

Fall 2007: Central Oaks & Prairies and East Texas Pineywoods

By Bert Frenz

This report is reduced from 3440 sightings of 300 species from 1 August to 30 November 2007.

WEATHER REPORTS:

Eric Haskell, 8 Aug, Lake Waco, McLennan Co., "Flooding has converted Waco Wetlands areas into extensive mudflats."

Eric Haskell, 22 Aug, Lake Waco, McLennan Co., "As the lake remains stable for 2 weeks (long time since that happened!), we are able to see affects at more remote locations like our wildlife areas. Much bottomland undergrowth was swept away, along with many killed Chinaberries (good!), Texas Ash and Shumard Oaks (bad!), but the tree canopy should be a smorgasbord for early passerine migrants. Sandflats/mudbars swept clean of vegetation on the tributaries should also be good stops for migrant shorebirds."

Peter Barnes, Matt White, August, ne Texas, "The very wet June and July raised local lake levels, markedly reducing habitat for shorebirds, so few were reported in August."

Rich Kostecke, August, Bell-Coryell-Lampasas counties, "August was generally hot with below average rainfall, but habitat conditions remained fairly lush, green, and moist as a result of the heavy rains of spring and early summer. Several species (e.g., Morning Dove and Northern Cardinal) capitalized on these conditions by prolonging their breeding seasons. Adults attending fledglings could still be found in August. In general, it seems to have been a stellar breeding season for most species as evidenced by the noticeable presence of hatch-year birds. By the end of the month, Belton and Stillhouse Lakes were still approximately 25' above normal water levels. High water levels have resulted in lower abundance and diversity, as well as greater dispersion, of waterbirds. However, water levels are steadily dropping, providing more potential wader and shorebird habitat. Lake levels are predicted to be back to normal by November, barring any additional heavy rain events. In most areas, the majority of hardwoods (e.g., our willows) seem to have survived the high water. The same cannot be said for the flooded junipers. Low-lying grasslands (at Union Grove WMA, Stillhouse Hollow Lake, for example) flooded for extended periods will also be negatively impacted, at least in the short-term."

Rich Kostecke, September, Bell-Coryell-Lampasas counties, "The weather during the month was characterized by stable high pressure systems which resulted in dry and warm-hot conditions. The lack of precipitation and heat resulted in a

substantial lowering of water levels in our local lakes, which had been swollen by flood-causing spring and early summer rains. By the end of the month, Belton Lake was only 15' above the conservation pool water-level and Stillhouse Hollow Lake was only 4' above the conservation pool water-level. As water levels fell, there was increased access to many of the parks and wildlife management areas bordering the lakes. It is nice to again have access to some of our traditional birding areas. Falling water levels also exposed mudflats, but there has not been much of a response from shorebirds as of yet. Of course, with access to our lake-side parks and wildlife management areas, we can now begin to evaluate the effects of the flooding on habitat conditions. To reiterate, many of the riparian hardwoods (particularly the willows) seem to have survived alright, but junipers were hit hard. Grassy flats bordering the Lampasas River and the lakes were also hit hard. Before the flooding, the grasses in many of these areas were pretty dense and rank. After the flooding, some dead clumps of grass, stubble, and lots of bare, damp, muddy ground were left. I suspect the reduction in grass cover could have a negative effect on some of our wintering grassland birds, at least in the short-term. There is also a lot of debris scattered about. The only climatic instability of note during the month was a cold front on 11 Sept. For those who were lucky enough to be out in the field that morning, there was an impressive number of migrants about.:

Peter Barnes & Matt White, September, ne Texas, "The absence of rain or cold fronts this month resulted in few sightings of fall migrant passerines, and the high water levels at local lakes made shorebirds hard to come by."

