

Winter 2004-2005: Central Oaks & Prairies and East Texas Pineywoods

By Bert Frenz

WEATHER REPORTS:

Rich Kostecke, 4 December, Bell Co., "I spent ~2.5 hrs at Dana Peak Park, Stillhouse Hollow Reservoir (Bell County) on 4 Dec, turning up 46 species. Water levels are high (all of the camping and picnic areas are underwater) and vehicles have been gated out of the main park area, but I was able to walk some of the roads (thus gaining good views of the lake) and bike/horse trails, as well as tromp through some of the grasslands and shrublands. "

Tim Fennell, winter season, Williamson Co., "Water, water everywhere! The record rainfall of the Fall continued through the season. Area reservoirs were full to overfull as were stock ponds. Standing water present in the agricultural areas around Granger throughout the season."

MOST UNUSUAL SIGHTINGS:

In spite of their proliferation near the coast, Ross's Geese rarely linger in *Bell*, so finding 3 grazing at the edge of a farm tank was a surprise on 6 Jan (Randy Pinkston).

Rich Kostecke commented on the 18 Dec Bell Co. CBC, "Waterfowl - In general numbers seemed to be down. Local hunting pressure, as well as greater availability of shallowly flooded areas due to the recent spat of rains, likely dispersed many of our ducks."

Peter Barnes, in NETFO News, commented about north-east Texas CBC's, ""Low numbers of ducks, particularly dabbling ducks, were noted on all the bird counts."

David Wolf in Pineywoods Scissor-Tales noted, "Few waterfowl had arrived by the end of the year and it would seem to be an "off" winter for them.

Greater Scaup made a good showing in Central Texas, with multiple sightings from 30 Dec to 19 Feb in *Bell* (Rich Kostecke, Randy Pinkston) and *Williamson* (Tim Fennell, Byron Stone), including an impressive 7 at Meadow Lake. Although more common in East Texas, more than 100 at Lake Bob Sandlin, *Camp*, is noteworthy (David Brotherton).

A **Long-tailed Duck** was present 28 Nov through 2 Dec (Frank Bumgardner) at Waco's sewage ponds in *McLennan*. Another at Hornsby Bend, *Travis*, lingered from late Nov to at least 21 Jan (m.ob.).

The Caddo Lake count, *Harrison-Marion*, had an all-time high of 248 Bufflehead on 4 Dec (David Ringer, James Pike).

On 16 Jan (Peter Barnes), 2 **Least Grebes** were still present at Richland Creek WMA in *Freestone*, where they nested this past summer. This is the first winter report for the species in the Central Brazos Valley.

Two **Western Grebes** at Lake Tyler in *Smith* on 19 Dec (Alan & Chris Byboth) is a very rare find.

American White Pelicans gathered at the spillway below Lake Livingston, *Polk*, and an impressive 2000+ were estimated on 28 Dec (Tim Fennell).

Apparently 2 Snowy Egrets wintering from 1 Jan to 19 Feb (Tim Fennell) at Meadow Lake in *Williamson* didn't know they should be farther south at this time.

Cattle Egrets lingered in East and Central Texas to the first week of Feb, the most notable being ~100 at Lake Palestine in *Smith* on 15 Jan (fide Jane Purtle).

On East Texas CBC's at Nacogdoches and Longview single White Ibis established first records for the CBCs, both on 18 Dec.

A pair of Cooper's Hawks were nest building in Waco, *McLennan*, on 13 Feb (fide Central Texas Audubon Society e-group).

The partial albino Red-tailed Hawk present since Sep in *Williamson* was still present 24 Dec (Lauryn Garza).

Three Rough-legged Hawks were counted on the Crawford (West Waco) CBC on 18 Dec (Karen Arquette, Nada Wareham).

A great find for East Texas and a new species for the Longview CBC on 18 Dec (Eddie Ray) was a **Golden Eagle**.

Peter Barnes reports, "'A **Crested Caracara** was a significant find in *Gregg*. on 11 Feb (David Brotherton). There are few records east of Van Zandt, Wood and Hopkins counties.'"

A Prairie Falcon on 31 Jan (Tim Fennell) in *Williamson* is rare for that blackland prairies area.

King Rail is unexpected in the Pineywoods so one on the Longview CBC on 18 Dec (Peggy Harding, Dorothy Metzler) is only the second monthly record for the region.

More expected is the Virginia Rail found on the 31 Dec Lake O' the Pines CBC (Bob Metzler, Dorothy Metzler).

The word from Tim Fennell on *Williamson Mountain Plovers* is, "12/1/04-2/28/05: High count of 34 birds on 1/22/05. They were generally hard to find this season and could have left earlier than usual as I looked for them a couple of times after 2/6/05 and could not find any. Of course, the real news this winter on this species is Bill Holliday's findings across the state, particularly southwest of San Antonio."

A second Jan record and a first Feb record for the Austin checklist area was an **American Avocet** first at Sore Finger WMA, *Williamson*, on 30 Jan (Tim Fennell) and then – presumably the same bird – again 27 Feb on Alligator Road, *Bell*.

