

# Winter 2009-2010: Central Oaks & Prairies and East Texas Pineywoods

By Bert Frenz

This report is reduced from 2170 sightings of 219 species from 1 December 2009 to 28 February 2010.

## **WEATHER REPORTS:**

David Wolf, Winter season, Angelina-Nacogdoches-St. Augustine area, "The late fall and early winter were mild, and our first freeze did not come until early December, but the fronts got stronger after this. Early January brought the coldest weather we've had in 14 years and it remained chilly the rest of the month. Generally the birds did not seem to be affected by the weather and there were few discernible trends, except perhaps that numbers were low in general. Conversely, the 40th Nacogdoches CBC on Dec 19 netted 120 species, well above our average species total of 114."

## **MOST UNUSUAL SIGHTINGS:**

**Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks** do not overwinter in northeast Texas, so noteworthy are reports of 12-20 at Lake Bob Sandlin, *Franklin*, 20 Dec – 25 Feb (David Brotherton, Luanne Brotherton, Mike Dillon).

Winter sightings of **Ross's Goose** in Central and East Texas include 1 at Lake O' the Pines in *Upshur* 26 Dec (David Brotherton), 1 at Tradinghouse Creek Reservoir in *McLennan* 2 Jan (Frank Bumgardner, John Muldrow) and 1 at Lake Bob Sandlin in *Titus* 31 Jan (ph. Linda Price).

Only the second winter for the occurrence of **Cackling Goose** in *McLennan*, one was found 2 Jan (Frank Bumgardner, John Muldrow) at Tradinghouse Creek Reservoir.

At least 4000 **Canvasbacks** were rafting off the TX 147 causeway on Lake Sam Rayburn, *San Augustine*, 5 Jan (fide David Wolf).

A **Pacific Loon** was spotted on Lake O' the Pines from *Marion* 22 Dec (Tim Fennell) and was still present during the CBC 26 Dec (David Brotherton, Luanne Brotherton).

An **Eared Grebe** was at Nacogdoches ponds 16-17 Dec (David Wolf).

An impressive 1250 **American White Pelicans** were below the Lake Livingston dam, *Polk-San Jacinto*, 7 Dec (Bert Frenz, Pat Coe, Bill & Ginny Taylor).

Ever since Hurricane *Ike* in fall 2008, **Brown Pelican** sightings in East Texas and in central Oaks & Prairies have dramatically increased. In East Texas, 8 pre-hurricane sightings 1991-2008 contrast to 12 sightings in the past 18 months. In Oaks & Prairies, 77 records 1974-2008 is 2.2 per year and have risen to 23.2 records per year subsequently. This season's sightings include an unprecedented count of 5 at Lake Waco in *McLennan* 19 Dec (Gary Hine, fide Jane Kittner), 1 at Lake Palestine in *Smith-Henderson* 15 Jan (Mike Bloodsworth), 2 at Navarro Mills Lake in *Navarro* 1 Feb (Jim Wright), 2 at Richland Creek WMA in *Freestone* 16 - 28 Jan (Steve Glover, Jim Wright), 5 at Lake Livingston spillway in *Polk-San Jacinto* 6 Feb (David Wolf, Robert Truss), and 1 at Richland Creek WMA in *Freestone* 20 Feb (Lamont Brown)

Although increasing in the area, the very few **Neotropic Cormorant** winter records for East Texas make noteworthy 1 at Lake Sam Rayburn, *Angelina*, 5 Jan (David Wolf).

Unusual winter records for **Anhinga** were 2 at Kurth Lake in *Angelina* 5 Dec (Louis Debetaz), 1 at Martin Dies S.P. in *Jasper* 26 Dec (Laurie Foss, Shelia Hargis) and 1 on the TAMU campus in *Brazos* 31 Dec (David Scott).

An immature **Little Blue Heron** wintered in *Morris* 22 Dec – 22 Jan (Tim Fennell, David Brotherton) and another was in *Jasper* 26 Dec (Laurie Foss, Shelia Hargis).

