

Sea Rim State Park Christmas Bird Count 3 January 2010

Sunday January 3rd was a cold day, with a moderate but biting east wind generally about 10 mph. Although there were a few periods of sunshine, there was a high overcast most of the day. All-in-all, the conditions represented reasonable birding weather. In the two months preceding, the El Niño Southern Oscillation (to give it its official meteorological name) sent the west to east storm track further south than normal, and mostly over (and often a little south of) the Upper Texas Coast, resulting in rain events every four or five days. The good aspect of this is that any remaining salt from the storm surge of Hurricane Ike in September 2008 has surely been washed away. The not quite so good is that conditions were very wet underfoot.

We very much appreciate the cooperation of McFaddin and Texas Point NWRs, and especially Patrick Walther for spending all day transporting this observer, mostly by airboat, over the refuges, Jim Sutherlin for access to J.D. Murphree WMA, and Justin Rhodes and Jerry Rashall of Texas Parks and Wildlife Department for permission to enter Sea Rim State Park.

The count results clearly show that the habitat conditions are very much returning to normal. However, the sandy beaches were not well populated with birds for reasons that are not totally clear. The storm surge did develop a beach ridge inland from the water line. To the east along Texas Point NWR to the Point itself, the ridge is quite significant, probably a good five feet in elevation, but the former marsh between the ridge and the water line continues to erode quite rapidly, and is not sandy. That is not new, and the birds in that area were pretty much "normal." To the west however, the sandy areas do appear reasonably normal to human eyes, except perhaps for a much steeper slope than before at the water line. Nevertheless, the number of beach birds there was substantially below normal. But the counts from areas just inland, such as Pleasure Island and McFaddin NWR suggests that many of the gulls particularly were a short distance inland, perhaps looking for areas sheltered from the wind. The total number of species recorded was 156, up from last year's 140.

There were good numbers of ducks, but with a relatively unusual distribution. Only a small number of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks were found and no Fulvous, although both species are quite plentiful further inland in the area. Most of the Northern Pintail that were seen were flying offshore, and there were relatively few "dabbling" ducks. Two or three concentrations of Gadwall in J.D. Murphree, Texas Point and McFaddin saved the day for that species but Northern Shovelers were relatively very scarce. Encouragingly, Mottled Ducks were seen in average numbers, up from the very low number last year. Diving ducks are usually to be found in the deeper water, and there were many Canvasback in J.D. Murphree and some in Barnett Lake in McFaddin. Three Common Goldeneye were not a surprise, even though the species is not seen every year on the count. We already knew there were reports of the species in some numbers. There were many Ring-necked Ducks in J.D. Murphree, and a fair number of scaup in several places. The somewhat choppy Gulf probably concealed many more scaup offshore, and hampered the unsuccessful search for scoters. Only a couple of American Wigeon were seen, but Mallards were again seen after being totally absent last year. However, small ducks were plentiful. Pleasure Island had a large number of Bufflehead, and there were teal everywhere. The 423 Blue-winged Teal shattered the previous high of 300. There are often good numbers of Green-winged Teal and this year's count is best classified as "high normal." Ruddy Ducks were also plentiful. Pairs of Hooded Mergansers are commonly found in Texas Point and J.D.

Murphree, and the total was on the high side of normal. Red-breasted Mergansers, on the other hand, were on the low side of normal, possibly hiding and/or out of sight in the choppy waters.

Large flocks of Snow Geese, with some embedded Ross's Geese flew over in the early morning heading west, and, as, usual, it is difficult to know if any were counted twice. A few Greater White-fronted Geese were seen in both J.D. Murphree and McFaddin, nice finds after missing the species last year.

No Northern Gannets were seen, but it must be pointed out that conditions were very unfavorable for finding inshore gannets. Access at Pleasure Island is still physically restricted, and Common Loons were not detected there. However, there was one in the corner of Clam Lake that is inside the circle, and two others flew by along the beach. An Eared Grebe in the east cove of Clam Lake was the only one seen.

