Stevenson Woods: America's top Songbird Photography Location

A quarter century ago I was approached by fantastic photographer Alan Murphy about photographing birds on my property, which has the highest yard list in America's history of 326. Now, after twenty-five years of working with him, I started leading photo workshops here Spring of 2024. Clearly it's become America's top migratory songbird photography location. Below: Jim, left; Alan, right.



Here is the first area we shot, which still serves morning shoots with special glass made for photography, but Alan's amazing insight created more!

Mornings birders have a choice of shooting inside through huge windows with glass made for photography or going down for sandpipers, plovers, gulls, terns and many other waterbirds at San Luis Pass in Jim's 4x4. This morning run is great for those who haven't had opportunities for beach birds in spring garb with Dunlin, both dowitchers, Sanderling, Ruddy Turnstone, Red Knot and other sandpipers leading the way. Eight tern species, six plovers and nice gull plumage with avocets, stilts, skimmers, oystercatchers, Reddish Egrets and all waders possible in their high breeding plumage. [A second early morning run is available the same distance away, with freshwater and salt marsh birds.]



Reddish Egret with high breeding plumage; skin color of waterbirds excels.

Black Skimmers are common at San Luis Pass and very interesting to shoot.



Midmornings we rejoin our friends at Jim's house as more songbirds drop in from their trans-Gulf flight. [We realize the idea of shooting birds from inside a house is questionable but here it works perfectly!] Seven huge windows five feet wide offer easy access for a small group. The sun is coming over the house (not as glary as it appears) and birds are extremely tame and abiding. Tripods may be used and furniture slides easily out of the way.



Below is the morning drip center, seen partially from the right window above. It can't be fully illuminated until spring. It has nice perches & limbs WHICH ARE DECORATED FAR MORE THAN THE WINTER IMAGES SHOWN. Cushioned metal chairs & sofas are available inside for those who wish & the adjacent kitchen and bathrooms are available. Glass made for photography.



Afternoons: Fantastic Outdoor Shooting with Perfect Light

The afternoon drip, again with our backs to the sun, brought colorful songbirds of a plethora of taxa, on wonderful drip pools with natural vegetation. The blinds sit ten feet from the drip and through the years, birds have become incredibly tame, like a long-time bird feeder in many locations. These birds have flown 740 miles from the Yucatan and badly need the fresh water and "cat$_{bird}$" naps in nearby bushes. A Seed feeder is nearby for the granivores and fruit is also growing as well as placed on the meristem of branches. These bring very active interactions between birds.



Fresh limbs strategically placed offer excellent photography perches over the drip.

Species like Blue-winged and Yellow Warbler begin migrating through around the middle of April, with the Canadian nesters following after the 20th of April, into the beginning of May. Since medium-sized, US-nesting songbirds like orioles, tanagers and grosbeaks peak slightly earlier, but are still present during the workshops, they don't crowd out the all-important warblers.



Oranges are set up to gain “action” with the frugivores like orioles and grosbeaks, a fun diversion during any slow periods. [Is it better to have a sharper bill or bigger?] Baltimore Orioles are abundant and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks common at the drip.



There are times the diversity at the drip in truly amazing!



When I moved here in 1995, there were mostly Chinaberry Trees, decent but not so great for birds. I immediately started planting trees to attract the birds, including oaks, mulberries, various fruiting species, Hercules Club (which only lives thirty years), elm and Cherry Laurels from down below migrated up the hill. I have been able to remove the Chinaberries and no tallow tree would be caught dead here! 😊



It is amazing how many species of birds we get in the drip pan at one time. Here a catbird & Rose-breasted Grosbeak face off while a male Painted Bunting watches. While most of the wildly-popular buntings pass through in mid April, we have two which nest most every year in the yard. Still, that is no guarantee you'll see them!

One of my favorite things about photography in the migration is how much folks see & learn. Here, changing plumage males (Summer Tanager and Orchard Oriole) share the sauna, while an adult of the latter just dove right in. [Bet he's been here before!] It's always best to shoot the bird BEFORE it gets wet!



The sound of the drip itself seems to attract birds like this Golden-winged Warbler. We also get Blue-winged Warblers and have had several hybrids through the years w/ Alan. Most are the "brewsters" but one day I hope to photograph a Lawrence's. We've also had other warbler hybrids…Lord only knows!