An immature **White Ibis** was present 17-18 Dec (Dick Pike, David Wolf) at Alazan Bayou WMA in *Nacogdoches*, but was gone before the CBC.

In East Texas, 8 **Bald Eagles** was an unusually high number for the Caddo count, and 15 is a 10-year high for the Lake O' the Pines CBC (fide Peter Barnes).

Adding to very few records for the Pineywoods is an adult **Golden Eagle** at Boggy Slough South in *Trinity* 4 Dec (Cliff Shackelford, Michael Scoggin), reported a week earlier by a wildlife tech.

Heretofore **Crested Caracara** sightings have surrounded the Pineywoods, but not reached inside the ecoregion until 25 Feb (Thomas Riecke) when one was observed flying over Nacogdoches, also a county record for *Nacogdoches*. In the past decade Crested Caracaras have invaded these East Texas counties: *Henderson* 1999, *Rains* 2001, *Smith* 2001, *Hunt* 2002, *Delta* pre-2003, *Hopkins* pre-2003, *Van Zandt* 2003, *Franklin* 2003, *Marion* 2003, *Montgomery* 2004, *Gregg* 2005, *Anderson* 2007, *Harrison* 2009, *Houston* 2009. Also added this season is *Panola* 24 Dec (Tripp Davenport) and another record for *Delta* 30 Jan (David Brotherton, Luanne Brotherton).

A **Peregrine Falcon** on an island off the TX 147 causeway through Lake Sam Rayburn, *San Augustine*, on 5 and 31 Jan (David Wolf) was only the third winter area record; the first two were in the same vicinity last winter.

Rare winter records for **Sora** were singles at Bellwood Lake in *Smith* 19 Dec (fide Peter Barnes) and at Country Club Lake in *Brazos* 16 Feb (Keith Arnold).

Thirteen **Common Moorhens** were an amazing sighting near Athens, *Henderson*, 11 Dec (David Brotherton, Luanne Brotherton), as we have no prior winter records in the northeast Texas regional database (fide Peter Barnes).

An impressive count of 297 **Killdeer** set a new high for the Tyler CBC, *Smith* (fide Peter Barnes).

One hundred **Long-billed Dowitchers** is an unusually high count for northeast Texas, reported at Long Lake in *Anderson* 23 January (Peter Barnes, Mike Dillon, Dennis Scott).

The Tenaha CBC of *Shelby-Panola* tallied 34 **American Woodcocks**, the third highest in the nation, narrowly surpassed by Matagorda CBC at 39 and less than half of the 80 counted at Cape May, NJ.

A **Laughing Gull** was at the Lake Livingston spillway, *Polk-San Jacinto*, 6 Feb (David Wolf, Robert Truss).

Out of season were single **Franklin's Gulls** at Gibbons Creek Reservoir in *Grimes* 11-12 Dec (Tony Frank, Bryan Tarbox) and Lake Bob Sandlin in *Titus* 20 Dec (David Brotherton).

"Incredible" or "bizarre" are words to describe the occurrence of a **Black Skimmer** at Airport Beach Park, Lake Waco, *McLennan* on 23 Dec – 4 Jan (ph. Eric Haskell). Two prior records, pre-1927 and 1974, mark it as accidental for the county, but a wintering bird has no precedent in the entire Oaks & Prairies region.

The Lake O' the Pines CBC, *Upshur-Marion*, yielded an impressive 74 **Eastern Screech Owls**, 12 **Great Horned Owls** and 9 **Barred Owls** on 26 Dec (all David Brotherton, David Weaver).

An unexpected first county record for *Williamson* is a **Long-eared Owl** found on the Granger CBC 2 Jan (Eric Carpenter, Kirsti Harms, Kim Soechting, et al.).

