

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

By Bert Frenz

This report is reduced from 1572 sightings of 219 species from 1 December 2005 to 28 February 2006.

WEATHER REPORTS:

Rich Kostecke, 2 December, Belton Lake, Bell Co. "Water levels were quite low and there was much exposed shoreline."

Brush Freeman, 8 December, Bastrop Co. "Still ice here and without getting out much, I know several limbs have collapsed under the weight on my property alone. High temp today was just 34 briefly and now at 6:00:PM it at it has already fallen to 29.8 after 22 low this morning. Tonight will be colder per the man, down to 16 up in Austin. Water seems especially important now to the birds here because much of Bastrop Co. remains in a drought. I passed 3 local ponds that normally have water at this time of year and all but one was bone dry. No other nearby water is available for the birds around my property other than what I have out, at least as far as I know. The piddle bit of ice that fell (<1/4") overnight is not gonna help a great deal and will likely just reduce the numbers of arthropods which were available to the birds previously as chow. It was enough ice to break the limbs of some trees not accustomed to it every year however."

David Phalen, 20 December, Grimes Co. "The Gibbons Creek Reservoir is 3 feet below its normal level."

Peter Barnes and Matt White, winter season, north-east Texas, "Severe drought conditions that exposed miles of mudflats, combined with a warm winter, resulted in extraordinarily late reports of many shorebirds."

Tim Fennell, winter season, Williamson Co. "Weather for the period: dry, dry, dry!"

Fred Gehlbach, winter season, McLennan Co. "SUGAR CREEK RESERVE REPORT from Fred and Nancy Gehlbach: This winter we had the fewest winter birds, both species and numbers, of any winter in the last 43, and all except one eastern phoebe and one hermit thrush left by the last week of February, when we had a small push-through of yellow-rumped warblers and ruby-crowned kinglets plus the first northward-migrating sandhill cranes. This was the warmest winter on record in the preserve and warmest January ever throughout North America. Most winterers stayed north, as substantiated by our records of North American migrants from our study site in Belize, where we study their role among tropical

lowland forest birds. We recorded the fewest in the last 10 years on February 9-17th. Records from Don Gehlbach in Columbus, Ohio, show winter birds there were more abundant than ever. Do you believe in global warming yet?"

MOST UNUSUAL SIGHTINGS:

Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, rarely found in *Grimes*, had a high count of 30 on the Gibbons Creek CBC 20 Dec. At the Walnut Creek Wastewater Treatment Plant in *Travis*, 27 black-bellieds on 9 Jan (Sally Breed) provided a first area record for mid January.

A dozen **Fulvous Whistling-Ducks** at Hornsby Bend 5 Feb (Barry Lyon) is rare and the only Oaks & Prairies report this season.

Six hundred **Snow Geese** over *Smith* on 14 Feb (David Brotherton) is an impressive count.

Debates over the identification of **Cackling Geese** concluded that one was present at Hornsby Bend 11-13 Dec (Eric Carpenter) and this bird may also have been the one seen at a Pflugerville reservoir on 9 Dec and over Kizer Golf Course on 2 Dec, all sites in *Travis*.

Two **Canada Geese** on 17 Dec are probably not the feral ones otherwise found on the Bell CBC (fide Rich Kostecke).

The presence of three **Tundra Swans** in *McLennan* caused quite a local stir, with repeated sightings from the 31 Dec (Frank Bumgardner, John Muldrow) Waco CBC to 7 Feb (m.ob.). The landowner stated that a10-12 were there the previous winter. An immature **Tundra Swan** in *Morris* on 11 Feb (David Brotherton, Luanne Brotherton) provided only the third reported sighting for north-east Texas and the first since 1984. The bird remained until 13 Feb and was seen and photographed by others.

One to three **Cinnamon Teal** visited the WMARSS ponds in *McLennan* from 1 Jan (Frank Bumgardner) to 5 Feb.

Casual to the East Texas Pineywoods, a **White-winged Scoter** was in *Harrison* from 22-31 Dec (David Brotherton).

