

Winter Bird Report Pineywoods Audubon Society
(December 1, 2015 – February 29, 2016)
by David E. Wolf

The **winter of 2015-16** may be summed up as **“mild” weatherwise and “boring” birdwise.**

Temperatures were above average the entire winter, not only here but also in most of the eastern half of the continent. In fact, it was considered the warmest winter on record in the Lower 48. Undoubtedly the weather had a big effect on our winter birds – or lack there-of. Most of our expected species had already been spotted by early December, but in relatively low numbers. We then kept waiting for greater numbers to appear, but they never really did, and many species seemed to be leaving by mid to late February. Did winter really come and go this easily?

The only report of northbound geese was a flock of 140 Snow over Central Heights on Feb 12; a second flock was heard (MHW, DW). 1300+ Wood Ducks leaving the Shawnee Bottoms at dawn on Dec 20 on the Nacogdoches CBC was a spectacular count (BB, CS). A male **Blue-winged Teal** at the Nacogdoches sewer ponds Jan 1 was a rare winter sighting (DW), while a pair at Alazan Bayou WMA Feb 14 were the first spring migrants (DW). On Feb 13 a single Northern Pintail was at Alazan Bayou WMA (LD et al; PAS) and 2 flew over the TX 147 causeway on Rayburn (DW); presumably these were spring migrants. The season high count of Redheads at the Nacogdoches ponds was 215 on Dec 11 (DW). A male Greater Scaup was off the TX 147 causeway Jan 2 (DW). The first Common Goldeneyes of the season were 2 at Kurth Lake on the PAS field trip Dec 11 (LD et al; PAS) and the next was 1 at Ellen Trout Park Dec 14 (LD), but none were reported after this. A female Red-breasted Merganser visited the Nacogdoches ponds Dec 17 (DW), an odd location for this species..

22 Common Loons at the TX 147 causeway Dec 16 was the season high count (DW). 29 Horned Grebes off the TX 147 causeway on Rayburn on Dec 16 was a high count for this area; 10 were still here Feb 13 (both DW). 4 Horned Grebes on Toledo Bend at Sabinetown on Jan 13 confirmed their presence on this huge lake (DB). An adult **Neotropic Cormorant** was on the Angelina County end of the TX 147 bridge on Rayburn on Dec 16 (DW), but there were no sightings after this until Feb 13, when at least 5 were at the TX 147 causeway (DW). These would seem to be arriving birds, making them one of our earliest spring migrants. An Anhinga at Ellen Trout Park Dec 4 was the last sighting this winter (LD). An **American Bittern** was at Alazan Bayou WMA on the Nacogdoches CBC Dec 20 (DW).

A late Osprey came over the Azalea Trail in Lufkin on Dec 7 (LD). By late January one eaglet was visible in the well-watched Bald Eagle nest at Ellen Trout Park in Lufkin (LD et al). Single **Common Gallinules** were seen at Kurth Lake Dec 20 (Janet & Ron Cook; photos; on the Nacogdoches CBC) and Jan 26 (LD). Single Spotted Sandpipers wintered at Kurth Lake (LD) and along the TX 147 causeway (DW). Eleven Greater Yellowlegs at Alazan Bayou Feb 13-14 (LD et al on PAS field trip; DW) were presumably early spring migrants. A few Bonaparte's Gulls were spotted at Kurth Lake and the TX 147 causeway, but numbers were low (LD, DW). A high count of 796+ Forster's Terns was tallied over the TX 147 causeway Dec 16 (DW), while 7 low over flooded Alazan Bayou WMA on Jan 1 were unexpected at this location (DW). A **White-winged Dove** was in Douglass on Feb 28 (CW). This species is still rare and unpredictable in our region. **Merlin** is rare in winter, but singles were at Alazan Bayou WMA on the Nacogdoches CBC Dec 20 (DW) and on Toledo Bend at Sabinetown Dec 28 (DB).

