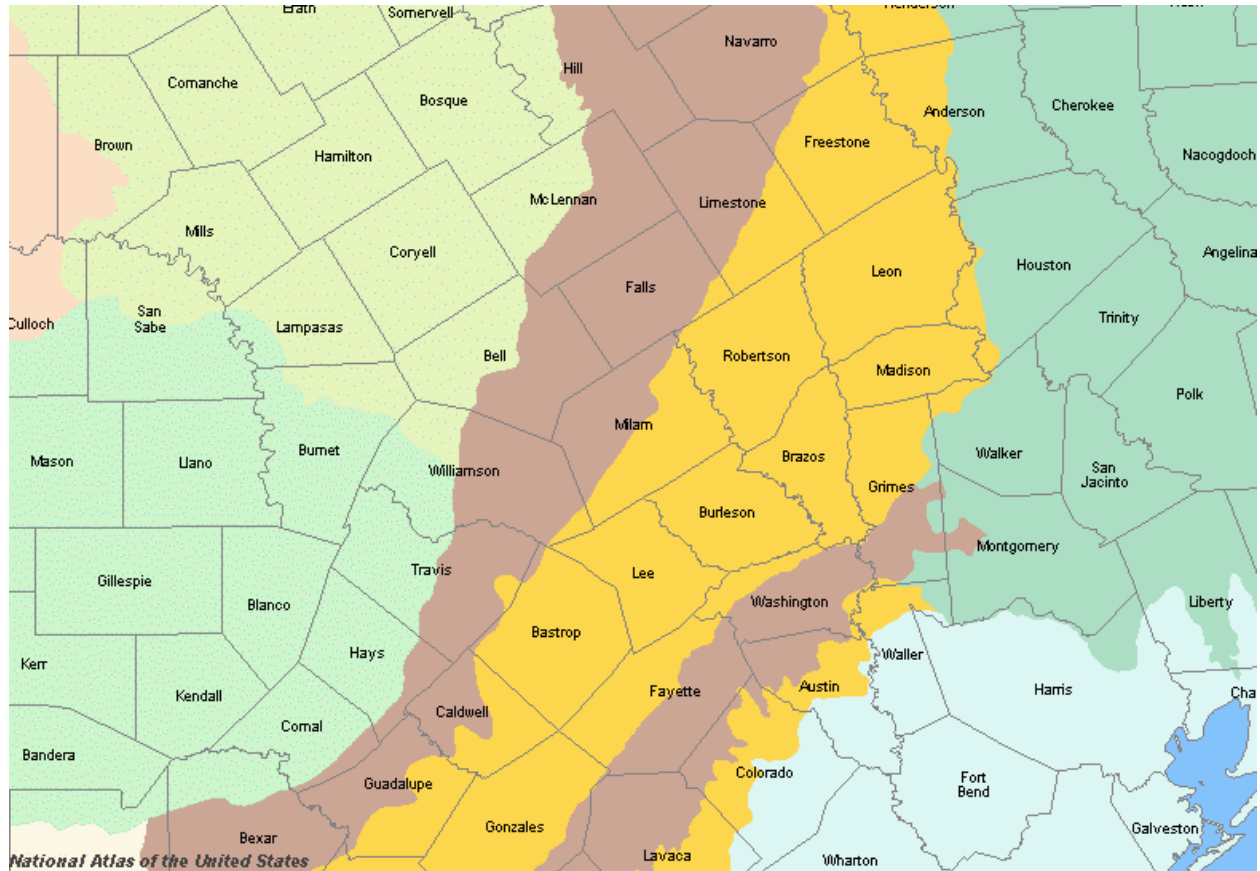


Winter 2018-2019: Central Oaks & Prairies of Texas

By Bert Frenz

This report is from 1 December 2018 to 28 February 2019. It includes sightings from the following counties: Bastrop, Bell, Brazos, Burleson, Falls, Fayette, Freestone, Grimes, Lee, Leon, Limestone, McLennan, Madison, Milam, Navarro, Robertson, and Washington.