American White Pelican numbers were somewhat low, perhaps reflecting an unwillingness to fly in the wind. Brown Pelicans were interesting, in that numbers were on the high side, but most of the birds were inland away from the shoreline. Also different from past years was that a high percentage of the Brown Pelicans were adult birds, whereas before, the vast majority seen were immature birds. Cormorant numbers – both species – were unremarkable. There were not many Anhingas by the standards of recent years, but the number was within the longer range norms.

Heron numbers were pretty much normal except for a low number of Little Blue Herons. Cattle Egret and Reddish Egret appear for us only about half the time and both were found this year. Given the relatively cold early December, it was somewhat of a surprise to find six Green Herons, even though that total is often reached. The Black-crowned Night-Heron roost in McFaddin produced fewer birds than normal this year, while no Yellow-crowned Night-Herons were seen.

Over 400 White Ibis is quite a high number by pre-hurricane standards, but less than might have been expected in light of the numbers seen earlier in the year. Dark Ibis, species whose numbers in the count circle are quite variable, were quite low, but that does reflect the low numbers earlier in the year.

By recent standards, the numbers of both species of Vulture were low, but many years ago, there were few Turkey Vultures and no Black Vultures along the immediate coast. We have come to think of five Ospreys as a low count, but Osprey can range quite far, and may have been elsewhere round Sabine Lake. White-tailed Kites left the area in the aftermath of Ike, presumably because the small rodent prey base had been virtually eliminated. Four birds is not a full recovery, but is double the number seen last year. Northern Harriers and Accipiters were found in the usual numbers. White-tailed Hawk was a new species for the count, an addition probably long overdue, as young birds have been in the area on and off for several years. This is likely another example of a species expanding northwards, as is Crested Caracara, three of which were seen after a miss last year. Anyone who has birded anywhere in the area this year will know that Red-tailed Hawks are very numerous, and 56 has been exceeded only once by a count of 60 in 1997. The expected three Falcons were there in near normal numbers. If anything, there were more Merlins but fewer American Kestrels than average.

Because many of the marshes in the count circle are brackish, Clapper Rails have almost always greatly outnumbered King Rails. Calling rails in clearly brackish situations such as along Pilot Station Road are assumed to be Clapper Rails because that is the only species seen there. King Rail was found in J.D. Murphree. Virginia Rails have apparently returned to near normal numbers. Although Soras are commonly heard calling in spring and fall, they have proven difficult to find in winter, and the bird seen was the first in three years. Black Rail is never an

expected species because of its secretive habits, but this year, one chanced to swim across a small boat channel in McFaddin NWR in front of two observers. Common Moorhens seem to have suffered badly in the hurricanes and 20, while an improvement over last year's 7, is low by historical standards. American Coots were present in normal numbers.

Black-bellied Plover is by far the commonest plover on the beach and mudflats. Numbers were close to the long-term average. Snowy Plovers used to be very difficult to find on the Upper Texas Coast until a group established a beachhead on the west part of Sea Rim SP about a decade ago. While not quite as numerous as in some past years, there were, nevertheless a good number there this year. Only six Piping Plover was a little low, although the profile of the beach restricts the amount of damp sand, which this species seems to prefer, unlike the Snowy Plover, which is usually found on drier sand. Semi-palmated Plovers, another species which seems to prefer damp mudflats were not numerous.

American Oystercatchers had seemingly established a tenuous presence around the Sabine-Neches Waterway, but we did not find any this year. Black-necked Stilts were down more than a little, while American Avocets, more seen in inland locations than usual, were within norms. Only two Spotted Sandpipers is a total well below norms, but lack of access to areas on Pleasure Island may be the cause.

When we first were able to bird the beach along Texas Point NWR in 2000, we were surprised to find Whimbrel wintering in an area. However, we have found them every year since. Often we have found a small mixed flock of Whimbrel and Long-billed Curlew in roughly the same area of the beach. This year, there was a new twist. The main flock had four Whimbrel, nine Long-billed Curlews and two Marbled Godwits! It was fascinating to see all three species in close proximity, both in the air and at the water's edge.