Rich Kostecke, October, Bell-Coryell-Lampasas counties, "For the most part, weather during the month was dry and rather stable with only a single 'strong' cold front hitting the tri-county area. There was a brief, but noticeable influx of birds following that front, but otherwise migration during the month can be categorized as a continuous trickle. Waterbirds were hit or miss during the month. Waders and shorebirds were the hits. Waders were both abundant and diverse with some amazing concentrations being reported. It seems that the waders took advantage of lingering pools and sheet water leftover from the summer flooding. Arguably, the best shorebirding of the fall season also occurred during the month as water levels fell and briefly exposed mudflats. All other waterbirds were generally more miss than hit. For example, most of our winter duck species were reported during the month but in small numbers that would often disappear soon after they were reported. A stronger cold front will apparently be needed before we see our wintering waterfowl, loons, grebes, gulls, and terns with regularity and in numbers. The bulk of our nearctic-neotropical migrant breeding species had left by the beginning of the month. Both Belton and Stillhouse Hollow reservoirs were back to normal, conservation pool water levels by the end of the month, and there is again access to many (though not all) of our traditional birding areas around the reservoirs. It is unclear as yet what impact the flood-damaged habitat will have on our wintering bird populations. On a positive note, remnant stands of switchgrass appear to be

attracting most of their usual complement of wintering Marsh Wrens, sparrows (though *Ammodramus* sparrows are still absent), and Common Yellowthroats."

Rich Kostecke, November, Bell-Coryell-Lampasas counties, "Climatically, November was generally characterized by mild temperatures, a continued lack of precipitation, and few cold fronts (at least until the last third of the month when several weak to moderately strong fronts hit and cooled things off). In general, it was not the best weather for blowing birds down into the region. ... The mild fall weather and an abundance of natural foods have certainly affected the number of birds attending feeders. Hummingbirds and seed-eating species have generally shunned feeders."

"We are also beginning to see the impact of our spring/summer floods on some of our wintering birds. Several unsuccessful tries have been made for the Short-eared Owl that has traditionally wintered at Union Grove WMA, Stillhouse Hollow Lake. Additionally, other raptors, such as Northern Harriers, have generally been absent from the site. Randy Pinkston attributes the absence of the owl and harriers to Union Grove WMA being "basically rodent-sterile" right now, lacking the prey base needed to support these raptors. Some grassland/wetland songbird habitat still exists at Union Grove WMA in the form of button bush, grass stubble, small clumps of dead switchgrass, and the apparently dead stand of giant reed. However, this habitat does not seem to suit the Sedge Wrens or *Ammodramus* sparrows that could formerly be found wintering at the site. A less noticeable impact from the flood was the damage done to the submergent vegetation (mainly Hydrilla) in the lake. Invertebrates, such as snails, that could be found on this submergent vegetation were likely the reason for the large concentrations of Canvasback and American Coot that have been wintering on the lake in recent years. Now that the Hydrilla is basically gone, there seem to be few Canvasbacks on the lake and the number of coots is in the low 100s rather than in 1000s."

David Wolf, November, Angelina-Nacogdoches-San Augustine counties, "Lake Rayburn did not drop low enough to expose flats for shorebirds until late in the season, but 30 American Avocets were at TX 147 on Oct 24. ... In general this was the dullest fall migration in years. The weather was too nice - without storm and frontal activity we just don't get many birds! Almost across the board wintering migrants were late in showing up, undoubtedly because of the prolonged mild weather up north. ... The one big news item this season is the major invasion of Red-breasted Nuthatches."

MOST UNUSUAL SIGHTINGS:

Providing the first evidence of **Black-bellied Whistling-Duck** breeding in *Lampasas*, 2 adults and 6 ducklings were discovered 8 Sep (D.D. Currie, Dell Little, Ray Little). For a second or third record for Richland Creek WMA in *Freestone*, a whistling-duck was seen 26 Aug (Peter Barnes, D.D. Currie, Dell

Little). One on 5 Oct (Robert Truss) in *Angelina* was the latest ever for that part of East Texas.

Canvasbacks, which usually congregate in winter by the 1000s on Stillhouse Hollow Lake in *Bell* have been reduced to only a few, an apparent result of summer flood damage to submergent vegetation (mainly Hydrilla) on the lake (Rich Kostecke). American Coots have similarly been reduced.

A high count of 75 **Redheads** were on Kurth Lake, *Angelina*, on 17 Nov (Louis Debetaz).

