

**Winter 2023-24 Bird Report for Pineywoods Audubon Society**  
**December 1, 2023 – February 29, 2024**  
**(by David E. Wolf)**

This was the hottest winter on record in the United States in 130 years of record-keeping and without a doubt this affected the winter avifauna here in East Texas. The greatest effects of the record warmth were felt in the Upper Midwest, Great Lakes and Northeast regions. Lakes Erie and Ontario never froze and there was open water in places as far north as Manitoba. All of these are source areas for birds that visit us in the winter, so it is no great surprise that many species never appeared in good numbers. Why come south when conditions closer to home are suitable? Spring came early and the last freeze, a light one, was overnight on Feb 18-19, almost a month early! Is this going to be our new normal?

Overall this was a very dull winter. The birding seemed “slow”, even “boring” at times, and there were few surprises. Most of the expected species were found, but the numbers and frequency of many were on the low side. Especially lacking were the usual hordes of robins, waxwings and blackbirds, and even typical winter residents like Brown Creeper, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Hermit Thrush and Dark-eyed Junco were scarce. By mid-February waterfowl were leaving (many never appeared in good numbers anyway) and by the end of the month sparrows and other winter birds were disappearing.

**Weather overview:**

This was yet another warm winter in East Texas, with one major exception. Cool/cold fronts came and went through the early part of the season, but none were especially noteworthy until the Arctic blast of Jan 14-16 sent us below freezing for three days. A secondary front kept it cold for a few more days, but then the weather shifted to heavy rains Jan 22-24 as it warmed up and moisture flowed in from the Gulf of Mexico. Some local areas recorded as much as 14 inches (KE in Hudson) and 11 inches (DS in Cushing) and most places got at least 7-8 inches of rain. With the rain lakes and ponds immediately came up dramatically, including huge Lakes Rayburn and Toledo Bend. Extreme weather! By mid-February it felt like early spring, until a cold front brought a light freeze overnight on Feb 18-19. After that it was mostly mild and warmed up quickly. The last week of February brought unusually warm temperatures, with highs well into the 80s, before cooling down on Feb 28. With the warm temperatures came an explosion of budding, flowering and overwhelming greenery. Could winter really be over? Have we possibly had our last freeze? [As I write this on March 17 it looks like it was!].

Spring is here. This is our most exciting season so keep me posted on your first dates for arriving summer residents and more interesting sightings of migrants. And thank you ( [dewolfnac@gmail.com](mailto:dewolfnac@gmail.com) )

**Bird List:**

It was not a great season for waterfowl, not surprising given that open water was available all the way north to central Canada during this warm winter. A lone **Black-bellied Whistling-Duck** survived the winter at the Nacogdoches sewer ponds and was still present March 1 (DW et al). It was eventually determined that it can't fly well (but it still provided a first ever on the Nac CBC). More surprising was a flock of 27 **Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks** that showed up there Feb 23, but did not stay around (DW). This is the earliest ever for this increasing species. 8 Snow Geese over Ewing Park on upper Rayburn on Dec 1 were the only southbound geese reported (GH) and there were no reports of northbound geese. A male **Redhead X Ring-necked Duck hybrid** was at the Nac ponds Jan 25 and present through Feb 17 (DW). Presumably this was the same individual back for its 4<sup>th</sup> winter in a row! A single Greater Scaup flew over the TX 147 causeway Jan 27 (DW) and one was amidst the huge coot flock there on Feb 6 (DW, MHW). A **White-winged Scoter** was seen on a roadside lake just outside of Jasper at least January 29-February 3 (m.obs. on eBird), but not found by the Wolfs on Jan 6. A Common Goldeneye at Ellen Trout Park Jan 18 was never seen again (GH) and proved to be the only report of this increasingly infrequent bird. 27 Hooded Mergansers at Alazan Bayou WMA Feb 10 was the season high count (DW).

A White-winged Dove was a regular visitor to feeders in Central Hts all winter and by the end of February it was calling (DW, MHW). Another was at feeders in Center Feb 4 (J Sm). A hummingbird

present near Hudson (Angelina Co) Nov 7, 2023-Jan 29, 2024 was suspected of being a **Black-chinned Hummingbird** from the start, but not fully confirmed as this species until late in its stay as KE got better and better photos. The identification was confirmed by nationally-recognized hummingbird expert Sheri Williamson. Another *Archilochus* hummingbird that visited south Lufkin Dec 1-4 may also have been a Black-chinned (GH), while a late one that visited Turk's cap flowers in Nacogdoches Dec 5 was probably a Ruby-throated (CS). A young male **Rufous Hummingbird** spent the entire winter in Center, acquiring more rufous as the season progressed, and was still present into March (J Sm). Additional *Selasphorus sp?* reports were one in south Lufkin Dec 10 (GH) and two independent reports from the Colonial Hills area in Nacogdoches on Jan 15 (Jack Rohrer fide RS; fide JS).

