

**Winter 2022-23 Bird Report for Pineywoods Audubon Society**  
**December 1, 2022 – February 28, 2023**  
**By David E. Wolf**

Winter 2022-23 may best be described as “rather ordinary”. Most of our winter birds were only present in modest numbers and some, like waterfowl, sparrows and blackbirds, were notably low in number. Several of our scarcest winter residents were completely lacking and there were few rarities.

The weather in December was mostly mild until the 22<sup>nd</sup>, when we were hit with an “Arctic bomb cyclone” that dropped temperatures dramatically. In Central Hts it went down to 8°F by dawn on Dec 23 and remained cold through the 27<sup>th</sup>, but then warmed up quickly. Conditions then became wet, quite a contrast to the drought of the latter half of 2022, and from late December through the middle of February the fronts went back and forth. Widespread storms and heavy rains were associated with frontal shifts on Dec 29-30; Jan 2-3; Jan 25; Jan 29-30; and Feb 1-2, with lesser amounts on other days. Some areas had up to 6 inches of rain in the last week of January alone and up to 8 inches for the month. Lake Rayburn was still very low in December, but after the heavy rains it quickly came up and covered the flats at the TX 147 causeway. Elsewhere the Angelina River bottoms were mostly flooded and small ponds and lakes filled to the brim. It stopped raining in mid-February and quickly warmed up after that and spring seemed to suddenly burst out. However, it seems hard to believe that winter was really over that early and we may get some colder weather and a late freeze yet. [PS: we did!]

The Nacogdoches Christmas Bird Count on December 18, 2022 tallied 109 species, just below our ten-year average. There were few discernible trends, but Golden-crowned Kinglet was in high numbers (84) and 4 Purple Finches were seen, the vanguard of a notable flight. 6 Gray Catbirds and 3 Common Yellowthroats were more than expected for these scarce winter residents. Also noteworthy were 4 southbound Snow Geese, 1 Common Goldeneye, 3 Common Gallinules at Kurth Lake and a Merlin at the Nacogdoches Airport, while the only real rarity was a Summer Tanager in the Shackelford’s yard in the late afternoon.

**Bird List:**

Waterfowl were generally in low numbers all winter and many of those that did reach East Texas disappeared in late February or soon thereafter, headed back north. The only reports of geese were 4 Snow Geese on the CBC Dec 18; 22 Snow over Lufkin Jan 8 (GH); and 60 northbound Greater White-fronted over Alazan Bayou WMA Feb 6 (DW, DB, RP). A Wood Duck was already brooding 14 eggs in a nest box just west of Nacogdoches on Feb 16, about a month earlier than usual (Howard Williamson fide CS). Redhead numbers at the Nacogdoches sewage ponds (hereafter = Nac ponds) were suddenly up to 45 on Jan 31 and amidst them was a **hybrid male Redhead X Ring-necked Duck**, likely the same bird present here the previous two winters. This year it did not stay for long and was last seen a few days later (DW). 33 Buffleheads at the Nac ponds Dec 14 was a high count for this site (DW). The Common Goldeneye that appeared at the Nac ponds Nov 30 (DW) was last reported in early January (RT); on Jan 1 a second bird was present for this one day only (DW). Hooded Mergansers at the Nac ponds peaked at 45 on Dec 14 (DW), while 16 on a very small pond in Central Heights during the Dec 22 Arctic blast was a high count for the locale (DW). 4 Ruddy Ducks at Alazan Bayou WMA Feb 12 seemed out-of-place and were only seen this one time (DW). 8-9 Horned Grebes on Kurth Lake Dec 14-15 was the season high count for this site (DW, TH, DB); only 3 were present on the Nacogdoches CBC Dec 18 (GH, TH).

