



Field Guides Tour Report

LOUISIANA: YELLOW RAILS & CRAWFISH TAILS | 2018

Oct 25, 2018 to Oct 29, 2018

Dan Lane & Eric Hynes

For our tour description, itinerary, past triplists, dates, fees, and more, please [VISIT OUR TOUR PAGE](#).



We saw many fantastic creatures on our quick adventure but riding the combine during the rice harvest turned out to be the favorite highlight of the tour. Photo by participant Judi Manning.

Thank you so much for choosing Field Guides to pursue the elusive Yellow Rail and take in the spectacle of migration and wintering birds in southern Louisiana. Dan and I really enjoyed birding with all of you.

The Cajun culinary treats, the gorgeous weather, the ubiquitous wading birds, good looks at Yellow Rails in flight, most of the world's Blue-gray Gnatcatchers and Soras, mesmerizing undulations of Black Skimmer flocks, and the longleaf pine plantation specialist trifacta in less than half an hour...none of that could top the thrill of riding on the deck of a combine harvesting rice. Haha. I can state with complete confidence that this was the first tour I have ever led where a machine was voted the favorite highlight of the adventure!

Day one began with birding the countryside en route to the rice harvesting. We studied blackbirds, shorebirds, wading birds, waterfowl and passerines in abundance. After sampling alligator bites, étouffée and breadding pudding, we linked up with Donna Dittmann, Steve Cardiff and combine operator Dustin in the rice fields outside of the tiny farming community of Thornwell. We can't thank Donna, Steve and Dustin enough for the amazing opportunity they provided us. We took turns riding on the combine as it harvested the rice with incredible efficiency. Many of you probably grew weary of me barking "SORA!" over the roar of the combine. Who knew so many Soras even existed? Virginia Rails were the second most common rail but we did manage to witness seven different flushes of Yellow Rails at close range - flashing their bold white secondaries and tiny size. Two other highlights were a single King Rail and an American Bittern, which the combine put up at least three times.

Saturday morning started with a trek to the west. We exited Interstate 10 at Sulphur and immediately hit a smorgasbord of woodpeckers. The giant Pileated Woodpeckers perched and in flight were thrilling but the Red-headed Woodpecker was certainly the standout. We birded our way toward the Wetland Walkway at Sabine National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). Merlins and American White Pelicans took turns putting on a show overhead while we discovered more reclusive prizes like King Rail and Sedge Wren. From the Wetland Walkway, we made our way to the Gulf of Mexico at Holly Beach. At the shore we were met with flock after flock of roosting gulls and terns, plus a diversity of foraging shorebirds. Noteworthy species at Holly Beach included: Gull-billed Tern, Franklin's Gull, Snowy and Piping plovers and American Avocet. After a picnic lunch at East Jetty, we tacked on Clapper Rail, Reddish Egret, Mottled Duck, Hooded Warbler and a distant Marbled Godwit to our growing list. The day wrapped up with a cooperative Nelson's Sparrow on Rutherford Beach Road and a chorus of Great Horned Owls hooting well before sunset.

Our final day began early as we headed north to Kisatchie National Forest with three longleaf pine forest specialists in our sights. A Bachman's Sparrow was heard chipping even before we could get the vans turned off and we quickly followed that up with Red-cockaded Woodpecker and Brown-headed Nuthatch. Since our primary targets were on the checklist in less than an hour, we had time to search for more. Barred Owl, Pine Warbler, Winter Wren and Blue-headed Vireo were noteworthy additions. The most bang for our remaining buck seemed to be down on the coast so we made tracks after lunch for Cameron. Our decision proved fruitful as White-tailed Kite, Seaside Sparrow and Sandhill Crane were tallied by all.

Thanks again for choosing Field Guides. Good luck birding, stay happy and healthy, and hopefully our paths will cross again someday.

Best,

Eric and Dan

KEYS FOR THIS LIST

One of the following keys may be shown in brackets for individual species as appropriate: * = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic, N = nesting, a = austral migrant, b = boreal migrant

BIRDS

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

SNOW GOOSE (*Anser caerulescens*) – Wintering birds were arriving in flocks by the hundreds and thousands

GREATER WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE (*Anser albifrons*) – These high arctic breeders were just arriving on their wintering grounds in Louisiana. Dan pointed out their multi-syllabled, high-pitched honks as skein after skein passed overhead our first morning.

