

Winter 2008-2009: Central Oaks & Prairies and East Texas Pineywoods

By Bert Frenz

This report is reduced from 1416 sightings of 208 species from 1 December 2008 to 28 February 2009.

WEATHER REPORTS:

Brush Freeman, 4-5 January, Bastrop Co., "A front came through Utley this morning but with no rain of course. As a testament to how hard things are for the birds here and how important those water features are, I estimate that there are at the minimum 110 Northern Cardinals coming into feed and water along with numerous other birds. It is impossible for me to photograph them all as they are on both sides of the house, but this photo shows about 18-20 just in one corner of the yard. ... I dare say that we are seeing something very exceptional. I have had as many as 100 cardinals here in the past 23+ years here, but the numbers are getting ridiculously high here and I have been here only 4 days. Today I would estimate that the numbers that could be detected at any one time, if there were eyes to watch all feeders and water on the two sides of the house, could be 140-150 or more with likely many more in the woods."

Rich Kostecke, January report, Bell Co. area, "Another dry, windy month for Bell, Coryell, and Lampasas counties. Moderate to extreme drought conditions prevail throughout the tri-county area. Water levels at Belton and Stillhouse Hollow lakes are over 3' and 5' below normal, respectively. That may not sound like a lot, but the drops in water level are enough to expose large expanses of mudflat at both lakes. On the plus side, if these conditions prevail, we could have an interesting spring shorebird migration. The majority of ponds and smaller creeks are now dry. If dry conditions continue, it could make for a rough breeding season for many species. It is difficult to say for sure, but drought conditions certainly seem to be negatively impacting some of our wintering waterfowl (e.g., Canvasback and American Coot seem to be unusually scarce) and possibly some of our wintering songbirds as well. It has been a pretty decent winter for most sparrows and the expected finches (American Goldfinch and Pine Siskin) so far, but species such as American Robin and Cedar Waxwing are more poorly represented than usual. It is definitely not an irruptive year for species such as Golden-crowned Kinglets and nuthatches."

David Wolf, Winter report, East Texas, "Because the level of Lake Rayburn was unusually low through early January (we have not had much rain since Hurricane Ike), exposing mudflats at the upper end and elsewhere, we had records of lingering shorebirds that are normally lacking (or at best very rare) in the region in the winter. The species found were to be expected - all of them are found occasionally at this season in the more open regions of Texas to the west of us."

Byron Stone, Winter season, Austin area, "Comments about conditions this winter - unbelievably dry, "heartbreakingly dry" to quote Anthony Hewetson of Lubbock. It has also been another remarkably warm winter, as freezes have been less frequent than usual, and cold fronts are replaced more quickly by a return of warm, southerly flow. Area-wide, most native grasses did not produce seed this winter, as there was inadequate rainfall. Fields of little bluestem, meadow dropseed and other grasses that usually hold good numbers of sparrows often had absolutely no birds because there was no forage. Sparrows tended to cluster along drainages with good stands of ragweed, which was able to produce seed despite the drought, perhaps because of fertilization from the massive floods of September 2007."

MOST UNUSUAL SIGHTINGS:

After several winter seasons with almost no sightings of **Ross's Goose** in East Texas, 1-2 at Alazan Bayou WMA in *Nacogdoches* 21-22 Dec (David Wolf) and one s. of Tyler in *Smith* 26 Dec (Peter Barnes) are notable. Another was in Central Texas near Temple, *Bell*, 25 Jan (Randy Pinkston) in a flock of 1000-1500 Snow Geese.

A **Red-breasted Merganser** 4 Jan (Byron Stone) on Alcoa Lake is the first *Milam* record in more than a decade.



Seen periodically 28 Dec – 1 Feb (ph. Tim Fennell, Ron Baltzegar, Matt White) a **Pacific Loon** was on Lake O' the Pines, *Marion-Van Zandt*.

A highlight of the 1 Jan (Alan Jaeger) Bastrop-Buescher State Parks CBC was a **Least Grebe**.

It appears some **Brown Pelicans** never left inland lakes following summer hurricanes, as 3 were at Kurth Lake in *Angelina* 13 Dec – 8 Jan (Louis Debetaz, Carroll Moore, et al.), 1 was on Lake Sam Rayburn, *Angelina*, 2 Jan (Carrol Wells, et al.), another was on Lake Livingston, *San Jacinto*, on 8 Jan (Pat Coe) and yet 3 more were on Lake Somerville, *Washington*, on 3 Feb (Betty Vermeire).

The Caddo Lake count on 6 Dec (fide Peter Barnes) hit an all-time high for **Double-crested Cormorants** with an amazing 33866.

Hardly ever reported in winter in north-east Texas, an **American Bittern** was at Richland Creek WMA in *Navarro* 28 Feb (D. D. Currie). Another was at Fort Hood in *Bell* 3 Jan (Gil Eckrich).

White Ibis records in the Central Brazos Valley are scarce in the cold part of winter, so an immature in *Brazos* on 8 Feb (Darrell Vollert) is noteworthy. An amazing count of 80 were at Richland Creek WMA the last day of February (Tyler Audubon field trip).

