

Winter 2021-22 Bird Report for Pineywoods Audubon Society
(December 1, 2021 – February 28, 2022)
by David E. Wolf

This winter will be remembered for its overall startling lack of birds! Some of our commonest winter species never appeared in numbers, especially robins, waxwings, blackbirds and Yellow-rumped Warbler. Goldfinches and sparrows were also scarce, but picked up a little in mid-January as winter weather with precipitation swept the Midwest and East Coast. Many other less conspicuous species were also down in numbers, including Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Northern Flicker, Eastern Phoebe, Winter Wren, Brown Thrasher, Eastern Bluebird, Hermit Thrush and Orange-crowned and Pine warblers. Some folks have theorized that last winter's severe weather may have decimated populations of many of these species. Others blame the low numbers on the weather, both here and well to the north of us. December was the warmest on record since 1889, plus there was very little rain, and we ended 2021 with rainfall totals well below average. The first freeze came late and was a light one, overnight on Dec 11-12. The New Year brought the first major cold snap of the winter. By mid-January the entire region was very dry. After that there were regular light rains associated with the passage of cold fronts, but the amounts were not enough to replenish soil moisture, raise lake levels or flood the river bottoms. Ephemeral marshes were completely lacking. There were several major cold fronts in February and much of the month was chilly and damp, but suddenly on March 1 the "switch was flipped" and it warmed up, the sun came out and spring finally started busting out. Keep your eyes and ears open as we go into this exciting season and keep those reports coming in! dewolfnac@gmail.com .

The 52nd Nacogdoches Christmas Bird Count was taken Dec 19 under ideal weather conditions. The final species total was 110, about average for the last six years, but the numbers were on the low side for many birds. The only real rarity was a **Western Tanager** found and photographed by Liam Wolff and Clint Robinson, but many other scarce species were seen, including Snow Goose, Virginia Rail, Common Gallinule, Herring Gull, Neotropic Cormorant, White-eyed Vireo, Marsh Wren, Gray Catbird, Henslow's Sparrow, Rusty Blackbird and Common Yellowthroat.

Bird Report:

Waterfowl in general were in low numbers, but there were a few interesting sightings. A flock of 20 Northern Pintail circled lower Lake Nacogdoches Dec 6 and a male was on a pond near Kurth Lake Feb 9 (both DW). 110-130 Canvasbacks were at Ellen Trout Park at least Jan 14-21 (DW). 100 Redheads were suddenly back at the Nacogdoches sewer ponds Jan 1 and amidst them was a **hybrid male Redhead X Ring-necked Duck**, almost certainly the same bird that was here last winter. It stayed through the season (DW, ph.). A Common Goldeneye was first found at Ellen Trout Park Dec 11 (CS). Then 2 were present there from Dec 15-Jan 31 (GH, DW) and one was last seen Feb 10 (GH). A single goldeneye was on Lake Cherokee (Cherokee Co) Jan 23 (LW). With the trend towards warmer winters this species has become increasingly infrequent in our region. Noteworthy were 2 Red-breasted Mergansers on Kurth Lake Dec 16 (DB, J Sm) and one still there for the Nacogdoches CBC Dec 19 (J Sm). At least 220 Pied-billed Grebes were counted from the Kurth Lake dam on Jan 21 (DW). This lake gets a lot of them! 9 Horned Grebes off the TX 147 causeway Dec 7 was a good count for this locale (DW), while an **Eared Grebe** at Kurth Lake Jan 21 was the first local record in several years (DW).

A White-winged Dove that first appeared in Central Hts Nov 26 was seen sporadically through Feb 26 (DW, MHW). This species is still hard to find in our area in the winter. An immature male Rufous Hummingbird visited Central Hts from Dec 2-29, but disappeared a few days ahead of the first really cold weather (DW, MHW). Single Spotted Sandpipers on a pond just outside of Nacogdoches Jan 5 (AB) and at Lake Nacogdoches Jan 15 (DW), and 5 Greater Yellowlegs near Center Dec 26 (J Sm), were the only shorebirds of note. Given the dry conditions Wilson's Snipe were relatively few and far between, but 26 were in a damp field near Woden Feb 8 (DW). The season high count of Common Loons at the TX 147 causeway was 23 on Dec 7 (DW). A Neotropic Cormorant was at Ellen Trout Park Jan 1 (DW), but none

were found thereafter. 55 American White Pelicans on Pinkston Res (Shelby Co) Jan 18 surprised the observer (AT). A **Cattle Egret** in Diboll Jan 1 was a rare find in winter (DW). A very rare **White-tailed Kite** was watched at length in an early successional field east of Broaddus (San Augustine Co) Jan 30 (Liam Wolff). Northern Harriers were very scarce and the only reports were one east of Nacogdoches Jan 26 (AB) and one at the Angelina Co Airport Feb 18 & 21 (GH). A “**Harlan’s**” Red-tailed Hawk spotted east of Nacogdoches on the Dec 19 CBC was a rare sighting (LW), although we are on the edge of the main wintering grounds of this form. A **Barn Owl** carcass was found at the SFASU Ag Farm (near Mahl) Feb 11 and from the looks of it the bird had probably died earlier in the month (David Kulhavy fide CS). A big surprise was a nicely-documented (ph. LW) **Short-eared Owl** flushed at Caddo Mounds (Cherokee Co) on the Feb 20 sparrow stomp (CS, LW et al; ph. LW). This is the first local record since 1997. A **Crested Caracara** feeding on a hog carcass near Huntington Jan 23 may have been a first for Angelina Co (JC, MB). Single Merlins were spotted in Nacogdoches Dec 16 (AB, CDF) and at Morris Frank Park in Lufkin Feb 18 (GH).