BLUE-WINGED TEAL (*Spatula discors*) – We had a few glimpses here and there but finally connected on a substantial flock in flight our last day

GADWALL (*Mareca strepera*) – A few here and there

MOTTLED DUCK (GULF COAST) (*Anas fulvigula maculosa*) – We enjoyed a good look at a pair in afternoon light as we departed from our picnic at East Jetty

RUDDY DUCK (*Oxyura jamaicensis*) – Dan spotted a distant pair for us at Holly Beach.

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

PIED-BILLED GREBE (*Podilymbus podiceps*) – A few here and there

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

NEOTROPIC CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax brasilianus*) – We had plenty of opportunities to study these divers up close. Their proportionally longer tails and head pattern differences from the following species were conspicuous.

DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax auritus*) – Just a few of these were flying along the coast

Anhingidae (Anhingas)

ANHINGA (*Anhinga anhinga*) – The species squeaked onto the triplist Saturday evening with a single bird in flight while we were driving.

Pelecanidae (Pelicans)

AMERICAN WHITE PELICAN (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*) – Plenty of great looks at these massive fishers soaring overhead

BROWN PELICAN (*Pelecanus occidentalis*) – Less conspicuous in our travels compared to the previous species

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

AMERICAN BITTERN (*Botaurus lentiginosus*) – We enjoyed multiple good looks in flight of this secretive wader when it flushed in front of the combine in the rice fields.

GREAT BLUE HERON (*Ardea herodias*) – Seen regularly but in small numbers

GREAT EGRET (*Ardea alba*) – Lots

SNOWY EGRET (*Egretta thula*) – Every day

LITTLE BLUE HERON (*Egretta caerulea*) – This species was surprisingly difficult to catch up to. Just two individuals were encountered during the tour.

TRICOLORED HERON (*Egretta tricolor*) – Good looks at this particularly lanky wader

REDDISH EGRET (*Egretta rufescens*) – We couldn't have asked for a more cooperative individual than the one on the rock as we entered East Jetty

CATTLE EGRET (*Bubulcus ibis*) – Numerous

GREEN HERON (*Butorides virescens*) – Just a few here and there

BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) – We spotted multiple birds in flight the first two days

Threskiornithidae (Ibises and Spoonbills)

WHITE IBIS (*Eudocimus albus*) – A remarkable concentration of these immaculate waders

WHITE-FACED IBIS (*Plegadis chihi*) – Numerous; no doubt we passed over a few Glossy Ibis among the masses

ROSEATE SPOONBILL (*Platalea ajaja*) – It was hard to not stop and gawk at every single one of these pink beauties. Luckily there were so many we didn't have time to do just that.

Cathartidae (New World Vultures)

TURKEY VULTURE (*Cathartes aura*) – There were a fair number lazily soaring overhead

Pandionidae (Osprey)

OSPREY (*Pandion haliaetus*) – They seemed particularly drawn to the utility poles for perching

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

WHITE-TAILED KITE (*Elanus leucurus*) – This elegant raptor was a late addition to the list.

NORTHERN HARRIER (*Circus hudsonius*) – Many good looks at this master soarer

COOPER'S HAWK (*Accipiter cooperii*) – One was being harassed by the Merlins when we first arrived at Sabine National Wildlife Refuge - Wetland Walkway

BALD EAGLE (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) – Only on day one

RED-SHOULDERED HAWK (*Buteo lineatus*) – This Buteo was conspicuous during our first morning in the field
SWAINSON'S HAWK (*Buteo swainsoni*) – One memorable individual soaring overhead entertained us while waiting for our turns on the combine
RED-TAILED HAWK (*Buteo jamaicensis*) – Like so many places in North America, this was the most common Buteo

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots).

YELLOW RAIL (*Coturnicops noveboracensis*) – YES! This remarkably difficult species to see flushed seven times during our combine rides, eventually giving all of us a look or three

KING RAIL (*Rallus elegans*) – One big rail was flushed during the harvest and another territorial bird gave us great looks at Sabine NWR

CLAPPER RAIL (*Rallus crepitans*) – This coastal specialist marched into view on our coastal day

VIRGINIA RAIL (*Rallus limicola*) – The number of individuals of this species was a distant second to Sora in the rice fields but we still saw several dozen

SORA (*Porzana carolina*) – Wow, who knew there were so many?!