A **Plegadis ibis** was at Lake Bob Sandlin, *Camp-Franklin*, on 25 Feb (Mike Dillon).

A first nesting record for *McLennan*, two pairs of **Bald Eagles** have been assembling and sitting on nests at Lake Waco (Eric Haskell, et al.) Another nest has been closely watched near Franklin in *Robertson* (Debra Corpora, Gayle Hardin).

A juvenile **Ferruginous Hawk** was sighted near Thorndale in *Milam* 4 Jan (Byron Stone).

Only the second record, the first dating back to 1987, for *Grimes* is an immature **Golden Eagle** found soaring with vultures near Shiro on the Gibbons Creek CBC 29 Dec (Laura Sare, Eric Hough, Elaine Hough).

The first winter record for the central Pineywoods region, an adult **Peregrine Falcon** was seen along the TX 147 causeway, *San Augustine*, 2 Jan – 4 Feb (David Wolf).

Lee got its first county record for **Prairie Falcon** 15 Feb (Sue Heath, Tad Finnell).

Very rare in winter in the central Pineywoods region, 6 **Western Sandpipers** were at Attoyac Bayou on upper Lake Rayburn, *San Augustine*, on 4 Feb (David Wolf).

Another rarity for the Pineywoods is **Dunlins**: a single seen 16 Dec in *Nacogdoches* and 6 seen 2 Jan in *San Augustine* (both David Wolf).

Again, probably also a result of the exposed mudflats on Lake Sam Rayburn, 4 **Long-billed Dowitchers** were at Attoyac Bayou, *San Augustine*, on 2 Jan (David Wolf).

Laughing Gulls were at Kurth Lake in *Angelina* 13-20 Dec (Louis Debetaz) and Wright Patman Lake, *Cass-Bowie*, on 22 Dec (Mike Dillon).

A rare winter find is the **Franklin's Gull** at College Station, *Brazos*, on 13 Dec (Laura Sare).



Glaucous Gulls were newsworthy this winter in Texas. In East Texas, a first-year was on Lake O' the Pines in *Marion* from 28 Dec (ph. Tim Fennell) to 21 Feb (Mike Dillon, Peter Barnes) and another was at Holiday Marina, Lake Tawakoni, 17 Feb (Peter Barnes, Mike Dillon). In Central Texas a first- or second-year Glaucous was on O. H. Ivie Reservoir, *Coleman-Concho*, 22 Feb (Blaine Carnes).

White-winged Doves apparently are increasing in East Texas where 36 were counted in *Henderson* on 31 Dec (D. D. Currie, Dell Little).

Reported in *McLennan* about once per decade, a **Common Ground-Dove** was documented 3 Jan (Joe Yelderman) along the Brazos River in the southern part of the county.

Short-eared Owls were a local sensation in *McLennan* where a simultaneous stake-out on 21 Jan (fide Karen Arquette) at two different locations found a total number of five.

With only five prior records in East Texas, an adult male **Broad-tailed Hummingbird** banded 7 Dec (ph. Kelly Hill, banded Sue Heath) in Magnolia, *Montgomery*, is noteworthy. It was still being seen at least to 4 Jan.

An adult male **Rufous Hummingbird** wintered in *Nacogdoches* from 22 Dec to 1 Mar (Jack Rohrer, Rick Schaefer).

Pileated Woodpeckers were reported in *Milam* 4 Jan and at Lake Somerville in *Burleson* 28 Feb (both Byron Stone).

With only one prior confirmed record of **Couch's Kingbird** for the Pineywoods, it is surprising to get two more this winter: 1 photographed, tape-recorded and observed at Kurth Lake 20 Dec – 25 Jan (Carroll Moore, Louis Debetaz, ph. David Wolf, et al.) and another non-calling Couch's/Tropical 20 miles away at Ryan's Lake in *Angelina* 7 Feb (Louis Debetaz, et al.). Another was observed in Central Texas at Bastrop State Park, *Bastrop*, on 7 Feb (Drew Plummer, Tim Field, Julia Freedman).

The eastern subspecies of **Bewick's Wren** was found at Lake Somerville in *Burleson* on 28 Feb (Byron Stone), a bit west of its normal range.

An out-of-season **Wood Thrush** was in Uteley, *Bastrop*, 4 Dec (Brush Freeman) and was seen again 5-8 Feb.

Out of range was a **Sage Thrasher** found 29 Dec (Keith Arnold, Jessica Taylor, Jerry Taylor) on the Gibbons Creek CBC. It is the third record for *Grimes*, the last one being in 1989. Interestingly, there are no other records for Central Brazos Valley except in westerly *McLennan*.

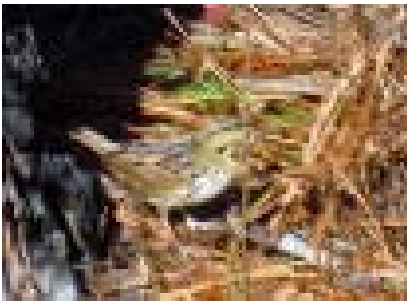
Undoubtedly the most unexpected of birds reported this season is the **Tropical Parula** carefully identified in College Station, *Brazos*, on 24 Dec (Ellen Ratoosh, Lizzie Furuta). While the species is expected in the Rio Grande Valley and has shown up in a few counties west of the Balcones Fault and along the central and southern Texas coastal plain, this is the only record for Post Oak savannahs.

