

Winter 2013-14: Central Oaks & Prairies and East Texas Pineywoods

By Bert Frenz

This report is reduced from 472 sightings of 163 species from 1 December to 28 February 2014.

WEATHER REPORTS:

None

MOST UNUSUAL SIGHTINGS:

Northern Pintail – An amazing count of 2917 Northern Pintails were at Richland Creek WMA, *Freestone* 29 Dec (D. D. Currie, Dell Little).

White-winged Scoter – East Texas experienced an unusual influx of White-winged Scoters with 3 at Greenville Reservoir, Lake Tawakoni in *Hunt* 25 Jan (ph. Brian Sanders), up to 3 at Lake O' the Pines in *Marion* 8-16 Feb (David Brotherton, Luanne Brotherton et al.), and 1 at Tyler State Park in *Smith* 19 Feb+ (ph. Boyd Sanders, ph. Peter Barnes, ph. Doug Ghrist et al.).



Photo by Doug Ghrist, 21 Feb, Tyler State Park

Long-tailed Duck – Quite amazing for an inland lake in the Central Brazos Valley, a Long-tailed Duck was discovered 30 Dec (Rick Bello, Terry Thibodeaux, Tom Kihn) on the Gibbons Creek CBC at Texas Municipal Power Agency property and was observed through mid-Feb (ph. Shirley Wilkerson, ph. Rick Laughlin, ph. Alton Patton, ph. Jesse Huth et al.). It is a first county record for *Grimes* and only the second for the Central Brazos Valley (the first was in *Milam* at an unknown date at least 20 years ago). Another Long-tailed Duck was at Lake Wright Patman, *Cass* 3-5 Jan (Charles Mills, ph. David Brotherton, Luanne Brotherton). An eBird search revealed Long-tailed Duck sightings in at least 15 Texas counties

this season: Aransas, Brazoria, Brewster, Burnet, Cass, Dallas, El Paso, Galveston, Gillespie (?), Grimes, Hudspeth, Jackson, Kimble, Matagorda, Nueces, Rains.



Photo by Rick Laughlin, 31 Dec, Grimes County

Common Merganser – Rare for the Pineywoods was a female Common Merganser 13-15 Dec (Louis Debetaz) at Kurth Lake in *Angelina*. Another female Common Merganser was photographed on Lake Conroe 7 Feb (ph. Terry Baldwin), a first record for *Montgomery*. Three female-type Common Mergansers were photographed at Airport Beach Park on Lake Waco 31 Dec (Steve Glover, ph. Greg Cook, Blaine Carnes) in *McLennan* where the species has been known to occur since before 1927, but has not been reported since 1992.

Red-breasted Merganser – For north-east Texas, David Brotherton reports, “After a poor year last year Red-breasted Mergansers have come back with a flurry. A 10 year high of 15 were recorded on the Lake O’ the Pines CBC in *Marion* 22 Dec (David Brotherton, Luanne Brotherton, Mike Dillon), while an amazing 635 were recorded on the Lake Tawakoni CBC in *Rains* 28 Dec (Richard Kinney).”

Red-throated Loon – A good season for Red-throated Loons in north-east Texas, 1-2 were on Lake Tawakoni in *Rains* 22 Dec – 10 Jan (Richard Kinney et al.), 1 was at Cooper Lake State Park in *Hopkins* (Blaine Carnes, Darlene Moore), 1 was on Lake O’ the Pines in *Marion* 9-21 Feb (ph. †David Brotherton, Luanne Brotherton, ph. Mark Edmund et al.), and yet another was reported in the Central Brazos Valley at Lake Limestone 9 Feb (Garett Hodne) where it is a first county record for *Leon*.

Pacific Loon – Up to 3 Pacific Loons were reported at Lake O’ the Pines, *Marion* 22 Dec – 15 Feb (Mike Dillon, ph. †David Brotherton, Luanne Brotherton, ph. Linda Gail Price et al.). Another Pacific Loon was studied off the TX 147 causeway on Lake Sam Rayburn, *San Augustine* 21 Feb (David Wolf) where there are less than a half dozen previous records for this large reservoir and no others elsewhere in the heart of the Pineywoods.

Common Loon – High numbers of Common Loons were reported on CBC’s in north-east Texas with 66 on the Lake O’ the Pines CBC, *Marion* 22 Dec (David Brotherton et al.) and 62 on the Lake Tawakoni CBC 28 Dec (Richard Kinney et al.). This compares to 95 counted from a boat in Aransas Bay, *Aransas* 29 Dec (Allan & Reba Dupilka et al.).