COMMON GALLINULE (*Gallinula galeata*) – plenty of good looks

AMERICAN COOT (*Fulica americana*) – In good concentration in a few locations

Gruidae (Cranes).

SANDHILL CRANE (*Antigone canadensis*) – We caught up to these massive migrants on the last day

Recurvirostridae (Stilts and Avocets).

BLACK-NECKED STILT (*Himantopus mexicanus*) – This beautiful shorebird with the crazy long legs was seen in numbers in the flooded agricultural fields.

AMERICAN AVOCET (*Recurvirostra americana*) – Good looks on Holly Beach

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings).

BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER (*Pluvialis squatarola*) – Also on Holly Beach

SNOWY PLOVER (*Charadrius nivosus*) – We had a great study of this delicate shorebird and its equally lovely, similar and threatened cousin, Piping Plover, at Holly Beach

SEMIPALMATED PLOVER (*Charadrius semipalmatus*) – Not many

PIPING PLOVER (*Charadrius melodus*) – See Snowy Plover

KILLDEER (*Charadrius vociferus*) – A few each day

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies).

MARbled GODWIT (*Limosa fedoa*) – Dan found one which tested our visual acuity at East Jetty

RUDDY TURNSTONE (*Arenaria interpres*) – They practically joined us during our picnic at East Jetty

SANDERLING (*Calidris alba*) – Where else...on the beach

DUNLIN (*Calidris alpina*) – They were working the sand flats at Holly Beach

LEAST SANDPIPER (*Calidris minutilla*) – An every day species

WESTERN SANDPIPER (*Calidris mauri*) – We teased out a few at Holly Beach

LONG-BILLED DOWITCHER (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*) – We encountered this plump shorebird by the hundreds in the flooded agricultural fields

WILSON'S SNIPE (*Gallinago delicata*) – Only one for the list and it didn't stay in view for long

GREATER YELLOWLEGS (*Tringa melanoleuca*) – A few each day

WILLET (*Tringa semipalmata*) – Good looks on our coastal day

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers).

BONAPARTE'S GULL (*Chroicocephalus philadelphia*) – Another find at Holly Beach

LAUGHING GULL (*Leucophaeus atricilla*) – In good numbers along the coast

FRANKLIN'S GULL (*Leucophaeus pipixcan*) – This species winters primarily on the Pacific coast of South America but we found quite a few that hadn't called it a season yet in North America

RING-BILLED GULL (*Larus delawarensis*) – Holly Beach was the spot to study gulls.

HERRING GULL (AMERICAN) (*Larus argentatus smithsonianus*) – Not many

GULL-BILLED TERN (*Gelochelidon nilotica*) – It took some work to tease these out of the large flocks

CASPIAN TERN (*Hydroprogne caspia*) – The world's largest tern

FORSTER'S TERN (*Sterna forsteri*) – We observed this widespread species in a number of locations

ROYAL TERN (*Thalasseus maximus*) – Numerous on the coast

BLACK SKIMMER (*Rynchops niger*) – The undulating flocks in flight at East Jetty were mesmerizing

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves).

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) – Not too many [I]

EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE (*Streptopelia decaocto*) – More common than the previous non-native [II]

INCA DOVE (*Columbina inca*) – Just one individual was found the first morning

WHITE-WINGED DOVE (*Zenaida asiatica*) – Patchy but in good numbers

MOURNING DOVE (*Zenaida macroura*) – All three days

Strigidae (Owls).

GREAT HORNED OWL (*Bubo virginianus*) – The chorus of calls late in the day on Saturday was thrilling. They sounded so close but we just couldn't find an angle to see them

BARRED OWL (*Strix varia*) – Dan's reliable spot remains just that

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers).