This is Stevenson Woods, where Jim lives. You can imagine how many birds drop in during the spring and fall migrations. This has a yard list of 326 bird species, the highest yard list in the history of North America. If you look hard you'll see where the trees are cut on the lower right-hand side of the small yard where we shoot (it's between the two light dots). It allows us to shoot until sundown, giving us fantastic light toward dusk and shots of birds like thrushes that often come late. We are also considering using the floodlights around dusk in front of the blind for a little extra shooting. Believe me, birds will drink till dark.



Moss or other decorations enhance the photography for birds like Canada Warbler.



Even more rare than the Canada is the Mourning Warbler approaching the drip. We get more of those two species in early fall but only one or two in late spring. Their* migration pattern is early fall and late spring (like many insectivores) so the second session spilling over into May is best for rarities like these, empids and lost species, often from the West.

Those to species winter in Central America and thus migrate through the interior of Texas in spring (unlike fall). That course makes them scarce on the Coast in spring, much like Wilson's and Nashville Warblers. Those two are our most common fall warblers, though, and consequently scarce back East, like in Florida.



Fall 2024 I've been experimenting with various vegetation like these Parrot Pitcher Plants. The Dickcissel seems to hear the drip behind her. [Getting all the extraneous sticks & other unwanted vegetation out of the picture will happen] This fall was an opportunity to see how it worked with songbird migrants. "Dead limb perches" will be replaced this spring with fresh branches decorated with flowers, etc.

Remember that *I* work for YOU. When we start out each afternoon (or morning) I will ask if anybody wishes for any changes, touch-ups or whatever on the drips or limbs. I will have several very ornamental limbs waiting to go in a stand (tripod) & point toward the drip pan. You can shoot like mad.



This fall Indigo Bunting male pales in comparison to loads of April spring males.



Quite often while shooting at the drip we inadvertently capture nice flight shots!



The last week of April and early May is a time for rare western species like this Olive-sided Flycatcher, or extralimital Caribbean species like Black-whiskered Vireo. These unexpected surprises add to the thrill of shooting in late April. Can you see the bug he snapped up before our very eyes?



You can get quite good at hitting flight shots by aiming “just off” of a perched bird and estimating which direction it will fly. This Orchard Oriole still has tiny bits of orange on his bill (and that’s not pulp fiction). Adjust your shutter speed!

Also my resident female cardinal, Rosabelle, pictured below. Where’s Henry?





The first two hours of the morning are early for incoming songbirds, so some in the group may head down to San Luis Pass in Jim's 4x4 for aquatic species. It is loaded with dozens of species of sandpipers, plovers, gulls, terns, herons, egrets and both pelicans. A Black Skimmer shot over the tide is a nice touch (especially 2 in focus). But one species is even better:



Reddish Egrets are polymorphic, seen in varying color phases, like dark and light Snow Geese. Fifteen percent of ours in the US are light morph. This is the official bird of Galveston Island and nothing could be more photogenic. They'll "canopy feed" with wings out, as the shade cuts the water's glare. But best of all, they chase fish, nailing them as they swim away! This is a common bird at the Island's West End, very tame and dying to pose for us!



A half-dozen species of plovers like this black-bellied are common along the beach and are usually tame enough to make for easy pickins. We wait for late April when they get really dolled up, right before they head north & the results are wonderful! Notice this one is allllllmost in full breeding plumage.



There are loads of sandpipers but these Eastern Willets are nesting while the other species (Western Willet) are migrating along the surge zone of the beach. Both of the species are dolled up in their breeding plumage with Easterns flying around us, yelling their heads off. Waterbirds are great for practicing flight shots!



Many thousands of a few tern species nest in Galveston Bay, many of them feeding in the Gulf, so there are often terns flying past with fish in their beaks and decked out in breeding plumage. In late April, everything you see will be in that plumage.* This is a Forster's Tern but all eight may be shot in late April.

