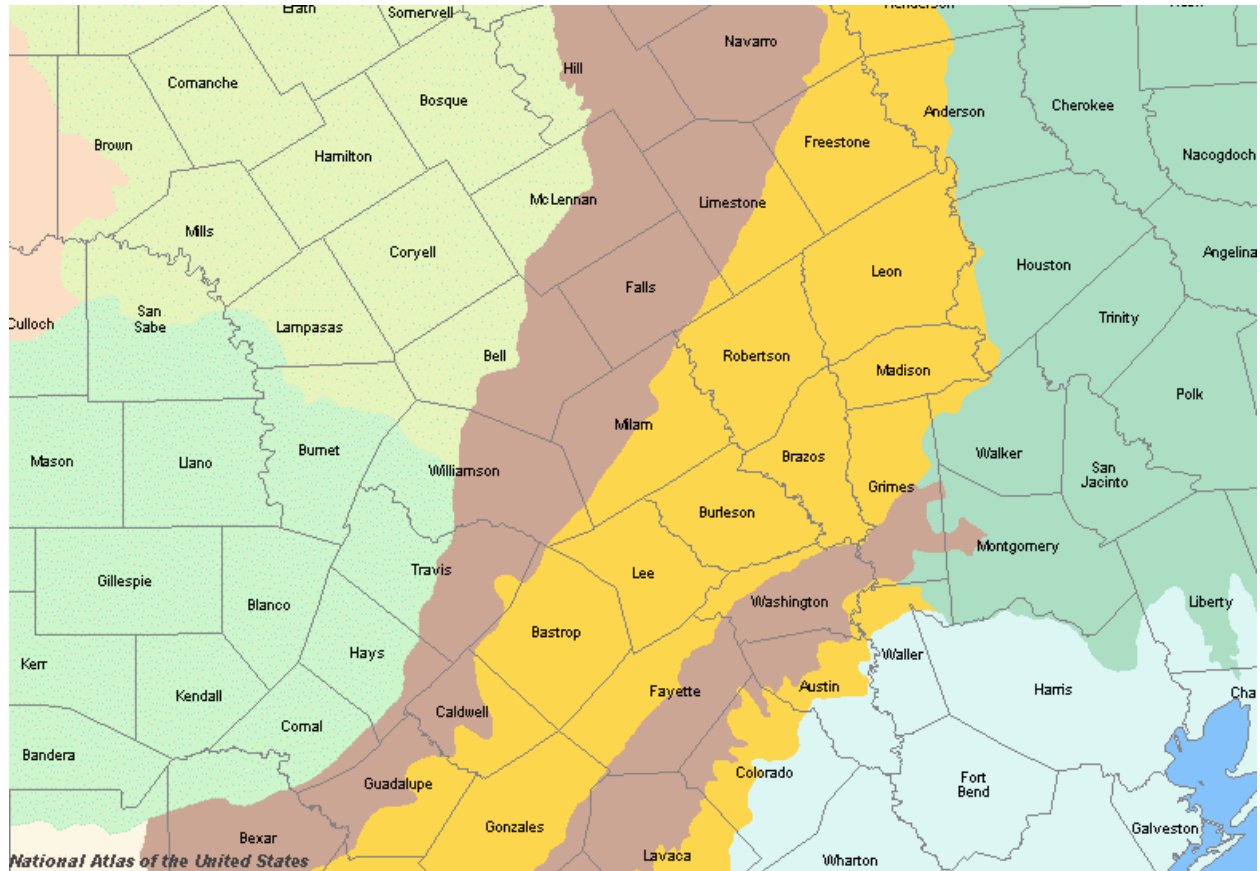


Winter 2020-2021: Central Oaks & Prairies of Texas

By Bert Frenz

This report is from 1 December 2020 to 28 February 2021. 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.

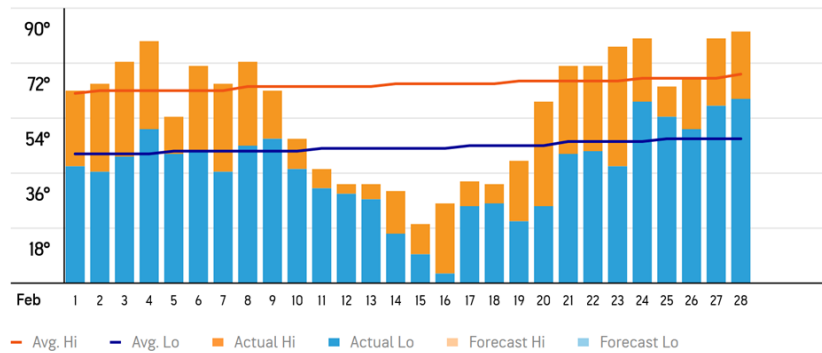


WEATHER:

Severe cold weather in central Texas is illustrated by the February temperatures in Bryan, Brazos Co. While the ice and snow provided some attractive bird portraits, numerous deaths of birds were also reported.

