

Spring 2004: Central Oaks & Prairies and East Texas Pineywoods

By Bert Frenz

This report is reduced from 3199 sightings of 301 species from 1 March 2004 to 31 May 2004 .

WEATHER REPORTS & SEASONAL SUMMARIES:

Tim Fennell, Spring Report, Williamson Co., "By April 1, the area was 4-5 inches above normal rainfall and all reservoirs were full or nearly so. In Williamson County, some ponds were still not completely full but all that have had water historically had at least some water. By the end of the period, all ponds were full."

Peter Barnes, May, North-East Texas, "May usually signals the peaks of passerine and shorebird migration. This year, reports of passerine migrants were about average, but almost no shorebirds were reported, perhaps because water levels were higher than usual and shorebird habitat accessible to birders was minimal."

David Wolf, Spring Report, Nacogdoches area of East Texas, "The first half of the migration (mid-March to mid-April) was generally dull, with birds arriving on schedule but little dynamic migration (even after the huge cold front around Easter). The second half was only marginally better. Two major cold fronts, a slow-moving one on April 24-25, and a very fast-moving one on May 1 produced a spate of locally rare to uncommon migrants, but no great "groundings" of numbers of migrants, though the diversity was OK. In the Nacogdoches area, almost all of our annual spring migrants were found at least once by someone."

Randy Pinkston, Spring Report, Bell County, "I'm sure y'all will hear plenty about how cool and wet the season was compared to last year. We certainly had our share of spring rains, AND June rains, such that we are currently several inches ahead of average annual precipitation. Lake levels are WAY UP, shoreline and mudflat habitats WAY DOWN (=nonexistent), and the countryside is lush and green. This spring flooded fields and lakeshores created better-than-average conditions for shorebird transients of that ilk such as Am. Golden-Plover, both yellowlegs, Solitary Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, Long-billed Dowitcher and snipe. Numbers of these species in March and April were impressive. In contrast, species that favor sandbars and shallow lakeshore like avocet, peeps, small plovers, Sanderling, and the like were very few in number, or not to be found at all. This was the first spring season I remember not seeing a single Western or Baird's Sandpiper. The usual shorelines and sandbars where they might be found were all underwater. Noteworthy were a dozen Willets on Lake Belton 25 April, and seven more in Temple 29 April.

"I made some interesting observations on the timing of spring migration this year. As you know, a strong cold front passed through Texas from NW to SE on 1 May, creating what might have been the best fallout conditions on the coast in thirty years. I heard that the birding on Sunday the 2nd was phenomenal, and I believe things stayed pretty interesting for several days afterwards. It was interesting to spend time afield inland in the days that followed that cold front and see that what is good for the goose (=coastal migrant traps) is not necessarily good for the gander (=inland stopover sites).

"I was co-leading a TOS warbler trip near Nacogdoches with Jesse Fagan that weekend. We were both disappointed by the lackluster aftermath of the front both on Sunday the 2nd and Monday the 3rd. I found the same quiet woodlots when I returned to Bell County the week of 3-9 May. The same Yellow-billed Cuckoos, Great Crested Flycatchers, and Summer Tanagers that had arrived a month previous were all that we could find. In fact, the main push of empids, thrushes, vireos, and warblers that we get each year in the first week of May did not begin to arrive until 10 May, with an apparent peak on 15 May. This is significantly later than is usual for our region.

"I'm not sure what to make of these observations. Presumably the migrants grounded on the coast by harsh weather stay put until the front passes through, then make haste northward with a tail wind under clear skies in the days that follow. Or do they? That would explain why the birding might be slow at inland sites in the days that follow a front's passage, but why then did we experience a delayed peak in our inland passerine movements? Were the birds so worn out following the cold front that they waited near the coast until their energy reserves were sufficient to complete the journey? I'm not sure, but the question of where the migrants are, and what these birds are doing, during the passage of the spring season is an interesting one."