Least Grebe – Far to the north of its normal range and only the second record for *Washington* were 3 Least Grebes 29 Nov – 1 Jan (ph. Wayne Dorchak, ph. Ronald Newhouse, ph. Rick Laughlin, Sarah Laughlin) at Washington-on-the Brazos SHP.



Photo by Rick Laughlin, 1 Jan, Washington-on-the-Brazos SHP



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Photo by Wayne Dorchak, 20 Dec, Washington-on-the-Brazos SHP

Western Grebe – A Western Grebe mixed with Horned Grebes was noted at Lake O' the Pines, *Marion* 21 Dec – 21 Feb (†David Brotherton, Luanne Brotherton, Mike Dillon, Mark Edmund).

Magnificent Frigatebird – A most amazing bird to be counted on the Lake O' the Pines CBC, *Marion* 22 Dec (Mike Dillon) was a soaring Magnificent Frigatebird flying high over the southern shore, probably blown in by the constant huge storm from the south the day before.

Neotropic Cormorant – For the central Pineywoods, David Wolf noted, “A few Neotropic Cormorants were found amidst the hordes of Double-crested early in the winter ... This species has greatly increased in our region in the last few years, but almost all of them leave for the winter.” Similarly, for north-east Texas David Brotherton wrote of the CBCs, “Unusual for the eastern pinewoods counts were Neotropic Cormorants.” Wintering Neotropic Cormorants were reported in *Angelina, Marion, Panola, Polk, San Augustine, Smith, and Walker*.

Brown Pelican – Inland Brown Pelicans are now consistently found at the Lake Livingston dam and spillway, Polk-San Jacinto, with sightings this season 20 Dec (John Berner, Robert Appelbaum) and 7 Jan (Richard Bello, Gary Worthington).

American Bittern – Nicely seen for the Central Brazos Valley, single American Bitterns were near Calvert, *Robertson* 1-11 Dec (Cathy Liles, Jackie Girouard, Connie Brown), Richland Creek WMA, *Navarro* 6 Dec (Michael Stewart), and 1-2 at Country Club Lake, *Brazos* 7 Dec – 23 Feb (m.ob.).

White Ibis – In winter, White Ibis usually vacate the Central Brazos Valley and north-east Texas, so noteworthy are 1 at Richland Creek WMA, *Navarro* 6 Dec – 22 Feb (Michael Stewart et al.), 25 at Martin Dies State Park, *Tyler* 28 Dec (Bill Wright), 3 at Lake Somerville, *Washington* 28 Dec (Robert Gilliam), 1 at Lake Livingston, *Trinity* 26 Jan (Andy Newman), 50 in several groups in *Liberty* 15 Feb, and yet another seen while kayaking Caddo Lake, *Harrison* 15 Feb (Christine Sliva).

White-faced Ibis – As with White Ibis, White-faced Ibis usually do not linger in winter in the Central Brazos Valley, so the 4-17 reported 6 Dec+ (m.ob.) at Richland Creek WMA, *Navarro* is noteworthy.

Roseate Spoonbill – A winter Roseate Spoonbill 16 Feb (Darrell Vollert) is a surprise for *Brazos*, where one was observed near Peach Creek Community at the Navasota River bottoms.

Hook-billed Kite – Hook-billed Kites are frequently encountered in Hidalgo although usually as singles on the move and not repeatedly seen at the same location. Thus the discovery of 5 Hook-billed Kites 21 Jan (†Mary Gustafson) foraging at Mission Nature Park drew attention to other birders. Kites were seen by hundreds of visiting birders almost daily through 23 Feb (Dan Tallman) and all 5 were still seen as late as 31 Jan (Pam Smolen). Photos were mostly of birds in flight, but one 13 Feb (ph. †Bert Frenz) shows a close-up of a perched light-morph adult. The kites left the Mission Nature Park area and presumably were the same 5 searching for snails at Anzalduas County Park 28 Feb (fide Mary Gustafson).



White-tailed Kite – Perhaps only the second report for *Polk*, a White-tailed Kite was observed near the Trinity River and Munson Lake 26 Jan (Clayton Bownds). Uncommon for the area, another White-tailed Kite was seen hovering 9 Feb (Carol Wells) near Douglas, *Nacogdoches*.

Bald Eagle – Although expected for *Brazos*, it is rare to see a Bald Eagle in the residential and industrial areas of the City of Bryan. This winter 7 Dec – 2 Feb (m.ob.) a near-adult Bald Eagle canvassed the 5-mi. trajectory from tiny Country Club Lake and Finfeather Lake to Lake Mary in Indian Spirit Springs and, perhaps, visited Lake Bryan, another 3 mi., although not reported there recently. Remarkable in count was 6-8 Bald Eagles at Richland Creek WMA, *Navarro* 29 Dec – 22 Feb (D. D. Currie, Dell Little, Ray Little, Linda Belssner).

