



The Fulvous Whistling Duck is the hardest resident duck to bag usually migrating south of Texas prior to the general waterfowl season.





OTHER GAME BIRDS OF TEXAS

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What weighs a few ounces and flies like Hall-of-Famer Phil Niekro's legendary knuckleball? Can you name the chicken-sized game bird of the marsh that walks on water lilies and sports bright yellow legs, protruded long toes, a crimson red bill, a purplish blue head and a greenish-bronze back? What is the only Curassow bird hunted in the United States? These three – Wilson's Snipe, Purple Gallinule and Chachalaca – are a few of the atypical game birds that can be hunted in Texas.

More than 50 legal migratory and non-migratory game bird species can be harvested in Texas, not including accidental or vagrant migratory species. Many are well known with high harvest numbers for 2013-2014 as reported by TPWD: doves – almost 10.5 million; quail – almost 321,000; and ducks – about 1.85 million. But, scattered across Texas are game bird species (although not in prodigious numbers) that can add a whole new dimension to your bird hunting.

Secretive and Rare Birds of the Marsh Rails

There are four rails (Virginia, King and Clapper Rails and the Sora) and two rail-related birds (Common Moorhen and Purple Gallinule) that can be legally hunted in Texas. All are localized and reserved dwellers of marsh-type environs including flooded rice fields. Clapper rails are generally associated with saltwater marshes while the other three legal rails prefer freshwater marshes. King and Clapper rails are year-round resident birds, while the Virginia and Sora are strictly migratory. None are easy to hunt and some can be downright impossible to find.

Rail hunting is often a cat-and-mouse game conducted in thick sedge flooded fields, glasswort-covered marshes, and second-cropped rice. Hunting them is akin to chasing running blue quail through prickly-pear thickets of West Texas, except you are





The Gambel's Quail lives in the Chihuahuan desert of West Texas and has a boom-or-bust population based on winter and spring rains.

wet-chasing them through marsh grass. Flushing retrievers can be used with some levels of success, but high September temperatures and active water moccasins should be considered before embarking with hunting dogs.

Gallinules

Even rarer in the hunter's bag is the elusive and colorful Purple Gallinule. (This bird is featured on the cover of this magazine.) In more than 30 years of pursuing waterfowl along the middle coast of Texas, I have never had an opportunity to harvest or raise a shotgun at one – but they are there. They are more common in coastal marshes closer to the Louisiana border and often bagged in the Bayou State. Rest assured: If I ever shoot a Purple Gallinule, it has a destiny with the taxidermist.

Another game bird closely related to the Purple Gallinule, but in greater abundance and less secretive, is the Common Moorhen – a drab-colored, dark bird with long

yellow-green legs. Most gallinules migrate out of Texas beginning in August and are nearly all gone by late October, so the best time to bag one is during the first split generally running the last two weeks in September.

One of the best places to pursue rails and gallinules are the marshes of the Anahuac and High Island areas. On average, fewer than 1,000 rails and gallinules are shot in Texas every season.

**Erratic Shorebirds
American Woodcock**

The American Woodcock is one of two legal shorebirds that can be hunted in Texas – a coveted bird in the northern states but overlooked and certainly underutilized by most Texans. This is not “Gentleman Bob” hunting behind stylish pointers, classic double barrels and open range. Woodcock inhabit an inferno of quagmires, barbed vines, briar-infested mottes and thickets so restrictive that working dogs have to make

calculated zigzags through the labyrinth to avoid being ripped to shreds. The admission price into woodcock country is torn clothes and drawn blood; I cannot recall one woodcock hunt that I returned unscathed. Clean flushes with open shooting lanes are not the norm; most shots are presented when a vine is interwoven around one's neck, gun and legs. But, there is a special reward each and every time you pick up a downed bird – a tasty “timberdoodle.”

