

Jefferson County, Texas Spring Migration Count – May 8, 2010

While the birder's interest in the count usually turns first to how many species were found, much of the real scientific value lies in the numbers of the more common birds. We will in this account try to touch on both aspects. While the number of participants was down slightly from the last few years, the number of "party-hours," perhaps the best measure of the coverage, was very close to average. The number of party miles was down, but almost exclusively in the miles by automobile category.

While the absolute number of birds recorded was on the high side of "normal," the 181 species represented was five more than the previous all time high recorded in 1998, and 15 more than last year. Six species were new to the count, bringing the cumulative total to an impressive 241. Even though the number of species was greatly influenced by the number of migrants along the coast, this is still a very gratifying result in the aftermath of three hurricanes in four years, and especially after the storm surge of Hurricane Ike in 2008 covered most of the county south of Highway 73 and some parts north of it. In many cases below, we indicate that the overall numbers of given species were normal. This does not, however, mean that all parts of the county have recovered equally well. Apart from the coastal woodlots, and the marshes which are regularly subject to salt water inflows, the southern parts of the county held very few birds.

Waterfowl numbers were generally unimpressive. However, it was encouraging to see Mottled Ducks at their highest number since 1988. Black-bellied Whistling Ducks seem to be still increasing, or at least spreading to more accessible places. The only truly "lingering" ducks were a pair of Green-winged Teal in Cattail Marsh. No Ruddy Ducks found this year.

After missing the species altogether, we did locate, albeit by call, seven Northern Bobwhites this year. The species still seems to be in a long term decline in the area, however. We missed Pied-billed Grebe for only the second time, although numbers are never very high in May. Brown Pelican numbers have always been variable, as the species is both gregarious and wandering, but 91, while less than last year's 231 is still good for a species absent on the Upper Texas coast before 1989, and rare in Jefferson county before 1998. Seven lingering American White Pelicans were found, quite a large number for early May. Neotropic Cormorants are doing well with the highest number ever. Nine Anhinga is a very respectable showing.

While the numbers of most Herons were pretty much normal, 12 Least Bitterns was the highest number since 15 in 2004. Least Bitterns seem to be numerous this year. There was nothing unusual in the numbers of Ibis or Roseate Spoonbills. All reports that represent normal numbers indicate that the habitat in at least most of the county has returned to something near normal.

Black Vultures were found in normal numbers while 75 Turkey Vultures was the highest in the history of the count. We had never found a Swallow-tailed Kite during the count in previous years so finding three, apparently two adults and one juvenile, over the Natural Wetland south of Cattail Marsh was cause for some celebration, even if it was not entirely unexpected in view of the slowly expanding and increasing population of the species in southeast Texas. Five

Red-tailed Hawks is more than we usually find in May. We know Crested Caracaras have been resident in the county, both in the western part and along the coast, for some years, but somehow, we didn't see any in 2007 through 2009. Four this year better represents the actual status of the species. Peregrine Falcons on the other hand are not expected to remain this late, and the one seen was only the fourth in the last ten years.

Rails were much as expected, even if a King Rail flying in a rather dry part of League Road in the western part of the county was in an unusual location. Purple Gallinules are a somewhat secretive species, but on this day, 17 of those in Cattail Marsh were seen, however briefly.

Most American Golden-Plovers have passed through by the first week in May but we found three, the first on this count since 2005. The true "shorebirds" seemed normal though a lack of both Snowy and Piping Plovers was unusual in the light of the early date of the count this here. The habitat along the immediate shoreline is still changing as it readjusts from the effects of Hurricane Ike. The Killdeer and Black-necked Stilt populations are still very healthy, while the lack of access to much of Pleasure Island probably was partly responsible for us not finding any American Avocets. Though most will have been well north of the area, most years a few (non-breeding?) birds remain through the summer. It is late for Solitary Sandpiper, but there seems to be a trend towards more of this species being found on this count.

Whimbrel is a species that has been seen in large numbers in some recent years. This year, any wet or even slightly moist rice field in the western part of the county had its complement of Whimbrel on count day. The total was an impressive 385 birds, well above the previous high of 264 in 2003. The early date of the count worked against finding a lot of Hudsonian Godwits, but there were two in Cattail Marsh and two in the rice fields.

Ruddy Turnstones are somewhat unevenly distributed along the coast and also somewhat variable, but we usually find a significant number as we did this year. Among the "Peep" Sandpipers, there was the usual good showing of White-rumped Sandpipers, especially in Cattail Marsh. No Baird's Sandpipers were seen, however. Probably the "bird of the count" was a Ruff found in Cell 4 at Cattail Marsh by John Haynes. This was all the more remarkable given the number of shorebirds in that cell! Both Dowitcher species were seen after several lean years following Hurricane Rita in 2005. Wilson's Phalaropes were seen in numbers both in the western part of the county and in Cattail Marsh.

The numbers of gulls and terns were all within normal parameters. Common Tern has become increasingly difficult to find while Sandwich Terns seem to be increasing.

