

A SPRING DAY ON THE ALABAMA COAST

By HENRY M. STEVENSON

No observer familiar with the Red-eyed Vireo or the Wood Thrush on its breeding grounds would expect to find it or other arboreal species among the sand dunes of the Alabama coast, but one of the interesting phenomena associated with migration is the occurrence of birds in most unusual habitats. In order to experience this phenomenon, however, the observer will need to visit the coast only when the weather conditions are favorable. The word "favorable" is not used here to imply suitability for picnics, swimming, or most other human activities, but favorable to the grounding of birds which would otherwise pass over the coastal region and continue into more congenial habitat. Two kinds of weather are "favorable": rainy and cold. (A combination of the two, of course, is better still.) Cold weather, at least in spring, is always accompanied by more or less northerly winds; that is, headwinds for birds flying more or less northward. Under these circumstances, most migrating birds land at the first opportunity. If they are flying over some part of the Gulf of Mexico, this first opportunity will be very near the coastline. Consequently such inclement weather, especially over a period of several days, usually results in an accumulation of many migratory land birds in the coastal woods, whereas a visit there in dry, warm weather would reveal the presence of very few of the same species.

Among the field trips I have made on the Alabama coast in spring, one in particular stands out in many respects as the most remarkable migration I have ever witnessed. The date was April 26, 1952. Just prior to this date a cold front had swept over most of the South, and throughout the day of the 26th a north-west wind estimated at 10 to 20 miles per hour prevailed. The temperature ranged from about 58° to 74°. Starting from Elberta, in Baldwin County, I drove to Foley, then down the Gulf highway, turned east at the canal to Orange Beach and Bear Point, then turned back west to Fort Morgan. Stops were made in the various types of habitat which may be found there. After some 10½ hours of counting birds I returned to compile the totals and learned that 109 species had been recorded and about 1,006 individual birds. Although the complete list will not be given, comments on some of the more interesting species and on omissions from the list seem in order.

WATER BIRDS: White Pelicans, seldom seen on the Alabama coast, were found flying over Bear Point and resting on the beach at Fort Morgan, these two flocks totaling about 40 individuals. Only four members of the family Ardeidae were found (Great Blue Heron, Snowy Egret, Little Blue and Green Herons),

and their numbers were comparatively few. Not a single species of duck was listed, although a more systematic search might have produced Lesser Scaup, Red-breasted Merganser, and Blue-winged Teal.

MARSH BIRDS: These birds are comparatively scarce on the Alabama coast, but two Soras, a Purple Gallinule, and a Coot were recorded. The apparent absence of the Clapper Rail was surprising.

SHORE BIRDS: In my limited experience, the Alabama coast is inferior in its variety and numbers of shore birds to regions farther east, but on this exceptional day 12 species were found. Except for the 50 Semipalmated Sandpipers, none of these numbered more than 10 individuals. Probably the most unusual for that region were two Hudsonian Curlews, a Pectoral Sandpiper, and a Stilt Sandpiper. Despite this comparatively good list of shore birds, such characteristic species as the Piping, Snowy, and Black-bellied Plovers, and the Red-backed Sandpiper were missed.

GULLS AND TERNS: Nine species were recorded, the most unusual of which, by far, was the Roseate Tern. Although I have another sight record of this species on the Alabama coast, it should not be added to the state list until a specimen is collected, because of the difficulty of separating it from other members of its genus.

RAPTORIAL BIRDS: This group was very poorly represented. Two species found were hardly surprises—the Osprey and the Broad-winged Hawk (which apparently nests at Bear Point). The third a, Pigeon Hawk at Fort Morgan, was one of the better records of the day. No other species of hawk, no owls, and no vultures were recorded, although a more thorough coverage of inland areas might have partly closed these gaps.

LAND BIRDS, LOWER ORDERS: Numerically outstanding among these species were 21 Yellow-billed Cuckoos and nine Ruby-throated Hummingbirds—far more of either species than one could find on a given day in summer. The nocturnal Chuck-will's-widow and the uncommon Ground Dove were missed.

WOODPECKERS: Here again there were some surprising omissions—the Pileated, Red-headed, Downy, and Red-cockaded, all of which should have been found in a more comprehensive search. The Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, however, is seldom found so late in spring.