Ninety **Buffleheads** 20 Nov (David Brotherton, Mark Edmund) at Texas Eastman in Longview, *Harrison*, is a remarkably high.

A very high count of 34 **Red-breasted Mergansers** were on Kurth Lake, *Angelina*, on 10 Nov (Louis Debetaz).

Brazos County, which once had a thriving population of **Northern Bobwhite**, has had only 18 reports in the past decade – only two in the past 5 years - and almost all of them have been in residential areas. Now an adult pair and a juvenile have been seen Jul-Sep (Jim & Kitty Anding) in a subdivision on the outskirts of College Station.

Only a second record for Lake Somerville, two **Horned Grebes** were viewed from the *Burleson* side 17 Nov (Laura Sare).

Probably a county first record for *Lampasas*, an **American Bittern** was at Lometa Reservoir on 30 Oct (Daniel Hodges).

A **Least Bittern** on 26 Aug (Peter Barnes, D. D. Currie, Dell Little) was a second record for Richland Creek WMA in *Freestone*.

High water levels at Richland Creek WMA excluded most shorebirds but was attractive to 14 species of large wading birds, including an impressive estimate of 300 **Great Egrets** and 100 **Snowy Egrets** on 26 Aug (Peter Barnes, D. D. Currie, Dell Little).

In *Williamson*, 24 juvenile **Tricolored Herons** gathered at Granger Lake on 15 Aug (Tim Fennell).

A **Glossy Ibis** near Granger Lake on 17 Aug (Tim Fennell) was a first county record for *Williamson*.

A **Wood Stork** tarried in *Waller* until 21 Oct (Bob Honig).

Swallow-tailed Kite sightings were on the increase this season, with 2 kites in *Washington* 20 Aug (Darrell Vollert), 1 in *Bastrop* 23 Aug and 3 there 27 Aug (Brush Freeman), 1 in *Grimes* 29 Aug (John & Gloria Tveten), 3 in *Travis* 2-3 Sep (Gary Newgord, Andy Balinsky, Robin Dennis), and two in *Comanche* 3 Sep (ph. Ray Matlack). The *Travis* sightings are noteworthy and, even more so, **the Comanche sighting is remarkably far northwest of their typical post-breeding wanderings and probably a first county record.** Veteran hawkwatcher Joel Simon commented, "Many of you have been asking me for the reasons our count of Swallow-tailed Kites at the Corpus hawk watch has been so large this season, and why are they been seen so far west. Hornsby Bend had their first ever sightings this season. Taking out the early start, as of 9 Sep we stand at 139 breaking our record set last season of 99. If the season ended today that would be a 40% increase. While I think that's great, listen to this....Veracruz has recorded 498 as of 9-9 against a five year high of 272, a whopping 83% increase! I wished I had Smith Points figures but from what I have heard they may more flat. What does all this mean? HawkWatch International just completed a ten year report for these three Gulf Coast hawk watch sites. The conclusion is that after significant increases in numbers of transgulf migrating Swallow-tailed Kites in the first five years there has a lot of variation between years and overall numbers were flat in the past four years. One year does not make a trend!!! This year may mark the beginning of another period of increases. The good news is that it is surely not the beginning of a decline. While the sightings of this species in Austin may be exciting (and it most certainly is) Hawk Mountain in PA also had its first record, and they have been doing counts for 56 years. I have also received reports of sightings from varied locations like Mass. Tulsa OK and Bastrop (thanks Brush), The potentially most important sighting is Hornsby Bend. The reason is that it could be caused (and I repeat could be) by the extension of their range north along the Mississippi River Basin. Birds from this area most certainly would not go out of their way to be seen at Smith Point, but would only be a little off in going through Hornsby Bend. If it continues then we would have another hawk watch in Texas to monitor Swallow-tailed Kites. Only the coming years will tell!"

A record number of 5-6 pairs of **Mississippi Kites** nested in about 200 acres of Woodway Ravine near Lake Waco, *McLennan*, this past period and along with other summer nesters, long-time residents Fred & Nancy Gehlbach termed it "the largest numbers of breeding birds ever in the Sugar Creek Nature Preserve."

