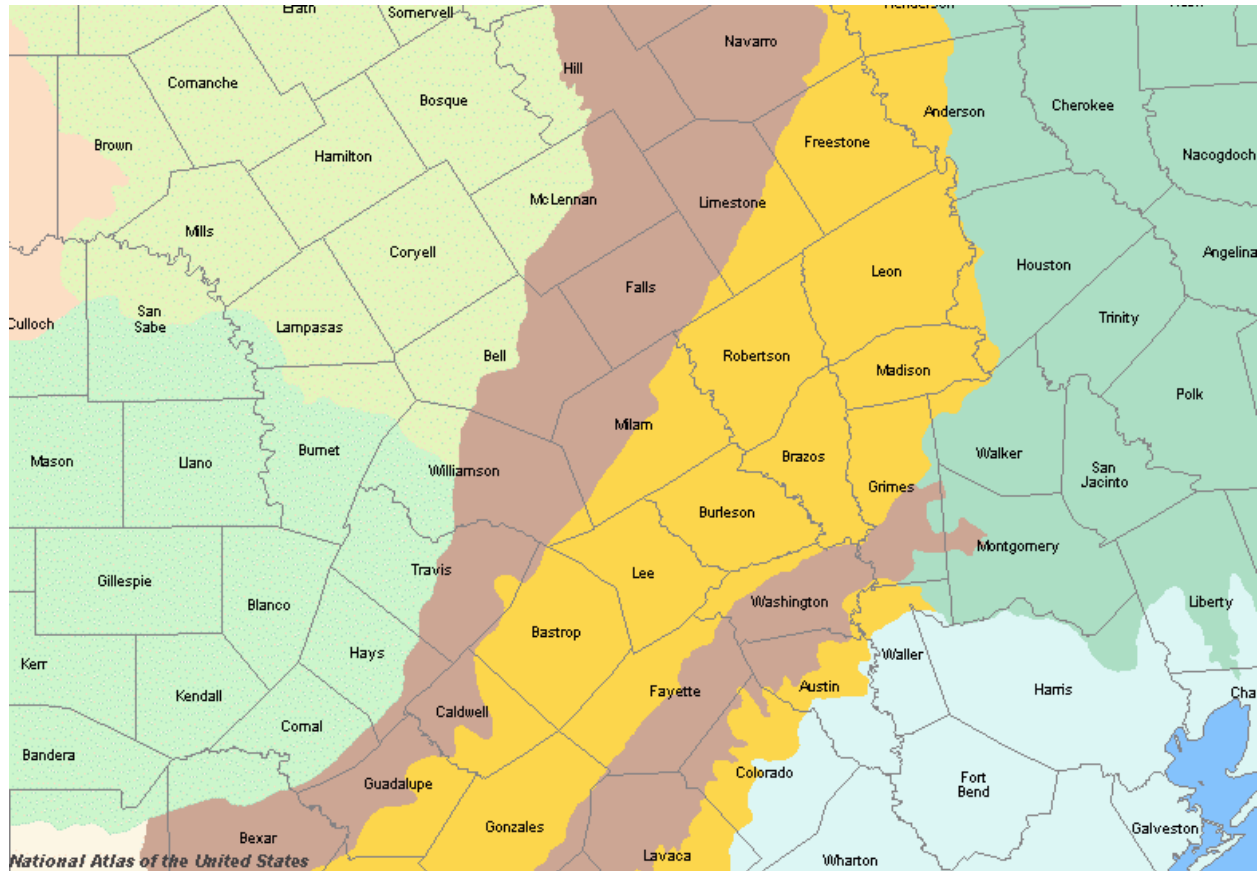


Winter 2019-2020: Central Oaks & Prairies of Texas

By Bert Frenz

This report is from 1 December 2019 to 29 February 2020. 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:

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck – A flock of ~250 Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks were at Country Club Lake, Bryan early in the morning of 7 Dec (Bruce Neville), the second highest historical count for *Brazos*.

