

Winter 2006-2007: Central Oaks & Prairies and East Texas Pineywoods

By Bert Frenz

This report is reduced from 1553 sightings of 228 species from 1 December 2006 to 28 February 2007.

WEATHER REPORTS:

Rich Kostecke, 14 Dec, Bell Co., "Despite the dry conditions, it was quite birdy. Lake levels are extremely low and continue to drop. Indeed, the upper half of the Cowhouse Creek arm of Belton Reservoir actually looks riverine once again. However, dry conditions may be negatively impacting birds that prefer moist woodlands which are now largely unavailable, like White-throated Sparrows which seem spotty and a bit sparse so far this winter."

Peter Barnes, 16 Dec, Smith Co., "The increases in numbers of Great Blue Heron (55), Hooded Merganser (8) Greater Yellowlegs (5), Least Sandpiper (79) and Ring-billed Gull (2,654) may be due to the extremely dry conditions and the extensive mudflats that are now present at Lake Tyler."

Keith Arnold, 30 Dec, Brazos Co., "We had the Gibbons Creek CBC on Thursday and heavy rains yesterday, so I finally got to the [Country Club] lake shortly before 10:30 this a.m. and carried out the survey ... Very high water: much still on the parking lot and the Common Moorhen was in open water between the cattails and the parking lot. The water had obviously been much higher, covering the gravel walk along the north arm of the lake; it poured 4.6 inches from my rain gauge in the back yard this afternoon."

Randy Pinkston, 31 Dec, Bell Co., "Recent rains have had zero effect on the water level. In fact, it looks lower to me than earlier in the month. The resulting mudflats are fantastic. Anyway, the Killdeers, Least Sandpipers, and American Pipits were all there, but not a Snow Bunting. I recorded 263 species within Bell County during calendar year 2006. Despite long term drought conditions I thought the year was quite birdy, indeed one of the best in my 12+ years here."

Eric Haskell, 28 Feb, McLennan Co., "For the most part, Waco's low level (10 feet below normal) has much shoreline and sandbar islands exposed for migrating shorebirds, of which the Least Sandpipers have begun arriving."

Tim Fennell, Winter season, Central Texas, "Rainfall continued to vary across the region. At season's end, Granger Lake was full in the east and Lake Buchanan was 20 feet low in the west."

David Wolf, Winter season, East Texas, "'Winter' is an extended and varied season here in the Pineywoods. At times this winter it seemed like 'the good ole days', when fronts came through regularly, the days were cold, and many nights went below freezing. Our first freeze, a light one, came on November 17, and then colder weather arrived November 30. The following week was chilly and temperatures as low as 20 deg. F. were reported. The rest of December vacillated between cool and warm (on Christmas Count Day on Dec 17 it reached 80 deg -- almost hot!), but January brought prolonged damp and chilly weather with regular fronts. We had one light ice-storm in mid-January, but our coldest night of the season (19 deg. F.) did not come until early February, after which it warmed gradually."

MOST UNUSUAL SIGHTINGS:

Bell Co. is not known for large concentrations of geese, so it is a surprise that 3K-10K geese have been wintering in farm fields near Oenaville in east *Bell* for several years (Bob Burlison). This season the flock was estimated at 5-6K, including at least 300 **Ross's Geese**, 500+ **Greater White-fronted Geese**, at least 7 **Cackling Geese** and the balance being **Snow Geese** (Randy Pinkston). On 13 Dec (Rich Kostecke) 14 **Greater White-fronted Geese** flew over Fort Hood in *Bell*, where they are seldom seen. Forty on the 16 Dec Austin CBC and 106 on the 30 Dec Granger Lake CBC were notable numbers for White-fronteds. A single **Snow Goose** was new for the Bell County CBC (fide Rich Kostecke).

Ross's Geese were also found more often in *Travis* and *McLennan*, with sightings 9 Dec (Barry Lyon, Victor Emanuel) at Hornsby Bend and again there on 10 Jan (fide Eric Carpenter), 18 Dec (Eric Haskell, Karen Arquette) at Lake Waco, a third county record for *McLennan*, and another east of Waco 25-29 Jan (Frank Bumgardner, John Muldrow, et al.).

Thirty **Cackling Geese** were at Pflugerville Reservoir in *Travis* 8 Dec (Tim Fennell), 1 on the 28 Dec (Keith Arnold, Jerry & Jessica Taylor) Gibbons Creek CBC in *Grimes*, 7 on the 30 Dec (fide Shawn Ashbaugh) Granger Lake CBC in *Williamson*, 44 on 25-29 Jan (Frank Bumgardner, John Muldrow, et al.) in *McLennan*, and 126 on 29 Jan (Tim Fennell) near Taylor in *Williamson*.

