



Field Guides Tour Report

Louisiana Rails with Maine Audubon 2019

Oct 24, 2019 to Oct 28, 2019

Dan Lane & Doug Hitchcox

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



Guide Doug Hitchcox was quick on the draw, and captured the expressions of several of our group as a Yellow Rail flushed very close by. It looks like it might take refuge in the vehicle, but we didn't get a look quite that close!

The northern Gulf Coast is a bit of an avian paradox: it is strangely depauperate with regards to the breeding avifauna, yet is one of the most important migration routes in North America, and is home to some of the highest winter bird biomass on the continent! October is a great time to witness these latter phenomena, and we managed to do so despite some testy weather.

We had to flip our itinerary around somewhat to accommodate the rains that hit on Friday, and luckily managed to find the rare, Southeastern endemic Red-cockaded Woodpecker in the pine forests near DeRidder, in the west-central part of the state. Most of the rest of the day was quite literally a washout, but the blow was lessened by the fine cuisine and curious ambiance at the Blue Dog Café. Saturday was our day to visit the coast. We headed down to the Pintail Loop at Cameron Prairie National Wildlife Refuge, then on to the tree island (“chenier”) of Willow Island near the town of Cameron, where we participated in a couple of rope drags with some rail researchers. A picnic lunch and several hours to enjoy the late passerine migrants in the chenier really made the day a smashing success. This was followed by a visit to the salt marsh and beach at Rutherford Beach, where Nelson’s Sparrow, a bold King Rail, and a few shorebirds also ended the day well for us. Our third day of the tour was “rail day,” when we were to join my friends Donna and Steve and a local rice farmer to do the rice harvest and see what rails would be flushed up. The morning dawned with a fruitful walk along West Niblett Road not far from the harvest spot, where overflying geese, raptors, grackles, shorebirds, ibis and ducks spoke of the sheer biomass in the area. On the ground, a few late warblers, Indigo and Painted buntings, four (!) Vermilion Flycatchers, and other wintering and migrant landbirds kept us occupied. After lunch, we showed up at the rice field, but the farmer was delayed for a few hours. When he finally showed up, however, the rail spectacle was nearly instantaneous, and everyone got views of Sora, Virginia, and Yellow rails (the main target!), and some folks managed to get on King Rail and American Bittern! It was a smorgasbord of marsh birds! Elated, we returned to our hotel and ended the day with a fine meal and goodbyes.

Thanks to you all for joining Doug and me on this tour, and I hope you all gained a better understanding of why Louisiana is such an important place for North American birds! Ayuh, we have a lot of ‘em down here! Y’all come on back now, cher!

Good birding,

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)

GREATER WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE (*Anser albifrons*) – Specklebellies! We saw them flying over us at West Niblett.

WOOD DUCK (*Aix sponsa*) – A group flew over at Pintail Loop.

BLUE-WINGED TEAL (*Spatula discors*) – One of the most common ducks in the South, and one we saw in huge numbers in the rice fields as we were headed to lunch.

NORTHERN SHOVELER (*Spatula clypeata*) – This was also present in large numbers in the crawfish ponds where the Blue-winged Teal were.

GADWALL (*Mareca strepera*) – Only a few of these had arrived so early, mixed in with the above.

MOTTLED DUCK (GULF COAST) (*Anas fulvigula maculosa*) – The "Black Duck" of the South, these remain in Louisiana to breed, unlike most other ducks.

NORTHERN PINTAIL (*Anas acuta*) – A few in the crawfish pond filled with the above ducks.

GREEN-WINGED TEAL (AMERICAN) (*Anas crecca carolinensis*) – Again, mixed in with the above congregation of ducks.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) – Yup.

EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE (*Streptopelia decaocto*) – After its rapid expansion out of Florida in the 80s and 90s, this species seems to have declined significantly in Louisiana, where it is now mostly found around livestock and strip-malls.

INCA DOVE (*Columbina inca*) – Seen in the communities near the coast.

WHITE-WINGED DOVE (*Zenaida asiatica*) – Our first ones were near the Red-headed Woodpecker spot off I-10.

MOURNING DOVE (*Zenaida macroura*) – The most common dove in the state.

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)

KING RAIL (*Rallus elegans*) – A fine view of a bird at Pintail Loop.