Long-billed Dowitchers were out of season when 8 were at Lake Bob Sandlin, *Titus/Camp*, on 12 Dec (Matt White) and 12 there on 23 Jan (David Brotherton).

Rich Kostecke reports, "In recent years we have discovered that American Woodcock is likely a more common wintering species than we have realized. On 6 Dec, Charles Pekins found 3 in a moist deciduous canyon on the *Coryell* side of Fort Hood. On the 16th, he found 2 more in a different, but similar canyon on the *Coryell* side of Fort Hood."

Franklin Gulls were late at Lake Palestine, *Smith*, on 6 Dec (Ron Gutberlet) and at Hornsby Bend, *Travis*, on 2 Jan (Eric Carpenter).

A rare **Little Gull** was at the spillway of Lake Livingston in *Polk* from 21-27 Dec (Chris Merkord, m.ob).

David Weaver identified 62 Eastern Screech-Owls on 2 Jan, adding to the total of 86 for the Tenaha CBC, *Shelby*, set an all-time record for the CBC.

Short-eared Owls seemed more plentiful than usual, with reports of up to 5 in *Coryell*, 2 in *Waller*, 1 in *McLennan*, 9 in *Karnes*, 2 in *Harrison*, and 5 in *Williamson*.

A Common Nighthawk 2 Dec (Cathy Liles) was late for *Brazos*, and one on 13 Dec (James Restivo) was even later for *Coryell*.

A summering Buff-bellied Hummingbird revisited an *Austin* feeder on the late date of 30 Dec (Sue Ruotsala, Billie Bernard). Most amazing is a **Buff-bellied Hummingbird** in the Pineywoods that has gone unreported for several years.

Located near Ratcliff in *Houston* county, the well photographed Buff-bellied first appeared in mid May 2003, disappeared until 9 Aug and then remained daily until the end of Oct 2003 (Becky Baker). In 2004, it appeared briefly in March and then again 11 Aug – 11 Nov. The bird reappeared 22 Feb 2005. Previous records of Buff-bellieds have been restricted to South Texas, Central Oaks & Prairies and coastal Texas, so this Pineywoods discovery is a unique find.

Quite unusual was an adult male Ruby-throated Hummingbird that visited Brenham, *Washington*, feeders from 6-30 Jan (Scott & Gail Cole, Darrell Vollert).

Only the third Central Brazos Valley record was an **Anna's Hummingbird** that regularly visited a *Brazos* feeder from 1 Dec to at least 22 Jan (Kitty Anding).

Allen's Hummingbirds were banded, measured and identified by Sumita Prasad, setting new Austin area records. The first was an adult male captured 11 Dec in eastern *Hays*. The second was an adult hatch-year female banded 28 Feb [???] in central Austin, *Travis*.

A male and a female **Green Kingfisher** were present from 30 Jan to the end of the season (Tim Fennell) near Mankin's Crossing in *Williamson*, and if they breed this would be the most northeasternly point in Texas for the species.

The Caddo Lake count tallied all-time high counts of 193 Red-bellied Woodpeckers, according to Peter Barnes in NETFO News.

A male Vermilion Flycatcher 5 Dec to at least 27 Jan (Peter Barnes, Mike Dillon, Ron & Carol Gutberlet) near Whitehorse was only the third county record for *Smith*. Also in East Texas, a female Vermilion Flycatcher was in *Walker* on 26 Dec (Rick Bello, Chuck Crum, Dick Payne), providing only the second record for that county.

A **Couch's Kingbird** at Gibbons Creek Reservoir on 4 Dec (David Phalen) is a first county record for *Grimes*. The species certainly is spreading through the coastal and Blackland prairies and the Post Oak savannah regions, as this is only one of many records this winter, including: 1 in West *Harris* on 5 Dec (Jim Hinson); 9 in *Colorado* on the 22 Dec Attwater Prairie Chicken CBC, 3 in *Waller* on the 1 Jan Cypress Creek CBC, an unusually large count of 16 on 31 Jan (Derek Muschalek) in *DeWitt*, 1 on 11 Feb (Brush Freeman) in *Bastrop* near the *Travis* line,

Scissor-tailed Flycatchers again lingered well into Dec in Central Texas, the last report being 1 on 21 Jan (Tim Fennell) in *Williamson*.

A Chihuahuan Raven was seen and heard at Wimberley in *Hays* on 4 Dec (Scott Young, Josh Mitchell).

Out of range **Common Ravens**, usually limited eastward to the edge of the Balcones Fault, were reported in *Falls* on 5 Feb (Rich Kostecke, James Restivo) and in *Comal/Guadalupe* from 25 Dec through the end of the season (fide Susan Schaezler). The *Falls* raven is a first county record and only the second or third for the Central Brazos Valley. The raven in the Old Wiederstein area may be the first for *Guadalupe*, and the only other *Comal* records are in the western side of the county at the escarpment. This raven was carrying nesting material in Dec and a second raven was noted there in Mar.

A Horned Lark at *Nacogdoches* 14 Dec (Jesse Fagan) is rare for that area.

An uncommonly early Purple Martin was counted on the Palmetto State Park CBC on 1 Jan (fide Erik Huebner).

