

# Spring 2005: Central Oaks & Prairies and East Texas Pineywoods

By Bert Frenz

This report is reduced from 3237 sightings of 307 species from 1 March to 31 May, 2005.

## **WEATHER REPORTS:**

David Wolf in Pineywoods Scissor-tales, Spring Season, "Most of April and May this year brought prolonged pleasant weather, with cool nights and warm days (but not too hot), and weak cool fronts that slipped in without drama – but this pattern got a bit old as local birders waited and waited for migrants to appear. There were very few days when they did. Yes, it really does take storms and rain to cause those great "fallouts" that we so fondly remember, and it just didn't happen this spring. April and May were both much drier than average, though conditions for wildlife were still reasonably good due to ample rains earlier in the year. Recording-breaking hot temperatures in late May thankfully abated by the end of the month, when we even got some much-needed rain, though it was too late in the season to bring down many migrants."

## **MOST UNUSUAL SIGHTINGS:**

Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks continue to infiltrate Central Texas counties where there have been few prior reports, including a pair 28 Apr (Jean Pare) at Carlos Lake in *Grimes*, two 15 May (Shirley Wendlandt) along the Colorado River in *Mills*, and one adult 19 May (Randy Pinkston) on Salado Creek in *Bell*.

A Fulvous Whistling-Duck accompanying a Black-bellied on 21 Apr (Keith Arnold) and again 24 May at Country Club Lake in *Brazos* is the first spring record since 1964 for the county.

Two Greater Scaup 25 Mar (Randy Pinkston) accompanied a Lesser at Slough Pond in Temple, *Bell*.

David Wolf in Pineywoods Scissor-tales noted, "Waterfowl left early this winter and the only noteworthy late migrant was a female Red-breasted Merganser that shot past the TX 147 bridge [*San Augustine*] on 6 Apr."

Four Wild Turkeys showed up in an area of w. *Nacogdoches* where they have not previously been reported; the sighting was 1 May (Carol Wells).

A **Least Grebe** at Lometa Reservoir on 15 May (Rich Kostecke) extends the range northward, beyond the dotted line shown in Lockwood & Freeman and represents a first county record for *Lampasas*.

Pied-billed Grebes nested in *Coryell*, providing a first breeding record for Fort Hood; adults and fledglings were observed 26 May (Gil Eckrich, Rich Kostecke).

A spring migration flock of 1300 American White Pelicans over Copperas Cove, *Coryell*, on 15 Apr (Rich Kostecke) is noteworthy. On 31 May (Rich Kostecke), 160+ at Fort Hood in *Bell* is a high number for that late date.

In Pineywoods Scissor-tails, David Wolf comments, "Adult Neotropic Cormorants were seen regularly along the TX 147 causeway this spring, with at least 2 there on April 6 (*Angelina* end) and singles on May 9 & 29 (all David Wolf, et al.), raising the possibility that this species may be breeding in the Double-crested colony visible from the causeway, which has about 15 visible nests. This is one of the few breeding colonies in the state and has slowly increased since the first nesting here in 2001. Unfortunately, the birds are far enough away that accurate species identification of every individual is not possible from the road."

The only Central Prairie report of a Tricolored Heron was 29 Apr (Rich Kostecke, Gil Eckrich) in *Bell*, providing the first spring record for Fort Hood.

One Glossy Ibis was in a flock of 24 Plegadis at Hornsby Bend on 26 Apr (Eric Carpenter).

Migrating **Swallow-tailed Kites** made a good showing in Central Texas with sightings in *Bell*, *Bosque*, *Brazos*, *Travis* and *Washington*, but the most unusual was the discovery of 3 nests in East Texas in nw *Jasper* on 22 May (Phillip Hight) near Martin Dies Jr. State Park. On 31 May each nest held two chicks. As reported by Hight, "The Texas Parks and Wildlife Dept. in Austin said there have been only 5 confirmed nests in Texas since 1911, so these are 6, 7 and 8."

Limited evidence of breeding Mississippi Kites in late May was reported in *Bastrop* (Brush Freeman), *Williamson* (Tim Fennell), *Angelina* (David Wolf), and *Cass* (Eddie Ray), but more research is needed.

Swainson's Hawks typically don't migrate through the East Texas Pineywoods, so one in *Nacogdoches* on 1 May (Mimi Hoppe Wolf) is the first report in several years for that area.

Providing a first county record for *DeWitt*, a **White-tailed Hawk** was observed 21 May (Derek Muschalek).

It's been almost 50 years since the last spring occurrence of Purple Gallinule in *McLennan*, although a few times one has been found in the summer months, so one on 15 May (Andy Petter, Jud & Colleen Palmer) is noteworthy.