With no prior records for northeast Texas, a **Northern Saw-whet Owl** remarkably was identified by call, repeated three times in response to a screech-owl recording, in *Shelby* on 2 Jan (Linda Price, Donna Orr). Price has experience with the species in western New York State and played a saw-whet recording to

verify what they were hearing. Identification details have been submitted to TBRC.

One of few area records, a female **Black-chinned Hummingbird** was observed and photographed 29 Nov – 8 Dec (Stan and Jan Bohon, Mimi Hoppe Wolf) in *Angelina*.

**Rufous Hummingbirds** and female-type *Selasphorus* sp. overwintered in *Bastrop* (Louise Ridlon), *Brazos* (John Hale), *Montgomery* (Kelly Hill), *Nacogdoches* (Chuck Ely), and *Washington* (Scott & Gail Cole, Darrell Vollert). Outside the region, Rufous Hummingbirds were also overwintered in *Harris* (David McDonald), *Hardin* (John Mariani) and *Tarrant* (Lynn Barber).

A first county record for *McLennan*, two **Couch's Kingbirds** were found on the Waco CBC 2 Jan (Matt York, ph. Heidi Truedell) and remained throughout the season. At Kurth Lake in *Angelina* a Couch's Kingbird was observed 10 Jan (Carroll Moore, Louis Debetaz, Lynn Smith) at the same location it or another was located last year during the same period.

Winter sightings of **Scissor-tailed Flycatcher** include singles 19 Dec (Bill Ravenscroft) in *McLennan*, 23 Dec (Justin & Laura Stewart) in *Brazos*, 23 Dec (Susan Schaezler) in *Guadalupe*, 23 Dec (Ted Eubanks) in *Travis*, 31 Jan (Marj Swies) in *Williamson* and 14 Feb (Darrell Vollert) in *Washington*.

Thanks to concerted efforts of Pat Coe, the known range of **Fish Crows** in northeast Texas has greatly expanded, now adding first county records for *Montgomery*, *Polk*, *San Jacinto* and *Trinity*, as well as more recent sightings in *Walker*. The previously known range in northeast Texas covered *Bowie*, *Cass*, *Fannin*, *Franklin*, *Gregg*, *Harrison*, *Hopkins*, *Hunt*, *Lamar*, *Marion*, *Morris*, *Rains*, *Red River*, *Rusk*, *Smith*, *Titus*, *Van Zandt*, *Walker* and *Wood*. Starting with the original population in *Bowie* and *Cass*, expansion occurred via the Red River to *Fannin*, and via Sulphur River to Cooper Lake. A previously disjunct population in southeast Texas is more-or-less connected by Sabine River and it covers *Galveston*, *Harris*, *Jefferson*, and *Orange*. Until this season, the July 1993 record for *Walker* was separated from any reported population in adjoining counties. It now appears that Fish Crows have expanded via the Trinity River, which includes *Polk*, *San Jacinto*, *Trinity* and *Walker*. *Montgomery* adjoins two of these - *San Jacinto* and *Walker* - which in turn adjoins *Harris*.

Four **Cave Swallows** near the entrance to Boggy Slough South 4 Dec (Cliff Shackelford, Michael Scoggin) were a great find and provided the first winter report for the Pineywoods; it was also a first county record for *Trinity*. A flock of 100 flew over Gibbons Creek Reservoir in *Grimes* 11 Dec (Tony Frank) and 14 *Petrochelidon* sp. were at Lake Waco, *McLennan*, 17 Dec (Eric Haskell). In *Brazos*, one was over Country Club Lake 10 Jan (Toby Hibbitts) and the next day 20 were picked up dead under a Hwy 6 overpass, presumed victims of a recent

cold snap. Two more *Petrochelidon* sp. were observed 7 Feb (Randy Pinkston) in Temple, *Bell*, and 15 Feb two in Temple were identified as Cave Swallows.

A **Bushtit** (plumbeous race) in Frank & Jeanette Bumgardner's China Spring backyard 29 Dec is the first Frank has seen in 30 years of birding *McLennan*, not surprising since the only other country records were in 1965 and 1974.