Oddly, a female-plumaged **Summer Tanager** wintered 21 Dec to 10 Jan (Rick Schaefer) in *Nacogdoches*.

A surprising number of **Spotted Towhees** were reported east of their normal range: 18 Dec (David Scott) in *Brazos*, a female 1 Jan (David Wolf) in *Nacogdoches*, 11 Jan (Darrell Vollet) in *Washington*, 31 Jan (Laura Sare) also in *Washington*, 20 Feb (Mike Bloodsworth) in *Freestone*, and a male 27 Feb (Ruth Heino) in *Nacogdoches*.

Four **Eastern Towhees** 29 Dec (Randy Pinkston) on Belton Lake in *Bell* is a surprising number so far west.

In *Marion*, the Caddo Count on 6 Dec (fide Peter Barnes) tallied all-time high numbers for 5 sparrow species, with 78 **Fox Sparrows**, 220 **Swamp Sparrows**, 1335 **White-throated Sparrows**, 103 **Savannah Sparrows** and 529 **Chipping Sparrows**.



Although possibly present every winter, **Henslow's Sparrows** are hardly ever found at Lick Creek Park in *Brazos*; two seen 2 Jan (Toby Hibbits) were at the same place they were observed in 2000. An extensive survey 20 Jan (ph. Cliff Shackelford, Howard Williamson, Josh Pierce) for *Ammodramus* sparrows at four small remnant Blackland Prairie restoration sites produced the following results: 9 Henslow's, 5 Le Conte's, 20 *Ammodramus* sp. in *Montgomery* and 6 Henslow's, 1 Le Conte's, 6 *Ammodramus* sp. in *Walker*.

Harris's Sparrows invaded East Texas in above normal numbers, with flocks of up to 10 in at least a half dozen *Nacogdoches* sites in Dec (fide David Wolf), 3 in *Washington* 11 Jan (Darrell Vollert, et al.), 1 in *Walker* 29 Jan (Rick Schaefer), 4 in *Washington* 31 Jan (Laura Sare), 1 in *Montgomery* 3 Feb (Carol Bookout) . While it might be speculated that the sparrows evacuated drought-stricken Central Texas, there were also reports of Harris's in *Brazos*, *Burleson*, *Milam*, *Bell* and *McLennan*.

Rarely detected, up to 4 **Smith's Longspurs** were at Nacogdoches Airport, *Nacogdoches*, 2-6 Dec (David Wolf, Mimi Hoppe Wolf, et al.).

In drought-stricken *Bastrop*, an estimated 140-150 **Northern Cardinals** came into feeders and water in Uteley 4-5 Jan (Brush Freeman).

At Belton Reservoir in *Bell*, 2 **Pyrrhuloxia** became the first record for Fort Hood on 11 Dec (Gil Eckrich). The same day (Eric Haskell) 1 was at Airport Park on Lake Waco in *McLennan*.

A female **Black-headed Grosbeak**, east of its normal haunts, was photographed in *Waller* on 2 Jan (Kimberly Riley).

Strange for 5 Jan (ph. Brush Freeman) a **Dickcissel** was at Utleigh feeders in *Bastrop*.

Rusty Blackbirds made an impressive showing this winter in East Texas, especially for a species of concern. Ten on 13 Dec (Robert Truss, David Wolf) in Dorr Creek swamps, 1 at Alazan Bayou WMA 17 Dec and 2 on 20 Dec (David Wolf), 1 at Central Heights 23 Dec (Mimi Hoppe, Wolf), all in *Nacogdoches*. An unusually high count of 150 were in *Smith* 28 Dec (Peter Barnes). Rarely reported on the Gibbons Creek CBC, 1 was photographed at the edge of the reservoir in *Grimes* 29 Dec (Toby Hibbits, Dan Leavitt). A surprising record for *Brazos* and an amazing number, at least 90 were in the Navasota bottomlands on 8 Feb (Darrell Vollert). At Lake Cherokee in *Gregg*, 20 Rusty's were seen on 25 Feb (Donna Orr).

Brewer's Blackbirds were reported in good numbers, including 1 at Caddo Lake in *Harrison* 6 Dec (Mike Dillon), the highest local count ever at 270+ in a feedlot in *Nacogdoches* 6 Jan (David Wolf) dwindling to 50 by 18 Jan, and 50+ in the Brazos River bottoms of *Burleson* 28 Feb (Byron Stone). Most amazing is two flocks of over 1000 each east of Granger in *Williamson* on 21 Dec (Jim Hailey).

Purple Finches avoided Central and East Texas this season, with only a few reports of single-digit sightings.

Pine Siskins engaged in a major invasion into Central and East Texas with hundreds at some East Texas sites by mid-December and good numbers remaining to mid-March (fide David Wolf).

CONTRIBUTORS:

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