

Winter Bird Report for Pineywoods Audubon Society
December 1, 2019 – February 28, 2020
(by David E. Wolf)

In general this was a mild winter, both here and across almost the entire continent. Locally we never had any notably cold weather or wintry precipitation, though fronts were quite regular. It was not especially warm, however, and many days were chilly and damp and very few were warm and sunny. It was also quite wet, with regular rains throughout the season, the heaviest in the latter half.

How did the birds respond? Well, it seems like many of them never flew south to us this winter! Many of our most typical winter birds were in notably low numbers all winter, including Killdeer, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Northern Flicker, Brown Creeper, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Eastern Bluebird, Hermit Thrush, Brown Thrasher, American Goldfinch, Dark-eyed Junco, White-throated and Song Sparrows, Eastern Meadowlark and Yellow-rumped Warbler. Hard-weather species like Fox Sparrow, Eastern Towhee and Rusty Blackbird were almost lacking, while winter invaders like Purple Finch and Pine Siskin were non-existent and there were only a couple of reports of Red-breasted Nuthatch. Not surprisingly, most of the few species up in numbers were those that are more numerous in mild winters, like Great Egret, White-eyed and Blue-headed Vireos, House Wren, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Chipping and Lincoln's Sparrows, and Orange-crowned Warbler. After three decades now of generally mild winters I have to wonder if many, perhaps most, of our winter birds are undergoing notable shifts in their winter ranges in response to the changing climatic conditions. One can only hope that this indicates that they are able to adapt!

The **50th** Nacogdoches Christmas Bird Count, conducted on Dec 15, came in with a final species total of 110, slightly below the 30-year average. It was a warm and windy day, lousy conditions for winter birding in our area, and, as noted above, the numbers of most wintering species were very low, so this was a very good species total. Thanks to all who helped!

Bird Report:

5 Greater White-fronted Geese in a pasture in Central Heights on rainy 16 Dec were southbound migrants (DW), while on Feb 15 a flock of 40 northbound migrants passed over Alazan Bayou WMA (DB, DW et al; PAS field trip). 450+ Gadwall at the Nacogdoches sewage ponds (hereafter "Nac ponds") on Jan 1 was the season high count (DW). The first spring Blue-winged Teal were 2 at the Nac ponds Feb 24 (DW). 3 Northern Pintail were found by 2 parties on the Nacogdoches CBC Dec 15 (RS, ET, RT). We often miss this species on the count. More pintail records were a pair at Alazan Bayou WMA Jan 31; a male there Feb 21; and 4 headed north over the TX 147 causeway Feb 6 (all DW). The first Redheads on the Nac ponds all winter were 47 on Jan 30 and by Feb 5 they had increased to 80. The peak count was 110 Feb 14-17, but they were down to 60 on Feb 24 and these were still present into early March (DW). A female Red-breasted Merganser was at the TX 147 causeway on Rayburn Dec 18 (DW). Peak counts of Hooded Merganser were 34 near Center Jan 18 (J Sm) and 55 at Alazan Bayou WMA Jan 31 and Feb 20 (DW). Pied-billed Grebes wintered on Kurth Lake in large numbers, with 150-250 tallied on various visits from mid-Dec to late Feb (m. obs.). 5 Horned Grebes off the TX 147 causeway on Rayburn Dec 18 were the only ones found here all season (DW), while 35+ above Toledo Bend dam (Newton Co) on Jan 27 was the season high count (DB, J Sm).

A White-winged Dove calling in Nacogdoches beginning Feb 10 was first local report all winter (CS, RS); but then one appeared in Central Hts Feb 17-28 (DW, MHW) and a pair was found in north Nacogdoches Feb 18 (DW). Small numbers were present in Lufkin (GH) and Center (J Sm) all winter. The immature male **Rufous Hummingbird** that appeared in Sabinetown Nov 10 stayed through Jan 5 (DB). 34 Wilson's Snipe in a flooded field near Center on Jan 18 was a high count for one spot (J Sm). A very late migrant **Solitary Sandpiper** came through Central Hts Dec 17 (DW). **Greater Yellowlegs** showed up in unusual numbers this winter. The first was one at the Nac ponds Dec 8-15 (DB, J Sm et al; PAS field trip) and again on the Nac CBC Dec 15 (RS). Then 7 were at Alazan Bayou WMA on Jan 1 (DW); 19 were near Center Jan 18 (J Sm); and 18 were at Alazan Bayou WMA Jan 31- Feb 8 (DW, CS,

