

Winter 2020-21 Bird Report for Pineywoods Audubon Society
December 1, 2020 – February 28, 2021
by David E. Wolf

It wasn't much of a winter for either birds or weather. That is, **not until mid-February**, when our lives took a dramatic turn for the worse as **Winter Storms Uri & Viola** hammered our region and much of the rest of eastern North America. At that point mere survival became an issue for some of us, as temperatures plunged to below zero°F in places locally; a 6-inch snowfall became coated with ice; and many of us lost water and/or electricity for some time. I hope that all of you came through this week OK. Throughout the week of the worst weather (Feb 13-20) the birds outside our windows provided entertainment as they swarmed our feeders and yards, struggling to survive. Many did not make it. A more detailed report on this event follows in a few paragraphs.

Winter was slow in arriving and our **first freeze** did not come until overnight on Nov 30-Dec 1, later than average, but it was a shockingly hard 23°F. After this, relatively mild fronts went back and forth, the most noteworthy the lovely 6-7 inches of snow on Jan 10-11. This was the 3rd highest snowfall ever recorded here! It didn't last long and did not seem to disrupt our local birds. The next fronts were relatively mild, but then came "the big ones", Uri and Viola. Our **last freeze** was at the end of these storms on Feb 21, but soon thereafter spring was busting out everywhere. The change was amazing!

The **Nacogdoches CBC** was held on December 20 under pleasant weather conditions. We had an enthusiastic turnout and our final species total was 114, right on our 20-year average but higher than the previous 6 counts. Rarities were the immature male Ruby-throated Hummingbird (Kathy Greer, AT, LW); a Clay-colored Sparrow at Alazan Bayou WMA (DW); and 2 Summer Tanagers (L Wo, CS). Other significant finds included Greater Roadrunner, Virginia Rail, Common Gallinule, Herring Gull, Anhinga, Neotropic Cormorant, White-eyed Vireo, Marsh Wren, Gray Catbird, Sprague's Pipit, Henslow's Sparrow, Rusty Blackbird and Common Yellowthroat. Thanks go to everyone who helped make this count such a success.

Winter Storms Uri & Viola: The bird of the winter storms was **Fox Sparrow** and they appeared at feeders simply everywhere! **At least 20 feeding stations** in Nacogdoches County attracted them in varying numbers (fide CS, DW, m.obs.), as well as 3 stations in Angelina County (MB, JC, GH). They were also found to the east in Center (J Sm) and Sabinetown (6-8; DB), though not to the west near Rusk (BW). The highest count was at least **80-90 at once** for James & Erin Childress on their farm near Huntington. This species had been very scarce before these storms and I have to believe that these birds were driven south by the weather. The first ones appeared with the snow on Feb 15 and numbers steadily increased through that day and the next, reaching a peak during and after the ice storm Feb 17-18. Most disappeared quickly as the weather abated Feb 20-21. The last were one in Center Feb 27 (J Sm); 2 near Huntington March 1 (JC); and one in Central Hts through March 3 (DW, MHW). A surprise visitor reported from 7 feeding stations in Nacogdoches Co during the worst weather was **Eastern Towhee**. Most were singles, but AW had 5 at once. None of these feeders had ever attracted them before. **Rusty Blackbird** was another surprise visitor for some. 6 were present in Melrose Feb 15-20 (RT); one was in Central Hts Feb 15-16 (DW); and 8 were near Center Feb 15-20 (J Sm). Up to 5 **Western Meadowlarks** foraged at a small feed trough in Central Hts Feb 15-19, at least one of which visited the Wolf's feeding station daily. Was this species driven off the Plains by the storms? Best of all, **2 Lapland Longspurs** fed amidst the Fox Sparrows near Huntington on Feb 18-19 (JC). Almost everyone reported large numbers of Chipping Sparrows and American Goldfinches. Many had flocks of Red-winged Blackbirds and smaller numbers of Purple Finches, Pine Siskins and Dark-eyed Juncos were found widely. Among the fatalities that I heard of were Eastern Phoebe, Eastern Bluebird, Hermit Thrush, American Goldfinch, Chipping Sparrow, Yellow-rumped Warbler and Northern Cardinal, but there were doubtless many more. This storm for the record books was very hard on the birds and vegetation!

Bird List:

The only geese reported were a southbound flock of 80 Greater White-fronted over Melrose on Jan 2 (RT). Waterfowl in general made a mediocre showing and only one rarity was found, a **hybrid Redhead X Ring-necked Duck** drake at the Nacogdoches sewer ponds Feb 26-28 (DW; ph.). Two pairs of Wood Ducks were already exploring nest boxes near Nacogdoches Feb 23, just after the brutal weather abated, and first eggs were seen March 4 (HW). A Northern Pintail stopped at the Nac ponds Feb 6 (DW). A peak count of 15-21 Hooded Mergansers visited a pond in Central Hts Feb 5-11 (DW).