Fifty-seven **Hooded Mergansers** on Meadow Lake in *Williamson* on 20 Dec (Tim Fennell, Shawn Ashbaugh, Scott Young) is a number only surpassed by fall migration or CBC counts. Thirty were nearby yet on 2 Jan (Robert Bates).

Adding to only a handful of **Common Merganser** records for East Texas is one found 2 Jan (Wanda Bosmans, Barbara Cavin, Lisa Evers, Candra Troop) during the Lake O' the Pines CBC in *Marion*.

A single **Northern Bobwhite** on the Tyler CBC in *Smith* on 17 Dec (Peter Barnes) was the first one seen since 1995.

A new high count of 22 **Common Loons** was reached at the 17 Dec Bell CBC, all of them on Stillhouse Hollow Lake.

Least Grebes overwintered at Hornsby Bend and in good numbers, with a high concentration of 10 on a single small pond on 7 Dec (Shawn Ashbaugh, Scott Young), 12 at the ponds during the Austin CBC and a total of 17 in the count area 17 Dec, far exceeding the previous high of 3.

Up to 18 **Western Grebes** were at Lake Buchanan, but the more unusual were two at Granger Lake in *Williamson* on 19 Feb (Tim Fennell), a fourth county record, and a single bird at Canyon Lake 28 Jan and 25 Feb (David Pueppke, et al.), one of few *Comal* records.

A high count of 540 **American White Pelicans** was tallied at the Lake O' the Pines CBC on 2 Jan.

Brown Pelicans again wandered inland in early Dec to at least the 20 Dec (Rich Kostecke) at Stillhouse Hollow Lake, *Bell*, on 11 Dec (Tim Fennell) at Granger Lake, *Williamson*, and the most unusual, a juvenile at Texas Eastman at Longview, *Harrison*, from 9-31 Dec (David Brotherton, et al.).

An unusual bird to find in mid winter in East Texas, a **Snowy Egret** was near Steinhagen Lake in *Jasper* on 2 Jan (Kreg Ellzey).

Providing a first record for the Gibbons Creek CBC in *Grimes* and one of very few winter records for the Oaks and Prairies region, a **Yellow-crowned Night-Heron** was seen 20 Dec (Jim and Kitty Anding, Ed Shackly, Lucy Decker).

Uncharacteristically, **White Ibis** remained in East Texas in large numbers in early winter, with reports at Caddo Lake in *Harrison* from 1-11 Dec (Paul Miliotis), peaking at 115 on the 3 Dec bird count, and 53 at Lake Sam Rayburn in *San Augustine* on 19 Dec (David Wolf) and still 2 at Cassells-Boykin Park in *Angelina* on 4 Jan (David Wolf), the latest records ever for that area.

On 27 Feb (Fred Gehlbach) a pair of **Cooper's Hawks** started building their nest at a Lake Waco preserve in *McLennan*, an early nesting record.

Harris's Hawks were uncharacteristically conspicuous in the *Travis* area, with one at Roy C. Guerrero Colorado River Metropolitan Park on 6 Dec (Austin

RBA), one at Pflugerville 3-16 Jan (Suzanne Chaiken, m.ob.), two near Hornsby Bend 8 Jan (Andy & Julia Balinsky) and one near the *Bastrop/Travis* county line on 10 Jan (Brush Freeman).

Making a good showing in Central Texas, **Zone-tailed Hawks** were sighted 18 Dec (Mollie Kloepper) in Austin, 3 Jan (Suzanne Chaiken) in Pflugerville, 4 Jan (Brush Freeman) in *DeWitt*, 21 Jan (Mikael Behrens, Ed Fair) in sw Austin and 25 Feb (David Pueppke, et al.) near Canyon Lake in *Comal*.

Not reported for two decades in *McLennan*, a **Ferruginous Hawk** was found on the Waco CBC 31 Dec (E.G. & Joey White-Swift) and seen in the Bellmead infrequently thereafter (Karen Arquette).

An adult male **Prairie Falcon** was photographed near Granger Lake on 18 Dec (Tim Fennell).

A count of 18 **Virginia Rails** during the first ever Granger CBC provides an impressive number to beat in future years. The rails were in a marshy area near the Granger Lake dam with 29 **Soras**.