Rare for north-east Texas, three **Tundra Swans** near Clarksville, *Red River*, 25 Jan – 25 Feb (Jim Smith) were identified from photos (ph. Matt White).

A male **Eurasian Wigeon** was on O.H. Ivie Reservoir in *Concho* 2-9 Dec (Jay Parker, et al.).

David Wolf reported for the Pineywoods of East Texas, "Waterfowl were low in numbers and diversity most of the season and no rarities were reported."

Two **Red-breasted Mergansers** were new for the Longview CBC in *Gregg* 16 Dec (fide Peter Barnes).

Two **Pacific Loons** were on Lake Waco for the 16 Dec (Frank Bumgardner, John Muldrow) Crawford CBC in *McLennan*.

An impressive count, 56 **Common Loons** were observed at Lake O' the Pines, *Marion*, 11 Feb (David Brotherton).

Horned Grebes were also in good numbers at Lake O' the Pines, with 321 on the CBC held 30 Dec (fide Peter Barnes) and 185 on 11 Feb (David Brotherton).

Adding to a very few other winter records of inland **Brown Pelicans** is one on Town Lake in Austin 26-27 Dec (fide Eric Carpenter).

Snowy Egrets are supposed to fly south for the winter, but many lingered in *Travis* and *Williamson*, including 25 still present at Hornsby Bend on 8 Jan and a few still there at the end of the period (fide Eric Carpenter), in addition to others on the Colorado River and at San Gabriel Park in Georgetown, *Williamson*, as late as 25 Feb.

Likewise, **Little Blue Herons** lingered in Central Texas, including 15 still at Hornsby Bend 8 Jan (fide Eric Carpenter) and one through the period at Longhorn Dam.

Very late for East Texas was a **Tricolored Heron** at Lake Sam Rayburn, *San Augustine*, on 7 Dec (David Wolf).

The **Reddish Egret** that appeared at Stillhouse Hollow Lake in *Bell* in late October was still present 7 Jan (Rich Kostecke), making it the first January record for the Oaks & Prairies region. It was also counted for the Bell County CBC, a first.

Except from one late January record, there are no winter records of **White-faced Ibis** beyond mid December for the East Texas Pineywoods, so the 8 found at Stubblefield Campground in *Walker* on 17 Feb (Kathy Reiser, Bill Goloby) is surprising.

Vultures were amazingly abundant on the 28 Dec Gibbons Creek CBC in *Grimes* with new record highs of 941 **Black Vultures** and 1165 **Turkey Vultures**.

Single **Harris's Hawks** showed up 30 Dec in western *Bastrop*, 6 Jan in *Gonzales* and 25 Jan – 2 Feb in *Travis* at Austin (fide Eric Carpenter, Austin RBA).

At Palmetto State Park, *Gonzales*, a **Zone-tailed Hawk** was present 27 Dec – 18 Feb (Louise Ridlon, et al.). Another was in *Guadalupe* for the New Braunfels

CBC 29 Dec (David Sarkozi, Leslie Lineman, Judy Owens) and one was found during the Comal County CBC on 29 Dec (fide David Pueppke). Still others included singles in *Bastrop* 31 Dec (Phil Rostron) and in *Hayes* along the Blanco River to at least 16 Feb (fide Eric Carpenter).

Single **Rough-legged Hawks** were reported 27 Dec (Larry Galvez) in *Caldwell* and 1 Jan (C. Crosley) in *Williamson*.

Crested Caracara expansion continues unabated with increasing numbers being reported for *Henderson* in East Texas, a new country record for *Leon* on 23 Jan (David Williams) in the Central Brazos Valley, a family of an adult and 4 juveniles feeding on a feral hog in *Milam* on 10 Feb (Debra Corpora), and a new high count of 8 on the Bell County CBC in Central Texas.

This was a good winter for finding **Merlins** with reports stretching throughout the period from *Lampasas* to *Harrison*. Particularly noteworthy in East Texas where they are rare in winter, single Merlins were found in *Angelina*, *Harrison* and two locations in *Nacogdoches* (fide David Wolf, Peter Barnes) in Feb.

A **Prairie Falcon** 1 Dec – 6 Jan was in the Granger area of *Williamson* (Tim Fennell), one was in southern *Williamson* 26 Jan (Brush Freeman), another in *Travis* 1 Feb (Brush Freeman) and still another in *Guadalupe* on 25 Feb (Susan Schaezler).

