

Late Fall/ Winter Bird Report – November 1, 2013 – February 28, 2014

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This report covers a very long period, during which it was cold earlier than expected, got colder by mid-Dec, and then stayed cold through January-February and even into early March. It's been a long time since we've had such a prolonged cold winter and even as I finish writing this report (March 11) the signs of spring are late. Certainly this weather must have impacted our wintering birds, but few trends were discernible. There were no winter invaders like Red-breasted Nuthatch or Pine Siskin to report, and very few Purple Finches (and these only in Jan-Feb). Special thanks go to Louis Debetaz for his regular coverage of the waterfowl and other waterbirds on Kurth Lake and the Lufkin parks over the course of the season.

Report:

Nov 11, a warm day ahead of a major cold front, brought the first major southbound push of Snow Geese, with 4 flocks over Central Hts (MHW) and some over Loco Valley (RH). Spring migrant geese were heard going north on Feb 20 (JW; MHW). The first good numbers of ducks appeared on Kurth Lake Nov 2 (LD). Mallard has become a surprisingly scarce winter bird in recent decades, but the cold weather brought a push of 60 to Alazan Bayou WMA Dec 12 (DW), the highest count received (most were gone by the Dec 15 CBC). An early **Blue-winged Teal** at Ellen Trout Park Feb 3 was likely a spring migrant (LD). Northern Pintail sightings were 2 at Kurth Lake Nov 2 (LD); 6 at Kurth Lake Nov 23 (LD); 30 at Alazan Bayou WMA on cold Dec 12, a high count for there (DW); and 14 at Kurth Lake Dec 13 (LD et al; PAS). None were found on the Nac CBC Dec 15, but 2 were at Kurth Lake Dec 17 (DW, TR). 19 at Kurth Lake Feb 4 (LD) were likely the first northbound migrants. This prairie duck is irregular in our area and rarely lingers for long. Canvasbacks were in high numbers on Kurth Lake in December, including 600+ counted on the very cold and wet PAS field trip Dec 6 (LD et al; PAS). 1060 at TX 147 on Feb 2 was season high count (DW). Good counts of Redheads at the Nac ponds were 70 on Nov 27 and 125 on Dec 2, but the numbers slowly dropped through December and by late January there were none there (DW). This seems to be a regular pattern for this species in our area. A high count of 180 Redheads at Kurth Lake Feb 17 may have reflected spring movement already (LD). The first Greater Scaup was at the Nac ponds Nov 27; one or two were seen here sporadically through at least Jan 29 (DW). Two were at Kurth Lake Dec 6 (LD et al; PAS) and one was there Dec 17 (DW, TR). The first Bufflehead were 7 at Kurth Lake Nov 16 (LD), while 30 at the Nac ponds Dec 6-12 was a high count for this site (DW). The only Common Goldeneye reported were a bright male at the Nac ponds Dec 2 (DW); one at Country Club Lake in Lufkin Jan 15 (LD); 9 on Lake Rayburn (TX 147 and Powell Park) on Feb 2 (DW); and 3 at TX 147 on Rayburn Feb 26 (DW). A female Red-breasted Merganser was on Kurth Lake Dec 13-Feb 4 (LD, DW et al). A female **Common Merganser** appeared on Kurth Lake with the Red-breasted on Dec 13 (LD et al; PAS), but the identification was not confirmed until the CBC on Dec 15 (LD). It was not seen again after this. This species is a great rarity in our region that appears only with the coldest weather and rarely stays around for more than a day or two. The first Hooded Mergansers were 3 at Kurth Lake Nov 10 (LD). 40 at the Nac ponds Dec 6 was the fall high count there and then numbers dropped until none were present by late January (m. obs.).

