

Trip Report – Yellow Rails & Rice Festival, Jennings, LA
Oct 27-Nov 1, 2015

Day 1: Oct 27 – Drove down from Asheville

Day 2: Oct 28 – Marceaux & West Niblett Road; Thornwell Rice Compound; Rice fields outside Thornwell w/ Beat the Crowds

Day 3: Oct 29 – Johnson Bayou; Peveto Woods; Sabine NWR

Day 4: Oct 30 - Cameron Prairie NWR; Lyons Rd; Boat trip in Misere Bayou

Day 5: Oct 31 - Cameron Jetty; Broussard Beach Rd; Rutherford Beach

Day 6: Nov 1 – Drove back to Asheville

It was a very long and tiring drive through steady rain from Asheville, NC to Jennings, LA, but we were able to have a nice Mexican dinner and get a good night's rest before starting festival activities the next day. Wednesday morning dawned clear (thankfully) after several days of rain, and we kicked off the 'Beat the Crowds' part of the festival with a trip over to Marceaux Road near Thornwell. The fields at our first stop were chocked full of ibis – mostly White-faced, but we did manage to find a few Glossy and White as well for good comparison. Great-tailed Grackles were in no short supply and there were several Boat-taileds as well. The flooded areas had quite a nice selection of shorebirds – Stilt, Western, and Least Sandpipers, Long-billed Dowitcher, Laughing Gull, and Gull-billed Terns were all present. We were also pleased to see a female Vermilion Flycatcher, which was quite obliging as it hunted insects from a conspicuous perch. In a flock of blackbirds and cowbirds we found both a Bronzed Cowbird and a Yellow-headed Blackbird – great birds for this location. Over on West Niblett Road, an Eastern Screech Owl responded to Steve's whistled call, and we found a few passerines as well in this forested stretch – Orange-crowned and Wilson's Warblers, Gray Catbird and Eastern Phoebe. Donna found a Cave Swallow with Tree Swallows flying overhead, which we got a quick glance of before it disappeared behind the tree line. During a bathroom stop at the Thornwell Rice Compound we had excellent looks at a Barn Owl in an old building, and had a few nice flyby Bald Eagles. After an excellent lunch at Regatta in Lake Arthur, we headed over to the rice fields near Thornwell for the main event – to ride the combine and look for rails! Our afternoon could not have been more perfect, as everyone in our group got excellent looks at Yellow, Virginia and King Rails as well as Sora, and we each got to ride multiple times on the combine – a truly unique and educational experience! All told, we probably saw about 20 Yellow Rails, many flushing from in front of the combine, revealing their white secondaries even from a distance.



After our rail success on day 1, we struck off on our own to do some birding separate from the festival activities. A Groove-billed Ani and Black-headed Grosbeak had both been reported at Peveto Woods down on the coast, and we wanted to try for both of these rarities. On the way down, we stopped along the road near Johnson Bayou, where we encountered Crested Caracara, Peregrine Falcon and our first Clapper Rail, which had wandered out into full view on a grassy side road. Down at Peveto we found a nice mix of passerines in the woods before the beach – Nashville, Black-throated Green, Orange-crowned and Yellow-rumped (Myrtle) Warblers, Common Ground and White-winged Doves, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Hermit Thrush and Blue-headed Vireo. A quick walk down to the beach yielded Black-bellied, Snowy and Piping Plovers, Sanderling, a juvenile Yellow-crowned Night-Heron and lots of American Avocets. No ani or grosbeak, but 53 species wasn't bad for this stop! After lunch we made our way back through Sabine NWR, where we found lots of Neotropic Cormorants

and a single Double-crested for a nice comparison. Exploring the roadside walkway we had nice looks at Common Yellowthroat, Green & Tricolored Herons, and lots of Savannah Sparrows. We were surprised as well to find a juvenile White-crowned Sparrow associating with a Clay-colored Sparrow.



Clay-colored Sparrow

Friday morning we set out for Cameron Prairie NWR for a selection of waterbirds, waders and anything else we could find. Along the auto drive we found mostly American Coots and Common Gallinules, Mottled Ducks and Blue-winged Teal, with a smattering of Northern Shoveler, Mallard, Gadwall and Greater White-Fronted Geese. We also found several Roseate Spoonbills, which are always a delight to see, as well as a flyby American Bittern. There were lots of American Alligators in here as well, most of them just 3-4 feet long. We explored a few more parts of Cameron Prairie NWR then headed back to Jennings for lunch before an afternoon jaunt to Lyons Road. On the way we spotted a single Scissor-tailed Flycatcher on a power line, and managed quick glances before it flew south. Le Conte's Sparrow was our main target at Lyons Road, but the wind kept picking up and we saw little other than Northern Harriers and a pale Krider's Red-tailed Hawk.

Next up was our boat trip through Misere Bayou. As we approached our boatman's house, we were delighted to find thousands of blackbirds feeding on spilled grain in the road. The majority were Red-winged Blackbirds but every so often we saw a flash of yellow in a sea of black – there were at least 2 Yellow-headed Blackbirds mixed in. Our boat trip was lovely and relaxing, and though we didn't have much bird activity or diversity, we all enjoyed cruising past the cypresses, catching glimpses of Anhinga, Pileated Woodpecker and Belted Kingfishers. Returning to the dock we got to witness a mix of several hundred Great Egrets and White Ibis coming in to their evening roost.

Our last full day began with uncertainty and the threat of yet more rain. We headed down to Cameron Coast with the hope that we could at least avoid some of the rain for the morning. Luckily, the weather cooperated, and the rain held off until noon. By Cameron Jetty we found a few nice flocks of coastal birds, including our first Black Skimmers, Short-billed Dowitchers and Ruddy Turnstones. Another highlight was watching Bottlenose Dolphins playing in the wake of massive oil tankers, which we could have observed all day had we had the time! A quick check of Rutherford and Broussard Beaches yielded handfuls of the expected species, from Eastern Meadowlark to American White Pelican. Evidence of the big rain event that passed through a few days previous was apparent, as many of the side roads were still submerged and there was an abundance of dead jellyfish washed up on the shore. It wasn't long before the bottom dropped out, and we made our way back to our hotel in Jennings for a relaxing and rainy afternoon. Our last dinner was at the festival social, held at the local museum, which was full of rich history of the area. We each enjoyed several glasses of wine and lots of bites and nibbles, from crawfish etouffee and fried catfish while the more adventurous (or unknowing) eaters tried gator bites wrapped in bacon. This was a lovely last evening and gave us a chance to meet and talk with both farmers and other birders and appreciate all the interesting things within this small museum.

The next day we rose early to drive back to North Carolina, and unfortunately it rained on us the entire way back! However, we were thankful that the weather cooperated while we were in Louisiana, and we finished this one-of-a-kind trip with 134 species, including 5 species of rail.

Aaron Steed

All photos by Mimi Anderson



2015 Yellow Rails & Rice Venture participants & guides
(Ashley Peele – *front, left of center*; Aaron Steed - *back, far left*)