CLAPPER RAIL (*Rallus crepitans*) – Mostly a look at a flying bird as we did the rope drag at Broussard Beach.

VIRGINIA RAIL (*Rallus limicola*) – Several were flushed in front of the combine.

SORA (*Porzana carolina*) – Perhaps the most common rail in the rice fields!

COMMON GALLINULE (*Gallinula galeata*) – After being known as Common Gallinule in the US for many decades, it was renamed Common Moorhen to conform with worldwide use, until it was split from the Old World Moorhen, and regained its old moniker.

AMERICAN COOT (*Fulica americana*) – Only a wintering bird in Louisiana, we saw some groups near the coast.

YELLOW RAIL (*Coturnicops noveboracensis*) – Ah yes, the reason we were here! After several hours waiting after lunch, the combine finally showed and we did indeed enjoy several of these tiny, "burnt marshmallow-colored" rails as they burst out of the field in front of the combine! Mission accomplished!

Recurvirostridae (Stilts and Avocets)

BLACK-NECKED STILT (*Himantopus mexicanus*) – A field full of these long-legged "marsh poodles" in the rice country.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER (*Pluvialis squatarola*) – Several along the beach.

SNOWY PLOVER (*Charadrius nivosus*) – One or two along the beach.

SEMIPALMATED PLOVER (*Charadrius semipalmatus*)

KILLDEER (*Charadrius vociferus*) – The widespread plover.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

WHIMBREL (HUDSONIAN) (*Numenius phaeopus hudsonicus*) – At Rutherford Beach, showing nicely.

STILT SANDPIPER (*Calidris himantopus*) – A few mixed in with yellowlegs and some other shorebirds in a wet rice field.

SANDERLING (*Calidris alba*) – At the beach.

DUNLIN (*Calidris alpina*) – Also at the beach.

LEAST SANDPIPER (*Calidris minutilla*) – The most common *Calidris* in the state.

LONG-BILLED DOWITCHER (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*) – The more common of the two dowitchers in Louisiana, and the expected species away from the coast.

WILSON'S SNIBE (*Gallinago delicata*) – Encountered each day, mostly as fly-bys.

GREATER YELLOWLEGS (*Tringa melanoleuca*)

WILLET (WESTERN) (*Tringa semipalmata inornata*) – Birds encountered at this time of year are the western type, with local breeders having departed by early September for the Caribbean or the coast of South America.

LESSER YELLOWLEGS (*Tringa flavipes*)

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

LAUGHING GULL (*Leucophaeus atricilla*) – The common gull in the state.

RING-BILLED GULL (*Larus delawarensis*)

HERRING GULL (AMERICAN) (*Larus argentatus smithsonianus*) – A few at the beach, mostly brown immatures.

CASPIAN TERN (*Hydroprogne caspia*) – Mostly around Pintail Loop.

ROYAL TERN (*Thalasseus maximus*) – A common tern at the coast.

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

NEOTROPIC CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax brasilianus*) – The common cormorant of coastal marshes.

Pelecanidae (Pelicans)

BROWN PELICAN (*Pelecanus occidentalis*) – A few flying offshore. Louisiana's state bird.

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

GREAT BLUE HERON (*Ardea herodias*) – This and the next three species were daily encounters.

GREAT EGRET (*Ardea alba*)

SNOWY EGRET (*Egretta thula*)

LITTLE BLUE HERON (*Egretta caerulea*)

TRICOLORED HERON (*Egretta tricolor*) – Also called (with some hurt pride) Louisiana Heron.

CATTLE EGRET (*Bubulcus ibis*) – Daily.

GREEN HERON (*Butorides virescens*) – A bird at Rutherford Beach.

YELLOW-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON (*Nyctanassa violacea*) – A rather trusting immature stood beside the road at Rutherford Beach.

Threskiornithidae (Ibises and Spoonbills)

WHITE IBIS (*Eudocimus albus*) – Encountered daily.

WHITE-FACED IBIS (*Plegadis chihi*) – The default dark ibis in this area.

ROSEATE SPOONBILL (*Platalea ajaja*) – Cajun Flamingos!

Cathartidae (New World Vultures)

TURKEY VULTURE (*Cathartes aura*)

Pandionidae (Osprey)

OSPREY (*Pandion haliaetus*)

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

NORTHERN HARRIER (*Circus hudsonius*) – It seemed a bit early, but these were in in force!