A **Pacific Loon** was carefully studied off TX 147 on Rayburn on Feb 21 (DW). The first fall Common Loons were one at Lake Nacogdoches Nov 11 (CW); 2 migrating over Central Hts Nov 24 (DW); and 3 on Kurth Lake Nov 26 (LD). 15 at the TX 147 causeway Dec 1 was a good count for early in the season (DW); 24 there Feb 21 was the season high count (DW). A push of 17 Horned Grebes at the TX 147 causeway Dec 1 was a high count for this area (DW, RT). For some reason this species did not utilize Kurth Lake much this winter – we missed it on the Nacogdoches CBC – but 2 were seen there on the cold and wet field trip on Dec 6 (LD et al; PAS) and 3 were there Feb 1-17 (LD). Southbound migrating Am. White Pelicans were seen more often than expected, including 30 over Lake Nacogdoches Nov 5 (CW); 50 over Lufkin that same day (AM); 50 over Central Hts Nov 11 (MHW); and 35 over Douglass Dec 18 (CW). A few **Neotropic Cormorants** were found amidst the hordes of Double-crested early in the winter, 2 at the TX 147 causeway Dec 1 (DW, RT) and one at Kurth Lake Dec 17 (TR, DW). 12 (coming into breeding plumage) at TX 147 on Feb 26 were likely spring arrivals (DW). This species has greatly increased in our region in the last few years, but almost all of them leave for the winter. They are easier to find in winter at the Lake Livingston spillway, where there were at least 8 amidst 1200 cormorants on Dec 29 (DW, RT). A single wintering **Anhinga** was seen irregularly at Ellen Trout Park through at least Feb 14 (LD et al). Good numbers of Great Egrets lingered around the Lufkin lakes all winter (m. obs.), but there were few in the Nacogdoches area (only 4 were found on the CBC on Dec 15).

The last Osprey of the fall was at Kurth Lake Nov 2 (LD), while one at TX 147 Feb 26 was likely an early migrant (DW). A **White-tailed Kite** near Douglass Nov 14 was seen again on Feb 9 (CW). The nesting Bald Eagles at Ellen Trout Park had two young visible in the nest by Feb 3 (LD; m. obs.). An adult Cooper's Hawk first seen on the Azalea Trail (Lufkin) March 7 was carrying nesting material March 11 (LD). Breeding has been confirmed here in the past. A rarely-reported "**Harlan's**" Hawk was at a stripmine in Rusk Co Feb 2 (RS). Two Merlins were found on the Nac CBC Dec 15 (SL, TR, LD). This species is rare in winter, but can turn up just about anywhere. A **Peregrine Falcon** at Lake Naconiche Dec 25 was a rare winter find (CW, RW). Another was seen sheltering on the TX 147 causeway during the howling norther on Jan 2; likely the same bird was here Feb 26 (both DW). One has wintered at this site several times in the recent past. Virginia Rails were heard at Alazan Bayou late Jan (TH) and Feb 1 (DW). Great numbers of American Coots were present on Kurth Lake by early Dec, estimated at 9000-11,000 birds (LD, DW et al), but numbers gradually declined through Jan-Feb. **4 Sandhill Cranes** migrating over Alazan Bayou WMA on the Nac CBC Dec 15 (DW) were a very rare sighting and the first time this species has been seen on the Nac CBC. 2 late American Avocets visited Kurth Lake Dec 1 (LD). A Spotted Sandpiper at the Nac ponds Dec 12 did not stay around (DW), nor did one at Kurth Lake on the Nac CBC Dec 15 (LD); another was at Ellen Trout Park Jan 17 & 24 (LD et al; PAS); one was at Kurth Lake again Feb 4 & 17 (LD); and one was at TX 147 Feb 26 (DW). Late migrant or lingering Greater Yellowlegs were 4 at the TX 147 causeway (Angelina Co end) on Dec 1 (DW, RT); a total of 3 on the Nac CBC Dec 15 (only the 2nd time for this species on the count; SL, TR, DW); 5 at Alazan Bayou WMA Jan 1 (DW); 5 at the base of the TX 147 causeway Jan 2 (DW); and 1 in Nacogdoches Feb 2 (DW). The first Bonaparte's Gulls were 7 at Kurth Lake (LD) and 1 at TX 147 (DW, RT) on Dec 1; on Dec 3 there was a high count of 45 migrants at Kurth Lake (LD). One **Laughing Gull** was at Kurth Lake Dec 1 & 3 (LD) and then a surprising 3 (2 adults; one first-cycle) were there on the Dec 6 PAS field trip (LD, DB, LS, DW). One was still present for the Nac CBC Dec 15 (LD), but none were seen after this date. 16 Laughing Gulls (half adults) were at the Lake Livingston spillway Dec 29 (DW, RT). **Two Lesser Black-backed Gulls** were also at the Lake Livingston spillway Dec 29 (DW, RT), an adult (photographed) and a first-cycle. One adult was

here Feb 23 (DW, RT). This is the only regular spot for this rare species in East Texas. A first-cycle Herring Gull visited Kurth Lake Dec 15 (LD) and Dec 17 (DW, TR).