One to two **Virginia Rails** arriving in Oct were present at Hornsby Bend throughout the period (Eric Carpenter). Three Virginia Rails were also found on the Granger Lake CBC in *Williamson* 30 Dec.

A first for the Gibbon Creek CBC and only the second *Grimes* record was 3 **Common Moorhens** found 28 Dec (Larry & Tonna Harris-Haller, S. W. Harris).

Although there are a very few migration records of **Sandhill Cranes** over *Walker* – the species is especially rare in the Pineywoods of East Texas - heretofore there were no winter records, so two separate reports on Christmas Day were surprising: five flying near Huntsville in the morning (Rick Bello) and a flock heard overhead at night near the Trinity River (Dwight Kersten).

Mountain Plovers were present in small numbers in the Granger area throughout the season, with a high count of 39 birds on 11 Feb (Tim Fennell).

Thirty **American Avocets** on Kurth Lake in *Angelina* on 9 Dec (Louis Debetaz, et al.) were unexpected late migrants.

Winter **Solitary Sandpipers** are rare, yet 4 were counted on the Austin CBC 16 Dec, 1 was photographed on the Nacogdoches CBC at Alazan Bayou WMA on 17 Dec (David Wolf) and especially late was one lingering throughout the winter

and still present 28 Jan (Joe Yelderman) at the sewer ponds in Waco, *McLennan*.

Rare in winter, a **Long-billed Curlew** was found in ne. *Travis* on 3 Jan (Brush Freeman).

Rare anytime in *McLennan* and never before reported in winter, a **Dunlin** was seen at Speegleville Park on Lake Waco on 7 Dec (Eric Haskell).

A high count of 117 **Wilson's Snipes**, including 93 seen from canoe 28 Dec (Mike Manson, David Scott), easily surpassed previous records for the Gibbons Creek CBC in *Grimes*.

Only the fourth record for the Pineywoods – all at the same site – was an adult **Lesser Black-backed Gull** at the Lake Livingston spillway 2 Jan (Rick Schaefer).

Not much of a surprise, **Eurasian Collared-Doves** counts continue to increase on CBC's with a boost from 7 to 33 on the Tyler CBC in *Smith* being typical (Alan & Kris Byboth).

White-winged Doves reached a new high of 1020 on the Bell County CBC, nearly doubling the previous high.

Burrowing Owls were plentiful in Central Texas, with reports of 3 individuals in *Bell*, 9 individuals in *Williamson* (Tim Fennell) and 1 individual in *McLennan* (Jim Edwards).

Only one winter record on the Pineywoods checklist, an addition is a very late **Common Nighthawk** over Lufkin, *Angelina*, on 5 Dec (Louis Debetaz).

Broad-tailed Hummingbirds were reported in above average numbers on the Upper Texas Coast this winter, including one banded in *Montgomery* 20 Jan (Brad Lirette), present since November and where they are rarely reported for East Texas

David Wolf reports in Pineywoods Scissor Tales, "An Empidonax believed to be a **Hammond's Flycatcher** was seen well with a large mixed-flock of migrants along the TX 147 causeway [*San Augustine*] on 7 Dec (David Wolf). This is the first regional report of this species, but as a one-person sight record it must remain hypothetical."

The decline of **Loggerhead Shrikes** in East Texas was noted by Peter Barnes in NETFO News, "Ten Loggerhead Shrikes were observed on the Tyler CBC, 5 on the Caddo Count and none on the Longview or Lake O' the Pines CBCs, continuing a trend of steady declines of this species."

Two **Fish Crows** were new for the Longview CBC in *Gregg* 16 Dec (fide Peter Barnes).

Two tardy **Tree Swallows** were seen on the Gibbons Creek CBC in *Grimes* on 28 Dec (Darrell Vollert).

Wintering **Cave Swallows** were common in Central Texas in December, including 57 on the Austin CBC and 30 on the Gibbons Creek CBC, but a late January ice storm dealt a devastating blow to the *Brazos* birds, plummeting the roosting population under one College Station bridge from 100-120 to only 15 on 26 Jan (Ellen Ratoosh). Several were found dead nearby and perhaps others moved south as Caves were seen flying high over *Bastrop* the next day (Brush Freeman). According to Freeman, the swallows can seek warmer air overriding the colder lower air and thus could survive. By late March, 50 Cave Swallows were nesting under the College Station bridge, presumably new arrivals.