A belated first county record for *Williamson* was a Common Moorhen 11 May (Tim Fennell) at a stock pond ne of Round Rock.

Eight Whooping Cranes flew over the *Coryell* side of Fort Hood on 9 Apr (Laura Baird).

Five Whimbrels at Lake Waco on 8 May (Frank Bumgardner, John Muldrow) at Lake Waco was a good find for *McLennan*.

Also atypical was a flock of 21 Marbled Godwits photographed there on 13 Apr (Eric Haskell).

Breeding evidence of **American Woodcocks** in Central Texas is severely limited, so the discovery of a nest containing a nestling at Fort Hood, *Bell*, on 10 Mar (Dave Sperry) is a significant contribution.

A worn first-year Herring Gull must have lost its way at Lake Livingston, *Polk*, for a sighting on 26 May (Mimi Hoppe Wolf) is a late date for the Pineywoods.

David Wolf reports, "On 17 Mar an adult **Lesser Black-backed Gull** was at the Lake Livingston Dam amidst 600+ Ring-billeds (Jesse Fagan); this is only the 3rd record for the region and all have been from this site."

A scarce and easily missed migrant through the Central and East Texas, single Black-billed Cuckoos surprisingly were found at 5 locations from 26 Apr to 15 May in *Angelina*, *Smith*, *Bell*, *Bastrop* and *Karnes*.

Fred Gehbach, a detailed record keeper, noted, ""Eastern Screech-Owls had been incubating since March 1. Over the last 30 years they have laid first eggs a day earlier every three years. That's global warming!"

Very rare as far north as *Bastrop*, Freeman heard a Pauraque 1-14 May near Utley.

A very late female Rufous Hummingbird lingered until 6 May (Mark Klym) at the Schaezler property in *Guadalupe*. Presumably, the same bird was photographed in late April for the San Antonio Express News. Neither the Austin area nor the Oaks & Prairies checklists shows May sightings for this species.

**Green Kingfishers** made a significant push into the Pineywoods of East Texas when a nesting pair was observed 5 Mar (Mike Howlett, John & Gloria Tveten) on Spring Creek in both *Montgomery* and *Harris* near Jesse Jones Park. The pair

was seen again 13 Mar (Scott Gleason). Subsequently, it was revealed that a Green Kingfisher had been observed on Spring Creek in 2000 and 2001 (Scott Gleason). On 31 May (Jerry Walls, Emilee Peters) watched another pair fly to a hole in a canal bank in Sam Houston National Forest in *Walker*. Independently, the same or a different pair was observed near that location the same day (Kevin Broussard).

An Ash-throated Flycatcher that wintered at Hornsby Bend was still present 13 Mar (Eric Carpenter). One week later the first-of-season Ash-throated arrived in *Bell*. Thereafter the species was oft reported at Fort Hood, prompting Kostecke to comment, "It seems to be developing into a good year for this species around these parts, as I seem to be seeing more individuals and in more places than in past years." A 12 May (Frank Bumgardner, John Muldrow) sighting in Waco may be a first county record for *McLennan*.

A Great Kiskadee in *Guadalupe* on 19 Apr (Ernest Jasek) is only the second for the county. More rare is **Great Kiskadee** in *Nacogdoches* on 8 May (Jesse Fagan, Robert Truss, David Wolf), providing the first confirmed East Texas record.

*Bell* hosted at least 2 **Couch's Kingbirds** with one at Union Grove Wildlife Area on Stillhouse Hollow Lake 28 May (Rich Kostecke) – the same location as one was found in summer 2003 – and another seen many times at Temple Lake Park on Lake Belton from 5 May (Randy Pinkston) through the end of the period. These are the only records for the county.

Western Kingbirds are rare in East Texas, so one on 2 Apr (Nancy Bird, Louis Debetaz) at Ryan Lake in *Angelina* is noteworthy and of particular interest since two were recorded there several springs ago. Another Western Kingbird was in *Rusk* on 15 May (Wanda Bosmans, Peggy Harding).

A Blue-headed Vireo lingering through 16 May (David Wolf) in *Nacogdoches* establishes a new late date for the Pineywoods.

Seven Philadelphia Vireos in *Karnes* on 9 May (Derek Muschalek) is an unusually large number for an infrequent migrant through the Central Prairie.

A Red-eyed Vireo in *Nacogdoches* establishes 18 Mar (Jesse Fagan, Robert Truss, David Wolf) as a new early arrival date for the Pineywoods.