White-winged Doves continued their slow expansion into our region this winter. One wintered in Central Hts Dec 30-Feb 26 and then was singing March 10-11 (DW, RT, MHW). **Four** were seen at Jones Park in Lufkin on the Jan 17 field trip (LD et al; PAS) and then a very vocal bird was found in Nacogdoches Feb 26 (CS). 2 *Archilochus sp?* hummingbirds were still in Loco Valley Oct 20; one that may have been a female Black-chinned lingered there until Nov 12 (RH). Immature male **Rufous Hummingbirds** visited Douglass Sept 28-29 (CW) and Central Hts from Nov 4-Jan 6 (MHW, DW). A female *Selasphorus* (likely Rufous) was at a different site in Central Hts Nov 27-early Jan (LS). Both Central Hts birds disappeared just ahead of very cold weather. A female **"Red-shafted" Flicker** was photographed at Alazan Bayou WMA Dec 5 (Linda Price); we have few records of this race from our region and this was the first in many years. The first returning Purple Martins were 1 at Ellen Trout Park Feb 3 and 25 at Kurth Lake Feb 4 (both LD). Two very early Tree Swallows were at Kurth Lake Feb 11 (LD), while 33 on upper Rayburn Feb 26 was a high count for so early (DW). The first Barn Swallows were 10 at Kurth Lake Feb 25 (LD). **"The bird of the season" was Cave Swallow**, our first winter records ever. The first sighting was 25 at Kurth Lake on Nov 26 (LD) and then varying numbers were regularly seen here through Feb 11 (LD; m. obs.), with a high count of 42 on Dec 17 (TR, DW). From 1-5 were also seen at Ellen Trout Park in Lufkin Dec 9-Feb 3 (LD). The first sighting in Nacogdoches County was 13 at the Nac ponds Nov 27 (DW, RT, CW). They were not seen at this site again, but 1-5 were seen at two other county locations to at least Jan 1 (TH, TR, DW) and on March 14 there were 9 back at the nesting site at Alazan Bayou (DW). This species has been breeding locally in small numbers since 2008, but these are the first sightings later than Oct 10. Red-breasted Nuthatches were completely lacking this winter, quite a contrast to last winter's big invasion. Only one Bewick's Wren was found on the Nac CBC Dec 15 (RT), but another wintered outside the count circle in Central Hts (MHW, DW). Sedge Wrens were very scarce all winter and may have been pushed further south by the cold weather (DW). Two Marsh Wrens were at the base of the TX 147 causeway Dec 1 (DW, RT); one was at Mize Lake Dec 8 (RT, DW); and one was found on the Nac CBC on Dec 15 at Alazan Bayou WMA (BB, CS). No wintering Blue-gray Gnatcatchers were found, not surprising given the severity of the weather, and the last was one at the TX 147 causeway Dec 1 (DW, RT). Hermit Thrush was more common than usual this winter, with 163 on the Nac CBC Dec 15 a very high count (m. obs.). American Robins appeared in good numbers beginning early in the season. The first high counts was 1095 over Central Hts Nov 24 and 2155 on Nov 26 (both DW). A Gray Catbird was in Nacogdoches Dec 18-Jan 1, but not thereafter (LS). At least 2 Sprague's Pipits were regularly flushed at the Nacogdoches Airport in Dec-Jan (DW, SL et al). This is our only regular site for this scarce grassland species in our region. The first Cedar Waxwings were 10 over Central Hts Nov 11 (MHW).

