

Fall Bird Report
(August 1 – October 25, 2011)

(by David E. Wolf)

This is our most complex season for birds, one of “firsts and “lasts”, migrants, and post-breeding wanderers, and **over 200 species** were found by area observers during these months. Many of them were seen on Pineywoods Audubon field trips. As we are all acutely aware, **our weather was extreme this fall**. For the entire season we were classified as in “**exceptional drought**”, the highest category of drought, as was most of Texas. For the 12-month period ending Sept 30 we were down 30-33 inches of rain below average and this was considered the driest year ever recorded in Texas. **Temperatures continued extreme** in August, with only one day that didn’t reach 100 deg. or higher. September brought relief from the extreme heat, but almost no rainfall. October is normally one of our driest months, and we had many clear and cool days, but we were also blessed with three good rains associated with frontal passages. The effects of this on-going drought will be with us for a long time to come.

Shorebirds and other waterbirds are a major feature of this report. With reservoir levels very low they have been prominent, especially around Lake Sam Rayburn, but also on smaller bodies of water. For example, by the end of August Louis Debetaz had recorded 11 species of shorebirds on the tiny VFW Pond in Lufkin, including such scarcer ones as Baird’s and Stilt sandpipers. This is a great example of how profitable it can be to check a good spot regularly, even if only briefly. **Passerine migrants** were generally in low numbers, but persistent observers did find a wide variety, especially around the Rayburn shore and the parks in Lufkin, in areas with rank vegetation – and therefore food and water. There were exceptions of course, and more Olive-sided Flycatchers, Wilson’s Warblers and Clay-colored Sparrows were seen than expected. **Raptors** passed over largely undetected against the relentless clear blue skies, but exceptional numbers of Merlins were noted. Most **wintering species** arrived on schedule or later than normal, with the exception of several sparrows for which there were record early sightings.

Some first dates for winter residents: Gadwall - 10 at Kurth Lake Sept 14 (LD); American Wigeon - 35 at Kurth Lake Oct 21 (LD); Northern Shoveler - 2 at TX 147 causeway Sept 4 (DW et al, PAS); Green-winged Teal - 3 at TX 147 causeway Sept 5 (RS); Redhead - 6 at Kurth Lake Oct 15 (LD et al, PAS); Ring-necked Duck - 2 at Kurth Lake Oct 21 (LD); Ruddy Duck - 2 at Kurth Lake Oct 15 (LD et al, PAS); Yellow-bellied Sapsucker - 1 in Central Heights Sept 27 **tied our earliest ever** (MHW); Blue-headed Vireo - 1 at TX 147 causeway Oct 21 (DW); House Wren - 1 in Loco Valley Sept 28 (RH); Winter Wren - 1 in Ellen Trout Park Oct 17 (LD); Sedge Wren - 1 at Alazan Bayou WMA Oct 1 (DW et al, PAS); Golden-crowned Kinglet - 1 at TX 147 causeway Oct 21 (DW); American Pipit - 1 over Central Hts Oct 4 (MHW); Orange-crowned Warbler - 1 at Ewing Park Oct 18 (DW); Yellow-rumped Warbler - 45 at Ewing Park Oct 18 (DW); Chipping Sparrow - 1 at Alazan Bayou WMA Sept 17 (DW); Field Sparrow - 1 very early migrant at TX 147 causeway Oct 9 (DW et al, PAS); Vesper Sparrow - 3 at Alazan Bayou WMA Oct 18 (DW); **Savannah Sparrow** - 1 at Ewing Park Sept 11 was our **earliest ever by 9 days** (DW, CS et al, PAS); LeConte’s Sparrow - 1 at Ewing Park Oct 6 was our **earliest ever by 2 days** (DW); Song Sparrow - 1 at Ewing Park

Oct 18 (DW); Swamp Sparrow - 1 at Ewing Park Oct 6 (DW); White-throated Sparrow - 1 in Central Hts Oct 19 (DW); and White-crowned Sparrow - 1 at Ewing Park Oct 6 (DW).