JS). **4 Laughing Gulls** on Toledo Bend Reservoir near Sabinetown (Sabine Co) on Jan 15 (DB) may have been a winter first for this huge lake. A Herring Gull was present on Kurth Lake at least Dec 14-15, including on the Nacogdoches CBC (GH et al). Season high counts for Common Loon were 21 off the TX 147 causeway on Rayburn Dec 18 (DW) and 22 on Toledo Bend near Sabinetown Jan 15 (DB). We finally got a Neotropic Cormorant on count day for the Nacogdoches CBC on Dec 15, one photographed at Kurth Lake (J Sm, GH et al). An immature appeared at the Nac ponds Dec 16 and an adult was there Jan 7; one or both were present regularly through Feb 5 (DW). Another was at Ellen Trout Park Jan 5 (DW). Winter Anhingas were 2 at Ellen Trout Park Dec 1 (KBE); 2 at a pond near Joaquin (Shelby Co) Dec 30 (J Sm); and 2 at North Toledo Bend WMA on Feb 9 (J Sm). A Great Blue Heron colony at North Toledo Bend WMA (Shelby Co) already had ca 12 nests on Feb 9 (J Sm). This species begins nesting early! 19-22 Great Egrets seen regularly at Alazan Bayou WMA Jan 31–March 4 was a high count for winter (DW, CS et al). Late Ospreys visited Kurth Lake Dec 14 (GH) (not present on the CBC the next day) and the Toledo Bend Dam Jan 27 (DB, J Sm). **Crested Caracara** seems to be slowly expanding its range eastward into our region and this season brought the **3rd and 4th records** for Nacogdoches Co, one at Alazan Bayou WMA on the Nac CBC Dec 15 (CS, R Th) and another feeding on roadkill in north Nacogdoches town Jan 25 (JS). I do not know of any sightings in Angelina or counties east of us, but this species has become semi-regular in small numbers in the counties just to the west. A Merlin photographed at the Angelina County Airport Dec 9 was not seen again (GH).

An **Ash-throated Flycatcher** was seen well at Carrice Creek (TX 21) on Toledo Bend Reservoir (Sabine Co) Jan 4 (DB). It was in bushes growing on the grassy flats of the exposed lake bottom. This is a casual fall and early winter vagrant for which there are fewer than 10 records for the Pineywoods. Interestingly, several other sightings have been in similar habitat on Lakes Rayburn and Livingston. The last Scissor-tailed Flycatcher for the year was one in Central Heights Dec 1 (MHW). White-eyed Vireo was easier to find than usual this winter, including 3 on the Nac CBC Dec 15; 3 in Shelby Co on Dec 24 (J Sm); 1 in Lufkin Feb 13 (GH); and 1 at Alazan Bayou WMA Feb 15 (DB, J Sm, DW et al; PAS field trip). A flock of 11 **Fish Crows** heard and seen close at hand in San Augustine town Dec 4 (CS) were in a strange location for this species, which is almost unknown in the central Pineywoods. The first Purple Martins were at least 10 over Kurth Lake on the Feb 6 cold front (DB, J Sm). The first Cave Swallows were 12 at the Nac ponds on rainy Feb 19 and 40 were over Kurth Lake the next day (DW). The only Red-breasted Nuthatches were singles in Nacogdoches Dec 26 (RS) and Feb 15 (Aaron Bradley, CS et al at the Native Plant Center); the only other report this season was one in Lufkin in late Oct (GH). After several failed attempts your compiler finally caught up with a Bewick's Wren in the clearcut on FM 1275 in s. Nac Co on Dec 24 (DW). One was first found here Nov 17 (RT) and one was seen here on the CBC on Dec 15 (MHW, JS). Blue-gray Gnatcatchers were widespread in small numbers throughout this mild winter (m. obs.). A Gray Catbird that appeared in Nacogdoches Nov 17 was present to at least Dec 15 for the Nac CBC (CS, JS). A total of 6 catbirds on the Nac CBC was more than expected (m. obs.). From 6-8 Sprague's Pipits were located on multiple visits to the Nacogdoches Airport from Dec 8-Feb 21 (DW et al). With the entire airport mowed short the habitat was good for this species this winter. 500+ Cedar Waxwings on the PAS field to a clearcut in s. Nac. Co. on Dec 8 was the first significant count this winter (DW et al; PAS). Large numbers invaded Nacogdoches in mid-Feb, including 500 at the Native Plant Center Feb 18 (DW) and by the end of the month they were moving northward in good numbers.