COOPER'S HAWK (*Accipiter cooperii*)

BALD EAGLE (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) – Several in the rice fields.

RED-SHOULDERED HAWK (*Buteo lineatus*) – A high-flying pair over the wooded edge of the rice fields provided some good views.

RED-TAILED HAWK (*Buteo jamaicensis*) – Seen on two days, mostly appeared to be standard Eastern types (*borealis*).

Strigidae (Owls)

GREAT HORNED OWL (*Bubo virginianus*) – Doug pointed one out our second evening as it was silhouetted against a dramatic sunset.

BARRED OWL (*Strix varia*) [*]

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

BELTED KINGFISHER (*Megaceryle alcyon*)

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

RED-BELLIED WOODPECKER (*Melanerpes carolinus*)

DOWNY WOODPECKER (*Dryobates pubescens*)

RED-COCKADED WOODPECKER (*Dryobates borealis*) – Well, luckily we got great views of this US endemic before the heavens opened up and doused us!

PILEATED WOODPECKER (*Dryocopus pileatus*) – Seen flying over us in the pine woods.

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

CRESTED CARACARA (*Caracara cheriway*) – A species that has really increased in Louisiana.

AMERICAN KESTREL (*Falco sparverius*)

MERLIN (*Falco columbarius*) – Nice views along Rutherford Beach.

Tyrannidae (Tyrant Flycatchers)

EASTERN WOOD-PEWEE (*Contopus virens*) – Several late migrants in Willow Island on the coast.

EASTERN PHOEBE (*Sayornis phoebe*) – A common wintering flycatcher in the state.

SAY'S PHOEBE (*Sayornis saya*) – An annual visitor now in the state, we enjoyed seeing one just before lunch at Willow Island.

VERMILION FLYCATCHER (*Pyrocephalus rubinus*) – An amazing four were along West Niblett Road! Another wintering flycatcher that has increased substantially in the state in the past couple of decades.

SCISSOR-TAILED FLYCATCHER (*Tyrannus forficatus*) – A nice group allowed for good views along the road near the coast.

Laniidae (Shrikes)

LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE (*Lanius ludovicianus*) – Although still fairly common in the state, this species has undergone noticeable declines.

Vireonidae (Vireos, Shrike-Babblers, and Erpornis)

WHITE-EYED VIREO (*Vireo griseus*) – Seen in fair numbers, particularly at the coastal chenier at Willow Island.

RED-EYED VIREO (*Vireo olivaceus*) – A couple of birds at Willow Island were late.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

BLUE JAY (*Cyanocitta cristata*)

AMERICAN CROW (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) – Although some folks may have seen Fish Crows near Lafayette the day they arrived or departed, we only had this species for sure on the tour. Crows are strangely rare in the southwestern part of the state.

Hirundinidae (Swallows)

NORTHERN ROUGH-WINGED SWALLOW (*Stelgidopteryx serripennis*)

TREE SWALLOW (*Tachycineta bicolor*) – Overwhelmingly the most common swallow in late fall in Louisiana.

BANK SWALLOW (*Riparia riparia*) – A couple of these were late and were part of a swallow swarm over a field on West Niblett Rd.

BARN SWALLOW (*Hirundo rustica*)

CAVE SWALLOW (*Petrochelidon fulva*) – Seen both at the coast and in the rice country, this has become a regular breeder in the state, with the highest numbers in late fall.

Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)

CAROLINA CHICKADEE (*Poecile carolinensis*)

Sittidae (Nuthatches)

BROWN-HEADED NUTHATCH (*Sitta pusilla*) – A common denizen of pine woods, we got some views before the rain started.

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

HOUSE WREN (*Troglodytes aedon*)

SEDGE WREN (*Cistothorus platensis*) – Spectacular views of these little mousy wrens in the fields and saltmarshes.

MARSH WREN (*Cistothorus palustris*)

CAROLINA WREN (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*) [*]

Poliophtidae (Gnatcatchers)

BLUE-GRAY GNATCATCHER (*Poliophtila caerulea*) – Present in good numbers, and often the first species to show up at a scolding rave.