**Red-breasted Nuthatch** was scarce this winter with the few reported sightings of 15 Dec and 16 Feb (Keith Arnold) in *Leon* and 26 Dec on Lake O'the Pines CBC.

Thirty-five **White-breasted Nuthatches** were a new high for the Tyler CBC.

A female **Brown-headed Nuthatch** became the first country record for *Leon* at Fort Boggy S.P. 19 Dec (Keith Arnold) and a range extension for this non-migratory species.

David Wolf writes, "Lingering **Blue-gray Gnatcatchers** were seen at a number of sites in Nov-Dec (m. obs.), culminating in a record-setting 12 on the Nacogdoches CBC on 19 Dec. At least some were still around after the cold weather set in, with singles at the TX 147 causeway and near Diboll on 5 Jan (David Wolf); in Central Heights through 24 Jan 24 (Mimi Hoppe Wolf); and at the *Angelina* end of the TX 147 bridge 31 Jan (David Wolf)."

Peter Barnes writes, "Eight thousand **American Robins** in a single roost was an impressive concentration south of Tyler (Peter Barnes), contributing to the new high of 11,623 on the Tyler CBC."

**Gray Catbirds** should vacate northeast Texas in winter, so it is surprising for so many to remain this season, including 1-4 each in *Angelina* 13 Dec (Louis Debetaz), *Nacogdoches* 19 Dec (two parties on CBC), *Shelby-Panola* 2 Jan (Tenaha CBC), and *Grimes* 27 Feb (Darrell Vollert).

A **Sprague's Pipit** south of Tyler, *Smith*, 3 Dec (Peter Barnes) was outside the range shown in Lockwood & Freeman (2004) yet is the 10<sup>th</sup> record for the CBC, though not reported since the early 1970s; it is listed as scarce on an old *Smith* checklist.

More than doubling the previous high count for Tyler CBC was 3789 **Cedar Waxwings** in *Smith* 19 Dec (fide Peter Barnes).

A male **American Redstart** at Lake Tyler on the Tyler CBC (Peter Barnes) was new for the count; it was the northernmost record in the U.S. for this season's CBCs. Three other Texas CBCs reported the species: Guadalupe (3), Port Aransas (1) and Weslaco (1). California had 3 birds, Georgia 1 bird and Florida had many at 21 CBCs.

Lingering **Common Yellowthroats** included 2-9 in Waco, *McLennan*, 23 Dec – 17 Jan (Eric Haskell), 2 in *Fayette* 23 Jan (Stan VanSandt, Byron Stone) and 1 in *Washington* 30 Jan (Darrell Vollert).

For a month preceding 23 Feb (J.W. Smith Jr., ph. Roberta Smith, ph. Berlin Heck) a **Green-tailed Towhee** resided in Greenwood, *Red River*, remarkably out-of-range and the first record for East Texas since 1977. The very few prior records were in *Nacogdoches* (1977), *Smith* (1955) and *Harrison* (BLOT).

**Spotted Towhees** on the eastern edge of their range were singles in *Grimes* 11 Dec (Tony Frank) and in *Panola* 2 Jan (Peggy Harding, Becky Gullette).

A new county record for *Fayette* are 5 **Lark Buntings** observed 24 Jan (Stan VanSandt, et al.) on Mullins Prairie Loop. A flock of nearly 1000 must have been impressive in *Wilson* 15 Feb (Chet Burrier).

While finding 1 **Henslow's Sparrow** in *Montgomery* 13 Dec (Eric Carpenter, Maggie Burnet) is exciting, it pales in comparison to 89 found in concentrated study. Cliff Shackelford reports, "In *Montgomery* and *Walker* counties, a team of 8 biologists spent 3 field days systematically walking through 23 patches of restored Blackland Prairie that, when all combined, totaled almost 140 acres. During these area-searches, the group counted everything that flushed but was most interested in sparrows in the genus *Ammodramus*. The final tally included 89 Henslow's Sparrows, 32 Le Conte's, 1 Grasshopper, and 15 unidentified *Ammodramus* that got away before they could be positively identified (Cliff Shackelford, Howard Williamson, Rick Schaefer, Josh Pierce, Rusty Plair, et al.)."