Ross's Goose – An estimate extrapolated from photos gave a high count of at least 200 Ross's Geese near Oenaville, *Bell* 4 Feb (ph. Randy Pinkston). Not far away, in the Troy area, counts of 150 on 9 Feb (Gil Eckrich) and 138 on 10 Feb (Cheryl Wolfe) also were substantial numbers.



Ross's Geese, Bell County © Randy Pinkston

Northern Shoveler – A substantial flock of 250 Northern Shovelers gathered at Lake Creek Lake, *McLennan* 20 Feb (Keith Reich).

American Wigeon – A count of 188 American Wigeons were near Tradinghouse Creek Reservoir, *McLennan* 28 Dec (Anand Chaudhary).

Surf Scoter – Six Surf Scoters resided at the west side of Belton Lake 7 Feb+ (ph. Gil Eckrich, m.ob.). This is the 6th record for *Bell*, but also the 3rd consecutive winter this species has visited Belton Lake.



Surf Scoter, Belton Lake © Gil Eckrich

Black Scoter – Eighteen Black Scoters were at Fairfield Lake S.P. 26 Jan (ph. Laura Bunton, Mark McDermott, Kate Shermon) and most remained at the lake through 22 Feb (m.ob.); it is a 2nd record for *Freestone*.



Black Scoter, Fairfield Lake S.P. © Ron Newhouse

Long-tailed Duck – A 3rd record for *McLennan*, a Long-tailed Duck visited the City of Riesel treatment ponds 28 Dec–9 Jan (Keith Reich, ph.† Fay Ratta, ph.†Matthew York, ph.†Anand Chaudhary, m.ob.)



Long-tailed Duck, McLennan County © Matthew York

Bufflehead – Finfeather Lake, *Brazos* has become an annual winter gathering place for Bufflehead, topped this season by 120 on 18 Jan (Anthony Hewetson).

Hooded Merganser – Hooded Mergansers were in good numbers in the Central Brazos Valley with 24 at Lake Bryan, *Brazos* 6 Dec (Fred Collins), 67 in a pond near Navasota, *Grimes* 11-13 Dec (ph. John Pike, ph. John Faber, Eric Faria), and 150 at Lake Limestone, *Robertson* 17 Jan (Justin Bosler).

Ruddy Duck – A new high count for *Falls*, 121 Ruddy Ducks were at the Marlin WWTP 25 Dec (Ted Drozdowski).

Eared Grebe – A count of 14 Eared Grebes 16 Jan (Dell Little, D. D. Currie) is the highest for Lake Somerville since 1972.

Anna's Hummingbird – An Anna's Hummingbird at Steep Hollow, *Brazos* reported in the fall season remained until 22 Dec (Bill Morris).

Virginia Rail – Quite the surprise and a 1st record for *Grimes*, a Virginia Rail was heard and briefly seen by some at a pond near the TMPA power plant adjacent to Gibbons Creek Reservoir 19 Jan (†John Berner, Justin Bosler, Bert Frenz, m.ob.). Another Virginia Rail originally reported 2 Nov at Paint Creek Road was again heard there 2 Feb (†Jason Leifester), a 4th record for *Bastrop*.

Common Gallinule – Rare in winter at Richland Creek W.M.A., a Common Gallinule was at the North Unit, *Navarro* 31 Jan (Ed Wetzel).

American Coot – Although a “crude guesstimation,” 1000 American Coots at Stillhouse Hollow Lake, *Bell* 22 Dec (Randy Pinkston) is nonetheless an impressive number.

Mountain Plover – Undoubtedly the highlight of the College Station T.O.S. meeting field trips was the Mountain Plover found at Horizon Turf Farms in the Brazos River bottomlands of *Burleson*. First seen 17 Jan it continued until 21 Jan and was observed by over 100 T.O.S. attendees and photographed dozens of times. It is the second record for *Burleson*, the first being 27 Dec 2011 seen and photographed by only one observer.



Mountain Plover, Burleson County © Jack Lefor



Mountain Plover, Burleson County © Mike Jones

Ruddy Turnstone – Certainly the strangest and most inexplicable sighting of the season is 6 Ruddy Turnstones found in a wooded area of College Station, *Brazos* 16 Feb (ph. Susan Miles). Unique for number, date, habitat, mild weather conditions, and far-inland location, were it not for a good photo it is unlikely it would have been believed possible.