Main bird report:

The first geese were 45 Greater White-fronted over TX 103 at the Angelina on the Oct 18 cold front (DW). The first Blue-winged Teal were 5 at TX 103 at the Angelina August 14 (DW et al, PAS). Significant counts were 100+ on upper Rayburn August 27 (DW); 500+ at Kurth Lake (LD) and 580+ at TX 103 at the Angelina (DW et al) on Sept 14 (season peak); 385 around upper Rayburn Sept 30 (DW); and 250 still at Kurth Lake Oct 15 (LD et al, PAS). Northern Pintail is a scarce migrant in our area, but they apparently like our lakes shallow and we had more reports than usual, from 4 at the TX 147 causeway August 30 (CW) to 4 on Kurth Lake Oct 15 (LD et al, PAS). The highest counts were 12 at Kurth Lake (LD) and 15 on the Etoile Flats (DW et al) on Sept 14; and 35 at the TX 147 causeway Sept 30 (DW). 50 Pied-billed Grebes already on Kurth Lake Oct 1 had increased to a high count of 250 on Oct 15 (LD et al, PAS). The first American White Pelicans were 13 on the Etoile Flats August 19 (early), but they did not stay around (DW). From 1-10 Neotropic Cormorants were seen on every trip to Lake Rayburn this fall through Oct 23 (DW et al, PAS). More unusual was one at Ellen Trout Park Sept 30 (LD). Double-crested Cormorants were only slightly more numerous, until the arrival of migrants in late Oct (DW et al, PAS). Lingered Anhingas were 2 at Kurth Oct 15 and 1 there Oct 17 (LD et al, PAS). Great Egret numbers on upper Rayburn peaked Sept 15-30 (295-320+), with the largest concentration at TX 103 at the Angelina (DW et al, PAS). Season high counts of Snowy Egrets were 45 at TX 103 at the Angelina August 24 and 55 on upper Rayburn Sept 15 (DW). There were frequent sightings of 1-6 Tricolored Herons around the upper third of Lake Rayburn July 12-Sept 18, especially in the Eagle Point area (DW et al, PAS). Single immature **Black-crowned Night-Herons** were at Eagle Point (Ang Co) Sept 30 (DW) and Ellen Trout Park Oct 2-4 (LD). This species is a very uncommon migrant in our area. The season high count of White Ibis was 97 at TX 103 at the Angelina Oct 11 (DW). **"Dark ibis"** were found in extraordinary numbers and were seen on most trips to Rayburn from August 7-Oct 18.. All adult birds examined were **White-faced**, as presumably were all or most of the birds. The first were 2 in the Marion Ferry area August 7-27 (DW et al; PAS) and one at TX 147 on August 21 (DW et al, PAS). High counts were 37 at TX 103 at the Angelina Sept 14 (DW et al) plus 25 at Kurth Lake the same day (LD), and then the next day (Sept 15) a **remarkable 95** left an island roost on the Etoile Flats (Nac Co), almost 10X as many as have ever been seen in our area (DW). Numbers here dropped after this, to 54 on Sept 27; 16 on Sept 30; 4 on Oct 6; and 2 on Oct 18 (DW). To the delight of many observers, **Roseate Spoonbills** were seen on upper Rayburn from July 26-Oct 23, in **record numbers**. The first were singles on the Attoyac arm and at TX 147 July 26 (DW). The first numbers were 27 on the TX 103 at the Angelina flats August 14 (DW et al, PAS) and then consistent counts of 37- 45 were seen here August 19-Oct 11, with a one-day **peak of 63+** on Sept 1 (DW et al, PAS). 14 were still here Oct 23 (RT, DW). Up to 16 were along the Attoyac arm (Nac Co) from August 21- Sept 18, with 4 still there Sept 30 (DW et al, PAS). Wood Storks were scarcer than expected this fall. The first was one at TX 103 at the Attoyac July 26 (DW) and the season high count was a paltry 40 at TX 103 at the Angelina Sept 27 (DW).