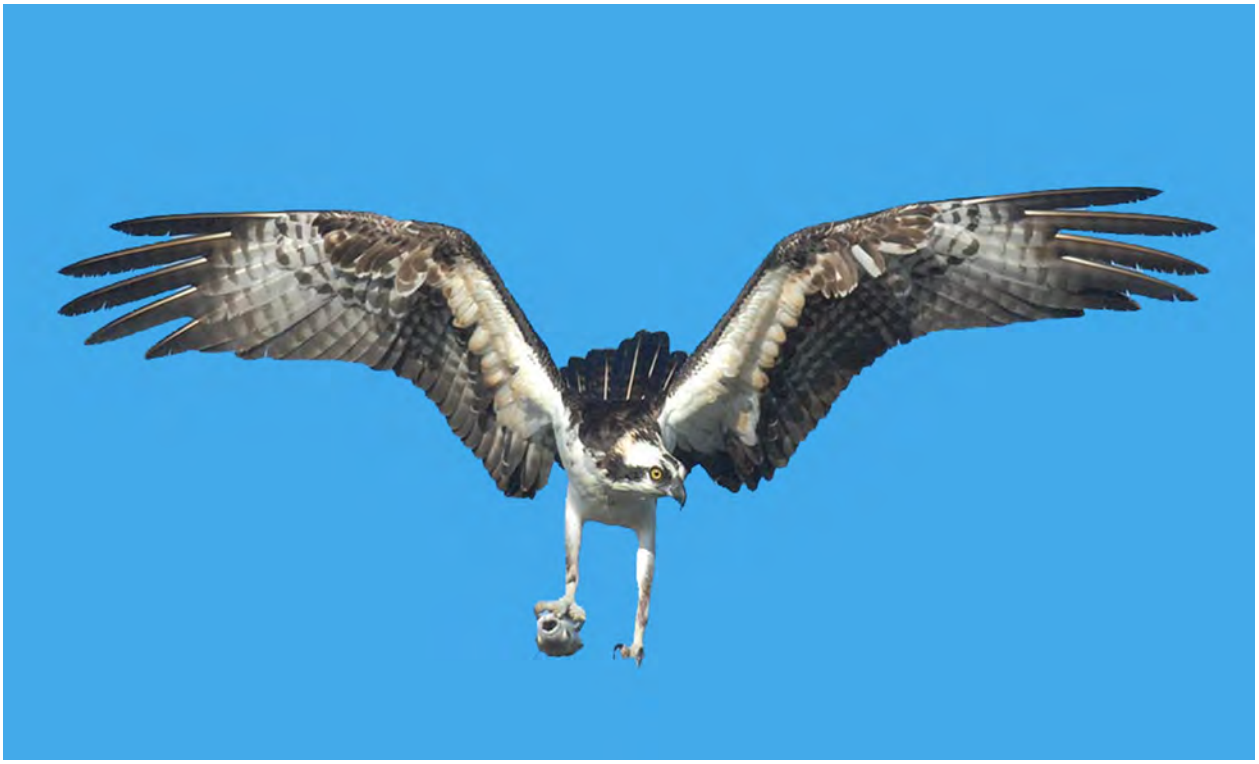
*Sadly, Golden Plovers migrate in early April and in their winter plumage.