TEMPERATURE GRAPH

°F



Red-bellied Woodpecker in ice, 18 Feb 2021, Brazos Co., © Mary Lloyd Richards

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker fell out of tree and died in his hand, 16 Feb 2021, Brazos Co., © Terence Stephen Wright



Anna's Hummingbird and icicles, 21 Feb 2021, Bryan, Brazos Co., © Suzanne Deatherage



Fox Sparrow in snow, 15 Feb 2021, Brazos Co., © Linda Rothermel

MOST UNUSUAL SIGHTINGS:

Ross's Goose – Following the most severe dip to 3°F, in subfreezing temperatures 16 Feb, a flock of 15 Ross's Goose arrived in mid-afternoon and roosted in snow and ice on a Brazos Co. turf farm 28 Feb (Michael McCloy, Keith Andringa, Bill Eisele); three of the flock remained to 21 Feb (Sandy Dillard, Meredith Anderson). At Renner Road in Waco, 10 to 17 Ross's Geese were present 22-24 Feb (Anand Chaudhary), the highest count for McLennan Co. and the first report in seven years.



Ross's Geese, 18 Feb 2021, Brazos County © Michael McCloy

Greater White-fronted Goose – Two flocks totaling 540 geese flew over the Ecology and Natural Resource area at Texas A&M University, Brazos Co. 18 Jan 2021 (Michael McCloy), unusual both for date and numbers. Rare in McLennan Co., 2-19 White-fronteds were at Renner Road 21-27 Mar (John Muldrow).

Canvasback – Several large flocks totaling 375 Canvasbacks were at Richland Creek WMA, Freestone Co. 5 Feb (Jeremy Webster), a substantial count for this location in winter.

Surf Scoter – A single subadult male Surf Scoter was in the company of five White-winged Scoters 2 Jan (Barry Lyon, Brooke Smith) at Stillhouse Hollow Lake, Bell Co., an unusual date for this rarity.

White-winged Scoter – Five White-winged Scoters were at Stillhouse Hollow Lake, Bell Co. 2 Jan (Barry Lyon, Brooke Smith) and three remained the next day (Randy Pinkston).

Hooded Merganser – An exact count of 213 Hooded Mergansers at Lake Bryan, Brazos Co. 19 Feb (John Hale) was the highest ever count for the central oaks and prairies region.

Ruby-throated Hummingbird – Rare in the depth of winter, a first-year female Ruby-throated Hummingbird visited a Salado, Bell Co. feeder 31 Dec—1 Jan (ph. Daniel Kelch).

Anna's Hummingbird – Owing to drought conditions farther west, the 2020-2021 winter was unusual for the eastward push of western species, including Anna's Hummingbird. This winter, single Anna's consistently visited feeders at six homes in Austin, four in Bryan, one in College Station, one in McGregor, and made sporadic visits to an additional four sites in Bell, Brazos, and Grimes counties. The one in McGregor was a first record for McLennan Co., seen late Dec—14 Feb (ph. Juan Aaya). Likely,

many died when severe sub-freezing weather blanketed the Region 11-20 Feb, dipping as low as 3°F in Brazos Co. However, one, first seen 19 Jan, survived in Bryan where the observer moved the feeder to a location it could be kept thawed electrically. The Anna's visited daily, was photographed amongst icicles 21 Feb, and remained until 26 Feb (Suzanne Deatherage).



Anna's Hummingbird, 26 Jan 2021, Bryan, Brazos Co., © Suzanne Deatherage

Broad-tailed Hummingbird – In the past decade, the number of wintering Broad-tailed Hummingbirds reported in the central oaks and prairies, plus the eastern edge of Edwards Plateau has been two to seven, average 4.5. This winter season, at least 20 Broad-taileds were reported in Bell, Brazos, Fayette, Travis, and Williamson counties. The Fayette Co. sighting near Ruttersville 2-3 Nov (†Ron Braun) was a first county record.

