

Grand Isle Diaries Transcripts : 04 Island Life Birding

1: In the spring fall out, you'll have the birds staging in South and Central America, getting ready in the late afternoon to start their flight across the Gulf of Mexico. Generally, they'll have a southerly tailwind helping them across the Gulf. They're going to fly at night because there are less predators, and it's cooler, so they use less body fat and muscle to make the trip across the Gulf because you're talking about a bird that weights maybe 3 or 4 ounces, sometimes hardly an ounce like a hummingbird, and they're going to make that 15 to 18 hour flight in one trip, so when they get to Grand Isle, they're looking for water and their food. They're looking for the protection that the oak trees afford them because the trees are so dense. There's lots of places to hide and rest, but it's daylight when they get here, so what you're going to see, let's say you have some warblers coming across the Gulf at night, hundreds of thousands are leaving South America at the same time, and they're flying across the Gulf and maybe they're within a couple hundred miles of Grand Isle, and they experience a front coming from northern Louisiana and the northern part of the United States that's bringing some north winds. These north winds meet the south winds, and the birds that are flying on this southerly tailwind can't fight the north wind because they're too tired, and so when they see Grand Isle, what happens is they just fall out of the sky, literally fall out of the sky into the grass, grassy areas of the island, into the wooded areas, people's lawns, and people's porches. They've been known to fall out on the platforms in the Gulf of Mexico. We had such a fall out of woody throat hummingbirds 3 years ago, the spring after Katrina. You could walk in the woods or walk in your front yard, and the birds were just on the ground. They were, if you, they were flying around looking for food and water, and children were youngsters going to grade school. One March morning, they got up to go to school, and as they were leaving the house, the 3 boys came running back inside. They were all excited because the front field in front of the house, which is a huge expanse about 90 feet by about 250 feet, was just a carpet of blue because it was nothing but indigo buntings.

2: Beautiful birds have come to Grand Isle during the spring. We used to, when we were growing up, they had about a tens of thousands. I'm talking about painted buntings, indigo buntings, grosbeak, all kinds of tropical birds. They still come to Grand Isle but not as much, and I was a person that always had caged birds, always when we were kids. We'd trap them and raise them in captivity. My grandmother had a painted bunting for 11 years. Grosbeak, you'd see them by the hundreds. Last year, they were here by the thousands. They kind of come together. That's when you see the fall out. They are mostly the fall outs. Always, we'd wait for the bird season. We'd wait for that. Today, they got friends from all over. They come from Scotland, from New Zealand. They come. They call me a lot, "Are the birds there?" you know. From the bird club in Houma and everything. "Hey, Ambrose, are the birds, are the birds there?" "Yeah, oh yeah, they're here the next day," so we still do that today.

3: We are very unique as a part of the Mississippi Flyway for migratory birds both in the fall and in the spring. We're the only barrier island that is a live oak-hackberry forest, and we're dead center of the Mississippi Flyway, so we're very important to the neotropical songbirds as well as migrating waterfowl that flies through here in the spring and fall. The forest on Grand Isle is about 2 percent of what it once

was. As a barrier island for the protection that we offer to the coast farther inland to the New Orleans, Lafourche, Jefferson Parish areas and the forest is important to the Grand Isle residents. It cools the island. It also lessens the winds in a hurricane situation. I don't think that we can live without this balance because trees have such a cooling effect as well as cleansing the air, reproducing our oxygen, so it's, if we don't help keep nature in balance, we'll be in serious trouble because we already are in serious trouble due to some imbalances.

4: Oh my God, it must have been beautiful. No trees, it was just (unintelligible) there's flowers, the garden on the farmland. I remember it from in my childhood to perishing to now. It hadn't eroded near as much. The marsh was so rich. It must have been a paradise.

5: Grand Isle is a wonderful place over there.

6: Yeah and it's a big horizon. It's one of the first places you can actually see horizon in south Louisiana cause you're A, you're high enough up, and B, you're high enough to where you go (sighs), and you start to see water, and you can really see the marsh. Then as you drive on through, your blood pressure starts to drop a little, and by the time you get past Fourchon and you're on your way, you can really see the marsh, and you start to see the fish jumping in the, along the ditches, and it's, even though there are little trees down on the side of the road. Then by the time you really get the island in your view, and you're like, "Oh yeah." Well when you cross the bridge coming onto the island, as people have told me and I have experienced myself, you're just like, "I'm home," and you relax. People will come in from all over the United States, and they all summarily say the same thing. They cannot get this sort of relaxation anywhere else, so Grand Isle is this private little quiet oasis.

7: It is a place where people come together and make things work. They love each other. They build upon each other. American history and Louisiana history proves that different nationalities got together. It's beautiful. You're free. You're actually free. You're able to walk out and smell life, smell the Gulf breeze. It's open. Nothing there to harm you. You're there or you're just about there by yourself. It's just open life. It's free. It's beautiful, very beautiful. Most of my life, that was one of my greatest things was to get up every morning and just walk the island, walk the beach and just smell, and just, it's peaceful, very peaceful, peaceful and tranquil.

8: That's this place because it's a beautiful place like no other. There's no other place like it. No other.

9: Personally, I never ever want to leave Grand Isle.