Regulidae (Kinglets)

RUBY-CROWNED KINGLET (*Regulus calendula*)

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

SWAINSON'S THRUSH (*Catharus ustulatus*) – Several present at Willow Island.

WOOD THRUSH (*Hylocichla mustelina*) – A couple of late migrants at Willow Island.

Mimidae (Mockingbirds and Thrashers)

GRAY CATBIRD (*Dumetella carolinensis*) [*]

NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRD (*Mimus polyglottos*)

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*)

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

PINE SISKIN (*Spinus pinus*) – One flying over Willow Island was a surprising early migrant.

Passerellidae (New World Sparrows)

WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*) – This and the next were seen feeding on the roadside along West Niblett Rd.

WHITE-THROATED SPARROW (*Zonotrichia albicollis*)

NELSON'S SPARROW (*Ammodramus nelsoni*) – It took a bit of work, but eventually we got fair views along Rutherford Beach Rd.

SAVANNAH SPARROW (*Passerculus sandwichensis*)

SWAMP SPARROW (*Melospiza georgiana*)

Icteridae (Troupials and Allies)

EASTERN MEADOWLARK (*Sturnella magna*)

BALTIMORE ORIOLE (*Icterus galbula*) – Several in the chenier at Willow Island.

RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD (*Agelaius phoeniceus*)

BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD (*Molothrus ater*)

COMMON GRACKLE (*Quiscalus quiscula*) – A few seen as we stopped near I-10 on our way to the coast.

BOAT-TAILED GRACKLE (*Quiscalus major*) – This and the next species provided some nice side-by-side views in the rice country and the coast.
This one has the dark eye.

GREAT-TAILED GRACKLE (*Quiscalus mexicanus*) – And this one has the light eye.

Parulidae (New World Warblers)

OVENBIRD (*Seiurus aurocapilla*) – Nice views of this as it rose up into the branches of the trees at Willow Island to see what was causing all the scolding.

BLACK-AND-WHITE WARBLER (*Mniotilta varia*) – This and most of the remainder of these warblers were late migrants at Willow Island, and provided some nice eye candy while there!

TENNESSEE WARBLER (*Oreothlypis peregrina*)

ORANGE-CROWNED WARBLER (*Oreothlypis celata*) – A common wintering visitor to the state, providing some nice opportunities to see it well.

COMMON YELLOWTHROAT (*Geothlypis trichas*)

HOODED WARBLER (*Setophaga citrina*) – Several were out hopping on the ground at Willow Island.

AMERICAN REDSTART (*Setophaga ruticilla*)

MAGNOLIA WARBLER (*Setophaga magnolia*)

BAY-BREASTED WARBLER (*Setophaga castanea*) – This is not an easy fall migrant to see in the state, so we enjoyed some fine views at Willow Island.

PALM WARBLER (*Setophaga palmarum*) – One bird showed well for Woody, Donna, and me as we waited for the ATV to take us down to the rice field that was to be cut.

PINE WARBLER (*Setophaga pinus*) – As far as I can tell, birds that are found in non-pine habitats in Louisiana in the fall and winter are migrants, whereas those in pines are probably local residents. Densities are high in the state!

BLACK-THROATED GREEN WARBLER (*Setophaga virens*)

Cardinalidae (Cardinals and Allies)

SCARLET TANAGER (*Piranga olivacea*) – A couple showed well at Willow Island.

NORTHERN CARDINAL (*Cardinalis cardinalis*)

BLUE GROSBEAK (*Passerina caerulea*) [*]

INDIGO BUNTING (*Passerina cyanea*) – A nice flock feeding along West Niblett Rd provided good looks.

PAINTED BUNTING (*Passerina ciris*) – Two female-plumaged birds were a nice find along West Niblett Road! These are usually gone by now.

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

HOUSE SPARROW (*Passer domesticus*)

MAMMALS

SWAMP RABBIT (*Sylvilagus aquaticus*) – Brief view of this large bunny near the coast.

NORTHERN RACCOON (*Procyon lotor*) – The front van spied some trash pandas as they scurried into the roadside brush.

NORTH AMERICAN RIVER OTTER (*Lontra canadensis*) – A fleeting view of one on the Pintail Loop road.

WHITE-TAILED DEER (*Odocoileus virginianus*) – The East's only deer, also seen near the coast.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 129 bird taxa and 4 mammal taxa