Mountain Plovers were hard to find in the Granger area this season, with a high count of only 38 on 7 Jan (Tim Fennell).

Peter Barnes and Matt White wrote in the NETFO Newsletter, "Severe drought conditions that exposed miles of mudflats, combined with a warm winter, resulted in extraordinarily late reports of many shorebirds. Most reports came from Lake Tawakoni, which hosted the continuing Pectoral Sandpiper (Rains Co.) on Dec 1 (RK), a Baird's Sandpiper (Hunt Co.) on Dec 11 (RBa), single Black-bellied Plovers (Van Zandt Co.) on Dec 11 (RBa) and 18 (RK), 5 Long-billed Dowitchers and 2 Dunlin (Rains Co.) on Dec 18 (RK), and an American Avocet, a Dunlin and a Long-billed Dowitcher (Rains Co.) on Dec 30 (DHi, BGi). One American Avocet, 1 Dunlin and 3 Dowitcher species were still at Texas Eastman in Longview on Dec 31 (David Brotherton, Sarah Brotherton)."

American Avocets are a rare winter occurrence in East Texas, so 7 at Lake Livingston in *Polk* on 22 Dec (David Wolf), one on 30 Dec in *Rains* and one on 31 Dec (David Brotherton, Sarah Brotherton) in *Harrison* are noteworthy.

Up to 3 **Western Sandpipers** wintered at Willis Creek Park on Granger Lake, *Williamson*, from 18 Dec to 29 Jan (Tim Fennell), very rare for the Central Prairie.

A high count of 236 **Least Sandpipers** at Gibbons Creek Reservoir in *Grimes* far exceeds previous totals for the CBC on 20 Dec and could be the result of the low water levels and exposed mudflats.

The earliest record for *McLennan* and one of the earliest for the region was a **Pectoral Sandpiper** 26 Feb (Joe Yelderman) at the Waco sewage ponds.

Up to 7 **Dunlin** were observed multiple times 11 Dec – 29 Jan (Tim Fennell) at Granger Lake, *Williamson*. One was seen in *Harrison* on 31 Dec (David Brotherton, Sarah Brotherton).

Two **Long-billed Dowitchers** on the College Station CBC and a remarkable 45 on the Gibbons Creek CBC are quite unusual for the Central Brazos Valley.

Again, exposed mudflats account for the high count of 72 **Wilson's Snipes**, including 66 at Gibbons Creek Reservoir, tallied for the Gibbons Creek CBC in *Grimes*. A high count of 82 occurred at Lake O' the Pines CBC in *Marion* on 2 Jan.

The unusually high occurrence of **American Woodcocks** continued into the winter season, with multiple reports throughout the Central Oaks and Prairies region. Lack of rain, forcing the woodcocks toward residential watered lawns, accounts for many sightings.

A **Little Gull** sighted at Wright Patman Lake, *Bowie/Cass*, on 15 Jan (Brian Gibbons) was well documented and was seen again 25 Jan (Mike Dillon) at the same lake.

There are still places in eastern Texas where **White-winged Doves** are not common, so two on the Gibbons Creek CBC provided a first for the CBC as well as the first winter record for *Grimes*. A first for the Longview CBC was one on 31 Dec (Bob Metzler) in *Rusk*.

Two **Common Ground-Doves** observed for about a week preceding New Years Day (Frank Bumgardner, John Muldrow) are the first seen in *McLennan* in years and among only a few records.

Monk Parakeets reached a new high count of 129 on the Austin CBC 17 Dec.

Fred Gehlbach reports an interesting observation, "This past December-January we found **Eastern Screech-Owls** eating White-winged Doves (3 records) for the first time ever anywhere! They must have caught them asleep on night roosts, because not even a Cooper's Hawk can catch a white-wing except by surprise (we've watched chases many times!). It has taken the owls nearly 15 years (since white-wings first nested on the preserve edges) to find them, and the interesting thing is that white-wings are a third larger than screech owls!"

As many as 14 **Burrowing Owls** wintered in the *McLennan*, *Coryell*, *Bell*, *Travis* and *Williamson* with multiple sightings 3 Dec to 19 Feb.