Ferruginous Hawk – Perhaps the first documented county record for *Austin*, an immature Ferruginous Hawk was studied 27 Feb (†Darrell Vollert) near the junction of Old Nelsonville Road and Old Highway 26 in the northern portion of the county.

Rough-legged Hawk – Rarely reported in the Central Brazos Valley and a first county record for *Robertson*, a dark morph Rough-legged Hawk was identified in the Calvert area 7 Dec (Sandy Dillard).

Sandhill Crane – North-east Texas sightings of Sandhill Crane are noteworthy, so we mention 1 at Lake Tawonkoni, *Rains* 3 Dec (Dave Spangenburg), 4 over Alazan Bayou WMA, *Nacogdoches* 15 Dec (David Wolf), and 3 at Sanders Creek Ranch, *Lamar* 21 Dec (Evan Janson).

Whooping Crane – Much to the excitement of birders hoping to add a county tic, the Whooping Crane near Calvert, *Robertson* was observed nearly daily to 29 Dec (m.ob.). A video of the crane recorded 4 Dec (William Tedrick) appears on You Tube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wDJVEL_42o4.



Photo by Sandy Dillard, 7 Dec, Robertson County

Black-necked Stilt – Remarkably out of season was a Black-necked Stilt at Richland Creek WMA, *Navarro* 29 Dec (D. D. Currie, Dell Little, Ray Little); it is only the second winter record for the Central Brazos Valley.

American Avocet – Hardly ever reported in winter in the Central Brazos Valley, 1-15 American Avocets were noted in both counties (*Navarro, Freestone*) of Richland Creek WMA 26 Jan – 22 Feb (Peter Barnes et al.).

American Golden Plover – Two American Golden-Plovers 28 Feb (†Laura Sare) at Overlook Park, Lake Somerville, *Washington* are early for Texas and the earliest record for the Central Brazos Valley. The only earlier report this winter was a coastal sighting 26 Feb (Wade & Melissa Rowley) at Bolivar Flats, *Galveston*.

Black-legged Kittiwake – Undoubtedly the rarest bird to show up in north-east Texas this winter was a first-winter Black-legged Kittiwake at Lake Palestine 9 Feb (ph. Greg Cook, †Blaine Carnes, †Peter Barnes, D. D. Currie, Dell Little, ph. †Doug Ghrist, Dennis Scott). This record will pass through the TBRC with excellent photographic and descriptive details. It is a first for *Smith*.



Photo by Doug Ghrist, 9 Feb, Lake Palestine, Smith
Laughing Gull – Inland Laughing Gulls were 3 at Kurth Lake, *Angelina* 6 Dec (Louis Debetaz) and 1 was present there for the Nacogdoches CBC 15 Dec (Louis Debetaz).

Franklin's Gull – Out of season Franklin's Gulls were 1-2 at Lake Wright Patman, *Cass* 3-19 Jan (Charles Mills, Mike Dillon) and a surprising 31 Franklin's Gulls were standing at the shore of Overlook Park on Lake Somerville, *Washington* at the early date of 22 Feb (†Laura Sare).

Lesser Black-backed Gull – Inland Lesser Black-backed Gulls are seen some winters at Lake Livingston dam and spillway *Polk/San Jacinto* and were again documented this season when an adult gull and a first-cycle gull were there 29 Dec (ph. David Wolf, Robert Truss). The adult was still seen 2 Jan – 23 Feb (†John Berner, David Wolf) at the same spot. More surprising is an adult Lesser Black-backed Gull at Pleasure Acres Lake 8 Dec (†Peter Barnes, ph. Mike Bloodsworth), a first county record for *Smith*.

Black Skimmer – A surprising oddity away from the coast and absent of a storm-related event is a Black Skimmer at Lake Conroe 2 Feb (†John Hale), a first record for *Montgomery*.

White-winged Dove – All but 6 counties in north-east Texas have one or more White-winged Dove records and as of 24 Dec (David Brotherton, Luanne Brotherton) that number is reduced to 5 when 7 doves were found at Bogota City Park, *Red River*.

Eastern Screech-Owl – the Tenaha CBC, *Panola* tallied a high of 31 Eastern Screech-Owls on 1 Jan (David Brotherton, Luanne Brotherton, David Weaver).

Black-chinned Hummingbird – Surprisingly, 4 hummingbirds were tallied at different locations on the Tyler CBC, *Smith* 4 Jan. Not all could be identified to species, but included Rufous and probably Black-chinned (ph. Caleb Frome).