MOST UNUSUAL SIGHTINGS:

Ross's Goose – The highest ever count of Ross's Geese for *Bell* was 500 estimated 11 Jan (Randy Pinkston) from a flock that included 2500 Snow Geese at Zane Lake near Rogers.

Gadwall – Setting a new record for high count of Gadwall for Richland Creek W.M.A. is 2500 on the *Freestone* side, plus 2000 on the *Navarro* side 8 Feb (Richard Kinney).

Mallard – An impressive count of 1500 Mallards at Richland Creek W.M.A., *Freestone* 8 Feb (Richard Kinney) is the greatest number ever for this central prairie region of 17 counties.

Green-winged Teal – On the same day, 8 Feb (Richard Kinney), an amazing count of 2750 Green-winged Teal were at the *Freestone* side of Richland Creek W.M.A. and another 2500 were on the *Navarro* side.

Bufflehead – Setting a record for the highest number of Bufflehead in *Fayette* was 75 at Lake Fayette 1 Dec (William Tarbox).

Common Merganser – A Common Merganser 9 Dec (†ph. Randy Pinkston) at Slough Pond is only the 3rd record for *Bell*. The male was nicely compared to an adjacent Red-breasted Merganser.



© Randy Pinkston

Wild Turkey – Wild Turkeys are very rarely reported in *Freestone* and *Navarro*, so two reports this season are noteworthy. One was seen 26 Dec (†Kate Sherman) near Fairfield Lake S.P., a female without a leg band. Another was seen 7 Jan (Duke Liebler) near Corsicana, also a female.

Western Grebe – A Western Grebe observed 13 Feb (†William Tarbox) at Lake Fayette is the 3rd record for *Fayette*.

Broad-tailed Hummingbird – A banded female Broad-tailed Hummingbird was photographed 25-26 Dec (ph. Harlan Stewart) at a residence near Belton Lakeview Park, *Bell*. It was banded in Rocky Mountain N.P. 7 Jun 2012 and has been observed at Belton Lake in winter-spring seasons since 2013.



© Harlan Stewart

Dunlin – A Dunlin at Sims Cutoff 30 Dec (†Mark McDermott) is only the 9th record in *Brazos* since 1969.

Least Sandpiper – On 27 Dec (John Hale), a flooded turf field on Sims Lane provided a conservative estimate of 500 Least Sandpipers, the highest count ever for *Brazos*.

Franklin's Gull – A surprise on the Gibbons Creek C.B.C. was 5 Franklin's Gulls on Gibbons Creek Reservoir, *Grimes* 20 Dec (†John Berner). One was also seen the next day (†ph. Gary Yoder)



© Gary Yoder

American Bittern – A good find for *Bell* was an American Bittern 15 Dec-6 Jan (Randy Pinkston) at Slough Pond, Temple and another 28 Feb (Gil Eckrich) in Pershing Lake, Fort Hood. Both sites have harbored bitterns in the past.



© Randy Pinkston, 15 Dec 2018

Little Blue Heron – The first winter record for *Milam*, a Little Blue Heron landed in a pasture near Gause 3 Dec (†Donna Lewis).

White-tailed Hawk – As part of a range expansion, single White-tailed Hawks were reported 15 Dec (ph. John Hale, et al.) at the Texas A&M Aquaculture Center, an 8th record for *Burleson*; the same day (†Jeff Hall) at Union Grove W.M.A., a 4th record for *Bell*; and 24 Feb (†William Tarbox) near Flatonia, a 7th record for *Fayette*.



© John Hale

Zone-tailed Hawk – A Zone-tailed Hawk photographed near Schulenburg 4 Jan 2019 (†ph. Stephen Falick) is the 3rd record for *Fayette*. Another Zone-tailed Hawk lingered along the Colorado River, *Bastrop* 19 Dec-15 Feb (Carlos Ross, Ian Layton, Tammy Brown, Morgan Hay).