American Goldfinch were remarkably scarce all winter (m. obs.) and there were no reports at all of Pine Siskin or Purple Finch. A cooperative Grasshopper Sparrow flushed from a roadside just east of Nacogdoches Dec 4 was a nice surprise (DW). With the mild weather large flocks of Chipping Sparrows were present throughout the region (m. obs.); one of the few species "up" in numbers this winter. A Lark Sparrow first appeared at a regular winter site in Central Hts Dec 31 and then 3 were present by Jan 4 (DW), while a flock of 7 a few miles east of Nacogdoches Feb 2 was more of a surprise (DW). Fox Sparrow was almost non-existent this winter and only one was found on the Nac CBC Dec 15 (DW). The only Harris's Sparrows were one in Central Hts Dec 26 and 2 at Alazan Bayou WMA Jan 1 (both DW). White-throated Sparrow, normally one of our commonest winter residents, was in very low numbers all season (m. obs.). 30 Vesper Sparrows at Alazan Bayou WMA on Feb 15 was a good count

(DW, DB et al; PAS field trip). With the mild weather Lincoln's Sparrows were easy to find and in places almost outnumbered the normally much more numerous Song Sparrow (DW). 12,000+ Red-winged Blackbirds from the Lake Alazan roost passed over Alazan Bayou WMA Dec 7 (DW), but that was nothing compared to the 75,000+ that left Lake Alazan at dawn on the Dec 15 Nac CBC (AT, D Wa et al). A Western Meadowlark was identified at Alazan Bayou WMA on the Nac CBC Dec 15 (DW). The only Rusty Blackbird reported was one at North Toledo Bend WMA (Shelby Co) Feb 9 (J Sm). Great-tailed Grackles may have wintered in Nacogdoches, as a flock of 15 female-plumaged birds was at the traditional Wal-Mart/Lowe's site from at least Jan 26 on (DW, CS). The first singing male was back here on March 2 (CS). Well outside of our area, but very significant were 2 weakly-singing **Northern Parulas** in the Sam Houston NF west of Huntsville (Walker Co) on Feb 25 (RS, JP). This is the earliest arrival date that I have for the entire Pineywoods region. A surprising number of late migrant or overwintering **Summer Tanagers** were found. An immature male was photographed in Lufkin Dec 3 (GH) and another was seen in Pecan Park in Nacogdoches Dec 10 (DW). A female was photographed in Lufkin Dec 12 (D Be) and another was elsewhere in Lufkin Jan 1-5 (GH). A male **Blue Grosbeak** photographed at Lake Livingston (Polk Co) on Dec 23 by Lee Jones and posted on the "Birds of Texas" website (fide RT) was a winter first for the Pineywoods, but only present briefly..

Observers: D Be = Donna Beck; DB = David Bell; KBE = Katrina Barr Echols; GH = Gary Hunter; JP = Josh Pierce; PAS = Pineywoods Audubon Society; RS = Rick Schaefer; CS = Cliff Shackelford; JS = Julie Shackelford; J Sm = John Smelser; R Th = Ron Thill; ET = Eammon Thurmond; RT = Robert Truss; AW = Ashley Wahlberg; D Wa = Dave Wallace; DW = David Wolf; MHW = Mimi Hoppe Wolf; m. obs. = many observers; CBC = Christmas Bird Count.

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

Localities in Jasper County: Lake Rayburn dam/spillway.

Localities in Nacogdoches County: Alazan Bayou WMA; Central Heights; Nacogdoches town (= Nac); Nacogdoches Airport; Nacogdoches sewage ponds (= Nac ponds); Native Plant Center (in Nacogdoches); Pecan Park (in Nacogdoches); FM 1275/Saint's Rest Road (s. Nac Co); Stephen F. Austin Experimental Forest (= SFA Exp Forest).

Localities in Sabine County: Carrice Creek (TX 21) on Toledo Bend Reservoir; Sabinetown.

Localities in San Augustine County: San Augustine town; TX 147 causeway on Lake Rayburn.

Localities in Shelby County: Center; Joaquin; North Toledo Bend WMA.