Woodcocks can be found along the Pineywoods of East Texas and the Gulf Coast. Woodcock biologist expert and former professor at Stephen F. Austin Dr. Monte Whiting said, “The absolute best place to hunt them is in a four to five-year pine plantation with sheared vegetation giving low coverage over ‘sloshy,’ wet, open ground. They probe the ground with their long bills for earthworms which will represent over 70 percent of their diet.”

During the day, woodcocks like to spend





Virginia Rails are common migrants of wetlands, freshwater and brackish marshes usually along the coast of Texas.



their time resting in thick coverts, they move to the edges of thick cover to feed at dawn and dusk – that is the best time to try to intercept them. You can hunt woodcocks without a dog, but your success rate will go up with a well-trained pointer with a beeper collar. Places to hunt woodcocks in East Texas include the Wildlife Management Areas of our National Forests. As with all game, it is always a good idea to call the refuge manager or local wildlife biologist for tips and specific hunting locations.

“Texas has an undetermined number of resident woodcocks, but the vast majority migrate from Northern States starting in October and reach their peak numbers with cold fronts late in December and into January,” said Whiting. An estimated 4,660 woodcocks were harvested in Texas during the 2013-2014 season per a Texas Parks and Wildlife Department Survey. The season for woodcocks is generally from the middle of December through the end of January.

Wilson’s Snipe

The other legal shorebird with a well-deserved game bird status is the Wilson’s



The Eurasian Collared-Dove is one of Texas’ fastest-growing populations of invasive species, currently estimated at 3 million birds.



The Sora is one of four rails that can be legally hunted in Texas.





The Chachalaca occupies one of the smallest ranges of all the game birds in Texas. It is limited to extreme South Texas along the Rio Grande River.

Snipe, commonly referred to as the Common Snipe or Jacksnipe. It is our smallest game bird in Texas and the United States. Make no mistake, this is a real game bird, superbly camouflaged, capable of mind-boggling aerobatics that no sporting-clay target can imitate. More than one skilled wingshooter has gone through a box of shells only to harvest a bird or two. Snipes seem to have an innate proclivity to avoid well-intended patterns through spiraling twists and turns like an erratic bottle rocket.

Large numbers of snipes winter in Texas settling in shallow moist soil areas, muddy grass fields, marshes and harvested rice fields where they probe for small invertebrates and worms. Just about any

wet area with cover along the coast could be a snipe haven.

“Snipes are found all over Texas, anywhere there is sheet water and moist soil they can probe for food,” says Shaun Oldenburger, Migratory Shore and Upland Game Bird Program Manager for TPWD. “They certainly are an underutilized recourse in Texas.” The only way to truly tell if an area is holding snipe is to don a pair of hip boats and trudge out into the muck to see if you can flush a rasping scaip, the distress call of the snipe. Snipe season is one of the last to close in the winter (this season – Oct. 3, 2015 to Feb.14, 2016), providing a few final attempts at live birds before one has to resort to clays. An estimated 12,387 snipes were harvested in Texas last season.

Unusual Game Birds of the Border Plain Chachalaca

The game bird with the smallest range in Texas is the Plain Chachalaca, a hen pheasant-like bird of thorny thickets, scrubland and second-growth forests of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Unlike other Galliformes, birds (pheasants, quail) that prefer to spend most of their time foraging on the ground, chachalacas prefer to spend much of their time in trees, running and hopping along branches to feed on leaves, berries and seeds. Unlike hunting for other upland game birds where one waits for a ground-level rise, a hunter will be looking forward and up to find one of these unique birds.

Chachalaca can be hunted on private





The Wilson's Snipe, or Jacksnipe, is Texas' smallest game bird weighing just a few ounces. It might be the most challenging to shoot on the wing.