Virginia Rail – Up to three Virginia Rails were found 5 Oct 2020—7 Feb 2021 (Tyler Scott) at the marsh behind Home Depot only 0.8 mi. from the 2019 Brazos Co. site and both part of the Lick Creek drainage. A response to playback at a marsh in Calvert provided a first for Robertson Co. 13 Feb 2021 (Mark McDermott).

Sandhill Crane – Unusually early migrants, a flock of 800+ Sandhill Cranes flew north over White Switch Road, Brazos Co. 1 Jan 2021 (Tyler Scott, Nicole Foley).

Black-necked Stilt – Oddly out of season and place were a single stilt at the Nails Creek Unit of Lake Somerville, Lee Co. 2 Dec 2020 (Michael McCloy) and two at Hergotz Lane quarry lake in Austin, Travis Co. 19 Dec 2020 (Robert Hardway, Bryce Hardway).

American Avocet – Rare in winter in central oaks and prairies, American Avocets lingered at the Nails Creek Unit of Lake Somerville, Lee Co. 2-28 Dec (Michael McCloy, Ken Hartman) with a peak count of 20 on 2 Dec. Six were at Granger Lake, Williamson Co. 16-20 Dec (Lynn Chapman) and another six were at Lake Bryan, Brazos Co. 8 Jan 2021 (Rhett Raibley).

Mountain Plover – Although the most heavily birded county in the Central Brazos Valley for over seven decades, a Mountain Plover had not been seen in Brazos Co. until the advent of turf farms, when one visited the Sims Lane turf farm 18-20 Feb 2021 (Simon Kiacz).



Mountain Plover, 19 Feb 2021, Brazos County © Shirley Wilkerson

Snowy Plover – Extremely late, a surprising count of 10 Snowy Plovers were on the mudflats of Union Grove WMA, Bell Co. 16 Dec (Randy Pinkston).

American Woodcock – A high count of 11 American Woodcocks were tallied at the Ecology and Natural Resource area at Texas A&M, Brazos Co. 30 Jan (Simon Kiacz).

Solitary Sandpiper – Although rarely found as singles in winter, it is unprecedented to locate three Solitary Sandpipers 9 Jan 2021 (Richard Harman) at a pond at Paint Creek Road in Bastrop Co.

Willet – Willets are hardly ever found in the cold months of winter in the central oaks and prairies, so one photographed and described at Sims Lane turf farm, Brazos Co. 20-21 Feb 2021 (ph. Vaishali Katju, †Sandy Dillard) is noteworthy.

Little Gull – McLennan Co. has seen its share of Little Gulls since the first in 1989, with reoccurrences 1990-1994. Now after a hiatus of seven years, a Little Gull again appeared, this time at Tradinghouse Hollow Creek Reservoir 6-14 Dec 2020 (John Muldrow, ph. Matthew York, ph. Mark McDermott, ph. Jeffrey Jackson, ph. Erik Atwell, ph. Simon Kiacz, ph. Beth McBroom, ph. Jesse Huth, ph. Bill Eisele, m.ob.).



Little Gull, 8 Dec 2020, McLennan Co. © Jeffrey Jackson

Laughing Gull – Unexplained is why 19 Laughing Gulls visited small inland Finfeather Lake, Brazos Co., 24 Jan (ph. Cameron Johnson, Michael McCloy, Keith Andringa) in an absence of stormy weather.



Laughing Gull, 24 Jan 2021, Brazos Co. © Cameron Johnson

Franklin's Gull – Unusually large flocks so late in migration were 54 Franklin's Gulls at Granger Lake, Williamson Co. 7 Dec (Rich Kostecke) and 40-60 at Trading House Creek Reservoir, McLennan Co. 7 Dec (Michael McCloy, Keith Andringa, Corina Giron).

Lesser Black-backed Gull – One of the Lesser Black-backed Gulls at Granger Lake, Williamson Co., first reported 7 Nov, was still seen 11 Dec (Rich Kostecke), making it the longest staying of its species in the central oaks and prairies region. It or another first-cycle Lesser Black-backed Gull was photographed at the lake 19 Feb (Sean Mecredy). A first for Grimes Co., a first winter Lesser Black-backed Gull was described at Gibbons Creek Reservoir 20 Feb (Todd McGrath).

Red-throated Loon – A first record for McLennan Co. was a Red-throated Loon at Trading House Creek Reservoir 6-13 Dec 2020 (Matthew York), observed and photographed by many.