Rare breeders in upland pine forests of East Texas, two noisy **Sharp-shinned Hawk** fledglings were begging in the Stephen F. Austin Experimental Forest in *Nacogdoches* 16 Jul – 5 Aug (Rick Schaefer).

A very late **Broad-winged Hawk** was in *Brazos* on 29 Nov (Laura Sare).

Also late was a **Swainson's Hawk** in *Henderson* on 30 Nov (Tony Gallucci).

A good find for *Bell*, a **King Rail** was heard 27 Oct (Rich Kostecke) at Stillhouse Hollow Lake.

A late **Virginia Rail** was at Union Grove Wildlife Area, *Bell*, on 16 Nov (Randy Pinkston).

While **American Coots** virtually abandoned Stillhouse Hollow Lake and other large reservoirs owing to the Hydrilla die-off and commensurate effect on lake invertebrates, 1300 were estimated at nearby Lometa Reservoir in *Lampasas* on 10 Nov (Rich Kostecke).

Common Moorhens made an appearance in ne Texas with 2 in *Anderson* on 11 Aug (D. D. Currie, Dell Little) and 1 on Sabine River 3 Sep (Peter Barnes), the later being the first report in more than 10 years for *Smith*.

Twelve **Semipalmated Plovers** on 29 Sep and still 11 on 7 Oct (Tim Fennell, Maggie Burnett, Eric Carpenter, Jason Leifester, Byron Stone) is a high count for Granger Lake in *Williamson*.

Tim Fennell suspected **Black-necked Stilt** local breeding during this extremely wet year when he found 1 adult male and two probable juveniles near Granger Lake, *Williamson*, on 26 Aug. One was late departing *Bastrop* on 22 Oct (Brush Freeman).

Not often found in *Burleson*, **American Avocets** were flying low over the Brazos River bottoms on 20 Oct (Jimmie Killingsworth). Additional sightings were 9 in *Bastrop* 22 Oct (Brush Freeman), 30 at Lake Sam Rayburn, *San Augustine*, 24 Oct (David Wolf) and one very late avocet at Lake Waco, *McLennan*, on 27 Nov (Eric Haskell).

Four **Short-billed Dowitchers** were identified at the Lake Belton spillway in *Bell* on 16 Aug (Gil Eckrich).

A breeding-plumaged adult **Laughing Gull** was on the *San Augustine* side of Lake Sam Rayburn on 7 Aug (David Wolf).

A very late **Black Tern** in 75% winter plumage was seen flying with Forster's Terns over Lake Somerville, *Burleson*, on 17 Nov (Laura Sare). Only one later record is known for the Central Brazos Valley.

A **jaeger**, unidentified to species, was observed 7 Oct (Tim Fennell, Maggie Burnett, Eric Carpenter, Jason Leifester, Byron Stone) flying over Granger Lake, *Williamson*, providing only a second county record and about the sixth central Oaks and Prairies regional record.

David Wolf reports, "A 'singing' **Common Ground-Dove** was heard in Central Heights [*Nacogdoches*] from early October (when we couldn't quite believe our ears) through Nov 4, but it was elusive and not seen until Oct 25, when a pair was spotted (David Wolf, Mimi Hoppe Wolf). This species is a very rare and irregular wanderer to our area, and has never been confirmed to breed, but this record certainly raises that possibility."

A **Short-eared Owl** 18 Nov (Phil Rostron) was a surprising find for far eastern *Bastrop* at Shipp Lake.

A late **Whip-poor-will** was observed in *Bastrop* on 10 Nov (Brush Freeman).

A sixth county record for *Brazos*, the first being in 1999, was a **Buff-bellied Hummingbird** in Kurten 22 Nov – 3 Dec (ph. Shirley Wilkerson). In Austin County, at least one Buff-bellied continues year-round to visit two yards north of Bellville (fide Darrell Vollert).

A **Calliope Hummingbird** 18-19 Aug (Brush Freeman) is perhaps only the second record for *Bastrop*.