Broad-tailed Hummingbird – A Broad-tailed Hummingbird first seen 12 Oct was still present 11 Dec (Darrell Vollert) in Chappell Hill, *Washington* where it is rare.

Northern Flicker (Red-shafted) – In the heart of the Pineywoods Northern Flickers are overwhelmingly yellow-shafted, so the female red-shafted photographed 5 Dec (ph. Linda Gail Price) at Alazan Bayou WMA, *Nacogdoches* is the first one of this race reported in many years.

Crested Caracara – Only the 4th record for *Smith* and one of the highlights of the Tyler CBC 4 Jan (†Peter Barnes, Linda Belssner, Ross Rickett, Zoe Ann Stinchcomb) was a Crested Caracara.

Peregrine Falcon – Although Peregrine Falcons are rare in the central Pineywoods, one was found 25 Dec (Carol Wells, Ruth Heino) at Lake Naconiche, *Nacogdoches* and another was observed 2 Jan and likely the same one 26 Feb (David Wolf) on the TX 147 causeway of Lake Sam Rayburn, *San Augustine*.

Prairie Falcon – A first county record for *Falls* is a Prairie Falcon flying around a large pond east of Hwy 6 near Marlin 31 Dec (†Greg Cook, Steve Glover, Blaine Carnes).

Ash-throated Flycatcher – Only the second record for *Grimes*, the last being in 2002, a Ash-throated Flycatcher was near CR 162 and Chaney Ln 18 Dec (ph. †Chance Hines).

Cave Swallow – This season, wintering Cave Swallows were oft reported throughout the Central Brazos Valley, including *Brazos*, *Grimes*, *Lee*, *Milam*, and *Washington*. For the first winter ever they stayed in numbers in the central Pineywoods, including 42 at Kurth Lake, *Angelina* 17 Dec (David Wolf, Thomas Riecke, Louis Debetaz et al.) and smaller numbers were regularly seen there through 11 Feb. Others were reported in *Nacogdoches* at 3 locations through 1 Jan (Tyson Hart, Thomas Riecke, David Wolf). In north-east Texas they were reported in *Hunt*, *Smith*, and *Van Zandt*.

Red-breasted Nuthatch – Noteworthy for the paucity of records, Red-breasted Nuthatches barely made an appearance in north-east Texas. Statewide on eBirds, a few sightings were reported in 29 counties, mostly single records, with the most reports (7) in *Harris*.

Black-and-white Warbler – The Black-and-white Warbler heard on the Longview CBC, *Gregg* 14 Dec (†Linda Gail Price) was a surprise and certainly a winter rarity for north-east Texas. Farther south, for the 4th consecutive winter a male Black-and-white Warbler visited feeders in The Woodlands, *Montgomery* through at least 18 Feb (Florence King).

Lark Sparrow – Unexpected in winter in *Panola*, a Lark Sparrow was reported on the Tenaha CBC 1 Jan (Peter Barnes, Bonnie Edmund, Mark Edmund) for the first time since 1989.

Yellow-headed Blackbird – The first Feb record for Yellow-headed Blackbird in the Central Brazos Valley occurred 15 Feb (Bruce Neville, et al.) at Washington-on-the-Brazos, *Washington* when a fly-over male surprised participants on a Rio Brazos Audubon Society field trip.

Rusty Blackbird – It was a good season for Rusty Blackbird sightings. Discussing the Nacogdoches CBC, David Wolf remarked, “The ‘bird of the day’ was Rusty Blackbird, with 6 of our 12 parties finding this often-difficult species, in numbers ranging from 1-818, for a remarkably high total of 1203.” Flocks of 30-200 were found throughout Jan and the last report was 18 birds 6 Feb (David Wolf). Elsewhere in north-east Texas in Dec, David Brotherton observed, “Rusty Blackbirds appear to be a little more common during this year than last with six counties reporting them, with a maximum of 121 being recorded on the Tyler CBC.” In the Central Brazos Valley where they are not often reported, a new spot for this species was found in the Navasota River bottoms of *Brazos* at Long Tressel Road, where 1-10 were found 21-25 Jan (m.ob.). A search of eBird showed Rusty Blackbird reports for 46 Texas counties with the highest counts being 350 in *Bowie* 16 Feb (Katelyn Scott) and 325 in *Nacogdoches* 15 Dec.

Purple Finch – Wintering Purple Finch were almost non-existent in north-east Texas, with a scattered singles in *Gregg, Henderson, Nacogoches, Rusk, Shelby, Upshur* and *Van Zandt*, most only 1-day wonders.

Pine Siskin – As in the case of Red-breasted Nuthatches and Purple Finch, very few Pine Siskins made their way to north-east Texas this winter.

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