A late **Barn Swallow** was present for the 30 Dec (Jim Palmer, Eric Carpenter) Granger Lake CBC.

The only report of a **Red-breasted Nuthatch** this winter in East and Central Texas was one in *Mills* on 16 Feb (Anthony Hewetson).

Dorothy Metzler reported, "The Caddo Lake count [*Harrison*] recorded all-time high numbers for **Brown-headed Nuthatch** (69), **Brown Creeper** (33), **Brown Thrasher** (91) and **Dark-eyed Junco** (1503).

Rock Wrens continued from the fall season into winter at Stillhouse Hollow Lake in *Bell* through at least 28 Jan (Randy Pinkston), at Wright Patman Lake in *Cass* to at least 21 Jan (Mike Dillon), at Lake Tawakoni State Park in *Hunt* until at least 26 Jan (Richard Kinney) and at Lake Georgetown in *Williamson* to the end of the period (Tim Fennell).

Golden-crowned Kinglets were common this winter and a new high count of 39 on the Bell County CBC was representative.

Mountain Bluebirds staged a major eastern irruption, penetrating *Coryell*, *Burnet* and *Bell* 16 Dec to 18 Jan and adding the species to the Bell County CBC.

Although reported regularly throughout eastern Texas, a flock of 600 **Cedar Waxwings** was described as an impressive sight in *Smith* on 15 Feb (Peter Barnes).

David Wolf reports "a good winter for **Henslow's Sparrow**" with up to 10 at the Nacogdoches airport mid-Dec to 27 Jan and others at Central Heights to 8 Feb

and near Trawick 27 Jan, all in *Nacogdoches*. Elsewhere in East Texas, one was seen on the Longview CBC in *Gregg* and another was seen 29 Jan – 2 Feb at Texas Eastman in *Harrison* (David Brotherton, Mark Edmund).

A bonanza of 55 **Le Conte's Sparrows** was counted in one area of the Granger Lake CBC on 30 Dec.

Lapland Longspurs were at the Nacogdoches airport with 6-8 on 14-17 Dec and 2 still present 2 Jan, but not thereafter (David Wolf). One was also included in the Granger Lake CBC 30 Dec.

Very rare for East Texas Pineywoods, a flock of 6 **Smith's Longspurs** were identified at the Nacogdoches airport 17 Dec (David Wolf, Robert Truss, Dave Saalfeld, Sarah Scherder).

A **Black-headed Grosbeak** visited *Guadalupe* 6 Jan (Susan Schaezler, m.ob.) and remained throughout the period. More unusual is the winter-plumaged male **Black-headed Grosbeak** that was photographed at a feeder on a farm in *Waller* 17 Jan (Carlton Colmenares), providing a first county record.

A one-day wonder, a **Dickcissel** accompanied a small flock of Chipping Sparrows eating seed off the ground below a College Station feeder on 29 Jan (Ellen Ratoosh), providing a first January record for the Central Brazos Valley.

Rusty Blackbirds made spotty and unexpected appearances in Central Texas and were uncharacteristically scarce in more likely areas of East Texas. Twenty observed on the Gibbons Creek CBC on 28 Dec (Mike Manson, David Scott) provided only a fourth *Grimes* record since 1938, two at Temple Lion's Park in *Bell* 1 Jan (Randy Pinkston) adds to small number of records for that county. A 3 Jan (Brush Freeman) sighting of 3 in *Lee* adds to an even shorter list of prior records. Most amazingly, Freeman reported up to 300 in a flock in western *Bastrop* 22-23 Jan, a number easily surpassing other records back to the mid 1960s when such numbers were not unusual for the central Oaks & Prairies region.

The rarest and most attractive find in East Texas this season was a brightly plumaged male **Bullock's Oriole** that appeared in Nacogdoches in early January and lingered through at least 8 Feb (Larry & Diana Walker, m.ob., ph. Rick Schaefer), feeding mostly on pears on a platform feeder.

For East Texas, David Wolf comments, "**Brown Creepers** and **Golden-crowned Kinglets** were more widespread and numerous than usual, but winter invaders like **Red-breasted Nuthatch**, **Pine Siskin** and **Purple Finch** were almost completely lacking."

Very small numbers of **Purple Finches** were reported in *Rusk* and *Nacogdoches* in East Texas and *Bell* and *Grimes* in Central Texas (5 reports total). **Pine Siskins** were only slightly more common with 8 reports from *Bastrop*, *Brazos*, *Grimes*, *Nacogdoches*, *Rusk* and *Morris*.

CONTRIBUTORS:

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