Ruddy Turnstones, Brazos County © Susan Miles

Pectoral Sandpiper – Unusually early for the Central Prairie, but consistent for the larger central Oaks and Prairies region, up to 8 Pectoral Sandpipers were viewed 22-29 Feb (ph. Shirley Wilkerson, †Warren Hardin, †Laura Sare) at Sims Lane, *Brazos*.

Long-billed Dowitcher – For *Falls* where Long-billed Dowitchers are seldom reported, a count of 38 at The Falls, Marlin is a good number on 31 Dec (Steve Glover).

Wilson's Snipe – A new high count for *Falls* is 43-45 Wilson's Snipe at The Falls, Marlin 25 Dec–4 Jan (Ted Drozdowski, Michael Gray).

Greater Yellowlegs – An amazing tally of 325 Greater Yellowlegs 24 Jan (Michael McCloy) topped the numbers present at Sims Lane 23 Jan–13 Feb and set a new high count for *Brazos*.

Laughing Gull – A surprising influx of Laughing Gulls were reported in the Central Brazos Valley. Sightings included a single at Lake Somerville, *Burleson* 16 Jan (Dell Little), 3 at Gibbons Creek Reservoir, *Grimes* 17 Jan (m.ob.), and more singles 17 Jan (ph. Ron Newhouse) at Peach Creek Ponds, *Brazos*, 17-18 Jan (†Justin Bosler, Cinda Crosley) at Lake Limestone, *Robertson*, and 18 Jan (m.ob.) at Lake Madison Park, *Madison*.

Franklin's Gull – Out of season Franklin's Gulls include 2 at Welch Park, Lake Somerville, *Burleson* 7-11 Dec (†Eric Faria, †Mike Rogan) and a wounded gull at Big Creek Marina, Lake Somerville, *Burleson* 1 Jan (Kenneth Bader).

Lesser Black-backed Gull – A 4th record for *Bell*, a Lesser Black-backed Gull was described 22 Dec (†Randy Pinkston, †Charlie Plimpton) at Slough Pond.

Glaucous Gull – A first cycle Glaucous Gull 1 Jan (†Randy Pinkston, ph. † Charlie Plimpton, ph. † Nic Webster, ph. † Kathy Cantu) at Slough Pond is a first county record for *Bell*.



Glaucous Gull, Slough Pond © Nic Webster

Forster's Tern – Unusually large numbers of Forster's Terns were feeding over Lake Somerville, *Burleson* 18 Jan (Michael McCloy, et al.). While the "rough and conservative" count was 270 terns, they report it was "likely closer to 500," when distant terns are included.

Common Loon – Common Loons are not easily found in the Central Prairie and not reported annually in any of the counties. One of the Common Loons at Lake Bryan, *Brazos* reported in the fall season was still present 6 Dec (Joanne Bradbury). Another was on the *Robertson* side of Lake Limestone 14 Dec (Greg Cook) and 3 were on the *Leon* side the same day. One flew over Buescher S.P., *Bastrop* 21 Jan (†Craig Rasmussen).

Cattle Egret – Rarely seen January Cattle Egrets were in *Bell*, including 3 at Witter Lane 2-4 Jan (†Randy Pinkston, †Charlie Plimpton) and 2 at FM 3369 on 25 Jan (Randy Pinkston).

White-tailed Hawk – A 5th record for *Bell*, a White-tailed Hawk was along FM 2268 near Holland 25 Jan (ph.† Randy Pinkston).



White-tailed Hawk, Bell County © Randy Pinkston

Ladder-backed Woodpecker – Only the 6th record for *Limestone* since the first in 1971, a Ladder-backed Woodpecker was in the Groesbeck area 8 Jan (ph.†Jane Tillman, Mark Lyon).