**Common Ravens** pushed eastward of their normal range when a pair began nest building 17-28 Mar (Ernest Jasek, Noreen Baker) in *Guadalupe* near the *Comal* border. Although they can be found farther west at the edge of the Hill Country, these are the first nesters in the Blackland Prairies of *Guadalupe*. Less surprisingly, although still rare, one was present near Liberty Hill in *Williamson* 23

Apr to 2 May (Byron Stone) and two were observed in eastern *Coryell* on 7 May (Rich Kostecke, Scott & Crissy Summers).

A rather recent phenomenon, Tree Swallows continue to nest in small numbers in Central and East Texas. Apparently, newly placed bluebird nest boxes in Purtil Creek State Park in *Henderson* have attracted Tree Swallows to a new nesting site, perhaps the first for the county. On 20 Apr (Richard Kinney) 12-20 swallows were observed on and around the boxes.

A few Red-breasted Nuthatches lingered in *Travis* and *Angelina*, but the latest was one still in *Cherokee* on 1 May (Jane Purtle).

For a rare migrant through the Central Prairie, this seasons 18 reports of single Veeries in *Bastrop*, *Bell*, *Coryell*, *Guadalupe*, *Karnes*, and *Travis* represents a major inland shift of its normally coastal migration route; the majority of sightings were 7-9 May.

As in the case of Veery, Gray-cheeked Thrush migration shifted away from the coast, with more than usual numbers traveling through the Central Prairie. A report of three in a small College Station park in *Brazos* on 1 May (Ellen Ratoosh) is particularly unusual.

Six Wood Thrush on the morning of 20 Apr (Scott Summers) is an impressive count for *Bell* and probably hasn't been duplicated in a Central Prairie county since a similar number in *Travis* in 1968.

For *Bell*, Randy Pinkston reported, "Two Sprague's Pipits in Temple 27 April, with one bird remaining through 4 May, were incredibly late. The Austin regional checklist shows Sprague's as rare after mid-March with no records at all beyond early April. "

#### Warbler migration

A lackluster inland migration in April and early May turned interesting thereafter. Torrential rains 6-13 May along the Texas coast caused migrants to move inland through the Central Prairie and North Central Texas, resulting in many sightings of species usually very rare in those areas. Thirty-three species of warblers were reported in the Central Prairie this season, with notable numbers of Golden-winged (12 reports), Black-throated Blue (5 reports), and Cerulean (2 reports) warblers.

On 9 May, Derek Muschalek reported, "This was one of the largest groundings in the last 8 years in Karnes County. The storm system dumped 5.75" of rain on Sunday [8 May], creating a monster flash flood in Dewitt County. Many of the county roads washed away! I counted migrants on the Adanal Ranch, which is just west of Hwy 119, for 6 hours today." Muschalek's counts that day were impressive and included 18 warbler species with counts such as: 26 Tennessee, 22 Yellow, 34 Chestnut-sided, 33 Magnolia, 36 Black-throated Green, 12

Blackburnian, 12 Black-and-white, 32 Redstarts. Further evidence of the migration shift, among the rarer species Muschalek saw that day were: Black-billed Cuckoo, Veery, Wood Thrush, Golden-winged Warbler, Scarlet Tanager. The oft-visited Schaezler property in *Guadalupe* produced 29 warbler species this season, with 20 species of warblers on 9 May alone and still 16 species on the 13th (fide Susan Schaezler).

Contrastingly, East Texas offered few surprises among migrants. David Wolf in Pineywoods Scissor-tails reported, "It was not a very good spring for migrant warblers and overall numbers were disappointing, but all of the regular species were found at least once by someone, with the best variety appearing on May 4 and May 8-9."

The migrant wave hit North Central Texas a bit later. On 11 May, Brian Gibbons noted in Dallas, "Finally something worth reporting from NCTX. Since the 2nd of May songbird migrants have been scarce. Today, without change in the weather, birds were all over." That same day Perry Ping remarked, "The birds are finally making it to North Central Texas. In the last 24 hours I've had 48 species including two new birds in the preserve." The next day in *Denton*, Lawrence Duhon commented, "I'm happy to report that this morning brought many long-awaited migrants to Lewisville (Denton County)! I've already had 13 warbler species today along with many other good migrants," and Brian Gibbons added, "The area parks were more active today than yesterday. An amazing day that produced 20 species of warblers, 6 species of Vireos ..."

Much higher than normal numbers of Golden-winged Warblers traversed the Central Prairie, particularly in *Karnes*, *Guadalupe*, *Travis* and *Bell*, with the peak movement 8-9 May.

Quite unexpectedly, a pair of **Tropical Parulas** singing on territory and carrying food items was observed 11 May (Stephan Lorenz) and again 22 May (Richard Kaskan) at Hamilton Pool, southwest of Austin, in *Travis*.