A White-winged Dove that first appeared Nov 16 spent the entire season in Central Hts (DW, MHW); another was in Douglass Dec 25 (CW); and the first calling bird was heard in Nacogdoches Jan 31 (RS). This species is still hard to find in Nacogdoches Co, but is slowly increasing. An immature male **Ruby-throated Hummingbird** appeared at feeders just west of Nacogdoches in early December after our first freeze (Kathy Greer) and was found on the Nacogdoches CBC on Dec 20 by Laura Wilson and Anne Tindell. It was not conclusively identified to species until Jan 8 (DW, MHW; ph.) and was last seen on Feb 17 during the ice storm (Kathy Greer). Video was obtained of an **Anna's Hummingbird** that visited Nacogdoches Nov 25 (Jack Rohrer fide RS). This was only our 4th record of this western visitor in 40 years! A female *Selasphorus* hummingbird, likely a Rufous, was present in Sabinetown from Nov 10-Feb 23 (DB).

An Anhinga was at the swamp on the Dorr Creek Road on the Nacogdoches CBC Dec 20 (MHW, JS). 2 Neotropic Cormorants were at the SFASU Farm on Jan 17 (DW); 2 were at the Nac ponds Feb 26 (DW) and 8 were at the TX 147 causeway Feb 27 (DW). A flock of 70 American White Pelicans kettling low over Alazan Bayou WMA Feb 26 was a strange sight (DW). A **White-tailed Kite** found at the Angelina Co Airport Feb 1 (GH; ph.) was still there the next day (DW). This is a very rare and irregular visitor to our area. There were only 2 reports of Northern Harrier, one in Nacogdoches County Dec 16 (RP) and a male in Central Hts Feb 10 (ED; ph.). **3 Crested Caracaras** together in a pasture near Melrose Feb 24 was only the 6th Nacogdoches Co record and the first of multiple individuals (HW). A **Merlin** was just west of Nacogdoches Jan 8 (DW, MHW; ph.).

Completely unprecedented was a **Fork-tailed Flycatcher** described from Nacogdoches Dec 30 (CDF). This is the first report ever from our region, but unfortunately could not be photographed. The first Purple Martin was over Diboll Jan 28 (RT) and the second was near Center Jan 31 (J Sm). More swallow "firsts" were a Northern Rough-winged and a Tree over the TX 147 causeway Feb 27 (DW) and 2 Barn at the Nac ponds Feb 26 (DW). 2 Cave Swallows were at the Nac ponds Dec 19 (LW); 2 were there again on Jan 1 (DW); and 25 were present Feb 11 as the cold weather moved into our area (DW). A few **Red-breasted Nuthatches** were found throughout the season, including one near Alazan Bayou WMA Jan 16 that was still present in mid-March 7 (AW); one in Nacogdoches daily to at least Feb 15 (TH); a regular in Center last seen Feb 25 (J Sm); and one near the SFASU Farm into April (BB). A few Blue-gray Gnatcatchers were found before the winter storms, but none thereafter. American Robins and Cedar Waxwing appeared in large numbers in Nacogdoches the last week in January, quickly stripping the berry-producing trees and shrubs (CS, JS, m.obs.). Far greater numbers of robins were driven south by the winter storms, and as the snow and ice melted they were seen feeding on the ground simply everywhere throughout the region. A **Gray Catbird** appeared at a suet feeder in Cushing Feb 23, after the brutal weather, and was seen into April (DS; ph. DW)

2 Lapland Longspurs near Huntington Feb 18-19 were the rarest visitors brought by the winter storms (JC; ph.). This species was formerly a much more frequent and numerous visitor to our region, usually during the most severe winter weather, but this was the first regional record since 2010. **Purple Finches** staged a widespread invasion throughout the central Pineywoods this winter. Almost everyone with feeders reported them and they were a delight (m. obs.)! The highest single counts were 32 at once in Nacogdoches Feb 24 (RS) and 36 at feeders near Center Feb 27 (J Sm, DB). Most had disappeared by mid-March. Pine Siskins were not as widespread and numerous as expected after the big flight last fall, but some feeders attracted numbers of them for the entire season (i.e. J Sm in Center and up to 30+ in w. Cherokee Co daily from Nov 29 to March (BW). Other feeders had 15 or fewer, or none (m. obs.). Henslow's Sparrows were located with difficulty in one area of the Nacogdoches Airport, one on Dec 13 (DW, RT); 3 on Dec 17 (DW, AT, LW); and one on the Nacogdoches CBC Dec 20 (LW, AT). An additional 3 were found on the CBC near Nacogdoches town (AB, CDF). A **Clay-colored Sparrow** found at Alazan Bayou WMA on the Nacogdoches CBC Dec 20 was a first ever for the count (DW). What was almost certainly the same bird was nicely photographed in the same area Dec 28 (AT). Lark Sparrow is