Pileated Woodpecker – Although Pileated Woodpecker is rare in *Bell*, 1-2 have been reported at Witter Lane since at least Apr 2017 and this season included 17 reports at that location. Likewise, the species is rare in *McLennan*, with only 5 prior records, but this January there were 4 reports: 3-12 Jan (†Mike Hernandez, ph.† Matthew York, ph.† Fay Ratta) at Bosque Park spillway on Lake Waco and 28 Feb (Maurice Rich) at Lake Waco Wetlands.



Pileated Woodpecker, Lake Waco © Matthew York

Crested Caracara – An unusually large gathering of 56 Crested Caracaras 25 Dec (Dennis Palafox) were in the Utley area, *Bastrop*.

Prairie Falcon – In roughly the same location as last winter, a Prairie Falcon was observed 11 Jan (†Mike Goebel) along Old Sayers Road, *Bastrop*. Much more surprising was a Prairie Falcon at Horizon Turf Farms 14 Jan (†Michael McCloy, Cameron Johnson) where it is a first county record for *Burleson*.

Couch's Kingbird – Couch's Kingbird did not reach northward to *Brazos* until 2004 when it appeared at Country Club Lake. It was reported there again in 2005, but not thereafter until this fall. Then it apparently moved to nearby Finfeather Lake where it was reported regularly 13 Nov–15 Feb (m.ob.).



Couch's Kingbird, Finfeather Lake © Ron Newhouse

Scissor-tailed Flycatcher – A wintering Scissor-tailed Flycatcher roosted at a car dealership along the Hwy 6 bypass of College Station, *Brazos*, last reported 11 Jan (ph. Julie Crouch).

Black Phoebe – At the extreme of its range, a Black Phoebe was along the Brazos River on the Anderson-Tucker Ranch 11 Jan (†Alberto Manterola, †Neil Diaz), a first county record for *Robertson*.

Say's Phoebe – Rare in *Brazos*, a Say's Phoebe was found at Moore Farm during the T.O.S. meeting field trips and was seen repeatedly thereafter 18 Jan+ (John Hale, m.ob.).



Say's Phoebe, Brazos County © Ron Newhouse

Vermilion Flycatcher – The Central Prairie saw a dramatic increase in the number of Vermilion Flycatchers reported this winter, largely owing to the increased coverage mid-January during the T.O.S. meeting in College Station. The list of sightings is long: Lake Somerville–Nails Creek Unit, *Lee* 1 Dec; Witter Lane, *Bell* 1 Dec–25 Jan; Brenham, *Washington* 2 Dec; near Schulenburg, *Fayette* 6 Dec; Aquacultural Facility, *Burleson* 15 Dec; Lick Creek Park, *Brazos* 29 Dec–16 Feb; Moore Farm, *Brazos* 11 Jan+; Allen Farm area, *Brazos* 21 Jan; Lake Somerville–Birch Creek Unit, *Burleson* 16–19 Jan; Anderson-Tucker Ranch, *Robertson* 18 Jan; Dilly Shaw Tap Lake area, *Brazos* 31 Jan–1 Feb.

Common Raven – East of its normal range, a Common Raven was described at Camp Swift, *Bastrop* 1 Jan (†Leah Razuri).

Winter Wren – Usually reported singly, a count of 6 at Democrat Road, *Brazos* 11 Dec (†Michael McCloy) is surprising.

Hermit Thrush – Eighteen Hermit Thrushes is a good count for Lick Creek Park, *Brazos* 12 Dec (Michael McCloy).

Long-billed Thrush – A 5th record for *Bastrop*, a Long-billed Thrasher was in the Colorvista area 15 Feb (†Jason Leifester).

American Pipit – Huge flocks of American Pipits appeared in the Central Prairie the second week of January, including 220 at Waco, *McLennan* 9 Jan (Ezekiel Dobson), 260 at Anderson-Tucker Ranch, *Robertson* 17 Jan (Alberto Manterola), and 400 at Horizon Turf farms, *Burleson* 18 Jan (Justin Bosler).

Longspur sp. – In *Milam*, where longspur sp. are rarely reported, a mixed flock included at least 2 Chestnut-collared Longspurs, 35 Lapland Longspurs, and 4 McCown's Longspurs in a plowed field near Clarkson 23 Dec (ph.† Karen Pair).