The first migrant Mississippi Kites were 2 over Central Hts July 26 (MHW); the first numbers were 4 near Appleby (CW) and 10 over Nacogdoches (MHW) on August 6; and the season high count was 30 over Nacogdoches August 8 (TR). The first Northern Harrier was a juvenile over the Etoile Flats Sept 14 (DW

et al), while several remained in this area through the period. A noisy juvenile Sharp-shinned Hawk at Marion Ferry Sept 6 likely had been raised nearby (DW). Cooper's Hawks outnumbered Sharp-shins through mid-October, but no significant flights of either were detected. The first migrating Broad-winged Hawk was one over Etoile Park Sept 15 (DW). The prolonged clear skies made hawk-watching difficult, and the only sizable flight of Broad-wings was 259 over Central Hts Sept 28 (DW, MHW). We had a phenomenal number of **Merlin** sightings from Sept 7-Oct 21, the most noteworthy of which were 2 early migrants at Townsend Park Sept 7 (DW, SL); 4 on the Sept 18 field trip to upper Rayburn (3 off Townsend Park and 1 at the Etoile Flats; DW et al, PAS); and a high count of 7 in one morning over TX 103 at the Angelina Sept 27 (DW). The only Peregrine Falcons were singles over TX 103 at the Angelina Sept 27 (DW) and Kurth Lake Oct 21 (LD). An adult **Common Moorhen** accompanied by a juvenile at Kurth Lake on Sept 18 (LD) was a **first record for Angelina County** – and breeding confirmed at that! American Coot was also confirmed breeding at Kurth Lake when 2 juveniles were seen Sept 7-18 (LD). By Oct 1 over 500 coots had arrived there, increasing to 2000 on Oct 15 (LD et al, PAS).

With Sam Rayburn Reservoir at its lowest level ever this was an excellent season for **shorebirds**. David Wolf and members of PAS surveyed the lake regularly from July 1 through the end of October, recording a remarkable 25 species of shorebirds. Habitat was accessible along the upper Angelina and Attoyac Bayou arms of the lake and around the base of the TX 147 causeway throughout the season, shifting as the lake continued to recede. It is likely that there were other sites attracting shorebirds that we never located and to my knowledge nobody checked the lower 2/3 of this huge reservoir. A more complete report on our shorebird surveys will be posted in a later report, but here I include the rarities and a few highlights. An **American Golden-Plover** on the Etoile Flats (Nac Co.) Sept 15 (DW) was the first fall record for the Pineywoods since 1977. We have 7 previous fall records, all from CDF surveys from 1971-77. A bright adult **Snowy Plover** on an island off the TX 147 causeway (San Aug Co) July 26 (DW) was only our 3rd local record ever; all have been in the fall. The endangered **Piping Plover**, a rare migrant inland, made a good showing, with one adult at TX 103 at the Angelina (Ang Co) August 7; 5 (together) at the same spot the next day (August 8); and 4 on an island off the TX 147 causeway (San Aug Co) August 16 (all DW). The first American Avocet was one at Kurth Lake August 24 (LD); 6 were here on the Oct 15 field trip (LD et al, PAS); and one was on the tiny VFW pond in Lufkin Oct 24 (LD). A late Solitary Sandpiper was at the VFW pond Oct 24 (LD). Upland Sandpipers were widespread in small numbers on the grassy Rayburn flats. The first were 2 over TX 147 on July 26; peak count was 19 on August 19 at TX 103 at the Angelina; and the last at Rayburn were 3 over the Etoile Flats on Sept 12 (DW et al, PAS). However, the last sightings were singles 5 miles east of Nacogdoches on Sept 19 (LS) and over Central Hts Sept 20 (MHW), our latest fall dates ever by 2-3 days. A **Whimbrel** at the Angelina County Airport on Sept 19, after overnight storms, was a remarkable find and a **first record for Angelina County** (LD); I know of only one other fall record for the entire Pineywoods region. A distant **Long-billed Curlew** over the Marion Ferry flats (Nac. Co.) on the August 7 field trip (DW, PAS) was our 3rd local record ever, and the 2nd for fall. A **Marbled Godwit** photographed at the TX 147 causeway (San Aug Co) on August 16 (DW) was also our 3rd local record ever; all have been in the fall migration. One then showed up on the Marion Ferry flats (Nac Co.) on August 24 (DW). Yet another was further down the Angelina arm on the Etoile Flats (Nac Co) Sept 12-15 (DW et al). It is possible that all three reports involved the same bird. First dates for a few shorebirds included 2 Semipalmated Plover at TX 147