Single Common Yellowthroats were at Alazan Bayou Dec 12 (DW); the Nac ponds Dec 15 for the CBC (RS); and at Kurth Lake Dec 17 (DW, TR), but none were seen after this. Lark Sparrows again wintered in Central Hts. By Dec 26 there were 4 present, but only 1-3 were around in Jan-Feb (MHW, DW). A Grasshopper Sparrow at the Nac Airport Jan 1 (DW) was the only report. An excellent count of 8 Henslow's Sparrows on the Nac CBC Dec 15 was due to the hard efforts of the Nac Airport party (SL, WC, TR); one was seen here Dec 20 (DW). The first Fox Sparrows, one of our latest winter arrivals, were 3 at Alazan Bayou WMA Nov 29 (DW, RT). One was still at Alazan Bayou WMA March 2 (DB, LD, LS). The first

Harris's Sparrows were in Douglass Nov 11 (CW) and near Lake Naconiche on Jan 1 (RH, CW); none were found on the Nac CBC. One visited Central Hts Jan 30-Feb 6 (DW, MHW) and another showed up near Lufkin Feb 4-6 (JP). The first White-crowned Sparrow was one in Douglass Oct 23 (CW). The first Dark-eyed Juncos were singles Nov 10-11 in Douglass (a rare "**Pink-sided**"; CW) and Central Hts Nov 10 (MHW); the next was in Nacogdoches Nov 24 (LS). The "**Pink-sided**" was seen in Douglass again on Feb 15 (CW). **Our other notable winter invader** this season was **Rusty Blackbird**. This species is typically one of the very last winter birds to appear. The first were 18 in Nacogdoches during a nasty cold front on Dec 8 (DW). A flock of 60 at Alazan Bayou WMA on Dec 11 was the field trip highlight (DW et al; PAS) and then record-setting numbers were tallied on the Nac CBC on Dec 15, with 6 of 12 parties reporting them, for a **grand total of 1203** (DW; m. obs.). This is 6X our previous high count! Flocks ranging in size from 20-210 birds were then seen regularly around Nacogdoches town from Dec 22-Feb 6 (DW; Dennis Shepler). The last report was 25 in Nacogdoches on March 11 (LS). The first **Brewer's Blackbirds** were 16 in Central Hts Dec 24 that dwindled to 6 on Jan 1 (DW). On Feb 4 there were 200 (a high count) at a feedlot just south of Alto (Cherokee Co; BW). One lonely **Great-tailed Grackle** at the Nacogdoches Wal-Mart Dec 19 (SL) and a male at the North St Kroger in Nacogdoches Feb 20 (CW) were the only local reports this winter. Even though this species has built up in numbers in Lufkin and Nacogdoches the last couple of summers most of them continue to disappear for the winter. Purple Finches were scarce and the first was not reported until Dec 28, a female at feeders in Loco Valley (RH). The only other reports were one in Douglass on Jan 23 (CW); near Lufkin Jan 24 (JP); and a small flock in Nacogdoches in mid-Feb (fide CS). None seemed to stay around. The first American Goldfinches were 3 in Douglass Nov 10 (CW); birds were heard over Central Hts Nov 11 (MHW); and one was at a feeder in Nacogdoches Nov 22 (LS). Numbers of goldfinches on the CBC were "average", but by the end of January everyone's feeders were inundated with them (m. obs.). Most left the feeders abruptly in mid-Feb. In contrast to the huge late winter/spring invasion last year, Pine Siskins were completely lacking this winter.

Observers: DB = David Bell; BB = Brent Burt; WC = Warren Conway; LD = Louis Debetaz; TH = Tyson Hart; RH = Ruth Heino; SL = Susie Lower; AM = Alison Maxwell; m. obs. = many observers; Nac CBC = Nacogdoches Christmas Bird Count (Dec 15, 2013); PAS = Pineywoods Audubon Society field trip; JP = Jimmie Putnam; TR = Thomas Riecke; RS = Rick Schaefer; CS = Cliff Shackelford; LS = Les Stewart; RT = Robert Truss; CW = Carol Wells; RW = Ron Wells; BW = Becky Whisenant; JW = Jerry Winker; MHW = Mimi Hoppe Wolf; DW = David Wolf.

Localities in Angelina County: Azalea Trail (Lufkin); Country Club Lake (in Lufkin); Ellen Trout Park (in Lufkin); Kurth Lake; Lufkin (town).

In Nacogdoches County: Alazan Bayou WMA; Central Heights (=Hts); Douglass; Lake Nacogdoches; Lake Naconiche; Loco Valley; Mize Lake; Nacogdoches (town); Nacogdoches Airport; Nacogdoches sewage ponds (= Nac ponds); Pecan Park (in Nacogdoches).

In San Augustine County: TX 147 causeway (unless specified as Angelina County side).