Cave Swallows are again rewriting the record books. Last year a very few lingered through the winter in the Central Brazos Valley. This year up to 80 spent the winter (Ellen Ratoosh) in College Station, *Brazos*; 3 in *McLennan* on 11 Dec (Ellen Ratoosh); 89 counted 28 Dec (Darrell Vollert) in three different areas of the Gibbons Creek CBC in *Grimes*; the 1 Jan Palmetto State Park CBC included Cave Swallows; 6 were present in *Clay* on 9 Jan (Brian Gibbons, Ross Rasmussen) following severe subfreezing temperatures; 1 in *Washington* on 13 Jan (Darrell Vollert). Later sightings may be more wintering birds or very early migrants: 9 in *Travis* on 22 Jan (Cliff Shackelford); some in Mitchell Lake wetlands in *Bexar* on 23 Jan (Sheridan Coffey); 30 were in *Milam* on 30 Jan (Fred Collins); 22 in *DeWitt* on 31 Jan (Derek Muschalek); 20+ on 3 Feb (Tim Fennell) in *Williamson* at a traditional nesting site.

Three late Barn Swallows were in *Grimes* on 8 Dec (Ellen Ratoosh) and, setting an Austin area record for the month, 1 was reported at Hornsby Bend 4-15 Dec (m.obs.).

Inexplicably early (or late), in *Milam* two new **Carolina Chickadee** nests were found in nesting boxes on 22 Dec (Sharon Kersten), one containing an egg, although none of the 24 boxes had nests on 3 Oct. On the Dec date a pair was noticed entering and exiting another nestbox near a feeder.

Red-breasted Nuthatch reports were restricted to the Pineywoods and seemed few in number.

A Rock Wren in *Hill* was out of range on 27 Dec (Brush Freeman).

Mountain Bluebirds visited *Bastrop* on 21 Dec (Phil Rostron) and 18 Jan (Brush Freeman), east of their normal range.

Several observers commented that American Robins were more widespread and numerous this season in East and Central Texas.

Typically rare in winter, Gray Catbirds turned up on CBC's as far flung as *Bell*, *Marion*, *Shelby*, *Nacogdoches*, *Harris* and *Waller* counties. Elsewhere, Brush Freeman commented, "In my many years of birding in Texas, I have never seen so many wintering Gray Catbirds on the central coast."

All of the feathers were off-white on a partial albino Northern Mockingbird residing in *Washington* from 6 Feb through the end of the season (Darrell Vollert).

An Audubon's Yellow-rumped Warbler was photographed 13 Dec (Matt White) in *Lamar*.

The first winter record in decades for the local area, a Yellow-throated Warbler was at a window feeder in Nacogdoches on 6 & 8 Jan (Carroll Moore).

Quoting Peter Barnes in the December NETFO News, "Summer Tanagers are rarely present here in winter, but a male was seen in *Harrison* on 12 Dec (Eddie Ray) and a female was at Texas Eastman in Longview [*Harrison*] on 17 Dec (Guy Luneau). "

Some 50 days later than the previous late date for the Oaks & Prairies region is a female/immature **Scarlet Tanager** photographed 10 Dec (Susan Schaezler) in *Guadalupe*.

Rare to the Central Brazos Valley, yet remarkably persistent at this particular location, a **Western Tanager** seen on 12 Feb (Darrell Vollert) in *Washington* was at the exact location twice last winter.

Freeman reported ~150 American Tree Sparrows in four Panhandle counties on 15 Jan, but his sighting of one 2-10 Feb in *Bastrop* is the first record in several decades. Equally remarkable is a first county record for *Falls* of one reported on 5 Feb (James Restivo).

Harris's Sparrows featured prominently in East Texas this season with multiple sightings in *Smith*, *Shelby*, *Nacogdoches* and *Walker* from 5 Dec to 26 Feb.

Large numbers of Rusty Blackbirds were reported at several Central and East Texas locations, but the best was 650 in *Rusk* on 15 Jan (Guy Luneau).

An out of season Baltimore Oriole was photographed at a College Station feeder in *Brazos* on 6 Feb (Charlotte Neill). A second (or the same) was reported (Anne Backus) about the same time in the same city.

Almost every feeder watcher in East and Central Texas seems to have had Purple Finches this winter, many for the first time since they've put up feeders. Some finches were still being seen at the end of the period.

Up to 10 **Red Crossbills** were reported 1-25 Dec (Mark Gray, Phil Rostron) at Bastrop and Buescher State Parks in *Bastrop*.

An immature male **White-winged Crossbill** was studied closely on 1 Dec (Brush Freeman) near Utley in *Bastrop*.

Pine Siskins were widespread and common across Central Texas, in numbers from 1 to 75, but East Texas had reports as high as 200-250 at a *Montgomery* feeder in late Dec (Carol Bookout) and over 400 were banded by Charles Ely in his Nacogdoches backyard by Jan. They appeared to have left the Central Texas area by mid February, but still were present in East Texas at the end of the period.

Hundreds of American Goldfinch clustered Central Brazos Valley feeders through mid January and dwindled to a handful by the end of the period.

CONTRIBUTORS QUOTED ABOVE:

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