Red-throated Loon, 11 Dec 2020, McLennan Co. © Fred and Kay Zagst

Magnificent Frigatebird – An odd sighting, out of season and absent of stormy weather, a Magnificent Frigatebird flew above Lake Somerville, Burleson Co. 1 Jan (Ben Hobratch, Sisi Medina).

American White Pelican – A count of 340 American White Pelicans, found in four groups, at Lake Somerville, Lee Co. 2 Dec (Michael McCloy) and 350 pelicans were at the Washington Co. side of the lake 16 Jan (Fred Collins), the second highest winter count for the central oaks and prairies region.

Brown Pelican – A juvenile Brown Pelican at Trading House Creek Reservoir, McLennan Co. 10-26 Dec (Simon Kiaz, Keith Reich, Matthew York) is likely the same seen last on 27 Nov.

Snowy Egret – The highest ever count for wintering Snowy Egrets in the central oaks and prairies region was 66 set at Roy Guerrero Colorado River Metro Park, Travis Co. 4 Dec (Richard Deulofeut). Also impressive was 45 at East Bouldin Creek 29 Dec (Kevin Ebert).

Burrowing Owl – A Burrowing Owl 5-27 Feb (Alberto Manterola) at the O. D. Butler Animal Science Complex at Texas A&M University produced excitement among local birders as it was the first record in Brazos Co. since 1999. Another was a one-day wonder at the Anderson-Tucker Ranch 22 Feb (Alberto Manterola), a third record for Robertson Co.



Burrowing Owl, 27 Feb 2021, Brazos Co. © Nancy Thaden

Short-eared Owl – Quite contrary to the norm, the winter of 2020-2021 was exceptional and unprecedented, much attributed to drought in the west. This season's sightings of Short-eared Owl blossomed to 137 reports on eBird for the central oaks and prairies, with sightings in Bell, Brazos, Burleson, McLennan, Robertson, Travis, Waller, and Williamson counties 31 Oct 2020—20 Mar 2021, including double-digit counts on 11 days at Granger Lake, topped by 22 owls on 26 Dec 2020 (ph. Tim Fennell, ph. Craig Browning) and 8 Jan 2021 (Jack Cochran, Lori Malloy).



Short-eared Owl, 26 Dec 2020, Granger Lake, Williamson Co., © Craig Browning

Prairie Falcon – A Prairie Falcon at Ship/Stagners Lake 21 Feb (Bernd Gravenstein) is a new location for Bastrop Co., some 20 miles southeast of its occasional appearances at the Old Sayer's Road site.

Ash-throated Flycatcher – After a decade's hiatus in Washington Co., a single Ash-throated Flycatcher was seen five times 1 Dec—7 Feb (Darrell Vollert) from Nicholson Road to Red Gully, separated by five to seven miles.

Couch's Kingbird – A flurry of Couch's Kingbird sightings in the Brazos River valley included up to three at Baylor University in McLennan Co. 2-25 Jan (Chris Holmes), one continuing at Finfeather Lake in Brazos Co. 1 Dec—9 Feb (Brandy Falise, m.ob.), one in northern Austin Co. 9-22 Dec (Darrell Vollert), and two or more at four locations in southern Austin Co. (m.ob.).

Say's Phoebe – An unusually large number of Say's Phoebes were pushed eastward in areas where they are rarely found. Although less surprising are the multiple sightings in Bastrop, Bell, and Travis counties, those farther northeast are at best only occasionally found. One was in the Allen Farm area of Brazos Co. 6 Dec—9 Jan (Bert Foquet, John Hale), one was present near China Spring, McLennan Co. 5 Dec (Matthew York), and another was at Frances Road, Waco, McLennan Co. 10-17 Dec (Simon Kiacz, Jeremy Ballard). Yet another was near Thorndale in Milam Co. 10 Feb (Rich Kostecke) and one was on the Anderson-Tucker Ranch near Calvert, Robertson Co. 3 Feb (Alberto Manterola).