There were no American Coots at the TX 147 causeway for most of December through January and then suddenly, after the lake rose from the heavy rains, there were 2750 there Jan 27 (DW) and at least 6500 Feb 6 (DW, MHW). The **Limpkin** trio frequenting the Marion Ferry area was spotted Dec 1, Dec 21 and Jan 1 (all GH). On Jan 25 one was photographed on the west side of Lake Nacogdoches for a first sighting from this area (Cory Adams fide RS, CS). Another was seen at Sandy Creek Park on Lake Steinhagen Feb 16 (Fred Lyons eBird). They're out there! Lake Rayburn was very low in the first half of the season and still attracting some shorebirds, including 70 Least Sandpipers on a small muddy island off the TX 147 causeway Jan 2. With them was a single Western Sandpiper (DW). The last Long-billed Dowitcher of a good fall for them was one at Marion Ferry Dec 1 (GH). Only a few Spotted Sandpipers were found: one at Lake Nacogdoches (West Overlook) Jan 18 (TH); another at Sabinetown Jan 26 (DB); and 2 at the SFA Ag Farm pond Feb 18 (DW). A **Solitary Sandpiper** at Ellen Trout Park Feb 18 and again March 1 was photographed nicely for confirmation (GH) and lends credence to one reported in Jasper Co on Feb 9 on eBird. This is very out-of-season for this species and I can't guess whether these were lingering birds that wintered farther north than expected or extremely early spring migrants! There were 24 Greater Yellowlegs at Marion Ferry Jan 1 and 19 still there Jan 8 (GH) and 2 at the TX 147 causeway Jan 2 (DW). 67 Bonaparte's Gulls just off Overlook Park at the west end of the Lake Rayburn Dam Feb 6 was the season high count (DW, MHW). A single first-cycle Herring Gull over the TX 147 causeway Jan 2 was the only one seen on multiple trips to this site (DW). The winter high count of 270 Forster's Terns at the TX 147 causeway was also on Jan 2 (DW).

23 Common Loons off Sabinetown on Toledo Bend Jan 21 was the season high count there (DB). A conservative tally of 1275 Double-crested Cormorants in a raft off Ewing Park (TX 103 at the Angelina) Jan 19 was the highest count on Rayburn in many years (DW). Neotropic Cormorant is one of our earliest "spring" arrivals and 17 at the TX 147 causeway Feb 6 were the first (DW, MHW). Single **American Bitterns** were found at Morris Frank Park Dec 5 (GH) and just west of Nacogdoches on the Dec 17 CBC (AT). Late White Ibis were one at Marion Ferry Dec 1 and 11 there Dec 21 (both GH). Almost 100 Turkey Vultures in a stream over Lufkin Jan 30 seemed like long-distance migrants (AW), but it is hard to know just how much these birds move around locally. A Northern Harrier was at the Angelina Co Airport Dec 27 (AB) and on Jan 21 there were 2 there (DW, RT). One was at the TX 147 causeway Feb 6 (DW, MHW). A Crested Caracara near Douglass Dec 31 was noteworthy inside Nacogdoches Co (CW), though they have regularly been seen not far west of here.

A pair of Eastern Phoebes was already nest-building in Nacogdoches on the early date of Feb 3 (RS). A rare **Vermilion Flycatcher** (female) was photographed at Martin Dies SP Dec 3 (AT). 5-6 Fish Crows were heard on Jan 14 in James community ca 8 miles out of Center (J Sm). The first Purple Martins were 1-2 heard over the SFA Exp Forest Jan 20 (CS) and 5 over Ellen Trout lake Feb 17 (TH). The first Barn Swallow was one over the SFASU Ag Farm pond Feb 28 (DW). A single **Cave Swallow** was at Ellen Trout Park Jan 17 (TH); 3 were over Lake Naconiche Jan 20 (TH); and at least 8 were spotted working low over Lake Naconiche Jan 21 (DW). These insect-feeders seemingly survived the Arctic blast by picking insects from the surface of the lakes. Sedge Wrens were largely lacking this winter, but 5 were found in a marsh near Lake Naconiche Feb 17 (TH). The only Gray Catbirds were singles at Ellen Trout Park Jan 2 and in the SFA Exp Forest Jan 4 (both DW). A large flock of 130+ American Pipits was at the Nacogdoches Airport Feb 4 (TH, RP, DW) and at least 2-3 Sprague's Pipits wintered there this season (AT, DW et al).

