

## South Padre Island Fall Migration 2023 – A Brief Account

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### August:

While we do see some early migratory songbirds in July, it doesn't quite feel like things are moving much until early August with the arrival of large numbers of Yellow Warblers. Their little chip notes fill the air of change. By mid-August a few more species started to show up at the SPI Birding Nature Center and Alligator Sanctuary (SPIBNCAS).

Yellow Warbler (*Setophaga petechia*)

At this moment in time the regular everyday weather is extremely hot and humid, “two underwear days,” as a visiting birder referred to them. Because of this and the drought conditions at the time, most of the migratory birds would congregate around the drip water feature located



in the shady Songbird Alley Trail in the afternoon. Birders would gather on the back deck in the mid-afternoon and squeeze together under the shade of the hackberries and umbrellas and wait for the birds to come into the drip for a drink. At this spot we observed plenty of Canada Warblers and Mourning Warblers (more than we saw in the spring), Red-eyed Vireos, Yellow Warblers, American Redstarts, Yellow-breasted Chats, Yellow-billed Cuckoos, and several species of flycatchers. The biggest surprise was a rare Yellow-green Vireo that in a ghost-like fashion appeared at the drip for a second and quickly disappeared into the shrubbery never to be seen again.

Yellow-breasted Chat (*Icteria virens*)

### September:

September is a great month to witness seabird migration along South Padre Island (SPI) beach. Tropical systems in the Gulf will stir things up and you never know what is going to be blown towards SPI. The sea birding got interesting as soon as the month started after hurricane Idalia tore through the Gulf and made landfall in Florida during the last couple of days of August.



Black Terns (*Chlidonias niger*)

A week later, after the hurricane swell finally settled and left the beach flat and compacted as a city street, a visiting birder reported a Brown Noddy some 12 miles up the beach from the end of the road on SPI. Brown Noddy is a tropical species normally found in the warm tropical waters of Caribbean. In the United States it can be seen around the southern tip of Florida and especially the Florida Keys.

The next day, I hit the beach as soon as I got out of work. With the sun to the west, I scanned the glowing waves and beyond as I drove up the beach. I enjoyed the flocks of migratory Black Terns and Common Terns, among the movement of Gulf resident, Royal Terns and Brown Pelicans, but no Brown Noddy. I made it to the county line, turned around, and made my way back south as the sun started to set. Just a short while later I noticed a small, deep brown, tern getting chased by Laughing Gulls just past the first set of breaks. Brown Noddy!! I fell out of the car and fired off some camera shots as it flew past me and away down the beach! I got it! Brown Noddy was a lifer for me! There are just a few records of this species in the county, so it was extra special. On my way back down the beach I joyfully sang some made-up lyrics that went... “Who wants a Noddy, I want a Noddy, who wants a Noddy, oh everybody!”



Brown Noddy (*Anous stolidus*)

## October:

The most beautiful month of the year on SPI. Seaside goldenrods and coastal nectar plants are in full bloom and the sunlight is low and beautiful. The Turk’s cap in the garden provided lots of fruit to the Northern Mockingbirds and Great Kiskadees and other migratory birds throughout the month.



Groove-billed Ani (*Crotophaga sulcirostris*)

On October 7, the SPIBNCAS hosted its annual fall Big Sit and Habitat Drive. A group of 11 birders made up of staff and Texas Master Naturalist volunteers birded from sunrise almost to sunset from within a 17 foot diameter circle strategically placed on the back deck of the birding center. We logged 70 species in our effort that day. In the Songbird Alley we recorded: Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Summer Tanager, Painted Bunting, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Gray Catbirds, Northern Waterthrush, and others. A couple of days later, a Groove-billed Ani also showed up on the trail.

Later in the month on October 25, I was hanging around the base of the jetty at Isla Blanca Park when I witnessed a young Ring-billed Gull, a wintering species on our coast, trying to run off with a mermaid's purse! What a shyster! In plain daylight too! A mermaid's purse is what beachcombers call the washed-up embryo sacks of oviparous sharks and skates found on the beach. I chased the gull and luckily it dropped the mermaid's purse at the water's edge. I reported it to iNaturalist and the authorities said it was the embryo sack of a clearnose skate (*Rostroraja eglanteria*).



Ring-billed Gull with mermaid's purse

## November:

November began with the first cold front of the season arriving right on November 1. The SPIBNC Naturalists team along with some young local birders hosted a Texas Parks and Wildlife filming crew who were in town to film a segment on coastal birding. They got lucky with an amazing day of coastal migration! The gardens were alive with migratory songbirds pushed down by the front, many of which were desperately feeding on the ground trying to find insects in the cold wind. Most notably was the large number of Ruby-crowned Kinglets in the garden. There must've been more than 50 on site. Among them we found one Golden-crowned Kinglet, an uncommon bird in deep south Texas.

On this day it became apparent that we were having a western push. Several western bird species that rarely come this far east were reported on the island. I photographed a Western Tanager loading up on manzanita berries in the front gardens. Green-tailed Towhees were reported all over the island and Cassin's Kingbirds were sighted perched high up on the tips of the mangroves and tree-tops around the birding center and convention center. Previously there were only a couple of records of this kingbird in Cameron County. They look a lot like our resident Tropical and Couch's Kingbirds, but have a dark black, squared-off tail, a darker gray head, and white patch on the chin.



King Rail (*Rallus elegans*)

A Brown Thrasher showed up the following day and thrashed around in Songbird Alley, but the most unusual bird found was a King Rail that snuck around in the deep cover of the native gardens in front of the visitor center. We are used to Clapper Rails since they are saltmarsh specific. They often get erroneously reported as King Rails, but this time we finally had a real King Rail, but not in the marsh, in the gardens?!