August 4 (DW); 1 Spotted Sandpiper at Kurth Lake July 16 (LD); 1 Greater Yellowlegs over Central Hts July 21 (MHW); 10 Least Sandpipers at Marion Ferry July 17 (DW, RT); and 3 Pectoral Sandpipers in Central Hts July 14 (DW). An adult **Laughing Gull** at Kurth Lake August 3 (LD) and 2 juveniles on an island off the TX 147 causeway August 16 (DW) were the only reports of this rare wanderer from the coast. 4 Franklin's Gulls on an island off TX 147 on Sept 30 were on the early side (DW), while the first flock was 40 over Kurth Lake Oct 15 (LD et al, PAS). An adult Ring-billed Gull on an island off TX 147 on July 26 was our **earliest ever** by six days; 3 were in this area August 4 (DW). Single **Least Terns**, always a rare migrant, were at the TX 147 causeway August 16 (DW) and Sept 4 (DW et al, PAS). The first Caspian Tern was an early adult over TX 147 causeway July 26 (DW). The season high count for Black Terns was 80 in the TX 147 area during Tropical Storm Lee (DW, PAS), plus more off Townsend Park later that morning (SL), while 20 at Kurth Lake Oct 15 were somewhat late (LD et al, PAS). 3 Forster's Terns at Kurth Lake July 9 were the first of the season (LD). Two adult **Sooty Terns** over the main basin above the TX 147 causeway (San Aug/Nac Cos) during Tropical Storm Lee on Sept 4 were a remarkable surprise (DW, PB et al, PAS field trip), though I later read that this storm brought many inland in Louisiana. They were observed off-and-on for over 1 ½ hours during the height of the blowing rain and wind produced by this rather minor storm. This was only our 2nd record ever of these storm-driven waifs, the first being 1-2 adults in this same area Sept 12-13, 1998, after Tropical Storm Frances.

The only Common Nighthawks were 12 about 5 miles east of Nacogdoches Sept 19 (LS). With almost no flowers "in the wild" due to the drought large numbers of Ruby-throated Hummingbirds visited local feeders. A big push of migrants appeared Sept 10-20 and then numbers peaked the last days of September. Most abruptly disappeared as a major cool front came through Sept 30-Oct 1 (m. obs.). A juvenile Northern Flicker on the TX 147 causeway July 20 confirmed local breeding at a site where they have nested in the past (RT, DW). The first migrant flickers were one near Nacogdoches Sept 24 (CW) and 4 around upper Rayburn on Sept 30 (DW). It was a good fall for Olive-sided Flycatchers, with more sightings than usual: 1 in Central Hts August 18 (DW), 1 at Eagle Point August 19 (DW); 1 at Townsend Park August 25 (DW); 2 at Townsend Park August 27 (DW et al, PAS); 1 in Central Hts Sept 7 (MHW, SL); and 1 at Etoile Park Sept 14 (DW et al). The last Eastern Wood-Pewee was at Ewing Park Oct 18 (DW). Single Yellow-bellied Flycatchers were at Eagle Point August 14 (DW et al, PAS); Central Hts August 18 (DW); near Appleby August 19 (MHW); Marion Ferry Sept 6 (DW); Central Hts Sept 8 (DW); and 2 at Etoile Park Sept 12 (DW). Alder Flycatchers were vocal in the Eagle Point area from August 14-24 (DW, PB, PAS), with a maximum of 5-10 on August 19-24 (DW). Willow Flycatchers were either less common or less vocal to confirm the identification, but a few were recorded August 27-Sept 1 (DW). The first Least Flycatcher was in Central Hts July 28-29 (DW); peak count was 10 in the Eagle Point area Sept 1 (DW); and the last was one still at Ellen Trout Park Oct 10 (LD). 6+ Red-eyed Vireos were very vocal in Central Hts August 17, but gone the next day (DW). A Philadelphia Vireo in Lufkin on Sept 21 was noteworthy for fall (LD). The first Bank Swallow was one over Eagle Point August 8 (DW) and the last was one over the TX 147 causeway Oct 9 (TR, PAS). A few **Cave Swallows** were found amidst the hordes of Cliff and Barn swallows gathering on upper Lake Rayburn in late August, with 2 over Eagle Point (Ang Co) August 19; 1 off Townsend Park (San Aug Co) August 25; and 1 at Ewing Park (Ang Co) Sept 1 (all DW). A migrant Bewick's Wren visited Central Hts Oct 7 (DW). Migrant Marsh Wrens were found Sept 27-Oct 15 (DW, LD et al), with a peak of 5+ at the TX 147 causeway Oct 9 (DW et al, PAS). An extremely early Ruby-crowned Kinglet was at the Native Plant Center in Nacogdoches Sept 7 (JS). Large numbers