A White-winged Dove that appeared in Central Hts Jan 2 remained through the end of the season (MHW, DW). A Rufous Hummingbird that showed up in Lufkin in mid-Nov was last seen Dec 6 (KE). Shorebird sightings from the exposed mudflats at the TX 147 causeway on Lake Rayburn were 9 Least Sandpipers on Jan 1 (DW), and 2 Greater Yellowlegs on Dec 12 and 7 on Jan 1. Two Greater Yellowlegs there Jan 14 circled the recently-flooded flats and kept going (all DW). The season high count for Bonaparte’s Gull at the TX 147 causeway was 28 on Jan 1 (DW) and single first-winter Herring Gulls were spotted there Jan 1 & 14 (both DW). After Lake Rayburn came way up from the substantial rains 34 Common Loons were counted from the TX 147 causeway on Feb 9 (DW). A single Neotropic Cormorant

turned up on a small pond in Central Hts Feb 14 (DW). This species is one of our earliest spring migrants. A Great Horned Owl nest was confirmed in Sabinetown in mid-February (DB). (What a treat to have this species close at hand and visible!). A **Crested Caracara** at a carcass near Huntington Feb 22 provided one of very few sightings for Angelina Co (JC).

The only winter reports of White-eyed Vireo were singles at Marion Ferry Jan 6 (GH); in the SFA Experimental Forest Feb 24 (CS); and in south Nacogdoches Feb 28 (AT). A noisy flock of about a dozen **Fish Crows** was seen and heard in Woodville Feb 10 (CS), yet another site for this expanding species. There were two reports of extremely early male Purple Martins, one in Huntington on Jan 7 checking out a martin house (JC) and one over Ellen Trout Park on Jan 18 (GH). No others were reported after this until into March. At least 3 **Cave Swallows** were at the TX 147 causeway Jan 14 (DW). The only Red-breasted Nuthatches were singles in Lufkin Jan 5 (KE) and Nacogdoches Jan 12 (JS). This was clearly an "off" winter for this species, not surprising after the large flights the previous two winters. 6 Blue-gray Gnatcatchers in one flock at McAlister Park on upper Rayburn Dec 12 were a surprise and likely late migrants given the warm weather (DW). Single gnatcatchers were found through most of the winter at Ellen Trout Park and Alazan Bayou WMA (m.obs.). An elusive Marsh Wren was found in a small territory at Ellen Trout Park in Lufkin Feb 7 (AT), Feb 13 (GH) and Feb 15 (DW). A Gray Catbird was found at Ellen Trout Jan 21 (GH), seen again a few days later (AT) and then two were chasing each other here Jan 27 (DW). This winter brought a major flight of Cedar Waxwings. They appeared in good numbers earlier than usual and then became very widespread and numerous as the season went along. For example, on Jan 28 at least 760 passed through our yard in Central Hts in just 15 minutes (DW, MHW).

Purple Finches staged a notable flight into the region this winter. They arrived late, but in January became widespread at feeders throughout our area. After a few singles were seen in late November the next were 4 on the Nacogdoches CBC Dec 18 (CS, RT). Then 4 appeared near Alazan Bayou WMA Jan 1 (AW) and 2 in Cushing the same day (DS). 2 showed up in Central Hts Jan 5 and soon increased to 15 (DW, MHW). Less than a week later they were reported at two more feeders, west of Nacogdoches ca Jan 6 (DR) and in Nacogdoches ca 15 Jan (RP). AB had his first 2 in Nacogdoches Feb 5 and CS, JS had their first 2 in north Nacogdoches Feb 10. Eight appeared in Sabinetown Feb 15 (DB). Most of these then stayed through the end of the season. After no Pine Siskins at all last winter a very few were found this season. The first was one in Jones Park in Lufkin on Jan 1 (GH). Then one appeared at feeders in south Lufkin Jan 9; on Feb 12 there were 2 (GH). One in Center Jan 27 did not stay around (J Sm), nor did one that visited a feeder in Cushing Feb 4 (DS). In Sabinetown 3 showed up Feb 5 and remained through Feb 15. One was still present Feb 18, but not thereafter (DB). One showed up at feeders in north Nacogdoches Feb 16 (JS). American Goldfinches were scarce through the early winter, but suddenly in late January they appeared at feeders in numbers. They pulled back from feeders just as suddenly in mid-February (m.obs.). Sparrows in general were in low numbers this winter, though the expected species were present. There were no reports of Lark or Harris's sparrows; both are scarce and irregular in our area in the winter. A **Grasshopper Sparrow** sat up for good views at Alazan Bayou WMA Jan 4 (DW). This species probably winters regularly in small numbers in dry grassy/weedy fields, but they are solitary, hard to detect and not often found. 8 Fox Sparrows at Alazan Bayou WMA Jan 4 (DW) was the season high count, while one was a surprise in Old Orchard Park in Diboll on Feb 12 (GH). 10 LeConte's Sparrows were seen in one small area of the Nacogdoches Airport Dec 14 (DW, AT), but numbers decreased after this. The only Henslow's Sparrow found this winter was one flushed from the same area at the Nacogdoches Airport on Dec 14, 16 and on the CBC on Dec 18 (DW, AT).