One or perhaps two **Buff-bellied Hummingbirds** continued to visit *Austin* [county, not city] feeders at two sites separated by 0.7 mi until mid Jan (Sue Ruotsala, Billie Bernard, Margaret Cook).

A male **Ruby-throated Hummingbird** arriving at fall migration remained the entire winter at a residential feeder near the Brazos River in *Washington* (Jan Redden).

For the second winter a female **Black-chinned Hummingbird** stayed late Oct to 9 Feb (Ruth Heine, David Wolf) in Loco Valley, *Nacogdoches*.

A male **Anna's Hummingbird** stayed for about ten days to 17 Dec (Linda Scholey, ph. Kathy Adams Clark) in Conroe, *Montgomery*.

Single **Broad-tailed Hummingbirds** visited three *Travis* locations with the longest stay 8 Dec – 9 Feb (Shawn Ashbaugh) in south Austin.

In East Texas in *Rusk*, an immature male **Rufous Hummingbird** visited a feeder from 6 Nov through the end of Jan (Peggy Harding).

Ringed Kingfishers made an unprecedented incursion into the Central Oaks and Prairies with long staying birds. Two at Hornsby Bend remained all season (m.ob.). One adult female at Georgetown's San Gabriel Park in *Williamson* 1 Dec to 14 Jan (Tim Fennell, et al.) appeared simultaneously with Belted and Green kingfishers. One sighted 7 miles downstream from Georgetown at Mankin's Crossing on 18 Dec (Tim Fennell) may have been the same. The first county record for *Grimes* discovered 19 Nov was still present for the 20 Dec (Dale Kubenka) Gibbons Creek CBC. Another first county record was a Ringed along the Lampasas River in western *Bell* 26 Jan – 4 Feb (Grant Critchfield, Randy Pinkston).

The first **Williamson's Sapsucker** for *Washington* and the first in almost three decades for the Central Brazos Valley was a male seen 3 Dec (Darrell Vollert) near Chappell Hill.

A vagrant to *McLennan*, multiple or the same **Say's Phoebe** was observed 9 Dec (Eric Haskell) at Lake Waco, 11 Dec (Eric Haskell) west of Waco, and 17 Dec (Bryan Stone, Karen Arquette, Joan Glass) north-east of McGregor. Another was found along Sayer's Road in *Bastrop* 24 Nov and again 7 Dec (Austin RBA). Only sporadically found on the Bell CBC, one was counted 17 Dec. Amazingly, on the Granger CBC the country roads of *Williamson* provided 8 Say's, a higher count than Easterns! Four were at scattered locations around Granger Lake on 7 Jan (Byron Stone).

An adult male **Vermilion Flycatcher** found 7 Jan (Darrell Vollert, Audette Foyt) near the Navasota River is a vagrant to *Brazos*. An immature Vermilion present

at Hornsby Bend since fall remained until at least 25 Feb (m.ob.), including the Austin CBC where it has been recorded only 8 times in the long history of this CBC.

For the third consecutive year an **Ash-throated Flycatcher** wintered at Hornsby Bend (Eric Carpenter).

Scissor-tailed Flycatchers left the Oaks and Prairies region on their “normal” schedule, with the only late report 11 Dec (Tim Fennell) in *Williamson*.

Perhaps owing to the warm weather, **Tree Swallows** arrived unusually early in *Harrison* 4 Feb (fide Peter Barnes) and in *Williamson* 19 Feb (Tim Fennell).

Northern Rough-winged Swallows should all be gone before winter, so 2 in Nacogdoches 14 Dec (David Wolf) and 4 in Burleson 17 Dec (Cathy Liles) are very rare.

Cave Swallows continue to winter in the Central Brazos Valley, this year setting a new high of 331 on the Gibbons Creek CBC in *Grimes* and 100+ in College Station (Ellen Ratoosh) and 150+ in Kurten (Shirley Wilkerson), both in *Brazos*.

A tardy **Barn Swallow** 17 Dec provided a new species for the Bell CBC.