© Stephen Falick

Ferruginous Hawk – A Ferruginous Hawk has not been reported in *Brazos* in over 18 years and before that only 5 times after the 1962-1976 time frame when it was uncommon. This winter's sighting was 29 Dec (ph. John Hale) at Fazzino Rd. It is the first photo-documented record for *Brazos*. In *Bastrop* an oft-seen Ferruginous Hawk was along Sayer's Road 18 Nov-6 Jan (m.ob.) where it has been reported wintering for decades.



© John Hale

Short-eared Owl – A new county record for *Milam* is a single Short-eared Owl first seen near Alligator Rd in the Bartlett area 30-31 Dec (†Bryce Hardway, †Robert Hardway, †Christian Walker, †Nancy Webber) and then 1-2 owls 2-10 Jan (†Steve Schmit, †Jeremy Webster) 25 mi. east of that location, in the direction of Rockdale.

Prairie Falcon – The 3rd documented record for *Lee* and the first photo-documented was a Prairie Falcon near Dime Box 2 Dec (ph. Rich Kostecke). Another Prairie Falcon reoccurred on a ranch near Calvert, *Robertson* 26 Dec (Alberto Manterola) where it has been seen in winter since 2015.



© Rich Kostecke

Barn Swallow – Early by nearly a week, 4 Barn Swallows were in a mixed flock with 20 Cave Swallows over Slough Pond, *Bell* 20 Feb (†Randy Pinkston).

Red-breasted Nuthatch – After a strong influx of Red-breasted Nuthatches in the fall season, only small numbers remained at feeders in *Bastrop*, *Brazos*, and *Washington* 6 Dec–16 Feb (m.ob.) based on about a dozen reports.

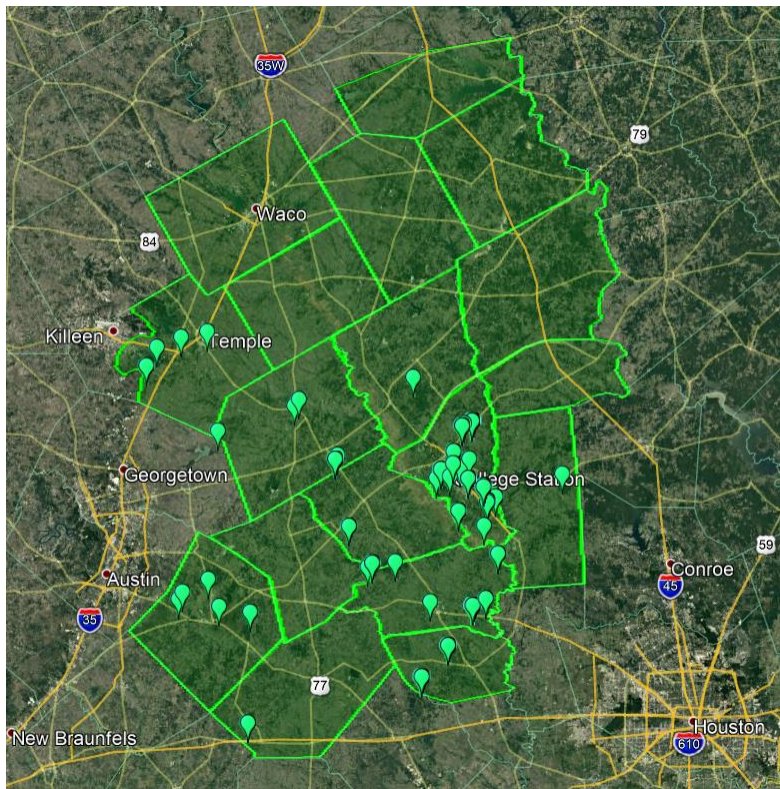
Canyon Wren – Not annual, 1-3 Canyon Wrens were vocalizing in the Tonkawa Falls area of *McLennan* 15 Dec-20 Jan (†Matthew York).