of Blue-gray Gnatcatchers were on the move from at least July 31-October 11 (m. obs.). The first big push was 55+ at Eagle Point August 19; the next was 110+ at Ewing/Marion Ferry Parks Sept 1; and the season high count was 190+ around upper Lake Rayburn Sept 6 (DW). A just-fledged Gray Catbird photographed in Nacogdoches on July 17 was a nice confirmation of continued breeding in the area (CS). The first Brown Thrashers were moving by late August (1 in Central Hts August 29; DW), but the species did not become widespread until the last days of Sept and first week of Oct (m. obs.). The first flock of American Pipits was 20 at Lake Nacogdoches Oct 14 (CW).

Warblers were not especially numerous, but persistent observers had some nice sightings. Single Blue-winged Warblers at Marion Ferry Sept 6 (DW); Etoile Park Sept 12 (DW); and the Azalea Trail Sept 12 (LD) were the only ones. The first Nashville Warbler was at Etoile Park Sept 12 (DW). The first Yellow Warbler was at TX 103 at the Angelina on August 7 (DW et al, PAS) while the best counts were 20 in the Eagle Point area August 19 (DW); 25 total at Ewing and Etoile Parks Sept 11-12 (DW et al, PAS); and 32+ (at four sites) on upper Rayburn Sept 15 (DW). One at Ellen Trout Park Oct 6 was the last (LD). Single Magnolia Warblers were at Townsend Park Sept 15 & 18, perhaps the same individual (DW et al, PAS). A beautiful female **Black-throated Gray Warbler** at Alazan Bayou WMA Oct 20 (DW) was a **first record for Nacogdoches County and surrounding areas**. The only previous records that I know of for the entire Pineywoods are both from Walker County in the far southwest of the region, in 1984 and 1989. The first Black-throated Green Warbler was at Etoile Park Sept 11 (DW, LS). A Yellow-throated Warbler at Ewing Park Oct 11 was somewhat late (DW). Five migrant Prairie Warblers was more than usual, with singles at Marion Ferry July 31 (DW); Eagle Point August 7 (DW et al, PAS); Ewing and Etoile Parks Sept 6 (DW); and at the base of TX 147 Sept 15 (a late date; DW). More migrant American Redstarts were seen than usual, from Sept 6-Oct 17 (LD, DW et al). The peak count of Prothonotary Warblers was 5 at Eagle Point July 31 (DW); this species is largely gone by mid-August and singles at Kurth Lake August 31 (LD) and Eagle Point Sept 1 (DW) were the last. The first Northern Waterthrush were 2 at Eagle Point August 24 (DW); the high count was 10 at various sites on upper Rayburn Sept 6 (DW); and the last were singles in Lufkin Oct 2 (LD) and Etoile Park Oct 6 (DW). Mourning Warbler sightings included one found dead in Nacogdoches August 30 (Bonnie Lacey); 1 in Central Hts Sept 5 (DW); great looks at 2 on the PAS field trip to Ellen Trout Park Sept 17 (LD et al, PAS); 1 at Kurth Lake Sept 18 (LD); and 1 at Etoile Park Sept 30 (DW). The first big push of Common Yellowthroats was 25+ at the TX 103 at the Angelina flats on Sept 27 (DW). Canada Warbler sightings were 2 at Eagle Point Sept 1 (DW); 2 on Sept 15 (Etoile Park and TX 147; DW); and 1 at Townsend Park Sept 18 (DW et al, PAS). It was a banner fall for Wilson's Warblers and far more than usual were seen. The first were 7 (at 3 sites) on upper Rayburn (DW) Sept 6, a high count. Other good counts were 8 (at 4 sites) on upper Rayburn Sept 15 (DW) and 4 at Ellen Trout Park Oct 6 (LD). 1-3 were found on numerous other days (m. obs.), while the last were 2 at Ellen Trout Park Oct 17 (LD). A Yellow-breasted Chat at Ewing Park Oct 11 was late (DW). A **Scarlet Tanager** in Central Hts August 18 (DW) was a rare fall sighting and the earliest fall record ever for the Pineywoods by two days. It was the best fall for **Clay-colored Sparrows** in more than a decade, with at least 16 records of 1-2 birds at various sites from Sept 11-Oct 21. The first was a **very early** adult at Etoile Park Sept 11 (DW, LS). Grasshopper Sparrows were also more frequent than usual, with singles at Alazan Bayou WMA Oct 1 (SL, DW); Ellen Trout Park Oct 6 (LD); and Ewing Park flats Oct 6 (DW); and then 3 together at the TX 147 causeway Oct 21 (DW) and at least 2 at Alazan Bayou WMA Oct 22 (DW, LD). The first Lincoln's Sparrow was one at Etoile Park Sept 27 (DW), while the first numbers were 5 in Lufkin Oct 2