Black-throated Blue Warblers were well represented in the Central Prairie with 5 sightings 19 Apr-14 May in *Bastrop*, *Williamson* and *Travis*.

While Blackpoll Warblers missed the Central Prairie this spring, they appeared more often than usual in East Texas with 7 reports in *Cass*, *Nacogdoches*, *Smith* and *Van Zandt*, including a remarkable 6 birds on 10 May (Mike Dillon) at Atlanta State Park.

Single Cerulean Warblers were noted 27 Apr (Susan Schaezler) in *Guadalupe*, 7 May (Randy Pinkston) in *Bell* and 8 May (David Wolf, Jesse Fagan) in *Nacogdoches*.

A Worm-eating Warbler on 7 May (fide Susan Schaezler) in *Guadalupe* was the only one reported for the Central Oaks & Prairies.

Scarlet Tanagers rarely pass through Central and East Texas in migration, yet this season there were an impressive 17 reports in *Austin, Hays, Karnes, Nacogdoches, Smith, Travis, Trinity, Washington, Williamson*, including 2 birds in *Austin* on 17 Apr (Sue Ruotsala).

A first record for *Bell* was an adult female **Western Tanager** near the Lake Belton shore on Fort Hood on 22 May (Michael Dionne).

Many backyard birders in Central Texas were surprised at adding Rose-breasted Grosbeak to their yard lists for the first time. Those birders more attuned a wider scope used words such as “remarkable number” and “relatively easy to find for a change” and “very conspicuous” to describe the many grosbeaks observed this spring.

Black-headed Grosbeaks shifted eastward and at least two observers were able to claim three grosbeak species (Rose-breasted, Black-headed, Blue) in their yard this season. Cliff Shackelford did it on 3 May in *Travis* and Ray Berry used three separate May days to claim the trifecta in *Cass*.

Lazuli Buntings pushed the easterly edge of their range with 6 sightings in *Bell, Travis* and *Bastrop*, but more surprisingly were the reports in *Austin* on 15 Apr (Sue Ruotsala, Billie Bernard), in *Washington* on 1 May (Darrell Vollert), and in *Bowie* on 12 May (Bob Jordan).

Some Bobolinks took a more westerly route through Texas when 2 were in *Williamson* on 4 May (Tim Fennell, Stu Wilson) and a dozen or so flew over *Bastrop* on 16 May (Brush Freeman). Thirty males in *Nacogdoches* on 4 May (Susie Lower) is an impressive count.

An adult male **Scott's Oriole** was a county first for *Bell* on 3 May (Rich Kostecke).

Purple Finches, quite a feature this past winter, dwindled to a few in early spring with the last in *Washington* on 2 Mar (Darrell Vollert), in *Nacogdoches* on 5 Mar (Jesse Fagan), in *Montgomery* on 9 Apr (Charles Bryant) and, surprisingly, in *Brazos* on 10 Apr (Brenda Yeomans).

Pine Siskins were still around in early May in *Washington, Brazos*, and *Nacogdoches*, but the latest were 2 in *Smith* on 10 May (Peter Barnes) and one in *Montgomery* on 20 May (Linda Schooley).

## **CONTRIBUTORS REFERENCED ABOVE:**

Keith Arnold, Laura Baird, Noreen Baker, Peter Barnes, Ray Berry, Nancy Bird, Wanda Bosmans, Kevin Broussard, Charles Bryant, Frank Bumgardner, Eric Carpenter, Louis Debetaz, Mike Dillon, Michael Dionne, Lawrence Duhon, Gil Eckrich, Jesse Fagan, Tim Fennell, Brush Freeman, Bert Frenz, Fred Gehbach, Brian Gibbons, Scott Gleason, Peggy Harding, Eric Haskell, Phillip Hight, Ernest Jasek, Bob Jordan, Richard Kaskan, Richard Kinney, Mark Klym, Rich Kostecke, Stephan Lorenz, Susie Lower, John Muldrow, Derek Muschalek, Jud & Colleen Palmer, Jean Pare, Emilee Peters, Andy Petter, Randy Pinkston, Jane Purtle, Ellen Ratoosh, Eddie Ray, Sue Ruotsala, Susan Schaezler, Linda Schooley, Cliff Shackelford, Dave Sperry, Byron Stone, Scott & Crissy Summers, Robert Truss, Darrell Vollert, Jerry Walls, Carol Wells, Shirley Wendlandt, Stu Wilson, David Wolf, Mimi Hoppe Wolf, and Brenda Yeomans.