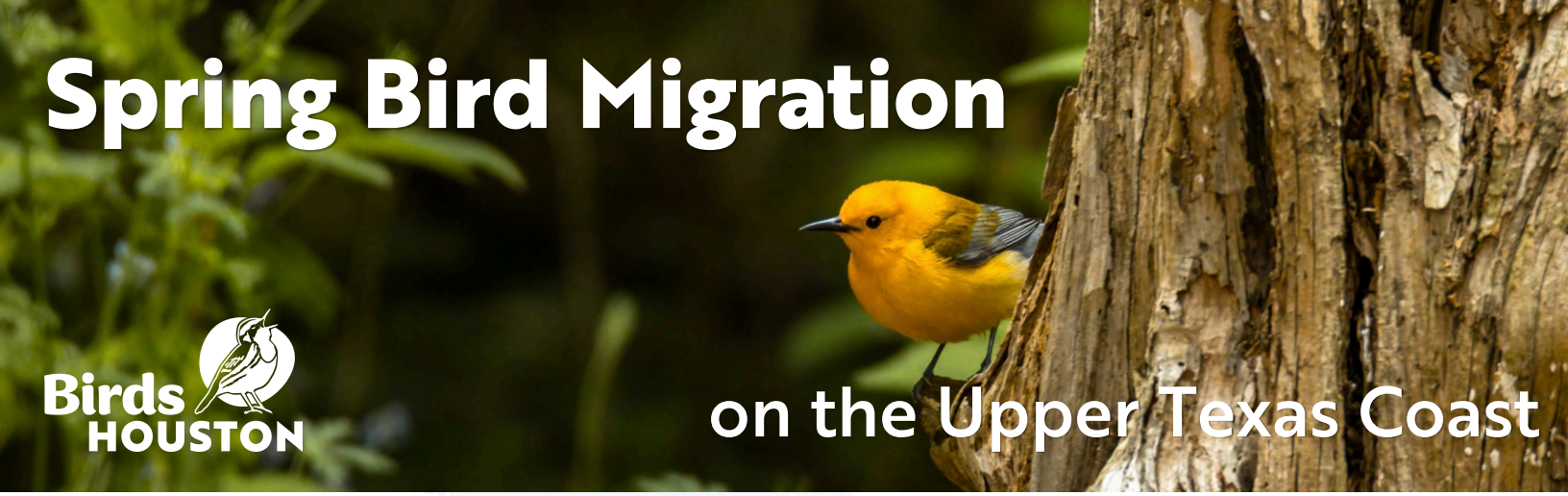

Spring Bird Migration

Birds HOUSTON

on the Upper Texas Coast

The Central Flyway

Every spring, billions of birds undertake a remarkable journey along the Central and Mississippi Flyways–the primary migratory routes connecting wintering grounds in Central and South America to nesting habitats across the United States and Canada. Due to its geographic location, Texas acts as a critical bottleneck for North American migration; approximately one-third of all migratory birds passing through the United States during spring travel through Texas. Driven by biological instincts to establish breeding territories and secure mates, these birds depend heavily on the diverse coastal ecosystems of the Upper Texas Coast and Greater Houston region for vital resources during their journey north.

The Trans-Gulf Crossing

A significant portion of these travel-bound species are neotropical migrants, which include songbirds like warblers, tanagers, and orioles, as well as shorebirds and hummingbirds. Beginning in early March, these birds assemble along the northern tip of Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula. Departing around sunset to take advantage of cooler temperatures and celestial navigation, they initiate an intense 600-mile non-stop crossing over the open waters of the Gulf of Mexico. The transit requires 15 to 18 hours of continuous flight. Under favorable meteorological conditions, migrants reach the Texas coast by midday and often continue flying further inland to utilize forest and prairie habitats before roosting at nightfall.

Stopover Ecology

Completing the Gulf crossing severely depletes a bird's energy and fat reserves. Consequently, coastal woodlots, oak mottes, wetlands, and prairies function as essential stopover habitats—acting as a refuge where birds can safely rest, hydrate, and forage for high-protein insects and native flora. When migrating flocks encounter severe weather, such as strong northern cold fronts or heavy rain over the Gulf, their energy is depleted far more rapidly. Unable to push further inland, thousands of exhausted birds must land at the first available terrestrial habitat along the immediate coastline. Known as a "fallout," this phenomenon demonstrates the ecological importance of preserving protected coastal sanctuaries to ensure species survival.

Conservation Strategies

Because a vast majority of neotropical migrants fly under the cover of night, artificial lighting from urban centers can cause spatial disorientation and increase the risk of building collisions. Conservation organizations, including Birds Houston and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, advocate for community-level action to reduce these hazards. Practicing "Lights Out" initiatives–turning off non-essential exterior lighting between 11:00 PM and 6:00 AM from March through May–significantly reduces light pollution during peak migration. Additional effective conservation actions include applying collision-prevention markers to windows, keeping domestic pets indoors, and cultivating native plant species to provide reliable food sources for migrating populations.

Learn more at www.BirdsHouston.org