Eurasian Collared-Doves are now a firmly established part of the local avifauna, but the number seen was not a new high. White-winged Dove populations seem to have stabilized although they are present in new locations each year. Mourning Doves do not seem to be declining. Perhaps only at backyard feeders are they being crowded out by the larger doves, while those in the open country face little competition from those species. Inca Doves, however, do not seem to have fared as well. We did find three this year, a pair that is at Sabine Woods and a lone bird in the extreme western part of county, after none in either of the last two counts.

Ten Yellow-billed Cuckoos was about normal, while Great Horned Owls and Barred Owls are now normal on the count, even if the Great Horned Owls are in varying locations from year to year. Common Nighthawks, Chimney Swifts and Ruby-throated Hummingbirds were all within norms. Three Belted Kingfishers is more than we normally find.

Among the woodpeckers, it was nice to find five Red-headed Woodpeckers but puzzling to find Red-bellied and Downy Woodpeckers to be down. The Yellow-bellied Sapsucker was the first since 2004.

Eastern Wood-Pewees were especially numerous and there were several *Empidonax* Flycatchers, perhaps to be expected on a day with many migrants in May. Fourteen Great-crested Flycatchers was a new count high. After large numbers of Western Kingbirds were seen ten days earlier, it was a little disappointing not to find any. Scissor-tailed Flycatchers have been very constant in the 40-50 range for several years, while Eastern Kingbirds seem to be decreasing. Loggerhead Shrike, a species of growing concerns were up to 56 from 51 last year, but the long term trend may still be obscured by the aftermath of the hurricanes.

There were lots of migrating Vireos. We don't always find Yellow-throated Vireo and four was a good count. This year saw an unprecedented push of Blue-headed Vireos late in April and one remained to be counted on count day.

Among the Corvids, Blue Jay numbers are best described as "low normal," while both Fish and American Crows have increased back to historic norms after a few years of lower numbers. Barn Swallows were everywhere and we recorded more than ever before on this count. Other swallows were unremarkable.

The classical woodland birds, Carolina Chickadees, Tufted Titmice and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers were in normal numbers, as were Eastern Bluebirds. This year has been an outstand one for migrant thrushes, but, on the day of the count, numbers were modest, although Gray-cheeked and Wood Thrushes were seen, albeit one each compared to six Swainson's Thrushes. The number of Gray Catbirds seen varies from year to year, but 15 was a respectable total. Northern Mockingbirds were present in average numbers, while European Starlings were not as numerous as they are in some years. Cedar Waxwings always stay around late into the spring, but 174 was the second highest total we have recorded on this count.

The first thing many birders ask on any day in the spring is "how many warbler species did you see?" Well, on this day, for the whole count, the answer was a very high (for well into May) 23. Perhaps even more remarkable was that 21 of these were seen in Sabine Woods (but not necessarily only there). The two exceptions were Pine and Prothonotary Warblers. Of the warbler species seen, Blue-winged, Golden-winged and Cerulean Warblers were new to the count. Northern Parula are expected but not always on the coast. Yellow Warblers and Chestnut-sided Warblers are among the late warblers than are almost always seen on the count. In recent years, Bay-breasted Warblers, another late migrating warbler, but one which often peaks very sharply on one or two days, had been regular from 1997-to 2004 but had been seen only on the 2007 count thereafter until this count. Black-throated Greens are occasionally seen

in May, while Blackburnian Warblers have been seen in four of the last five counts. Black-and-white Warblers are sometimes all gone by count time, but not this year, while American Redstarts are virtually always plentiful. Although all were "inland" Prothonotary Warbler numbers were the highest ever. This has been a good year for Ovenbirds, so four on count day, while high, was not totally unexpected. Northern Waterthrushes are almost always still migrating through in early May, but five tied the previous record high. In a year when Mourning Warblers had been visible at Sabine Woods day after day, it would have been disappointing in the extreme if there hadn't been any on count day, even though this was only the third count of which any of the species were detected.

Summer and Scarlet Tanagers were seen in near normal numbers. Thirty-two Savannah Sparrows was a new high total, as were 57 Nelson's Sparrows. Seaside Sparrows, not always easy to coax into view to count, were about normal, as were Northern Cardinals, while Rose-breasted Grosbeaks were present, something that does not always happen. We expect to find Blue Grosbeaks, and we did, although we had missed them in both of the last two years. Dickcissels have increased back to the levels of the late 1990 after several lean years. Bobolink is detected only very occasionally, so it was nice to find 29 this year after last year's 35.

Red-winged Blackbirds numbers were definitely on the low side, something we expected, as the species has become very scarce after each hurricane, even in the seemingly not seriously affected areas of the western part of the county. While Eastern Meadowlarks are not being seen in the numbers that were normal in the 1990s, the 55 found was much better than last year's 14. Common and Great-tailed Grackles are often found in close proximity to human habitation, and seemingly have recovered from any losses during the hurricanes. It was nice to find nine Baltimore Orioles, a species that sometimes we cannot find. Orchard Oriole numbers were normal, but this species nests in many areas of the county and is fairly conspicuous.

All in all, this was a very useful count, and may well be more so in coming years as it will be seen as a pivotal year in the recovery of many species from the disruptions occasioned by the storm surge of Hurricane Ike.

John A. Whittle
May 27, 2010