BELTED KINGFISHER (*Megaceryle alcyon*) – Plenty of these near the coast

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

RED-HEADED WOODPECKER (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*) – This stunning woodpecker punctuated the start to Saturday

RED-BELLIED WOODPECKER (*Melanerpes carolinus*) – Conspicuous at several stops

YELLOW-BELLIED SAPSUCKER (*Sphyrapicus varius*) – The individual we saw in the parking area at Sabine NWR was left with little options so close to the coast

DOWNY WOODPECKER (*Picoides pubescens*) – Only a few on the first day

RED-COCKADED WOODPECKER (*Picoides borealis*) – Nobody saw red but we all observed this specialist well

NORTHERN FLICKER (YELLOW-SHAFTED) (*Colaptes auratus auratus*) – Uncommon

PILEATED WOODPECKER (*Dryocopus pileatus*) – We marveled at these giant woodpeckers while they perched and flew

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

CRESTED CARACARA (*Caracara cheriway*) – These scavengers patrolled the rice fields

AMERICAN KESTREL (*Falco sparverius*) – A regular sighting roadside

MERLIN (*Falco columbarius*) – We caught up to this speedy raptor several times but they definitely put on the best show at the entrance to the Wetland Walkway at Sabine NWR.

PEREGRINE FALCON (*Falco peregrinus*) – Good looks on utility poles

Tyrannidae (Tyrant Flycatchers)

EASTERN PHOEBE (*Sayornis phoebe*) – We saw this species each day but they were most evident the first morning

SCISSOR-TAILED FLYCATCHER (*Tyrannus forficatus*) – We were fortunate to encounter these stunning migrants on multiple occasions

Laniidae (Shrikes)

LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE (*Lanius ludovicianus*) – This species does well in Cajun country

Vireonidae (Vireos, Shrike-Babblers, and Erpornis)

WHITE-EYED VIREO (*Vireo griseus*) – We found a few of these migrants our first morning

BLUE-HEADED VIREO (*Vireo solitarius*) – We found this species in the mixed flock after scoring our targets in Kisatchie National Forest

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

BLUE JAY (*Cyanocitta cristata*) – Along the way

AMERICAN CROW (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) – Lots

FISH CROW (*Corvus ossifragus*) – A bonus from our breakfast stop en route to the pine forest

Hirundinidae (Swallows)

NORTHERN ROUGH-WINGED SWALLOW (*Stelgidopteryx serripennis*) – A few migrants still around

TREE SWALLOW (*Tachycineta bicolor*) – In huge numbers

BARN SWALLOW (*Hirundo rustica*) – Common

CAVE SWALLOW (*Petrochelidon fulva*) – We enjoyed good scope views of this species that was once rare in the United States

Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)

CAROLINA CHICKADEE (*Poecile carolinensis*) – The southern chickadee

TUFTED TITMOUSE (*Baeolophus bicolor*) – Up in Kisatchie National Forest

Sittidae (Nuthatches)

RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH (*Sitta canadensis*) – A few migrants found themselves a long way from any forest at Sabine NWR

BROWN-HEADED NUTHATCH (*Sitta pusilla*) – One of the pine forest specialists we found in Kisatchie National Forest

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

HOUSE WREN (*Troglodytes aedon*) – A few each day

WINTER WREN (*Troglodytes hiemalis*) – One bird came close and even sang a bit but never gave us a clean look

SEDGE WREN (*Cistothorus platensis*) – We managed to find a few mildly cooperative members of this not-so-obliging species

MARSH WREN (*Cistothorus palustris*) – Sabine NWR held plenty in the marshes

CAROLINA WREN (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*) – Heard well and a few put eyes on it

Poliophtilidae (Gnatcatchers)

BLUE-GRAY GNATCATCHER (*Poliophtila caerulea*) – Did we see all of them? For many of us, the concentration of these sprites was startling. I am convinced I saw the best one.

Regulidae (Kinglets)

GOLDEN-CROWNED KINGLET (*Regulus satrapa*) – We found this migrant up in Kisatchie National Forest

RUBY-CROWNED KINGLET (*Regulus calendula*) – Fairly common closer to the coast

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

HERMIT THRUSH (*Catharus guttatus*) – Plenty of call notes heard, plus a few quick views

AMERICAN ROBIN (*Turdus migratorius*) – Another species we picked up during our breakfast stop on the way up to Kisatchie National Forest

Mimidae (Mockingbirds and Thrashers)

GRAY CATBIRD (*Dumetella carolinensis*) – Heard more than seen

NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRD (*Mimus polyglottos*) – Conspicuous

Sturnidae (Starlings).

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – Too many [I]

Parulidae (New World Warblers).

