

**Winter Bird Report for Pineywoods Audubon Society
December 1, 2018 – February 28, 2019**

by David E. Wolf

Weather: In general this winter was cool and wet, but not extremely cold or warm. It often just seemed chilly and damp. The first half of the winter was very wet, with regular heavy rains, leaving water levels in area lakes and floodplains very high. The first week of February brought warm spring-like weather with highs in the upper 70s for the first time all winter, before a cold spell arrived Feb 7-9. The rest of February was generally damp and chilly, but not especially cold, until a major cold front arrived on March 4 and dropped temperatures to the low 20s.

Trends: Waterfowl were generally in low numbers and widely dispersed in the Pineywoods and Upper Texas Coast this winter, largely due to the extensive habitat available throughout the rest of the state due to the widespread rains (fide TP & W). **Noteworthy “invaders”** were Red-breasted Nuthatch, Purple Finch and Pine Siskin, while **lingering “half-hardy” species** present in good numbers included White-eyed and Blue-headed vireos, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Orange-crowned Warbler and even Black-and-White Warbler.

Bird Report:

There were few noteworthy waterfowl records this winter, but unexpected was a male **Blue-winged Teal** at the SFA Ag Farm on Jan 4 and one at the Nacogdoches sewage ponds Jan 19-Feb 9-16; could it have been the same bird? (both DW). A flock of 22 Northern Pintail over Alazan Bayou WMA on the Dec 9 PAS field trip was a nice surprise (DW et al; PAS). Two Greater Scaup at the Nac ponds Dec 8 were the first and one stayed all winter and was seen on the Nacogdoches CBC Dec 16 (DW, RS). **12 Red-breasted Mergansers** were at the Lake Rayburn spillway Feb 18 (DW). 7 Horned Grebes off Sabinetown on mid-Toledo Bend on Jan 7 were the first there this winter (DB). A **Neotropic Cormorant** showed up at the Nac ponds on Jan 4, the first there since late Oct (DW). A second bird was present on Jan 19 and both spent the rest of the winter through spring (DW). Another one was photographed at the small “Ag Pond” on the SFASU campus in January (SC) and 2 were at Ellen Trout Park in Lufkin Jan 14 (DW). It was shocking to find 19 at the dam at Lake Murvaul (Panola Co) on Jan 19, many of them adults in breeding plumage (DW). Clearly this species is becoming part of our winter avifauna. **Green Herons** should not be in our region in the winter, but an immature was at Alazan Bayou WMA Jan 1 (DW, RT) and an adult was at Ellen Trout Park in Lufkin Jan 10 (DW) and Jan 27 (ATW). A hawk photographed near the Toledo Bend Dam on Jan 24 (DB, J Sm) was confirmed as a “Krider’s” race of Red-tailed by raptor expert Bill Clark.

A **Sandhill Crane** over Alazan Bayou WMA on the Dec 9 PAS field trip was a very rare migrant and a great surprise; good spotting Alix! (DW et al; PAS). 2 **Common Gallinules** were seen at Kurth Lake Dec 13 (DB, J Sm, DW) and **8** were then found on the Nac CBC Dec 16, a record high count (J Sm). At least some of the small breeding population now found here remains all winter. A late migrant Spotted Sandpiper was at the Nac ponds Dec 13 only (DW). Displaying American Woodcock were detected in both Angelina & Nacogdoches Counties from mid-January to mid-February (several observers). Bonaparte’s Gull were in good numbers around the Lake Rayburn spillway (Jasper Co), with 550+ on Feb 18 (DW). White-winged Doves were present all winter in Lufkin, with sightings of 1-10 on multiple dates from Nov 4 through the first week of February, when they began calling (GH). One singing on the SFASU campus in Nacogdoches on Feb 14 (CS, RS) was the only sighting in Nacogdoches this winter, where they are not yet as well-established and numerous here as they are in Lufkin. A **Merlin** photographed near San Augustine on Jan 30 was a rare winter find (J Sm).

The first Purple Martins were 3 in Shelby County on Feb 16 (J Sm). The first Tree Swallow was one at the Nac ponds Feb 21, with the first 2 Barn Swallows also present (DW). 5 **Cave Swallows** were over Lake Murvaul on cold Jan 19 (DW) and 6 were at the Nac ponds Feb 16 (DW). Were these over-

wintering birds or early arrivals? A highlight of the winter was the widespread “invasion” of **Red-breasted Nuthatches**. The Nacogdoches CBC on Dec 16 tallied **20**, a high count (PAS; found by 7 parties; DW compiler) and there were numerous reports of birds at feeders all winter (m. obs.). **14** Blue-gray Gnatcatchers on the Nacogdoches CBC Dec 16 was our 2nd highest count ever (PAS, DW compiler). Sightings continued through the winter, including 1 in Central Hts Jan 3-4 (MHW, DW); **11** at the TX 147 causeway on Jan 5 (DW); one in Sabinetown Jan 17 (DB), and one in Central Hts Jan 18 (MHW). A Gray Catbird was at North Toledo Bend WMA Feb 12 (ATW). In theory **Black-and-white Warbler** should not be present in the Pineywoods in the winter, or only very rarely at best, but **4** were found on the Nacogdoches CBC on Dec 16 (1 by RS at the Nac ponds; 3 by DW at Alazan Bayou WMA). Later one was seen at the Nac ponds on Jan 4 (DW) and 2 were seen together in a large mixed-flock of insectivores at Alazan Bayou WMA on Jan 12 (DB, J Sm, AT).

