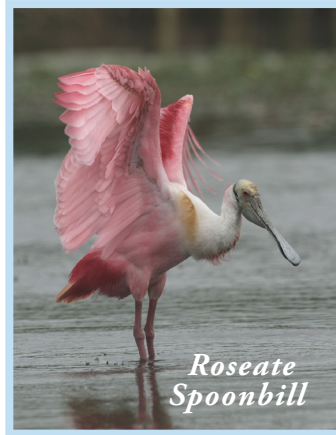


# YEAR-ROUND BIRDING IN GALVESTON COUNTY

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**The new year** ushers in the coldest, most bitter, and zoologically stressful time for some of Galveston County's creatures. Reptiles are driven underground. Most species of birds retreat to the tropics. Fish seek the shelter of deep waters. Most species of insects disappear. In addition, some mammals take this time to join the reptiles in hibernation.

Even so, **January** can be a wonderful time to seek out the hardier wildlife that nature places on display. On both ends of Galveston Island and the Bolivar Flats, congregations of water birds may number in the thousands. Three species of gulls and terns are common, with other varieties present but in less conspicuous numbers for the careful observer. Sandpipers and plovers show off their splendid diversity in these haunts, alongside a plethora of herons, egrets, ibis, and other exquisite wading birds such as roseate spoonbills.



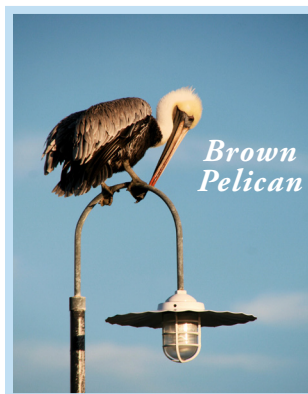
Our inshore waters, replete with swimming birds plus a few strays escaping the bitter northern areas, include two types of cormorants, common loons, two varieties of grebes, diving ducks like scaups and mergansers, and two pelican species, as different in appearance as they are in habits.

For those wishing to visit our National Wildlife Refuges, Brazoria and Anahuac NWR are chock full of different sets of water birds: dabbling ducks like gadwall, shoveler, pintail, and teal may be amazingly abundant, and are often accompanied by moorhen, rails, American bittern, coots, freshwater sandpipers and two species of geese. Our position along the southern coast of the United States places us in the migratory pathway of birds from across the continent.

By **February**, the weather turns milder, fog frequently dampens spirits as it does the land, and our winter resident water birds begin to slowly depart for their northern breeding grounds and the annual celebration of life. However, by mid-February, our own early spring is heralded by a most cheery precursor, the faintly chirping purple martin.

By the time the sandhill cranes have vanished in **March**, many spring arrivals have made their way to Galveston from the tropics. Yellow-legs, the ruby-throated hummingbird, parulas, waterthrush, and other southern-breeding warblers are among the brave travelers, risking life and limb to reach our shores although ferocious cold fronts may still rage. By the vernal equinox, our woodlands and marshes begin to fill up with weary spring migrants, joined by the now active snakes, lizards, bugs, and frogs.

**April** is mother nature's greatest celebration of life here in Galveston County. Each day, myriads of songbirds take cover in our remaining forests, worn out from their migratory travels and in need of shelter, food, and water. Birders from all over the country, as well as the rest of the world, flock to the Galveston area to behold the vast array of colorful songsters and hunt for that elusive "life bird".



By this time, the shallows are teeming with cold-blooded life forms. Semi-permanent lakes, fed by winter rains, become breeding ponds for bullfrogs and a dizzying array of insects, all fair game for hungry wading birds. In-shore waters, such as Gulf Beach, host untold

numbers of small fish, with predators like the speckled trout never far behind. Between the birders and the anglers, lodging in Galveston fills up with eco-tourists, along with others just seeking a fabulous beach vacation.

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In **May**, fishing explodes, featuring golden croaker in bountiful amounts. Bull reds patrol the murky shallows, and unwanted catfish bring their nasty spines to plague our fingers and toes. By mid-May, the songbird migration has ended, but our coastal lagoons fill up with thousands of sandpipers, fattening up for the long journey to Alaska's fragile Arctic Tundra. For a brief period each May, over five thousand Wilson's phalaropes invade Pelican Island's east lagoon, with equal numbers of semi-palmated sandpipers also appearing.

**June** is a great time for salt or freshwater fishing, water sports, or just enjoying our beaches. Mornings are a pleasant time to walk in mainland forests, with many species of breeding birds issuing a proverbial wall of sound from the canopy. Many other juvenile animals may be seen, and the miracle of resurgent life springs once again from the cold grip of winter. Scarcely noticed, purple martins and barn swallows begin slipping down the coast toward Brazosport on their fall migrations toward the tropics. On the island, where there are fewer species of breeding songbirds, the breathtaking painted bunting sings his rough whistled notes from inconspicuous perches.