Brown Creepers were oft seen this winter, including a first record for *Mills* 30 Dec (Lance Barnett) and 20+ found in about 30 min. at Sandy Creek Park in *Jasper* 2 Jan (Kreg Ellzey).

Rock Wrens are barely reported once per decade in *McLennan*, and then only on single dates, so a report of one 2 Nov – 23 Jan (Eric Haskell) at Koehne Park in Waco is unprecedented.

Winter Wrens and **Golden-crowned Kinglets** were reported in higher numbers this winter than usual.

Rare in winter months in Central and East Texas, **Gray Catbirds** were reported more often than usual: 1 in *Grimes* 20 Dec (fide Darrell Vollert), 3 in *Panola* 26 Dec (David Brotherton, Walt Brotherton), 2 in *Harrison* 31 Dec (Mark Edmund) and 1 in *Cherokee* 31 Jan (Jane Purtle).

High counts of **American Pipits** were 41 at Caddo Lake count, *Harrison*, on 3 Dec and 64 on the Tyler CBC in *Smith* on 17 Dec.

A **Nashville Warbler**, rare in winter in East Texas, was banded and photographed 10 Dec (Jim Ingold) at Caddo Lake in *Marion* and recaptured 23 Dec and 28 Dec.

Two **Black-throated Green Warblers** 17 Dec provided only the third record for the Austin CBC.

A **Palm Warbler** made an appearance 10 Dec (Scott Hayward, Byron Stone) at Tejas Camp in *Williamson*.

More sightings than usual of **Common Yellowthroats** occurred in East Texas, including reports in *Bowie, Smith, Panola, and Harrison*.

Casual in winter to East Texas, a female **Wilson's Warbler** was in *San Augustine* 5 Feb (Louis Debetaz) and a male was in *Angelina* 13 Feb (Louis Debetaz, Jack Windsor), the first February records for the area. Another Wilson's was in *Waller* on 22 Dec (Ted Eubanks).

Although casual to the Central Brazos Valley, at least one appearance per winter of a **Western Tanager** has occurred in *Washington* since 2002, this season's sighting being 3 Jan (Darrell Vollert) in Chappell Hill.

A **Spotted X Eastern Towhee** hybrid was observed in *Smith* on 10 Dec (Peter Barnes).

Lamar hosted 400-500 **Smith's Longspurs** in mid Dec (Stephan Lorenz), but finding 30 in *Harrison* on 19 Dec (Eddie Ray) is more unusual.

A first county record for *Grimes*, a **Pyrrhuloxia** was near Anderson for the Gibbons Creek CBC 20 Dec (Karen Russell, Jeffrey Musser, Joan Dziezyk).

Rusty Blackbirds made a strong showing in East Texas, with sightings in *Smith, Rusk, Panola, Harrison, and Van Zandt*, including a record high 247 in *Rusk* on the Longview CBC 31 Dec (Peter Barnes, Bob Metzler).

In recent years **Brewer's Blackbirds** have avoided the Central Brazos Valley, so a report of 199 in *Burleson* 17 Dec (Cathy Liles, Elaine Owens) and 8 in *Falls* on 23 Dec (D. D. Currie, Dell Little) is unusual.

David Wolf reported, "**Purple Finch** - widespread in small numbers this winter ("normal"), but very few came to feeders (and they did not stay), instead remaining out in the woods (many observers in *Nacogdoches* and *Angelina* Counties)." Other sporadic East Texas sightings were in *Harrison, Panola, Cherokee, and Cass*. Farther west, reports were few, with single birds in *Grimes* and *Washington* and two birds in Travis.

David Wolf reported, "**Pine Siskin** - very few around this winter, but most feeding station in both counties eventually had 1-5 birds visiting in January-through end of February, 2006 (m.ob.)."

Peter Barnes and Matt White reported, "Perhaps the most remarkable sighting this month was a belated report of a male "Black-backed" race of **Lesser Goldfinch** that visited a feeder southeast of Tyler on Nov 30 (Irene Hamel, David Sierra, Gloria Rognlie). This bird has never previously been recorded in north-east Texas and is a rare visitor as far east as Dallas and Denton counties (Pulich, 1988)." Tyler is in *Smith*.

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