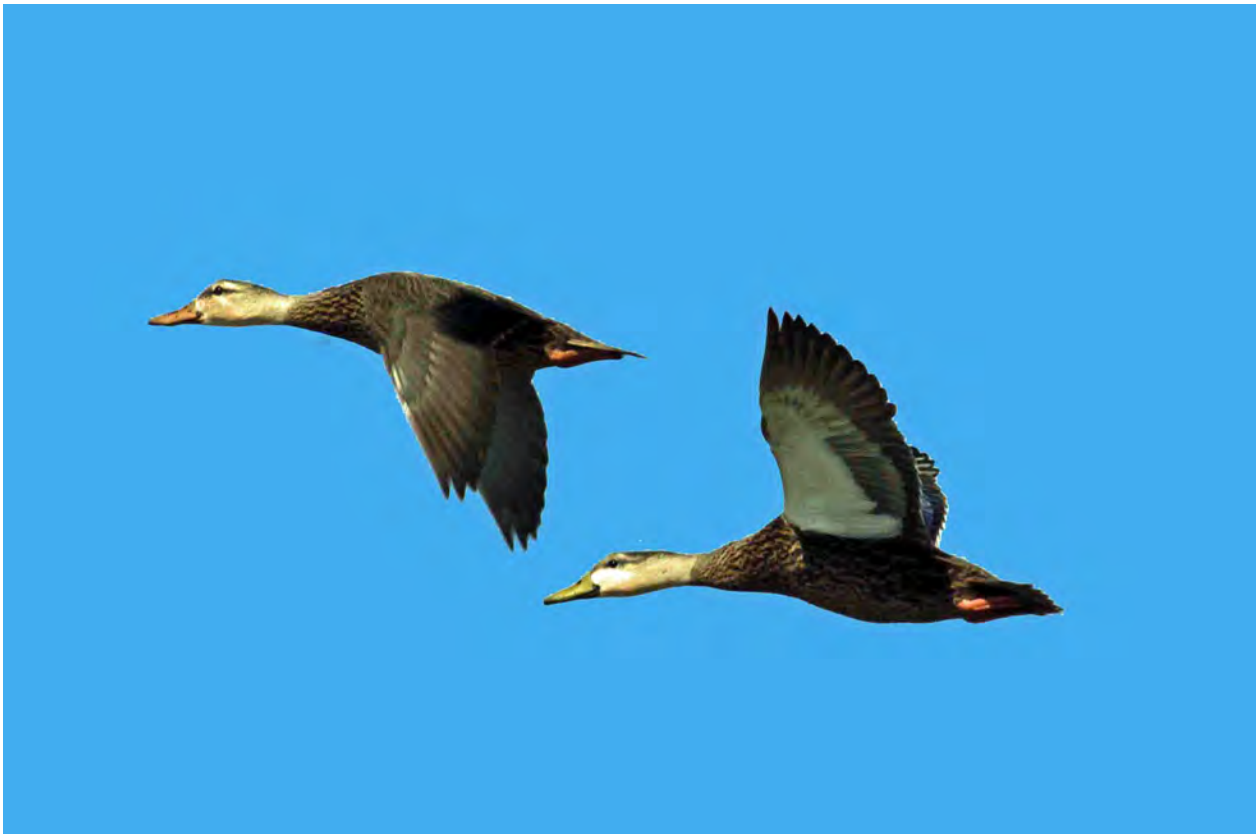
If the group wants to take a morning to go (EARLY!) to the rice fields of Chambers County to shoot the fantastic shorebird assemblages of alternate sandpipers like this Hudsonian Godwit, we can, and be back for the afternoon shoot. [You'll sleep that night!] That trip can easily include Anahuac NWR. I have a big box of boots…



When driving around in late April, Scissor-tailed Flycatchers are on fence wires.



Osprey are quite common along the Coast, even roosting in Jim’s neighborhood.



Lastly, Mottled Duck pairs are raising their families at this time, often with babies!

During the workshop the gathering time is early enough to be shooting right at sun-up. Most days this will include a 20-minute ride down to San Luis Pass, or another destination on Galveston's West End. If we choose to visit Rice Fields/ Chambers County, an additional hour is required. We finish morning shooting a little before noon. We meet up at 2:45pm for the spectacular afternoon shoot and fire away till sundown, around 7pm or so. A full lunch or snacks in your blind may be necessary. Temps are pleasant in late April with a cool, on-shore breeze. A mosquito or two may be in the blind but it's a very dry time of the year with rain seldom washing out shoots. It's really pretty close to Heaven.

The middle of the day is tough to shoot, so we provide a three-hour break as the sun is overhead and harsh. If you wish to seek out warblers, Laffite's Cove Nature Preserve nearby has a large, dense forest where you may have luck. I might also suggest a quick trip the other way to Dos Vacas Muertos. I'll point it out the first morning when we drive past.

Clothes- Boots are not necessary & no long walks. Shooters are asked to wear long, dark pants & a dark shirt (long or short sleeves). Wear no red, yellow or orange colors (aposematic colors) and please avoid loud talking, POINTING, tardiness and fast movements (except the shutter speed). ☺

Jim has been birding for nearly 70 years, having written over ten books. He can ID all the birds by their calls (raised by an ornithologist who insisted!), knows a great deal about field biology with a masters thesis on songbird migration. He cares a great deal about the success of his workshops! However, he is NOT an expert on most cameras, beyond basic concepts. There is usually at least one person in the group that is very "camera knowledgeable" and so far, so good.

Dates for those two five-day sessions in the heart of the songbird migration are 23-27 & 28-May 2. The cost, all included, is $3000. If you only have 2-3 days, you can put your name on a "possible" list if it doesn't fill up with full-time participants. Your cost is $750/day. PLEASE feel free to email with your questions or I'll happily arrange to talk by phone. 409-370-1515

One last suggestion. Ask Jim to put you on his bird picture list. It's free, only Jim gets your email address & you can get off very easily. Even if you don't wish to join the Photoshoot, you're welcomed to be a part of it. Pics largely come from Jim's yard but also the World: Jim leads trips about everywhere!