MOST UNUSUAL SIGHTINGS:

A 28 Mar sighting (Richard Kaskan et al.) of a Fulvous Whistling-Duck at Hornsby Bend, *Travis*, is one of very few local records for that month. A "cinnamon or dilute" Fulvous in a flock of about 100 normally plumaged birds in *Waller* on 27 Apr (Denny Granstrand) is unusual.

A male Blue-winged X Cinnamon Teal was at Hornsby Bend on 8 Apr (Jeffrey Hanson).

A late departing Canvasback tarried on Meadow Lake, *Williamson*, from 8-23 May (Tim Fennell).

In *Nacogdoches*, David Wolf commented, "Waterfowl migration was lacking. The wintering flock of Redheads off McAlister Park on [Lake Sam] Rayburn peaked at 95 on Feb 21, a high count for our area, and 40 were still present on Mar 11"

Peter Barnes noted, " A late Hooded Merganser at Camp Tyler [*Smith*] on May 12 (Jane Purtle) is part of a recent trend in the region and may indicate a local breeder."

Common Loons are expected in East Texas, but 64 on 16 Mar (Tim Fennell) is an impressive number for Lake O' the Pines, *Marion*. One still present 15 May (Gil Eckrich) in Central Texas in *Bell* is late.

A first county record for *Brazos* was secured by a pair of **Least Grebes** present since late May (Fred Schroeder, Ann Kier) and represents more evidence of this species advancement northward. Although reported in a few other Central Brazos Valley counties in recent years, this is the first photo-documented record.

Generally expected in western counties of the Oaks & Prairies region, e.g., *Bell*., but very rarely found in first four months of the year further east, a Horned Grebe on 15 Mar (Tim Fennell) at Lake Limestone represents a first county record for *Robertson*.

The Red-necked Grebe first appearing 1 Jan (Georgette Guernsey) in *Angelina* remained until 4 Mar; the well-documented rarity was accepted by the TBRC.

The Brown Pelican, rare but regular in Central Texas, set a very early date record on 7 Apr (Homer Rushing, Ethyl Kutac) at Hornsby Bend; this date is only preceded by one date in March for the area.

According to Peter Barnes, "Although Little Blue Herons are common breeders in much of the region, they are much less common in the northern counties, and one found on a breeding bird survey in Red River Co. on May 27 (Cheryle Beck, Brooke Nicotra) was the first record of this species on this route since the 1950's."

A Tricolored Heron 4 Apr (Peter Barnes) at Richland Creek WMA in *Freestone* is rare at this early date.

Rare in three respects (species, number, form), a first-year dark plumage **Reddish Egret** accompanied by a white form Reddish Egret was observed at McKinney Falls State Park, eastern *Travis*, on 29 May (Dan Smith, Bert Meisenbach).

It seems Wood Storks each year keep pushing back their post-nuptial arrival dates and this year was no exception. On 25 May (David Wolf, Jesse Fagan) in *Liberty*, 95 were counted in several flocks over the Trinity River floodplain,

prompting David Wolf to comment, " This is my earliest date ever for the entire Pineywoods eco-region, except one anomalous April-May record from Caddo Lake one spring. I have to wonder what factors at their breeding colonies (presumably in se. Mexico) sent this species on the move early." The following day Cliff Shackelford photographed a flock of 170 over Richland Creek WMA in *Freestone*. Cliff noted that one photo depicted "an immature stork with yellow bill and fuzzy brown head (thus born in '04; likely in the southern Gulf State of Tabasco, MX). By 2 Jun, the flock had increased to 250.

Two territorial Cooper's Hawks on 29 May (Brush Freeman) in *Bastrop* could be rare breeders.

A brief, but convincing, sighting of yet another **Zone-tailed Hawk** for *Walker* was on 6 May (Dick Payne). This would be the third record for a county far northeast of its normal range.

A Purple Gallinule at Richland Creek WMA on 20 Apr (Hayden Haucke, Cliff Shackelford) is only the second *Freestone* record, the first being at the same location in 1999.

Adding to relatively few spring records for the region, a Black-bellied Plover was observed on stormy 24 Apr (Mimi Hoppe Wolf) in *Nacogdoches*.