(LD). Dickcissels were a common sight around upper Lake Rayburn this fall, frequenting the dried-up flats covered with tall grass and weeds. The highest count was 105 at TX 103 at the Angelina Sept 27, but they were seen on every trip from July 17-Oct 23 (DW, m. obs.). One at Ellen Trout Park Oct 17 was new for that site (LD). This is a very prolonged migration period, quite different from the mad northward rush of this species in the spring. A male **Yellow-headed Blackbird** in Diboll on Sept 15 (RT) was a very rare surprise and one of our very few fall records. A Great-tailed Grackle over Etoile Park Sept 12 (DW) was a rare sight away from town, while high counts of up to 25 were noted at the Wal-Marts in Lufkin (LD) and Nacogdoches (RT) through early October. They seemed to disappear after this. The best push of migrant Orchard Orioles was 32 in the Marion Ferry area July 17 (DW). This species leaves very early and the last sighting of an adult male was July 24, while females and immature birds were seen through Sept 11 (DW et al). A few Baltimore Orioles were seen Sept 4-Oct 7, including at hummingbird feeders, but the numbers were low (m. obs.). A rare out-of-season American Goldfinch was detected over Townsend Park Sept 18 (TR).

Observers: PB = Peter Barnes; LD = Louis Debetaz; CDF = Charles Dean Fisher; RH = Ruth Heino; SL = Susie Lower; PAS = Pineywoods Audubon Society field trip; LP = Linda Price; **PAS** = Pineywoods Audubon Society field trip; TR = Thomas Riecke; RS = Rick Schaefer; CS = Cliff Shackelford; JS = Julie Shackelford; LS = Les Stewart; RT = Robert Truss; CW = Carol Wells; DW = David Wolf; MHW = Mimi Hoppe Wolf; m. obs. = many observers.

Localities in Angelina County: Angelina County Airport; Diboll; Eagle Point (receding pools and shoreline woods just above TX 103 at the Angelina arm of Lake Rayburn in **Angelina Co**); Ellen Trout Park (in Lufkin); Ewing Park (mudflats and shoreline brush just below TX 103 at the Angelina arm in **Angelina Co**); Kurth Lake; Marion Ferry (Ang Co).

Localities in Nacogdoches County: Alazan Bayou WMA; Appleby, Central Heights; Etoile Flats (the maor receding basin just above TX 103 at the Angelina arm of Lake Rayburn in **Nacogdoches Co**); Etoile Park (woods adjacent to Etoile Flats on the Angelina arm of Rayburn in **Nacogdoches Co**); Lake Nacogdoches; Loco Valley; Marion Ferry (Nac Co); Nacogdoches (town).

Localities in San Augustine County: Townsend Park; TX 147 causeway and nearby.