Finding Birds is Easy Along Louisiana's Coastal Tourway

BY D. FALKENHEINER

Nature, geography and climate have combined to make Louisiana one of the great birding areas in the U.S.A. More than 400 species have been identified in the state and it is possible to see 150 or more species in a single day. (Some groups of birders have seen as many as 200 in one day.)

Geography is the single most important factor in making Louisiana a birding paradise. Not only is the state located in the middle of the great Mississippi Valley migratory flyway, but the equally large Central migratory flyway crosses its southwestern tip as well. During the winter, several western species migrate to Louisiana, making the southwestern part of the state an especially attractive place for Eastern humans to meet many Western birds. Additional factors that make the state a birding bonanza are its large number of water bodies, its vast wetlands, tidal beaches and variety of forest types.

One of the primest of times to go birding in Louisiana is early in Spring when the region's substantial resident bird population is augmented by hundreds of thousands of migrants returning from their winter quarters. For many migratory species the state's coastal beaches and cheniers are the first welcome landfall on the long return flight over the Gulf of Mexico. Feeding and other habitat conditions there are so attractive that many remain for some time.

While all of south Louisiana is excellent birding country, the southwestern parishes (counties) of Cameron and Calcasieu are particularly fertile grounds. Indeed—along with the nearby upper Texas coast—they probably account for more different bird species than anywhere else in the mainland USA.

Not only are the birds abundant, some are very rare, such as the Bachman's Warbler that is occasionally spotted in Spring. Among other Spring migrants may be three of the tanagers (Summer, Western and Scarlet) and occasionally you'll find them all in the same tree.

The area is also a good place for seeing a number of species which look very much alike and which, for at least part of the year, occupy the same habitat. Many can provide a demanding test of field identification prowess. Even experienced ornithologists may be challenged to correctly differentiate between the Boat-tailed and Great-tailed Grackles, the White-faced and Glossy Ibis, or the Snow and Ross' Geese...plus many more.

Surprisingly, this rich birding region is easy to reach and easy to traverse. In fact, the Louisiana Office of Tourism has put together a tour of eleven diverse habitats in Calcasieu and Cameron parishes that can be conducted by car in one day. They've assembled it in a printed guide, along with route map and identification tips. It's free for the asking. Just write the Louisiana Office of Tourism, Birding Tour, P. O. Box 44291, Baton Rouge, La. 70804, (504) 925-3860. You will also receive a 32-page traveler's guide to the state.

Hundreds of bird species can be spotted in Louisiana's Cameron and Calcasieu Parishes. Contact the Louisiana Office of Tourism to get a copy of its new birding tourguide which includes the above map. Key: 1 — Sam Houston Jones State Park, 2 — I-10 Rest Area, 3 — Tourist Information Center and Boardwalk, 4 — Louisiana Backroad, 5 — Sabine National Wildlife Refuge and Nature Trail, 6 — Beach Road, 7 — Town of Cameron, 8 — Rutherford Beach, 9 — Rockefeller Refuge and White Lake, 10 — Lake Chenier Road, 11 — Lacassine National Wildlife Refuge.