We missed Ruddy Turnstone for the first time in ten years. There were fewer Sanderlings than normal, perhaps again reflecting the different nature of the sand at the water line. Western Sandpipers were in the eroding vegetation at the water edge in somewhat lower than normal numbers, while observers found more Least Sandpipers than usual, mostly in inland locations. Dowitchers are a "feast or famine" bird in that we either find a lot or none. One flock of Short-billed was in McFaddin NWR close to the Gulf beach, while there were larger flocks of Long-billed Dowitchers further inland. The number of Wilson's Snipe counted was quite low, but the birds sit tight and it is chance whether any given group is flushed.

Laughing Gull numbers were high, but not from any congregations on the beach. Most of those recorded were further inland. Equally unusual, four Bonaparte's Gulls were "inland" at Pleasure Island, and two more were in the marshes south of Backridge Road.. Ring-billed Gulls were seen in normal numbers, again with many away from the shore. Gull-billed Terns are not always found but small numbers are seemingly present in winter. This species tends to forage over marsh areas, and the one seen was over Texas Point NWR marsh. Caspian Terns were normal, some on the beach, some inland as usual. Royal Terns, which pretty much stick to the beach, were scarce, while Forster's Terns, which are found on any body of water as well as offshore were down only a little. Black Skimmers are very gregarious, and the large flock was located this year after being missed last year, as well as a few in an unusual inland location in McFaddin NWR.

Doves and pigeons are becoming very enigmatic in Sabine Pass. This year, Rock Pigeons were there in numbers but Eurasian Collared-Doves were nowhere to be found. Only one White-winged Dove was observed, while Inca Doves were missed again. A low number of Mourning Doves may reflect the wet conditions in the count circle as much as anything.

The count missed Barn Owl last year, something we blamed on the presumed absence of rodents, but earlier this fall there were certainly at least six in Sabine Woods. The observers there reported only one during the count, but three were flushed from the marsh at Texas Point NWR – basically across the highway from Sabine Woods – and another from the McFaddin marsh. Three Great Horned Owls also points to a return to normal.

Hummingbird feeders were hung in Sabine Woods early in December, and it was gratifying when a hummingbird greeted observers in the early morning. When the other observers in the vicinity were summoned, the hummingbird obligingly returned but was immediately "bombed" by another hummingbird which then went to one of the other feeders before perching in good view. Unfortunately, both were females, and we had to settle for *Archilochus* species for one and *Selasphorus* (or Rufous/Allen's) species for the other. A third hummingbird was there but too shy for identification.

Red-bellied Woodpeckers used to be an occasional species on the count, but we have found them five years in a row now, and 16 topped the previous 2002 high of 13. Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers and Downy Woodpeckers were recorded in normal numbers; Northern Flickers were on the low side.

Only one species of flycatcher can be relied on in the count circle – Eastern Phoebe. It is a good year for that species elsewhere in the area, but 54 was normal for this count. It was good to find a Vermilion Flycatcher for the fourth time in the last six years, and the first time since 2006. It was known that there had been two Great Kiskadees in Sabine Woods in early December, so it was not unexpected that the species might show. In the event, the first observers to reach the Woods in the early morning immediately heard a Kiskadee call. Even though both were not seen at the same time, calls made it clear that both were still in the vicinity. The "2004" count was the only previous one that found a Kiskadee.

White-eyed Vireos were not to be found in the three previous years, so it was nice to find one again. Blue-headed Vireos were back up to normal numbers after a low count last year. Blue Jays were back up from last year, but still lower than the long term average. Inexplicably, no Tree Swallows showed up last year. This year, they seemingly were everywhere in the circle, and the total is well above the long term average.