Not often found in East Texas, single **Rufous Hummingbirds** were reported 2-3 Sep in *Angelina* (Carol Wells) and early Oct to mid Nov in *Montgomery* (Florence King).

Infrequently birded *Leon* had its first county record for **Red-headed Woodpecker** on 30 Sep (D. D. Currie, Dell Little).

Unexpected single **Red-naped Sapsuckers** were photographed in *Bastrop* on 21 Oct (ph. Brush Freeman) and *Bell* on 28 Oct (ph. Rich Kostecke).

A silent **Western-type empid** was found at McKinney Roughs in *Bastrop* on 28 Nov (Brush Freeman).

A **Couch's-Tropical kingbird** did not call, but was observed closely off Rock Prairie Rd in *Brazos* on 30 Sep (D. D. Currie, Dell Little), not a first county record though certainly very rare.

Usually gone by the end of September, an **Eastern Kingbird** lingered until 20 Nov (David Brotherton, Mark Edmund) at Texas Eastman at Longview in *Harrison*.

A very well seen **Cassin's Vireo** was at McKinney Roughs in *Bastrop* on 29 Nov (Brush Freeman).

Philadelphia Vireo is a good fall sighting for East Texas and one was in *Nacogdoches* on 9 Oct (David Wolf).

A first county record for *Falls*, 7+ **Cave Swallows** were at The Falls in Brazos River Park on 7 Sep (D. D. Currie, Dell Little).

A widespread invasion this season after a long hiatus of such an influx, **Red-breasted Nuthatches** spread throughout the region. For many backyard birders, this fall provided their first yard bird nuthatch. The first report came 1 Sep (Brush Freeman) from *Bastrop* and by the end of the period included *Austin*, *Bell*, *Brazos*, *Cherokee*, *Fayette*, *Henderson*, *Lampasas*, *McLennan*, *Montgomery*, *Morris*, *Nacogdoches*, *Polk*, *Robertson*, *Rusk*, *Smith*, *Washington*, and *Williamson*.

A fledgling **Rock Wren** was found with two singing adults at Lake Georgetown Dam in *Williamson* on 1 Aug (Tim Fennell). A single Rock Wren was at Lake Waco in *McLennan* on 23 Oct (Eric Haskell).

A rare sighting for *Washington*, a first fall HY female **Prairie Warbler** was in Zionsville on 23 Aug (Darrell Vollert).

A **Palm Warbler** in Central Heights, *Nacogdoches*, was even rarer because it was the brighter, more easterly race, seen 16 Oct (Mimi Hoppe Wolf, David Wolf).

On 11 Nov (ph. Tim Fennell) a **Green-tailed Towhee** was southeast of Thrall in *Williamson*, the first county sighting since 2001.

A single Clay-colored Sparrow on 3 Nov (Mimi Hoppe Wolf) was late in *Nacogdoches*.

Lark Buntings spilled over their eastern range boundary with sightings in *Hays* on 3 Nov (Byron Stone), *Bell* on 4 Nov (Randy Pinkston) and *Williamson* on 11 Nov (Tim Fennell).

According to David Wolf, "Female **Painted Buntings** were still feeding fledglings in Central Heights [*Nacogdoches*] through the first week of Sept and 2 were present through Sept 22 (David Wolf, Mimi Hoppe Wolf). This is late for this species."

A late **Dickcissel** was in the Granger area of *Williamson* on 11 Nov (Tim Fennell).

Three hundred **Brewer's Blackbirds** is an impressive number for *Anderson*, seen 16 Nov (D. D. Currie, Del Little).

Can you imagine seeing 288 **Baltimore Orioles**? That was the count for flocks pouring down in a passing cold front on Fort Hood, *Bell*, on 11 Sep (Rich Kostecke, Gil Eckrich).

An early East Texas influx of **Purple Finches** started 9 Nov (Robert Truss) and by the end of the month included reports from *Cherokee*, *Henderson* and 3 *Nacogdoches* locations.

On 2 Sep single **American Goldfinches** appeared in *Nacogdoches* (Mimi Hoppe Wolf) and *Smith* (Peter Barnes).

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