FLYCATCHERS: Several Crested Flycatchers and a single Wood Pewee were recorded, but the feature of this family was the Eastern Kingbird. It was literally everywhere, and my estimated total of 55 individuals is extremely conservative. That many of these were migrants is indicated by the fact that along this same strip about six weeks later only four Kingbirds were found.

SWALLOWS: The results here were disappointing, especially the omission of the Rough-wing, which nests near the Alabama coast. Fair numbers of Barn Swallows (which nest at Fort Morgan) and Purple Martins were found, but otherwise the list came to a single Bank Swallow coursing over the airport at Fort Morgan.

SEDENTARY LAND BIRDS: Among the conspicuous omissions were the American (Common) Crow, Brown-headed Nuthatch, and Long-billed Marsh Wren. None of the species which were found were listed in unusual numbers.

MISCELLANEOUS MIGRATORY LAND BIRDS: A single House Wren was rather late (although another was seen the next day), but some other winter residents in this group had apparently left: Short-billed Marsh Wren, both kinglets, and American Pipit. As to numbers, the 26 Catbirds were remarkable, as the species does not breed on the Alabama coast and only a few winter there.

THRUSHES: From a quantitative point of view, these birds might be considered the event of the day. In the woods, in the scrub covering the sand dunes, and even in the oldeanders and prickly ash (*Xanthoxylum*) at Fort Morgan, thrushes seemed to be flying around continuously. Because of my efforts to avoid duplication, plus the difficulty of identifying every individual Olive-backed or Gray-checked, I feel sure that my numbers are much too conservative, but even so they are extremely high in my experience with these birds. The list showed about 22 Veeries, 12 Olive-backs, 12 Gray-cheeks, and 11 Wood Thrushes. Evidently all Hermit Thrushes had departed, as was also true of the Robin.

VIREOS: Only the wintering Solitary (Blue-headed) Vireo was missed. Numbers of White-eyed Vireos were moderate, and only one Yellow-throated Vireo was found, but Red-eyes were abundant (45). It seemed incongruous to find them foraging in scrub live oaks less than two feet high. Over much the same route on June 14, only four Red-eyed Vireos could be found.

WARBLERS: Although my list of 19 species looked good by coastal standards, it actually represented just a little more than half the "possible" number. Quantitatively, the Tennessee Warbler stood out at 18 individuals, outnumbering even the wintering and summering species. Those which are thought to be most unusual for the Alabama coast were: five Cape Mays, two Blackpolls, and two Prairies. One or two of the Ovenbirds at Fort Morgan were walking around **inside** the fort. Among the more notable omissions might be mentioned the Worm-eating, Blue-winged, Golden-winged, Magnolia, Black-throated Green, Blackburnian, and Kentucky Warblers, and Louisiana Water-thrush.

BLACKBIRDS, ORIOLES, AND TANAGERS: Some members of these groups were among the most abundant species of the day, for example: Bobolink, 30; Orchard Oriole, 25; Scarlet Tanager, 27; Summer Tanager, 14. (It goes without saying that the resident Red-wing and Grackle were also well up the list.) The sight of three or four male Scarlet Tanagers perched in a single dead bush on a sand dune is as indescribable as it is unbelievable. The Baltimore Oriole was comparatively scarce, only two being found.

FINCHES AND SPARROWS: The family Fringillidae accounted for only nine of the species seen. The most numerous of these (omitting resident forms) were the Indigo Bunting, 35, and the Rose-breasted Grosbeak, 17. Also present were a few Grosbeaks and a single female Painted Bunting. More thorough coverage might have produced the following additional members of this family: Sharp-tailed, Seaside, Pine-woods, and Chipping Sparrows.

If there is a moral to this rambling account, it is the great variety of birds which may be encountered in a good spring day on the Alabama coast. On the day mentioned a really thorough coverage of southern Baldwin County might have produced 150 species. Undoubtedly such days have often occurred before and will come again. If a group of Alabama ornithologists would care to spend a day in late April or early May making an exhaustive census of the bird life of this region—an undertaking which would require four or five field parties at least—I should be pleased to take part in the project if by any means possible.

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