Lapland Longspurs, Milam County © Karen Pair



McCown's Longspurs, Milam County © Karen Pair

Lark Bunting – With only about 4 prior records in *Fayette*, a female type Lark Bunting 20 Jan (†Bob Friedrichs) in a weedy field south of Brandt River Bottom Rd is noteworthy.

White-throated Sparrow – “Abundant everywhere” was the description of 130 White-throated Sparrows seen and heard while walking the trails at Lick Creek Park, *Brazos* 12 Dec (Michael McCloy).

Scott's Oriole? – A controversial oriole photographed 8 Dec (ph.† Simon Kiacz) at Finfeather Lake, *Brazos* has variously been labeled a Scott's Oriole or an Orchard Oriole. Scott's Oriole has not previously been identified in *Brazos* or in the wider Central Brazos Valley. Orchard Oriole is common, but not in December and has only a few winter records. Some of the 10 photos are shown here.











Controversial Oriole, Finfeather Lake, Brazos © Simon Kiacz

Audubon's Oriole – A 2nd record for *Bastrop*, the first being 21 Apr 1964, an Audubon's Oriole was on Dairy Road 16 Feb+ (ph. Jonah Gula, ph.† Jason Leifester, †Brush Freeman, †Berndt Gravenstein).



Audubon's Oriole, Bastrop County © Jonah Gula

Rusty Blackbird – Difficult to find in the past couple of decades, up to 16 Rusty Blackbirds were reported 14 Dec–22 Feb (†Doug Orama, m.ob.) at Temple Lions Park, *Bell*. Up to 10 were at Black Lake, *Burleson* 17-19 Jan (m.ob.) and one was near Flynn, *Leon* 17 Jan (†Anthony Hewetson, Drew Harvey). Yet another single was at Pin Oak Lakes, *Robertson* 19 Jan (†Dell Little).

Nashville Warbler – An out-of-season Nashville Warbler was at Veterans Park, *Brazos* 15 Dec (†Alycia Fratzke).

Common Yellowthroat – An unusually high count of 20 Common Yellowthroats were reported at the Colorado River, *Bastrop* 4 Jan (Justin Bosler, Claude Morris).

Northern Parula – A wintering Northern Parula was at Seydler Road sand/gravel ponds, *Fayette* 20 Jan–1 Feb (ph.† Bob Friedrichs, ph. Michelle Summers, Steve Glover). Another was at College Station, *Brazos* 4 Feb (†Laura King) and another single was at Lake Somerville S.P.-Birch Creek Unit, *Burleson* 22 Feb (†Eric Faria).



Northern Parula, Fayette County © Michelle Summers

Palm Warbler – Errant Palm Warblers were reported 7 Dec (†Eric Faria) at Welch Park, Lake Somerville, *Burleson*, 8 Dec (Jeff Hall) at Iron Bridge Park, Belton Lake, *Bell*, 25 Dec (ph. Fay Ratta) at Middle Bosque Crossing, west of Crawford, *McLennan*, and 17 Jan (†Cecilia Riley, et al.) at Gibbons Creek Reservoir, *Grimes*.



Palm Warbler, McLennan County © Fay Ratta

Indigo Bunting – Hardly ever reported in winter in the Central Brazos Valley, an immature male Indigo Bunting was found at Washington-on-the-Brazos S.P., *Washington* 19 Jan (†Darrell Vollert, Neil Diaz, ph. Tonya Seitz, et al.).



Indigo Bunting, Washington-on-the-Brazos S.P. © Tonya Seitz

Painted Bunting – Rare in winter in the Central Brazos Valley, single adult male Painted Buntings were seen at Bryan, *Brazos* 25 Jan (ph. Sandy Dillard) and at Chappell Hill, *Washington* 20-23 Feb (ph. Darrell Vollert).



Painted Bunting, Bryan, Brazos County © Sandy Dillard

Dickcissel – A tardy Dickcissel was found 4 Dec (†Warren Hardin) eating seeds with House Finch and American Goldfinch at Country Club Lake, *Brazos*.

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