For East Texas, three Franklin's Gulls at Lake Wright Patman in *Cass* on 29 May (Mike Dillon) were late.

But more unusual was the **Black-headed Gull** present at Lake Wright Patman from 14-17 Mar (Matt Dillon, Charles Mills et al.).

Least Terns, rare but regular wanderers into Central Texas, made a good showing with single birds in *Williamson* on 15 May (Tim Fennell), in *Bell* on 19 May (Randy Pinkston), in *Travis* on 26 May (Scott Young) and in *McLennan* on 27 May (Eric Haskell).

A rare migrant inland, a Black-billed Cuckoo on 13 May (Wes Bailey) on the *Coryell* side of Fort Hood provided only the second record for the military reservation.

Two **Whip-poor-wills** calling to each other on 9 Apr (Sue Ruotsala, Billie Bernard) represent a new country record for *Austin*.

The rare wintering female Black-chinned Hummingbird in *Nacogdoches* was still present 6 Mar (Charles Ely).

There are a few western *Williamson* records of Green Kingfisher, but one 18 Apr (Tim Fennell, Byron Stone) on the San Gabriel River at Mankin's Crossing is

significantly east of those sightings and is in the Blackland Prairie portion of the county.

The date 15 May (Byron Stone, Tim Fennell) is very late for a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker to be in *Williamson*.

Eastern Phoebes again nested in College Station (Ellen Ratoosh) and another pair was found consistently in late May (Shirley Wilkerson) in Kurten, both records atypical for *Brazos*.

Expected but probably not recorded for this infrequently birded county, a Vermilion Flycatcher was found 2 May (Kent Nelson) in *Lampasas*.

Very rare in the Central Brazos Valley and a new county record for *Brazos*, a calling **Couch's Kingbird** was carefully documented on 5-20 Apr (Keith Arnold), providing yet more evidence of range expansion of this normally South Texas species.

A 25 Apr (Jesse Fagan, Sarah Stovall) report of a Western Kingbird in *Angelina* is the earliest spring record for this rare migrant to East Texas.

Beating the previous early arrival date by four days, a Black-capped Vireo was heard 12 Mar (fide Rich Kostecke) at its normal breeding grounds at Fort Hood, *Bell*.

Peter Barnes noted for North-east Texas, "Five sightings of Philadelphia Vireos were higher than usual, with single birds at different locations in Rusk Co. on 11 May (Peggy Harding) and 13 May (Jason Pike), and three sightings of single birds at one location in Smith Co. on May 3, 6 and 10 (Peter Barnes)."

A first county record for *Smith* and a range extension westward was a **Fish Crow** at Old Sabine Bottom WMA on 5 May (Darrell Pogue).

"Two Tree Swallows were suspected of nesting at Camp Tyler on Apr 25 (Alan Byboth). If confirmed, this would provide the first documentation of breeding in Smith Co." according to Peter Barnes.

East of its normal range, two **Bushtits** on 21 May (James Restivo) in *Bell* were a first record for Fort Hood as well as the county.

Quite surprising for *Liberty* were two White-breasted Nuthatches on 21 May (Barbara Tilton). The location is in the southern part of the county, 8 miles from the Chambers Co. line, but the species is not on the UTC checklist except for a "prior to 1962" reference and is considered a scarce or localized resident on the East Texas Pineywoods checklist.

Comments on the Spring Migration of warblers.

On 6 May, Rob Fergus commented on his experience in *Travis*, "I think overall it's been a pretty poor migration (Blue-winged Warbler and Golden-cheeked Warbler notwithstanding). I haven't had any Chestnut-sided Warblers, Canada Warblers, early ground-loving warblers, etc. One tanager. No orioles. Some folks have seen some species I missed, but not many, and not in numbers."

But by 27 May, Darrell Vollert commented, "This has been an outstanding spring migration ... I have seen 29 species of warblers this spring in Washington County. ... May 2004 was one of my best months since I began conducting weekly bird surveys at Clarann in July 2000. May 2004 ranks at the top with September 2000 and October 2000 when we had an outstanding migration."