Carolina Chickadees were not quite in normal numbers. Somewhat incongruously, we are able to find Brown Creeper in about half the counts, and found one this year, despite the lack of significant stands of pine trees. Almost every year, Brown Creepers do make it down to Sabine Woods in what we have always considered "overshooting." Apparently, some do not go back north very far. Similarly, Golden-crowned Kinglets are found 80 percent of the time, and this year, two or three are apparently wintering in Sabine Woods. Ruby-crowned Kinglets are very numerous everywhere this year, and the total matches the 2005-2007 period highs. It seemed Blue-gray Gnatcatchers were everywhere but the final total is not abnormally high.

Carolina Wrens are fairly localized within the circle and are easiest found in Sabine Woods. Numbers of those and the more widely distributed House Wren were normal. Sedge Wrens are present in the marshes in clusters, but this year, there were large areas devoid of them. While the number is still respectable, it is below normal. The second Winter Wren in ten years was found in J.D. Murphree.

Eastern Bluebirds were not found in the circle this year. Hermit Thrushes were found in normal numbers. Some years, a large flock of American Robins makes it to the coast. This is not one of those years, and we were probably lucky to find the three that we did. Numbers of both Gray Catbirds and Northern Mockingbirds were close to long-term averages. This does not seem

to have been a year for Brown Thrashers although two were found. A flock of American Pipits is usually located somewhere in the circle, but this year only four birds were confirmed. Six is also a small flock when Cedar Waxwings are concerned, but the species does seem to be more scattered this year than normal.

We did not find any lingering neotropical migrant warblers, perhaps not surprising after early December cold weather and frosts. Of the wintering species, numbers of Orange-crowned Warblers were on the high side, while Yellow-rumped were somewhat low, although certainly present everywhere. Pine Warbler was missed for the first time since 1995. This may not be very significant, and may just reflect chance. Thirteen Palm Warblers represented a new high for the count. Common Yellowthroats were where they should be, while the Wilson's Warbler was only the fourth in ten years.

Towhees seem to have ceased to winter within the circle, and for the third consecutive year, none were found. Chipping Sparrow is a "60 percent" of counts species but finding some was nice nevertheless. Field Sparrow is found about half the time while the Vesper Sparrow was the third on the last ten years. LeConte's Sparrows are mostly found in Texas Point NWR where many light sparrows seen from the airboat have to go unidentified. The numbers confirmed certainly represent a fraction of those actually present. Nelson's Sparrows are very easy to find in the *Spartina* marshes in November and again in the spring, but can be elusive during the count period. We were happy to find the ones we did. The two Seaside Sparrows that were found were surprisingly far inland. We missed Song Sparrow last year, but numbers are back to normal. Thirteen Lincoln's Sparrows is a high count, while 362 Swamp Sparrows exceeds the previous high of 277 in 1995 by a considerable margin. White-throated Sparrows have been noted as in low numbers on many other counts this year and 18 is very low. White-crowned Sparrows are not located every year, and 19 is a good total. Twenty-four Northern Cardinals is an improvement over the very low 17 of last year, but is well below the long-term average.

Red-winged Blackbirds were again under 1000, but not by much. Eastern Meadowlarks were located in normal numbers. Interestingly, numbers of Common Grackles were high while the number of Great-tailed Grackles was low. We failed to find House Finches again this year, but, probably on the favorable side, we saw no Brown-headed Cowbirds. Cowbird numbers had dropped steadily over five years to only one last year. House Sparrow numbers were back up after last year's single bird, perhaps reflecting the increasing number of humans living in Sabine Pass again.

We thank all those who participated in the count: Howard Davis, Gerald Duhon, Nancy and Don Fisher, Garrett Gauthier, Bill Graber, John Haynes, Don Jeane, Rose Ann and Harrison Jordan, Gary Kelley, Carol Lynn and Andy Loker, Karen McCormick, Art Mackinnon, Steve Mayes, Royce Pendergast, Alice Richardson, Sherrie Roden, Jenny Shuffield, Christine Sliva, Ken Sztraky, Patrick Walther, Tex Wells, Jana Whittle

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