The Cinnamon Teal (r) is a vagrant of the Central Flyway where it is shot on occasion. It is usually associated with flocks of Blue-winged and Green-winged Teal.

lands limited to Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr and Willacy counties and on the five units of the state-controlled Las Palomas Wildlife Management Area in the Rio Grande Valley. “They are tough and wary birds to hunt, but the best way to hunt them is to arrive early and listen for their loud, raucous wakeup calls. You should then quickly hone in on them, much like you would do while spring turkey hunting,” said Jimmy Stout, area manager for Las Palomas WMA. “The refuge does not keep track of how many chachalaca are harvested every season, but I am guessing the number is below 50.” The season generally opens at the beginning of November and closes in late February.

Gambel’s Quail

From El Paso to the Big Bend Region of the Chihuahuan desert of West Texas, one may pursue the beautiful Gambel’s Quail in mesquite, acacia and mimosa in which they also roost. Unlike the Blue Quail, which shares its habitat and sometimes interbreed, the Gambel’s Quail sports a teardrop-shaped head plume.

“Gambel’s Quail have never been abundant in Texas as we are on the edge of their preferred habitat--dry washes with a water source, riparian areas and nearby desert scrub,” said Robert Perez, upland game bird leader for TPWD. Places to hunt Gambel’s Quail include Big Bend Ranch

State Park (special draw permit), Black Gap Wildlife Management Area (recently reintroduced) and private ranches along the Rio Grande River.

Other Legal Doves Eurasian Collared-Dove

Eurasian Collared-Doves, considered an invasive species, were introduced in the Bahamas in the 1970s, and spread into Florida by the early 1980s, from which point they colonized rapidly along the Gulf Coast. First identified in Texas in 1995, their numbers have since swelled to nearly 3 million birds – about 1.1 million urban birds and 1.7 million rural birds – in just over 20 years. According to Shaun Oldenburger, their numbers are increasing at a 15 percent average annual growth rate across the state, making them one of the fastest-growing invasive species in Texas. Eurasian Collared-Doves inhabit just about every county in the state.

They are slightly larger than a white-winged dove, paler in color with a black collar around the back and sides of the neck. They are not gregarious as are other doves, so finding huge concentrations of the birds is unlikely. However, they are a bonus to anyone dove hunting as they do not count towards the daily bag. (Be sure to leave a wing on the bird for identification purposes.) There is no closed season or bag

limit on Eurasian Collared-Doves.

White-tipped Dove

The White-tipped Dove, formerly called the White-fronted Dove, was once limited to extreme South Texas, but recent dove surveys have documented the expansion of its range to the north. It is classified as a migratory species with seasons and a limit of no more than two in your bag. White-tipped Doves are low flyers and they have a penchant for walking (with a head bob) rather than flying when in search of food on the ground. Not a great deal is known about this dove, and TPWD estimates that approximately 5,000 of these birds are harvested every season, showing them to be more of an incidental take than a targeted dove. Best spot for bagging one of these birds would be along the Rio Grande River in South Texas.

Strange Ducks Indeed Cinnamon Teal

Unlike the Blue-winged and Green-winged Teal that flock to Texas in huge numbers every winter, the Cinnamon Teal is a vagrant species. They are a common duck of the Pacific Flyway and are never a common bird on a Texan duck hunter’s strap. But, every season, duck hunters in Texas shoot a few of these teal that intermingle with flocks of bluewings and greenwings. They can be told from other teal in the same flight by their contrasting dark overall color, often appearing almost black in flight. The Cinnamon Teal drake has red-orange eyes and in full plumage sports a deep cinnamon red color, a true trophy for any Texas waterfowler.

Fulvous Whistling-Duck

Probably one of the most coveted ducks to shoot in Texas is the Fulvous Whistling-Duck, not to be confused with the more common whistling-duck the Black-bellied Whistling-Duck. Fulvous ducks have a rich tawny-colored body with blackish wings. They are mainly late spring and summer nesting residents along the entire Texas Coast, common in marshes, rice fields and ephemeral wetlands. A few are known to winter along the coast, but most migrate out to the east coast of Mexico with the first cold fronts. Hunt early in the duck season along the coast and you might just shoot one of the hardest game birds of all to collect in Texas. 🍷