At least 2 Henslow’s Sparrows were located at the Nacogdoches Airport Dec 15-16 through Feb 5 (SL, DW, MHW). A Lark Sparrow appeared in Central Hts Dec 8 and spent the rest of the winter (DW, MHW). On Dec 13 flocks of 50 and 35 Dark-eyed Juncos were at different sites in Nacogdoches (DW, J Sm); this species was in good numbers all winter. 30 White-crowned Sparrows east of San Augustine Jan 30 was a high count (J Sm); otherwise they were scarce. The first Harris’s Sparrow was one in Central Hts Dec 27 (DW), while the next was one at Alazan Bayou WMA Jan 1 (DW, RT). A **Spotted Towhee** on the Nacogdoches CBC Dec 16 was the only report this winter (RS). An adult male **Summer Tanager** fed on the larvae of beehive beetles in Nacogdoches from Dec 29–mid January (Maggie Forbes; photo). This species is not supposed to winter north of the border, but this record adds to a surprising number of winter sightings for our region. Now, in looking back at the season, it seems notable that most “blackbirds” (except Red-winged) were in very low numbers in the early half of the winter. Then they suddenly appeared with cold fronts in January, when there was significant snow and ice to the north of Texas. The first Rusty Blackbirds were 45 in Center on Jan 4 (J Sm); 2 were at North Toledo Bend WMA (Shelby Co) on Jan 15 (J Sm) and 60 were at North Toledo Bend WMA (Shelby Co) on Jan 29 (J Sm). The first Brewer’s Blackbirds were 3 in w. Nacogdoches Co Dec 29 (DW). 6 Brewer’s Blackbirds were at a feedlot near Grigsby in sw. San Augustine Co on Jan 16 (DB) and then 25 were at this site Jan 20-30 (DB, J Sm), with 6 still there Feb 8 (DW). Brown-headed Cowbirds were almost lacking until mid-January (i.e. only 13 on the Nacogdoches CBC), when suddenly 1500+ comprised about 1/3 of the large Red-wing flocks at Alazan Bayou WMA on Jan 12 (DW, DB et al; PAS). 400 were in San Augustine Co Jan 16 (DB). Only 45 Common Grackles were tallied on the Nacogdoches CBC, but by mid-January flocks of hundreds were appearing in Center (J Sm), with fewer elsewhere.

A big highlight of the winter was the **Purple Finch** flight. They were simply everywhere, from Cherokee County east across the central Pineywoods to Sabine and Shelby Counties! The first reports of a few were Nov 27-Dec 7 and soon thereafter they appeared in numbers. A high count of **58** was tallied on the Nacogdoches CBC on Dec 16 by 7 parties (PAS, DW compiler). Numbers peaked from late December to mid February, both at feeders and in the wild (m. obs.). The highest counts at one time were 25 at feeders in Central Hts Dec 17-Jan 8 (MHW, DW) and 43 in Sabinetown Jan 7 (DB). After mid-January many birds pulled back from the feeders, but they remained widespread, feeding on the early tree buds and flowers. By mid-March most were gone. **Pine Siskins** also staged a widespread flight into the region (m. obs.). Numbers really picked up beginning the first week of January and by mid-month they had inundated many feeders. An especially high count was 200 at Sabinetown on Jan 17 (DB). By February many were feeding “in the wild” more than at feeders, but they remained around in good numbers well into the spring.

Observers: DB = David Bell; SC = Susie Carney; CBC = Christmas Bird Count; GH = Gary Hunter; EI = Ernie Iverson; PAS = Pineywoods Audubon Society; RS = Rick Schaefer; CS = Cliff Shackelford; J Sm = John Smelser; AT = Anne Tindell; ATW = Ashlely Tubbs Wahlberg; BW = Becky Whisenant; DW = David Wolf; MHW = Mimi Hoppe Wolf; m. obs. = many observers.

Localities in Angelina County: Boykin Springs (borders Jasper Co); Ellen Trout Park (Lufkin); Kurth Lake; Lufkin.

Localities in Nacogdoches County: Alazan Bayou WMA; Central Heights; Mahl; Nacogdoches; Nacogdoches Airport; Nacogdoches sewage ponds (= Nac ponds); Stephen F. Austin Ag Farm (Mahl); Stephen F. Austin Experimental Forest (= SFA Exp Forest); Stephen F. Austin State University campus (= SFASU)..

Localities in Jasper County: Lake Rayburn spillway and dam.

Localities in Sabine County: mid Toledo Bend Reservoir; Sabinetown.

Localities in San Augustine County: San Augustine.

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