The first Purple Martin was 1 at Sabinetown (Sabine Co) on Feb 7 (DB), while the first numbers were 60 at Kurth Lake Feb 23 (LD). A single Tree Swallow was also sighted at Kurth Lake Feb 23 (LD). **Cave Swallows** turned up again this winter, a single at Kurth Lake on Dec 17 (LD) and 7 at the TX 147 causeway on Feb 13 (DW). These latter birds may have been spring arrivals; a high count of 75 **Cave** at Kurth Lake Feb 23 (LD) almost certainly were. A very tardy **Barn Swallow** at Kurth Lake on the Nacogdoches CBC Dec 20 (LD et al) was a first ever for count day. Blue-gray Gnatcatchers were found more often than usual this winter, presumably due to the mild conditions, including 1 at TX 147 causeway Dec 16 (DW); 1 at Lake Alazan on the Dec 12 field trip (DW et al; PAS); 1 at the Nacogdoches ponds Dec 17 (DW); 3 on Nacogdoches CBC on Dec 20 (RS; PAS); 1 at the Nacogdoches ponds Jan 1 (DW); 1 in Sabinetown (Sabine Co) Jan 13 (DB); and 2 at Indian Mounds (Sabine Co) on Jan 15 and 1 there Feb 9 (DB). A Gray Catbird was at Alazan Bayou WMA on the Dec 6 field trip (LD, LS et al; PAS) and again on Dec 23 (DW), while another was found on the Nacogdoches CBC Dec 20.

From 1-3 **Lark Sparrows** again wintered in Central Hts from Nov 23-early March (DW, MHW); a few have wintered here for most of the last 20 years, but they are rarely found elsewhere in our area at this season. 10+ Fox Sparrows were already at Alazan Bayou WMA Dec 6 (DW et al; PAS), while the peak count here was 18 on Jan 27 (DW). The first Harris's Sparrow was one in Central Heights Dec 2 (DW) and the next was one at the SFA Experimental Forest gate Dec 6 (LS). It was a good winter for this species and they were later found at several more locations, including 4 at once in Central Hts Jan 17 (DW) and a high count of 9 in w. Nacogdoches County Feb 14 (CW). Birds leaving a large blackbird roost at Lake Alazan Dec 15 were roughly estimated at 19,500 Red-winged Blackbirds and 20,000 Common Grackles with a smattering of cowbirds amidst them. On the Nacogdoches CBC Dec 20 an estimated 79,400 red-wings were counted here, though grackle numbers were about the same. The first Brewer's Blackbird was one in Central Heights Dec 5 (DW) and 12 were at their usual site in w. Nacogdoches Co. on Jan 6 (DW), but there were no other reports. Very few Rusty Blackbirds were found this winter. 26 Great-tailed Grackles were at the intersection of US 59 and Loop 224 in Nacogdoches on Jan 19 (DW). Have they been here all winter and we've all just missed them? A few single Purple Finches briefly visited feeders in Nacogdoches Dec 2 (TD); Loco Valley Dec 15 (RH) and Nacogdoches Jan 19 (LS; photos), but they clearly were not widespread or numerous. The season highlight was a **Common Redpoll** that visited John & Thelma Dalmas's feeders in Nacogdoches from Jan 10-Feb 1, 2016 (JD, TD; m. obs.; photos). This was our 2nd record ever of a bird extremely rare anywhere in Texas. Special thanks go to John and Thelma for sharing this bird with many other observers, especially since it was most reliable in the early morning! A very few Pine Siskins were reported sporadically in January and February, including 3 banded in Nacogdoches in early January by Chuck Ely, but it was clearly not a major invasion winter for them.

Observers: BB = Brent Burt; DB = David Bell; JD, TD = John & Thelma Dalmas; LD = Louis Debetaz; RH = Ruth Heino; PAS = Pineywoods Audubon Society (field trip); CS = Cliff Shackelford; LS = Les Stewart; CW = Carol Wells; DW = David Wolf; MHW = Mimi Hoppe Wolf.

Localities in Angelina County: Ellen Trout Park (in Lufkin); Kurth Lake

In Nacogdoches County: Alazan Bayou WMA; Central Heights (=Hts); Douglass; Lake Alazan; Loco Valley; Nacogdoches (town); Nacogdoches sewer ponds; SFA Experimental Forest..

In San Augustine County: TX 147 causeway on Lake Rayburn (unless specified as the Angelina County end of the bridge).