Taking a middle of the road stance, in his May report for the NETFO portion of East Texas, Peter Barnes commented, "May usually signals the peaks of passerine and shorebird migration. This year, reports of passerine migrants were about average."

And David Wolf, in his Nacogdoches area Spring report said, "The first half of the migration (mid-March to mid-April) was generally dull, with birds arriving on schedule but little dynamic migration (even after the huge cold front around Easter). The second half was only marginally better. Two major cold fronts, a slow-moving one on April 24-25, and a very fast-moving one on May 1 produced a spate of locally rare to uncommon migrants, but no great "groundings" of numbers of migrants, though the diversity was OK. In the Nacogdoches area, almost all of our annual spring migrants were found at least once by someone."

Thirty-six species of warblers were reported within the area covered by this report. Some of the better warbler finds this spring were:

- Blue-winged Warbler: 20-23 Apr (Rob Fergus) at State Capitol grounds in Austin; 16 May (Keith Arnold) in Bryan, *Brazos*.
- Golden-winged Warbler: an extremely early date of 27 Mar and 9 May (Susan Schaezler) in *Guadalupe*; 2 May (Ellen Ratoosh, Lizzie Furuta) in *Brazos*; 2 May and 12-13 May (Darrell Vollert) in *Washington*; 10 May (Derek Muschalek) in *Karnes*; 11 May (Richard Kaskan) in *Travis*; [This list is a good showing for this rare migrant].
- Golden-cheeked Warbler: 8 Mar (Susan Schaezler) in *Guadalupe*; a late migrant on 23 Apr (Rob Fergus) at the State Capitol grounds in Austin.
- Blackburnian Warbler: nine were reported at various East Texas locations 1-11 May, an unusually high number for the Pineywoods (fide Peter Barnes).
- Yellow-throated Warbler: 19 May (Byron Stone) at Webberville County Park, eastern *Travis*, a late date for this area.
- Prairie Warbler: 22 Mar (David Cimprich) at Fort Hood in *Coryell*; 12 May (Rudy Montez) on Hancock golf course in Austin, *Travis*.

- Palm Warbler: 16 Apr (Lisa Chirrey) at Fort Hood in *Bell* is a first county record and a first record for the base; 16 Apr (Frank & Jean Nichols) at Schaezler property in *Guadalupe*; 26 Apr (Robert Truss) at Alazan Bayou WMA in *Nacogdoches*.
- Blackpoll Warbler: 27 Apr (Jim Hughes) in *Brazos* for a second county record and one of very few for the Central Brazos Valley; 3 May (Jesse Fagan, Randy Pinkston et al.) and 8 May (Jesse Fagan, David Wolf) and 10 May (David Wolf) all in *Nacogdoches*, constituting more than usually reported; 9 May (Mike Dillon) two at Wright Patman Lake in *Cass*; 12 May (Carol Dill) in *Milam*, a first county record; 16 May (Rich Kostecke) at Webberville County Park in eastern *Travis*. All told, this has been an amazing spring migration of Blackpolls.
- Cerulean Warbler: 10 May (Derek Muschalek) in *Karnes*, the only report of this species in the region.
- Worm-eating Warbler: 27 Mar (Richard Kaskan) at Hornsby Bend, *Travis*; 2 May (Jerry Walls et al.) at Chappell Hill, *Washington*.
- Swainson's Warbler: seven reports, but the most unusual was 31 May (Darrell Vollert) of a fledgling being fed by an adult in *Washington*.
- MacGillivray's Warbler: 16-17 May (Travis Audubon Society, Susan Schaezler) and 23-24 May (Susan Schaezler, Don Schaezler) in *Guadalupe*.

A male **Western Tanager** observed on 5 Mar (Darrell Vollert) in *Washington* is a rare sighting at an even rarer time of year. Last year a female over-wintered at the same Central Brazos Valley location.

A bit east of its typical range, a Spotted Towhee lingered in *Washington* from 6-28 Mar (Darrell Vollert).