Purple Finches were almost completely lacking, but one female visited south Lufkin Jan 16 (GH). After a few tantalizing sightings of **Pine Siskins** early in the season, including 1-2 in south Lufkin beginning Dec 4 and one at Kurth Lake on the Nacogdoches CBC Dec 17 (both GH), they suddenly appeared more widely in January. The greatest numbers by far were in the eastern part of our area at Sabinetown, where DB had 32 on Jan 2-3; 75 on Jan 15; his season high count of 185 on Jan 25; 50-100 through Feb 8; and 10-50 through March 1 (DB). 7 came to feeders in Center Jan 21, while the season high count there was 100 on Feb 3 (J Sm). Numbers were much lower in Nacogdoches and Angelina Counties, but first sightings at feeders included 3 in south Nacogdoches Jan 10 (AT); 2 in Nacogdoches Jan 21 (AB); 5 in Central Hts Jan 25 (MHW, DW); and 3 in Nacogdoches Jan 27 (JS, CS). Numbers at these feeding stations increased somewhat in the following weeks, but no more than 20 at once, and by mid-February they had pulled back from most feeders and become inconspicuous (m.obs.). Fox Sparrows were hard to find this winter, but 2 were in the SFA Exp Forest Jan 4 (DW) and 2 were at Alazan Bayou Feb 16 (AT). The most unexpected bird of the winter was a "**Gray-headed Junco**" that appeared at feeders in south Lufkin Jan 14 and was present through March 1 (GH). This was the first Pineywoods record of this readily-recognized Rocky Mountain race since an "invasion" into the region in 2000-01 (when they were found in 4 East Texas counties and even in Arkansas and Louisiana). Single **Grasshopper Sparrows** were seen at the exact same spot at Alazan Bayou WMA on Jan 1 and Jan 28 (DW) and in the same general area on Jan 21 (TH). 24 Vesper Sparrows at Alazan Bayou WMA Jan 1 was a big increase, perhaps attracted to the recent burn (DW). The only **Henslow's Sparrow** report this winter was one seen well at Alazan Bayou WMA Jan 21 (TH). A female **Spotted Towhee** in the SFA Exp Forest Jan 4 (DW) was found in the same area again on Feb 11 (TH) and another was in east Nacogdoches Jan 28 (AB).

Brown-headed Cowbirds were almost completely lacking early in the winter, but appeared more widely from late January through February. A high count of 3500+ was at a feedlot in sw. Shelby Co. on Feb 2 (DW). A surprising number of Rusty Blackbirds were found this winter: 42 at Alazan Bayou WMA on the Nacogdoches CBC Dec 17; 4 over the Nacogdoches Airport Jan 7; a single at Alazan Bayou WMA Jan 28; a flock of 24 that worked their way through the treetops of the flooded bottomland forest at Alazan Bayou WMA Feb 21; and at least 18 that did the same thing on the Nac sewer ponds entry road March 5 (all reports DW). 3 Brewer's Blackbirds at a small feedlot off TX 7 West were a great find on the Dec 17 Nacogdoches CBC (RP, RT), and 6 were amidst the horde of cowbirds at a feedlot in sw. Shelby Co Feb 2 (DW). They have been regular at this latter site in the past. The general lack of Great-tailed Grackles in the winter continues to puzzle us, but to make it more confusing a flock of 50 was at the Redlands Love's gas station on Feb 7 (CS). DB also mentioned seeing some here earlier, but your compiler stopped here twice during this period without finding any! Then on Feb 25 both CS and TH reported noisy males back at the Wal-Mart in Nacogdoches. Common Grackles were surprisingly hard to find all winter and no really large flocks were reported (m.obs.). A **Black-and-white Warbler** at Alazan Bayou WMA on the Nacogdoches CBC on Dec 17 (DW) was not too surprising given the mild fall and early winter. Last, but not least, was one of the best sightings this winter, the **Palm Warbler** found just outside Nacogdoches town on the Dec 17 CBC (AB). This was the first time ever on the count and there are very few winter records in general.

**Observers:** DB = David Bell; AB = Aaron Bradley; KE = Katrina Echols; TH = Tyson Hart; GH = Gary Hunter; m.obs. = many observers; RP = Ryan Phelps; RS = Rick Schaefer; DS = Dennis Scheef; CS = Cliff Shackelford; JS = Julie Shackelford; J Sm = John Smelser; AT = Anne Tindell; RT = Robert Truss; AW = Ashley Wahlberg; CW = Carol Wells. DW = David Wolf; MHW = Mimi Hoppe Wolf.

**Localities in Angelina County:** Angelina Co Airport; Ellen Trout Park in Lufkin; Ewing Park on upper Lake Rayburn (TX 103 crossing); Hudson; Kurth Lake; Lufkin; Marion Ferry on upper Lake Rayburn; Morris Frank Park in Lufkin; Redlands.

**Localities in Jasper County:** Jasper; Martin Dies SP; Overlook Park (West end of Rayburn Dam); Sandy Creek Park.

**Localities in Nacogdoches County:** Alazan Bayou WMA; Central Heights; Douglass; Lake Nacogdoches (West Park); Lake Naconiche; Nacogdoches; Nacogdoches Airport; Nacogdoches sewage ponds (= Nac ponds); Stephen F. Austin Experimental Forest (= SFA Exp Forest); SFASU Ag Farm (near Mahl).

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

**Localities in Sabine County:** Sabinetown on Toledo Bend Reservoir.

**Localities in Shelby County:** Center.