The only Loggerhead Shrike seen at Alazan Bayou WMA this winter was one on Feb 20 (CW). Another one was seen sporadically in Central Hts throughout the season (DW, AW, RP). This species has declined so much in our area that all reports are now noteworthy. A noisy flock of 100+ **Fish Crows** in the backwaters of Pinkston Reservoir on Jan 14 & 18 created quite a show (AT). This was an amazing high count for the areas west of Toledo Bend/Sabine River, but indicative of how fast this species is spreading in the central Pineywoods. 3 were back in Diboll Feb 9, if indeed they ever left (GH). The first Purple Martin was a male in Lufkin Feb 19 (GH). Early swallows at the TX 147 causeway on the Feb 27 cool front were 5 Tree, 1 Northern Rough-winged, 1 Barn and at least 15 Cave (DW) and another Barn was seen in Lufkin Feb 28 (GH). Red-breasted Nuthatches were detected through the season and into March (m.obs.). A Marsh Wren was a surprise in dry upland habitat on the Caddo Mounds sparrow stomp Feb 20, while 31 Sedge Wrens were more expected (CS, LW et al). Golden-crowned Kinglets were almost as numerous as Ruby-crowned; the latter were scarce compared to most winters (m.obs.). 17 Blue-gray Gnatcatchers on the Nacogdoches CBC on Dec 19 was the highest total ever (m.obs.). Who can even remember when this species was a rarity on the count and we were lucky to get one or two? (The answer is throughout the 1970s and 80s). There were also sightings at various locations throughout the season to the end of February (m.obs.). A Gray Catbird showed up at the Shackelford home in Nacogdoches again this winter, but only on Dec 12 & 17 (JS, CS).

Purple Finches were almost completely absent the entire winter and the only reports were a female photographed in Lufkin Dec 7 and posted on “Texas Birds” by Josh Moore; one heard in Lufkin Dec 30 (Mike Austin, GH); and one in Rusk (Cherokee Co) Jan 23 (LW). This was quite a contrast to the major invasion the previous winter! One Pine Siskin in Lufkin Jan 8 was the first of an “off” year for them (GH). The next were singles in Center Feb 1 (J Sm) and Nacogdoches Feb 3 (RS), while 5 in Center Feb 12 was the season “high count” (J Sm). Additional singles were in Nacogdoches Feb 16 (JS) and Center Feb 24 (J Sm). American Goldfinches were in remarkably low numbers until mid-January, when more began arriving and swarming the feeders (m.obs.). Several feeding stations reported up to 100 in February. Most sparrows were in lower numbers than usual this winter, especially Field, Vesper, Savannah, Song and Swamp. which are normally some of the commonest. A scarce-in-winter Lark Sparrow was near Nacogdoches Dec 22 (AB) and then 8 showed up in Central Hts Jan 6, with at least 2 remaining through Feb 10 (DW). 2 White-crowned Sparrows near Center Dec 12 (DB, J Sm) and one in Lufkin Jan 14 (GH) were eclipsed by a very high count of **65** at a regular site in sw. San Augustine Co Feb 21 (DB). The serious sparrow stomp at Caddo Mounds Feb 20 detected 54 LeConte’s Sparrows (CS, LW et al), but the only Henslow’s Sparrow found this winter was one at the Nacogdoches Airport on the Dec 19 CBC (SL, AT, LW). Two Western Meadowlarks were heard singing at Caddo Mounds Feb 20 (LW, CS et al). A female **Bullock’s Oriole** seen well in Nacogdoches Jan 27 (CDF) provided one of the few regional records of this western stray. The only Rusty Blackbirds reported were 4 at Alazan Bayou WMA on the Dec 19 CBC (DW, RR) and one with grackles at Ellen Trout Park Feb 27 (DW). The first sizable flock of Common Grackles was 1000+ over Nacogdoches Dec 6 (DW), but few others ever appeared (m.obs.). Common Yellowthroat is very scarce in our area in the winter, but 3 were near Center

Dec 12 (DB, J Sm) and 2 were found on the Nacogdoches CBC Dec 19. Yellow-rumped Warblers were notably scarce this winter (m.obs.). The **Western Tanager** first seen in Lufkin Nov 9 was last seen Jan 25 (GH), while yet another was a surprise rarity east of Nacogdoches on the Dec 19 CBC (LW, Clint Robinson, ph.). A third one was seen in Center last October. I have no guesses as to why this very rare western stray should stage a “mini-invasion” into our region! A **Summer Tanager** was also present in the same area in Lufkin from Dec 30-Feb 3 (GH, Mike Austin). At least one now seems to show up every winter although in theory they should be south of the border at this season.

Observers: DB = David Bell; AB = Aaron Bradley; MB = Matt Buckingham; JC = James Childress; CDF = Charles Dean Fisher; GH = Gary Hunter; SL = Susie Lower; m.obs. = many observers; RR = Robert Reeves; RS = Rick Schaefer; CS = Cliff Shackelford; JS = Julie Shackelford; J Sm = John Smelser; AT = Anne Tindell; AW = Ashley Wahlberg; CW = Carol Wells; LaW = Laura Wilson; DW = David Wolf; MHW = Mimi Hoppe Wolf; LW = Liam Wolff.

Angelina County: Angelina County Airport; Diboll; Ellen Trout Park (in Lufkin); Huntington; Kurth Lake; Lufkin; Morris Frank Park (in Lufkin).

Cherokee County: Caddo Mounds State Historic Site; Lake Cherokee; Rusk.

Nacogdoches County: Alazan Bayou WMA; Central Heights; Lake Nacogdoches; Nacogdoches; Nacogdoches Airport; SFASU Ag Farm (near Mahl); Woden.

San Augustine County: Broadus; TX 147 causeway on Lake Rayburn.

Shelby County: Center; Pinkston Reservoir.