Vermilion Flycatcher – An influx of Vermilion Flycatchers eastward resulted in 130 daily sightings in the central oaks and prairies region, including 13 locations in Bell, Brazos, Burleson, Grimes, McLennan, Travis, and Williamson counties. The list includes one to two flycatchers at Witter Lane in Bell Co. 1 Dec—13 Feb (m.ob.), one in the Brazos River bottoms of Burleson Co. 19 Dec (John Hale), one at White Switch Road in Brazos Co. 16 Dec—21 Jan (m.ob.), another at Kuder Road in Brazos Co. 1-2 Jan (Simon Kiacz, Ronald Newhouse), one at Moore Farms in Brazos Co. 11 Dec—9 Jan (John Hale), one at Rock Prairie Road in Brazos Co. 19 Dec—23 Jan (m.ob.), another at Gibbons Creek Reservoir in Grimes Co. 16-24 Jan (m.ob.), up to three at Hornsby Bend in Travis Co. 4 Dec—8 Feb (m.ob.), one at Lake Travis in Travis Co. 9 Feb (Buffie Eicher), one at Pace Bend Park in Travis Co. 7-15 Dec (Andy & Ellen Filtress), one at Birch Creek Unit of Lake Somerville in Burleson Co. 15 Dec (Gary Yoder), one near Thrall in Williamson Co. 17 Dec (Smantha Goulston), and one at Waco in McLennan Co. 30 Dec—6 Jan (m.ob.).

Western Bluebird – Only the second to sixth records for Bell Co., Western Bluebirds were reported at several locations: up to 17 at Taylor Valley Road at Belton Lake 4-9 Dec (ph. Gil Eckrich), one at Maxdale Road in Killeen 6 Dec (ph. Gil Eckrich), up to 10 in Salado 24 Dec—7 Feb (ph. Charlie Plimpton), eight at Chalk Ridge Falls on Stillhouse Hollow Lake 9 Dec (ph. Carol Delynko), and up to 15 at Union Grove WMA 3-9 Jan (ph. Randy Pinkston). Up to four Western Bluebirds first seen 26 Nov continued at Bryan City Cemetery, Brazos Co. until 3 Dec (Eric Lewis).



Western Bluebird, 27 Nov 2020, Bryan, Brazos Co., © Mary Richards

Mountain Bluebird – An unprecedented invasion of Mountain Bluebirds descended into the central oaks and prairies with hundreds of sightings in Bastrop, Bell, Brazos, Fayette, Limestone, McLennan, Milam, Robertson, Travis, Washington, and Williamson counties. These included first-county records: four bluebirds near Flatonia in Fayette Co. 31 Dec (Bob Friedrichs), two near Coolidge in Limestone Co. 5 Jan (ph. Auliya Gurzenda), up to 24 near Rockdale in Milam Co. 2 Jan—6 Feb (Jeremy Webster, ph. Rich Kostecke), two near Calvert in Robertson Co. 10 Dec (Clayton Leopold), and one at Brazos River Valley Trail in Washington Co. 16 Jan—7 Feb (Darrell Vollert, ph. Brian Berry).



Mountain Bluebird, 14 Jan 2021, Belton Lake, Bell Co., © Daniel Kelch

Sage Thrasher – While many invaded western Travis and Williamson counties, a few Sage Thrashers ventured farther east. In McLennan Co., two near Valley Mills 16 Jan (ph. Matthew York, ph. Beau Schaefer) and 20 Feb (ph. Matthew York) were the county's second record and one near China Spring 17 Feb (ph. Fay Ratta) was its third record. In Bell Co. singles were near Belton Lake at Taylor Valley Road 5 Dec (ph. Randy Pinkston), near Killeen at Maxdale Road 6 Dec (ph. Gil Eckrich), and at Fort Hood East Range 17 Dec (ph. Randy Pinkston).

Purple Finch – With almost 500 eBird submissions for the central oaks and prairies region, there is no question that Purple Finch was widespread and abundant this winter. It was reported daily throughout the season and seen in 13 of the oaks and prairies counties. High counts were 38-40+ at Kurten in Brazos Co. 17-25 Feb (Shirley Wilkerson) and 56-60 at College Station in Brazos Co. 21-27 Feb (Bill Eisele).

Pine Siskin – The biggest invasion of Pine Siskins ever recorded in the central oaks and prairies was documented with over 3000 reports in eBird that covered every one of its 21 counties. Peak counts were 210 at Woodcreek subdivision, College Station, Brazos Co. 30 Jan (Bill Eisele) and 270 at Belton, Bell Co. 17 Feb (Jeff Hall).

Chestnut-collared Longspur – Three Chestnut-collared Longspurs near Axtell 12 Dec (Steve Glover, Greg Cook) was the first report since 2013 for McLennan Co. One flushed at Lake Bryan 13 Nov (Michael McCloy) was the first since 2011 for Brazos Co.

Lark Sparrow – An exceptionally high count of 85 Lark Sparrows gathered at Pitts Road Pond in Brazos Co. 8 Dec (Sandy Dillard).