A Western Meadowlark singing in Central Hts Feb 28 was noteworthy (MHW, DW). This species is almost certainly present in small numbers every winter, but if they do not vocalize they are very hard to separate from the numerous Eastern Meadowlarks. Blackbirds were notably scarce through the early winter and numbers on the Nacogdoches CBC were very low. Almost no Brown-headed Cowbirds were seen anywhere all winter until Feb 10, when a flock estimated at 5000 appeared at the SFASU Farm with a comparable number of Red-winged Blackbirds. The flocks of both species were predominantly males (DW). 14 cowbirds showed up in Sabinetown Feb 14, the first seen there since last summer (DB). There were few sightings of Rusty Blackbird this winter. The first were 40 in south Lufkin Dec 21 and

again on Jan 3 (GH). On Feb 3 at least 3 were seen in flooded pastures just east of Nacogdoches (DW), while the last were 7 at the VFW Pond in Lufkin Feb 13 (GH). There were no reports of Brewer's Blackbird all winter (and your compiler searched for them at several sites where they have been regular in the past). The first Great-tailed Grackles back in Nacogdoches were 2 noisy males on Feb 9 (CS). They still do not regularly winter here, but they do in Lufkin, where at least 25 were seen near the Wal-Mart Feb 15 (DW).

A very rare winter **Black-and-white Warbler** was found at Alazan Bayou WMA Jan 22 (DB, RP). Much more unusual was a **Yellow Warbler** found and photographed at Ellen Trout Park on Jan 8 (GH). It was independently found and photographed again on Jan 20 (AT), and that afternoon and in coming weeks many observers got to see it. It was last seen on Feb 19 (GH). This species is almost unprecedented inland anywhere in Texas in the winter. Special thanks to GH and AT who did a fantastic job of documenting and keeping track of this rarity. Both obtained many good photos for confirmation of this unusual record. Once again a **Summer Tanager** showed up for the Nacogdoches CBC, this year at the Shackelford's feeders in north Nacogdoches (JS, CS). What was probably the same bird was seen again on Feb 23, a block away from the first sighting (JS). A beautiful immature male **Western Tanager** paused briefly in Central Hts Jan 5 (DW, MHW), but was never seen again.

**Observers:** DB = David Bell; AB = Aaron Bradley; JC = James Childress; KE = Katrina Echols; TH = Tyson Hart; GH = Gary Hunter; m.obs. = many observers; RP = Ryan Phelps; DR = Dave Richardson; DS = Dennis Scheef; CS = Cliff Shackelford; JS = Julie Shackelford; J Sm = John Smelser; RT = Ron Thill; AW = Ashley Wahlberg; DW = David Wolf; MHW = Mimi Hoppe Wolf

**Localities in Angelina County:** Diboll; Ellen Trout Park (in Lufkin); Huntington; Jones Park (in Lufkin); Kurth Lake; Lufkin; Marion Ferry

**Localities in Nacogdoches County:** Alazan Bayou WMA; Central Heights (= Central Hts); Cushing; McAlister Park; Nacogdoches; Nacogdoches sewage ponds (= Nac ponds); Stephen F. Austin Experimental Forest.

**Localities in Sabine County:** Sabinetown.

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

**Localities in Shelby County/velby County:** Center.