scarce and irregular in winter, but one was near Melrose Dec 13 (RT) and 2 were seen in Central Hts on the snow day of Jan 11 (DW). 2 "**Oregon**" **Juncos** visited feeders near Rusk (Cherokee Co) during the ice storm on Feb 17 (BW; ph.) and a "**Pink-sided**" visited Central Hts on the snow day of Jan 11 (DW). Both of these races are very rare in our region. The only reports of Harris's Sparrow were singles in Cushing Dec 12 (DS); Central Hts Jan 1 (DW); and near the SFASU Farm on the ice day of Feb 17 (BB). 45 White-crowned Sparrows in sw. San Augustine Co Jan 2 was a high count (J Sm). A rare **Spotted Towhee** was seen in Nacogdoches Dec 18 (AB). This species is not often detected in our area, but may be overlooked.

Up to 5 **Western Meadowlarks** foraged at a small patch of open ground under a feed trough in Central Hts during the snow and ice storm Feb 15-19, at least one of which visited the Wolf's feeding station daily. There were three reports of Brewer's Blackbird: 40 at a traditional site in w. Nac Co Dec 12 (RT); 45 at a feedlot in sw. San Augustine Co Jan 2 (J Sm); and 6 at a small feedlot in Central Hts Jan 4 (DW). Few Rusty Blackbirds were seen this winter, but 12 were found on the Nacogdoches CBC Dec 20 (by 3 parties) and a few visited the Nac ponds and then feeding stations during the winter storms. 3 Great-tailed Grackles were on the leafless nest tree at the Lowe's/Wal-Mart intersection in Nacogdoches Jan 8 and 6 were there Feb 25 (DW), so at least a few are now wintering. There were 3 sightings of single Common Yellowthroats, rare in winter: a male on the Nac CBC Dec 20 (CS, BB); a male at Ellen Trout Park Jan 1 (DW); and a female at the Nac ponds Feb 6 (DW). Again this winter there were multiple reports of **Summer Tanager**. Conventional wisdom says this species should be south of the border at this season. **Two** were recorded on the Nacogdoches CBC Dec 20, one on the Nac ponds entry road (L Wo) and the other the continuing bird on the SFASU campus that first appeared Oct 30. Dec 20 was the last day on which it was seen (CS, L Wo). Another was seen sporadically in south Nacogdoches Dec 21-Feb 22 (AT; ph). One confirmed in Lufkin Jan 8 had possibly been present for several weeks (GH). A female came to a bird bath in Nacogdoches Feb 10 (JS; ph.) and likely the same bird visited a feeder a few blocks away Feb 11-21 (D Wa, VW), disappearing as the winter storms abated. Finally, a female regularly came to a suet feeder in Cushing Jan 14-Feb 4 (DS). Unexpected but not unprecedented was a female **Western Tanager** that came to a birdbath in Nacogdoches Jan 2 (CDF). A male **Indigo Bunting** in alternate (breeding) plumage visited a feeder in Nacogdoches March 1-5 (fide AT). This is a month earlier than expected, as was its fully blue plumage!

Observers: DB = David Bell; AB = Aaron Bradley; MB = Matt Buckingham; BB = Brent Burt; JC = James Childress; BB = Brent Burt; ED = Elena Drahn; CDF = Charles Dean Fisher; TH = Tyson Hart; GH = Gary Hunter; SK, BK = Steve & Billie Kinnaird; SL = Susie Lower; RP = Ryan Phelps; RS = Rick Schaefer; DS = Dennis Scheef; J Sm = John Smelser; CS = Cliff Shackelford; JS = Julie Shackelford; AT = Anne Tindell; RT = Robert Truss; AW = Ashley Wahlberg; D Wa = Dave Wallace; VW = Vickie Wallace; CW = Carol Wells; BW = Becky Whisenant; HW = Howard Williamson; LW = Laura Wilson; DW = David Wolf; MHW = Mimi Hoppe Wolf; L Wo = Liam Wolff; m.obs. = many observers; ph.= photographed.

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

Localities in Cherokee County: Rusk.

Localities in Nacogdoches County: Alazan Bayou WMA; Central Heights; Cushing; Dorr Creek Road; Douglass; Melrose; Nacogdoches (town); Nacogdoches Airport; Nacogdoches sewage ponds (= Nac ponds); SFASU Farm (near Mahl).

Localities in Sabine County: Sabinetown.

Localities in San Augustine County: TX 147 causeway.

Localities in Shelby County: Center.