**Harris's Sparrows** made a good showing in northeast Texas this season with reports totaling 55 sparrows in *Camp*, *Delta*, *Grimes*, *Harrison*, *Hopkins*, *Smith* and *Trinity*.

More longspur reports than usual included **McCown's Longspurs** in *Hardeman*, *Bailey*, *Crosby*, *Throckmorton*, *Randall*, *Gray*, *Dallam*, *McLennan*, *Coryell* and *Williamson*; **Lapland Longspurs** in *Hardeman*, *Dallam*, *Floyd*, *Moore*, *Grayson*, *Tarrant*, *Denton*, *Ellis*, *McLennan*, *Williamson*, *Burleson*, *Navarro*, *Waller* and an impressive 1650 in *Red River* 10 Jan (David Brotherton); **Smith's Longspur** in *Red River* and possibly *Coryell*; **Chestnut-collared Longspur** in *Hardeman*, *Dallam*, *Armstrong*, *Bailey*, *Crosby*, *Throckmorton*, *Grayson*, *Floyd*, *Tarrant*, *Denton*, *Burnet*, *McLennan*, *Coryell*, *Bell*, *Lampasas*, *Williamson* and *Lavaca*, where flocks numbering near 2000 were found 9 Jan (David Cimprich) at Fort Hood.

Rare in winter, a **Summer Tanager** visited a feeder 11 Jan (Luanne Brotherton) in *Morris*.

Although it has occurred here several times in past winter seasons, it is still surprising to find a male **Western Tanager** in Chappell Hill, *Washington*, 7 Jan (Darrell Vollert). Non-existent elsewhere in the Central Brazos Valley, Vollert speculates that it is the abundance of junipers that attracts it to Washington County.

A **Pyrrhuloxia** found 19 Dec (Bruce Neville, Ben Marks) on the College Station CBC remained until at least 27 Dec (ph. John Hale). East of its normal range, only 3 other records exist for *Brazos* and none since 1982.

A female **Black-headed Grosbeak** in Magnolia, Montgomery, 24 Jan (Kelly Hill, Glen Hill) is only the second county record and one of only a handful for the Pineywoods.

East of its normal range, a **Western Meadowlark** was heard in *Rusk* 2 Jan (Linda Price, Donna Orr).

**Rusty Blackbird** reports this season include 35 birds in *Harrison*, 22 in *Marion*, some in *Titus*, 3 in *Hopkins*, 50 in *Upshur*, 1 in *Smith*, 1 in *Brazos*, 1 in *McLennan*, and 7 in *Williamson*.

A new high for the Caddo Lake count 5 Dec was 300 **Brewer's Blackbirds** in *Harrison*. Much smaller numbers, 2-10, were counted at CBCs for Lake O' the Pines, Tyler, and Longview.

An immature **Baltimore Oriole**, showing some signs of hybridization with Bullock's, visited 26 Dec – 12 Jan (Florence King) in The Woodlands, *Montgomery*. A first winter male Baltimore wintered 31 Jan ff (Terri Sandvik) in Harvey Community, *Brazos*. Although unusual, there are some 16 reports of winter Baltimore Orioles for the combined regions of Oaks & Prairies and East Texas Pineywoods.

**Purple Finch** numbers were low this winter, with 1-6 birds reported each for *Harrison*, *Cass*, *Shelby*, *Smith*, *San Augustine* and *Van Zandt*.

The few reports of **Pine Siskins** were 1-2 birds each in *McLennan*, *Milam*, *Brazos*, *Smith*, *Nacogdoches* and Caddo Lake.

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