ORANGE-CROWNED WARBLER (*Oreothlypis celata*) – Good looks in the mixed flocks

COMMON YELLOWTHROAT (*Geothlypis trichas*) – Heard more than seen

HOODED WARBLER (*Setophaga citrina*) – This unexpected late migrant was found roadside as we left East Jetty

MAGNOLIA WARBLER (*Setophaga magnolia*) – Another migrant among the mixed flocks

PALM WARBLER (*Setophaga palmarum*) – At East Jetty

PINE WARBLER (*Setophaga pinus*) – Up in the pines of course at Kisatchie National Forest

YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER (MYRTLE) (*Setophaga coronata coronata*) – A few here and there

BLACK-THROATED GREEN WARBLER (*Setophaga virens*) – A favorite for some

Passerellidae (New World Buntings and Sparrows).

BACHMAN'S SPARROW (*Peucaea aestivalis*) – You have to love it when you hear chip notes of one of the primary targets of an outing before you even exit the van at the first stop

NELSON'S SPARROW (*Ammodramus nelsoni*) – Those gorgeous orangish birds in the Spartina were likely from the nelsoni subspecies from the interior

SEASIDE SPARROW (*Ammodramus maritimus*) – This coastal specialist was a major target for some of you. It took some doing to find the right spot but we eventually ended up with really good looks.

CHIPPING SPARROW (*Spizella passerina*) – At Sabine NWR

WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*) – Some of you caught up to some foraging on the ground while the picnic was being set up at East Jetty

SAVANNAH SPARROW (*Passerculus sandwichensis*) – Daily

LINCOLN'S SPARROW (*Melospiza lincolni*) – People in Eric's van spotted one that popped up in response to pishing as we exited East Jetty

SWAMP SPARROW (*Melospiza georgiana*) – An everyday bird

Cardinalidae (Cardinals and Allies).

NORTHERN CARDINAL (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) – Our best looks came on the first morning

BLUE GROSBEAK (*Passerina caerulea*) – A brown one held a perch in the vegetation in the bayou the first morning long enough for us all to get on it

INDIGO BUNTING (*Passerina cyanea*) – No colorful males

Icteridae (Troupials and Allies).

EASTERN MEADOWLARK (*Sturnella magna*) – It was a treat to hear a few singing their lovely song our first morning out. Our best looks were down at Holly Beach.

RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) – Numerous

BRONZED COWBIRD (*Molothrus aeneus*) – We played Where's Waldo among the blackbird flocks on the coast to find this species

BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD (*Molothrus ater*) – Several sizable flocks

COMMON GRACKLE (*Quiscalus quiscula*) – Daily

BOAT-TAILED GRACKLE (MAJOR) (*Quiscalus major major*) – The differences between the two large grackles in this region are subtle. In very general terms the Boat-tailed Grackle is more closely tied to the coast. In the subspecies we encountered along the Louisiana coast, they showed a darker eye compared to the light eye (and flatter head) of the next species.

GREAT-TAILED GRACKLE (*Quiscalus mexicanus*) – See previous species; we saw large flocks in the rice fields area

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows).

HOUSE SPARROW (*Passer domesticus*) – Patchy [I]

MAMMALS

SWAMP RABBIT (*Sylvilagus aquaticus*) – Our first at Sabine NWR seemed oblivious to our presence

EASTERN GRAY SQUIRREL (*Sciurus carolinensis*) – Some of us saw one on day three as we went north to Kisatchie National Forest

FOX SQUIRREL (*Sciurus niger*) – Spotted on day one only

NUTRIA (*Myocastor coypus*) – Originally from South America, this non-native aquatic rodent was "accidentally" released when a hurricane destroyed the enclosures that held them. They have spread like a plague on coastal marshes of the southeast part of the United States. [I]

BOTTLENOSE DOLPHIN (*Tursiops truncatus*) – We enjoyed our best looks from the ferry at Cameron

AMERICAN MINK (*Mustela vison*) – We all spotted a few roadkills but some people in Dan's lead van watched one run across the road

WHITE-TAILED DEER (*Odocoileus virginianus*) – Only a few; they were keeping a low profile given the open hunting season

Herps

AMERICAN ALLIGATOR (*Alligator mississippiensis*) – We saw many alive and well in the field but "Big Al" at Perjean's Restaurant was the most impressive (14 feet long and an estimate 800 pounds)

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 144 bird taxa and 7 mammal taxa