Lark Buntings – A sighting 28 Dec (Ken Hartman) of seven Lark Buntings near Ledbetter was only the second record for Lee Co. since 1987. Only the third and fourth records for Milam Co., single Lark Buntings were found 22 Jan (Rich Kostecke) near Thorndale and 6 Feb (Mike Rogan) near Rockdale. Up until last fall Lark Buntings were accidental in Brazos Co., but this winter one to three were observed at several locations, most consistently at Kuder Road all season (m.ob.). In addition, where they are more expected, Lark Buntings wintered at Bastrop, Bell, McLennan, Travis, and Waller counties.



Lark Buntings, 28 Dec 2020, Lee Co. © Ken Hartman



Lark Bunting, 25 Feb 2021, Kuder Road, Brazos Co. © Bill Eisele

Clay-colored Sparrow – In the central oaks and prairies Clay-colored Sparrow is an uncommon migrant and rarely visits in winter, until this season. One at Birch Creek Unit of Lake Somerville SP 15 Dec (Gary Yoder) was the first winter record for Burleson Co. Up to four sparrows were at Kuder Road in Brazos Co. 11 Dec—28 Jan (John Hale). A first winter record for Grimes Co. was 26 Dec (Fred Collins) in the Richards area. In northern Waller Co., two lingered at Old Hebert House since 13 Nov and one of these remained until 4 Jan (Bob Honig), while up to four were at Laas Farm 3 Dec—1 Jan (Harvey Laas), and yet another was at Kelsey Ranch 14 Jan (David McQuade).

Brewer's Sparrow – An unprecedented number of Brewer's Sparrows moved eastward into the central oaks and prairies this winter. Since 1983, there are only seven records for the 21-county region, but this winter produced 19 records in Brazos, Travis, and Williamson counties, plus more sightings in the Edwards Plateau western parts of Bell, Travis, and Williamson counties. Highlighted was a single Brewer's Sparrow at Pitts and Kuder Roads 6 Dec—3 Jan (ph. Bill Eisele, m.ob.), only the second record for Brazos Co.



Brewer's Sparrow, 11 Dec 2020, Brazos Co., © John Hale

Green-tailed Towhee – Each of the four prior Brazos Co. records were single-day occurrences 1979-2012, however this winter one was present 9 Jan—6 Feb (ph. Shirley Wilkerson, Dan Wilkerson) at Leonard road and viewed by two dozen observers.



Green-tailed Towhee, 25 Jan 2021, Brazos Co., © Ronald Newhouse

Yellow-headed Blackbird – Rare in winter and only the second winter record for McLennan Co., one was within a mixed blackbird flock at Trading House Creek Reservoir 27 Feb (ph. Jeremy Ballard).

Scott's Oriole – A first county record for Grimes Co. and well east of its normal range, a Scott's Oriole visited feeders near Anderson 27 Feb+ (Pix Hitchcock).



© Sid Ehlert Photography
Scott's Oriole, 3 Mar 2021, Grimes Co., © Sid Ehlert

Western Tanager – East of its normal range, a male Western Tanager visited 22 Jan+ (ph. Darrell Vollert) at a feeder in Chappell Hill, Washington Co.

Rose-breasted Grosbeak – Rare in winter, an immature male appeared in Washington Co. near Chappell Hill 24 Dec (Fred Collins).

Black-headed Grosbeak – Black-headed Grosbeaks pushed eastward into the central oaks and prairies, visiting Austin, Brazos, Grimes, McLennan, and Travis counties. One near Anderson 15 Feb (ph. Kelly Hill) was a first for Grimes Co. A third county record for Austin Co. was a pair 19 Jan+ (ph. Charlene Koehler) in Sealy and the fourth record was a first-winter male in the Wallis area 13 Feb+ (ph. Debbie McMullen). An unprecedented number were in Brazos Co., with repeated sightings near Bryan at Steep Hollow, and in College Station at Camelot and Woodcreek subdivisions and in the Spring Creek Greenbelt (m.ob.). A seventh record for McLennan Co. since 1974 was a female west of Lake Waco 29 Nov–18 Feb (ph. Linda Taylor).

Painted Bunting – Out of season, an adult male Painted Bunting was at College Station, Brazos Co. 30 Jan (ph. Vaishali Katju).

Dickcissel – A first winter record for McLennan Co. was a Dickcissel photographed at Old Crawford Road 26 Dec (ph. Fay Ratta). Another one was at Old Hebert House, Waller Co. 3 Dec (Bob Honig).

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