snow and, occasionally, Ross's Geese and Sandhill Cranes. Brazos State Park, near Stafford, has huge concentrations of Red-winged and Brewer's Blackbirds, Great-tailed and Common Grackles and Brown-headed Cowbirds coming into roost. We walk around a large inland lake with old, rotting trees which may provide us with Pileated and Red-bellied Woodpeckers, Carolina Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse and perhaps an overwintering Nashville Warbler. Transfer to Houston for a one-night stay.

**Day 7:** After breakfast, we travel to Houston International Airport for our internal flight to Seattle in the Pacific Northwest. On arrival

we drive north to Anacortes for a five-night stay.

**Day 8:** This morning we travel inland towards Padilla Bay, a haven for wildfowl. Flooded fields en route usually have Trumpeter and Tundra Swans and observant Red-tailed Hawks sitting in stunted trees. On our arrival at Padilla Bay, we can expect Great Northern Divers, Bald Eagle, Green-winged Teal, American Wigeon, Bufflehead and Glaucous-winged Gulls. A trail running through a nearby nature centre reveal our first Dark-eyed Juncos of the Oregon race. Later in the morning, we head towards the Cascade Mountains and the settlements of Rockport and Marblemount situated on the Skagit River. Mature woodlands and gardens attract birds from harsh winter weather in the Cascade Mountains down to mild river valleys. Species we may locate include American Dipper, Goosander, Hairy and





**Laughing Gull**

Downy Woodpeckers, Northern Flicker, Mountain and Chestnut-backed Chickadees, Red-breasted and White-breasted Nuthatches, Purple Finch, Steller's Jay, Pine Siskin and Spotted Towhee. The highlight of the day, however, should be Bald Eagles roosting and fishing along the Skagit River.

**Day 9:** Today we drive to the ferry terminal and cross to Lopez Island in the San Juan Islands. At the terminal we should see our first Northwestern Crows. On the crossing itself we may locate Great Northern and Pacific Divers, Pelagic Cormorant, Pigeon and Common Guillemot, Marbled Murrelet, Rhinoceros Auklet and Thayer's Gulls. Lopez is like stepping back in time to an isolated country community with small farmsteads, woodlands and lakes. Sheltered bays around the island hold Horned, Red-necked and Western Grebes, Greater and Lesser Scaup, Harlequin Duck, Surf Scoter, Bufflehead, Hooded and Red-breasted and Common Mergansers and a wide range of ducks. We check feeders for Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Fox Sparrow and perhaps a wintering Rufous Hummingbird. Raptors include Red-tailed Hawk and Peregrine Falcon. Stands of trees attract Pileated Woodpecker, Brown Creeper, Varied Thrush, Golden-crowned and Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Bushtit, Song, Golden-crowned and Lincoln's Sparrows. On our return to Anacortes, we have a chance of observing Sea Otters and Orcas which are resident around the islands. On

our arrival back in Anacortes, we visit a park for where wintering Prairie Falcons are sometimes seen.

**Day 10:** Point Roberts is our destination today, an enclave of the United States beyond the Canadian border. The beach at Point Roberts offers close views of divers, Western Grebe, Surf, White-winged and Black Scoters and Harlequin and Long-tailed Ducks. It is also a reliable site for Barrow's Goldeneye. Reifel Bird Sanctuary is just inside Canada with the city of Vancouver clearly visible on the horizon. Entrance fields usually hold thousands of Snow Geese and, on occasions, Snowy and Short-eared Owls. Walking around Reifel allows close views of Wood Duck, American Wigeon, Sandhill Crane, and Tree and Violet-green Swallows. Careful scanning of trees should reveal roosting Northern Saw-whet and Long-eared Owls and Purple Finch. Other interesting species present include the most northerly wintering Black-crowned Night-herons in North America.

**Day 11:** Our first destination is Deception Pass, a beautiful area overlooking the Straits of San Juan de Fuca. Offshore waters are a traditional staging point for migrant waterbirds. Red-throated and Pacific Divers can be numerous with smaller numbers of Pigeon Guillemot, Black-bellied Brent Goose and Surf Scoters. A walk in and around mature stands of conifers should yield Varied Thrush, California

Quail, Hutton's Vireo and the pacific race of Hairy Woodpecker. After lunch we can visit Fir Island with its thousands of wintering Snow Geese against a picturesque snow-capped backdrop. The geese are disturbed on a regular basis by Northern Harrier, Red-tailed Hawk and Peregrine Falcons. At the end of the day, we visit Samish Flats, a noted haunt of roosting and hunting raptors. From a vantage point we can expect close views of Rough-legged Buzzard, Short-eared and Snowy Owls (the latter being present in invasion years), Bald Eagle and Merlin.

**Day 12:** An early start today as we head towards the Straits of San Juan de Fuca, the crossing point onto Olympic Peninsula. The ferry journey to Port Townsend can be good for rafts of seabirds which may include Red-necked Grebes and Rhinoceros Auklets and smaller numbers of Marbled Murrelets. We also have a chance of the nomadic Ancient Murrelet. On arrival in historic Port Townsend we check the harbour for Hooded Merganser, California and Common Gulls. Our main area of interest is Dungeness National Wildlife Refuge, a huge coastal spit with driftwood littered along the shore. We hope to locate three winter specialities that occur here in some years, namely White-billed Diver, Gyr Falcon and Snowy Owl. The shore itself attracts Horned Lark, Snow Bunting and Lapland Longspurs. We also expect grebes and wildfowl, whilst feeders attract Fox and Song Sparrows, Steller's Jay and Chestnut-backed Chickadees. At the end of the day, a visit to Sequim may produce Varied Thrush and Common Raven.

**Day 13:** From Port Townsend we travel north alongside the Strait of San Juan de Fuca and inland to Hurricane Ridge Road. From here we can see Victoria in British Columbia. The road is closed at a campground entrance. Mature trees here have flocks of Common Crossbills and Grey Jays. Ediz Hook, a peninsula close to Port Angeles, is nearby. This area creates a safe haven for Black Turnstone, Sanderling, Harlequin Duck and Barrow's Goldeneye. Our journey takes us to the Indian village of La Push with its prominent sea stacks and

beaches littered with driftwood from further north. La Push has rock-loving Black Oystercatchers and a variety of gulls including Black-legged Kittiwake. We check several beaches and coastal forests en route to Ocean Shores, our final base for two nights.

**Day 14:** Ocean Shores is an ideal base from which to explore the delights of Grays Harbour and Ocean City State Park. A man-made jetty in the northern sector of the area has wintering Black Oystercatcher, Rock Sandpiper, Ruddy and Black Turnstones and Surfbirds. Gardens lure White-crowned Sparrow, Yellow-rumped Warbler and Bewick's Wren. Mature trees and feeders at Ocean City regularly produce Townsend's Warbler, Brown Creeper, Black-capped Chickadee and Rufous Hummingbirds feeding on purple flowers. Grays Harbour is a huge inlet close to Aberdeen. Water treatment ponds have a good selection of ducks including annual vagrants in Tufted Duck and Eurasian Wigeon. A boardwalk takes us through a birch forest where Marsh Wrens sing from hidden perches.

**Day 15:** Today we travel to Seattle for our onward flight to London via Houston. Arrival is on the following morning.

## Prices

Ground Price: £2995  
 Single room: £350  
 Deposit: £300  
 \*Air Fare: £900

This holiday is fully inclusive of accommodation and meals, transport, permit fees, guidance, tips and taxes.

**Not included:** drinks, insurance, baggage charges between Houston and Seattle, items of a personal nature.

\* Please refer to our terms and conditions relating to flights