Conversely, an Eastern Towhee appeared southwest of its normal range at the late date of 19 Apr (Susan Schaezler) in *Guadalupe*, marking it as the second to last such record on the Austin area checklist.

Two Canyon Towhees were east of their normal range on 15 May (Robert Bates) in Leander, *Williamson*, in an oak savannah area, an atypical habitat for this species.

Seven Grasshopper Sparrows was a good count for East Texas, these being in *Rusk* on 10 May (Jason Pike).

A Song Sparrow on 4 May (Keith Arnold) was late for *Brazos*.

as were single Harris's Sparrows on 24 Apr (Scott Young, William Reiner, Rich Kostecke) at three different locations in *Travis* and *Bell*, all later than the latest date shown on the Austin area checklist (except for an odd late May record).

A rare Gray-headed form of Dark-eyed Junco was photographed 15 Mar (John Ingram) in Austin.

A male **Chestnut-collared Longspur** observed 18 Mar (Scott Young) and photographed the same day (Shawn Ashbaugh) is an odd sighting for Kizer Golf Course in eastern *Travis*. The bird associated with a flock of Sprague's Pipits and a female was present with the same flock on 20 Mar (Dan Peak). The longspur was the 227th bird species identified on the golf course since Scott has been keeping records.

Alazan Bayou WMA in *Nacogdoches* was the place to find Bobolinks this spring, hosting 5 on 26 Apr, 20 on 5 May and 2 on 9 May (m.ob.).

A male Yellow-headed Blackbird in *Nacogdoches* on 26 Apr (Robert Truss) is locally very rare and not reported annually (fide David Wolf). Fifteen appeared at Richland Creek WMA in *Freestone* on 29 Apr (Hayden Haucke, Cliff Shackelford) and one female in *Waller* on 2 May (Fred Collins, photo) was only about the third record for that county.

A Bronzed Cowbird in *Brazos*, found on 6 Apr (Ellen Ratoosh), is a rare occurrence for the Central Brazos Valley. Coincidentally, the same observer found one at the same park last April.

Described as a **Bullock's Oriole**, a 11 May (Lelia Vaughan) sighting in *Harrison* is the only such report outside of a few winter records for the East Texas Pineywoods.

A very early migrant was the Baltimore Oriole found on 1 Apr (Truman Powell) in *Smith*.

A male **Scott's Oriole** on 20 May (Susan Schaezler) is out of range for *Guadalupe*.

A few Purple Finches lingered in East Texas until 17 Mar (David Wolf, Mimi Hoppe Wolf) after a lack luster winter season.

CONTRIBUTORS QUOTED ABOVE:

Keith Arnold, Shawn Ashbaugh, Charles Mills, Peter Barnes, Robert Bates, Cheryl Beck, Billie Bernard, Alan Byboth, Lisa Chirrey, David Cimprich, Fred Collins, Carol Dill, Mike Dillon, Gil Eckrich, Charles Ely, John Eriksson, Jesse Fagan, Tim Fennell, Rob Fergus, Brush Freeman, Bert Frenz, Lizzie Furuta, Denny Granstrand, Georgette Guernsey, Peggy Harding, Hayden Haucke,

Jeffrey Hanson, Jim Hughes, John Ingram, Richard Kaskan, Ann Kier, Ethyl Kutac, Bert Meisenbach, Charles Mills, Rudy Montez, Derek Muschalek, Frank & Jean Nichols, Brooke Nicotra, Kent Nelson, Dick Payne, Jason Pike, Randy Pinkston, Darrell Pogue, Truman Powell, Jane Purtle, Ellen Ratoosh, James Restivo, William Reiner, Sue Ruotsala, Homer Rushing, Don Schaezler, Susan Schaezler, Fred Schroeder, Cliff Shackelford, Dan Smith, Byron Stone, Sarah Stovall, Barbara Tilton, Robert Truss, Lelia Vaughan, Darrell Vollert, Jerry Walls, Shirley Wilkerson, David Wolf, Mimi Hoppe Wolf, and Scott Young.