Mountain Bluebird – A popular pair of Mountain Bluebirds delighted multiple observers along Old Sayers Rd, *Bastrop* 14 Dec-24 Feb, where they are rare.

Gray Catbird – Once a rare winter visitor in the Central Brazos Valley, Gray Catbirds started making more frequent appearances about 2015. This winter an amazing 18 reports from 9 locations 15 Dec-22 Feb (m.ob.) were documented for *Brazos*, *Burleson*, and *Washington*.

American Pipit – An impressive count of 200 American Pipits were in agricultural fields near Salado, *Bell* 20 Jan and 150 were still present 27 Jan (Charlie Plimpton).

Purple Finch – An amazing winter for Purple Finches, 187 reports were made for the 10-county Central Brazos Valley 5 Dec+. Counts at feeders were as high as 13. Within the Central Brazos Valley, Purple Finches were common winter residents 1965-1977 when, for example, over 130 finches were banded in the 1971-72 winter. Thereafter they have been erratic. Although a few were reported annually, the number of sightings was often less than a handful.



Green balloons show location of Purple Finch sightings this winter

Pine Siskin – Hundreds of reports of Pine Siskins in the central prairie substantiated a significant invasion. Most amazing was 26-27 Jan (Bill Eisele) when 73 on the 26th and 130 on the 27th seemed to be dripping from the trees at Woodcreek Subdivision, College Station, *Brazos*.

Lesser Goldfinch – A few Lesser Goldfinches spilled to the eastern edge of their normal range with 1-2 at Lake Waco, *McLennan* 28 Jan-8 Feb (Linda Taylor). More significantly, one reached eastward to *Brazos* at Austin's Colony Park 27 Jan-17 Feb (†Sandy Dillard). Interestingly, on the 27th Dillard had 4 finch species at his feeders: Purple Finch, House Finch, Lesser Goldfinch, and American Goldfinch.

Red-winged Blackbird and other blackbird species – At dawn and dusk, some enormous flocks of blackbird species were observed. At 4:50 PM 1 Jan (Simon Burton), some 10,000 were described as a river of blackbirds near Caldwell, *Burleson*. Even more impressive was a flock estimated at 50,000 passing the dam at Gibbons Creek Reservoir, *Grimes* at 7:02 AM 20 Dec (John Berner) and described as “an enormous stream like, long thin plume of smoke 50 wide by 1000 long.”

Rusty Blackbird – Rarely seen in *Brazos*, 3 Rusty Blackbirds were calling in trees in a flooded area of the Peach Creek bottoms near the Navasota River 1 Jan (Darrell Vollert).

Palm Warbler – A Palm Warbler in the Brazos River bottoms 15 Dec (ph. John Hale, et al.) is only the 6th record for *Burleson* and the first in 22 years.

Summer Tanager – Single out-of-season Summer Tanagers were at Lick Creek Park 3 Feb (†Boris Novikov) and at Brazos Center Park 23 Feb (†David Sarkozi), both in *Brazos*.

Western Tanager – A Western Tanager was in a Smithville backyard 28 Jan (†Ron Martin), providing a 7th record for *Bastrop*. Another Western Tanager was observed 22 Feb (†Richard Gibbons) in northern *Austin* near its border with *Washington*, a 4th record for *Austin*.

Rose-breasted Grosbeak – Out of season was a female Rose-breasted Grosbeak 10 Feb (†Marcia & Ron Braun) at a feeder near La Grange, *Fayette*.

Black-headed Grosbeak – A rare Black-headed Grosbeak visited a backyard feeder early each morning 8-12 Feb (†Harold Grabs) near Cedar Creek, *Bastrop*.

Painted Bunting – Surprisingly for *Washington*, a female/immature Painted Bunting wintered in Chappell Hill 20 Jan–23 Feb (†Darrell Vollert). Another green Painted Bunting was observed 30 Jan (†Donald Brightsmith) at Lick Creek Park, *Brazos*.

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