By the summer solstice and impending **July**, with temperatures soaring, many nature enthusiasts plan indoor activities, unwilling to pay the hot, humid price for viewing our resident creatures.

Unbeknownst to many, July is a fantastic month for viewing shorebirds, especially in our wildlife refuges.

Drying puddles and remnants of seasonal ponds host hordes of sandpipers, including many rare species, which are difficult to find in other months.



Birders who wish for challenge may try their hand at sorting out several species of small sandpipers called "peeps," medium-sized pipers such as dowitchers, as well as the other unexpected species or two.

By **August**, weather begins reacting to nature's oven. First, thermalclines set up in our marine



waters, preventing nutrients lower in the water column from reaching the surface, thereby shutting down algae production, the basis for local food chains. By late August, periods of rain, often lasting more than a week, set in, bringing on the reproduction of tree frogs, toads, and many insects. Mosquitoes may become more rampant, and some human residents are held hostage indoors by the buzzing throng. August also sees the return of songbird migrants from the north, often fattening up on our region's Hercules club trees much as they did on our Mulberries late last spring.

Some of our rarest avian visitors, such as the bewildering empidonax flycatcher genus, race through around Labor Day, delighting birders who are willing to tolerate the heat, humidity, and bugs to catch a glimpse. The rest of **September** is good for fall migrants, although their colors are more subtle and their songs strangely absent. These are mostly the insectivorous songbirds, although moisture and a dietary supplement of berries for carbs are welcome necessities.

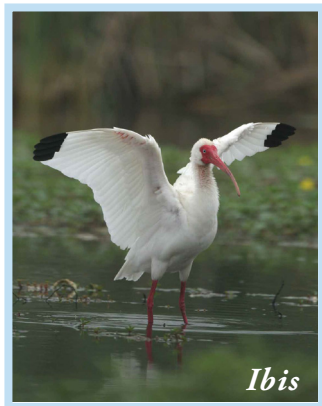
Late September sees our first cooler weather right around the autumnal equinox, and with it, new arrivals such as some seed-eating birds, our first ducks, and a hawk migration on Smith Point that is simply staggering! There also is a window of chance for spotting pit vipers, like rattlesnakes, roaming in search of winter quarters, a time hikers must be especially vigilant of the ground's inhabitants.

## YEAR-ROUND BIRDING IN GALVESTON COUNTY

Some of our loveliest weather blesses us in **October**, often with clear skies, gentle winds and refreshing temperatures. The dry eastern winds of early October reduce the mosquito population, raise the tides to remarkable levels, and encourage shorebird and songbird migrants to exit for points south. It is also a time for winter residents, such as phoebes, house wrens, various sparrows, scattered waterfowl, herons, egrets and ibis, to begin making their appearances.

In many ways, **November** is a continuation of October, with cooler temperatures, stronger weather fronts, and a gradual buildup of winter resident birds. Raptors return, such as the bulky red-tailed hawk, the rat-eating northern harrier that floats along over our marshes, and tiny falcons called kestrels; all forsake their summer diet of insects in exchange for our hefty mouse population. Cold snaps not only produce birds arriving from the north, they also encourage fish movement, such as the famous annual flounder runs.

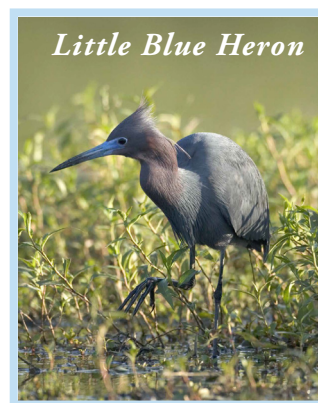
By Thanksgiving, geese honking overhead are a common phenomenon, a dozen or more sparrow species slip unobtrusively into our fields, stately sandhill cranes walk proudly through our pastures, and gangs of large, northern gulls patrol our beaches for the ocean's refuse. Indeed, our world is a very different place than a few weeks previously.



*Ibis*

Observant birders are aware of the strange absence of songbirds in late fall, with the less experienced wondering every year, "where did all the birds go?" When our summer residents and fall migrants having departed, and with many winter residents yet to arrive, there is indeed a hiatus in our woodlands, and often our feeders. Not to worry - they will be back!

Indeed, **December** brings avian gifts to our feeders, such as goldfinches and true sparrows from the north, often wrapped in nice colors - everything but a bow! Our wildlife refuges bulge with waterfowl and hikers and birders alike are out enjoying every last chance outside, before true winter weather sets in. At the winter solstice, much of the country is subject to barren trees and silent woodlands, but Galveston County remains alive with birds and mammals, breeding leopard frogs, whiting biting in the surf, and flowers decorating the roadsides. Indeed, the entire year is a time for mother nature to touch us all with her splendid beauty, calling us from our computers, cell phones and TVs to go out and enjoy all that our local ecosystems have to offer.



*Little Blue Heron*



*Sparrow*