

Jefferson County Fall Migration Count -- 17 September 2016

The fall migration count is set on a fixed date each year -- the third Saturday in September -- and unfortunately cannot readily be changed in the light of weather forecasts. However, as often happens, the weather prognosticators warn of possible rain showers that do not in fact come to pass, or pass by harmlessly. Such was the situation on count day this year, and weather did not interfere with the count.

However, the results were unusual in the extreme, and we do not yet understand fully why. Indeed, we probably will not until either much later in the fall season or even until we have next fall's results. In the northern tier of the county, particularly west of Beaumont, and that comprises, by area, most of the northern tier, the numbers of birds counted was very low. To those of us counting in these northwestern areas, it was clearly evident that there were not many of the various blackbird, cowbird and grackle species to be seen. In addition, there were not many of the mockingbirds that are usually to be seen in the shrubs and bushes that mark the edges of the rice fields. On the other hand, the numbers and variety of species seen in the coastal areas was exceptionally high, and we tallied 174 species, not an all-time high but close to it and perhaps 10 species above normal. The total number of individuals was around the middle of the normal range, with larger numbers of grackles in the southern tier areas making up for their absence in the northern tier.

The timing of the count is such that we usually see at least the first of the winter residents that make the area so attractive for winter birding. The weather in the days prior to count day was unusually warm, both in our area and the areas somewhat further north. This could well explain why we saw so few of species such as American Kestrels, Northern Harriers and Red-tailed Hawks. These species most likely move south as the availability of prey begins to decrease, and that is almost always temperature dependent. Indeed, as this is written in very early October, the number of Kestrels seems to have increased to normal.

There is one species that is always very scarce in September, and that is the Eastern Meadowlark. Meadowlarks can be found in the county in almost every other month of the year. We know from the experience in the panhandle of Texas and areas

somewhat further south that meadowlarks are significantly migratory, with typically more present in the winter. Western Meadowlarks are found in Texas (mostly in the Panhandle), basically only in winter. We believe that, in Jefferson County, the meadowlarks we see in summer, migrate south for the winter, and are replaced by birds moving in from the north. But the summer residents seem to leave before the winter ones arrive. To the best of my knowledge, there is as yet no definitive evidence that this is the case, but as tracking individual birds becomes easier and cheaper, we should be able to confirm this. We are inclined to hypothesize that a similar phenomenon exists in other species, but, in most years at least, the departure of summer residents does not significantly precede the arrival of the winter ones. If later in the fall, we see normal numbers of these other species, that will be evidence that their arrival was merely late, as it is difficult to believe that we just failed to see them on count day, as access to most areas in the northwest part of the county from public roads is very good. We do not discount the possibility that only some of the birds of these species are migratory, as the numbers of, for example, Northern Mockingbirds and Northern Cardinals in the cities and towns seemed to be at least nearer normal, suggesting perhaps the urban dwelling individuals do not migrate. This is possibly most easily seen in the case of American Robins. Robins now routinely breed in the cities in the Golden Triangle, and are present in similar numbers year round. But in winter, large flocks of Robins typically descend on the areas of the Big Thicket just to our north (and sometimes briefly invade the cities, but not usually until late January or February).

We do understand that the numbers of fall passerine migrants that we find on the count is variable, as weather and particularly wind conditions in the days prior can cause feast or famine conditions in the woodlots that make birding in the area so attractive. This year was a "feast" year and overall we recorded a remarkable 25 species of warblers on count day, most, but not all, in the coastal woodlots. There were large numbers of Northern Waterthrushes in the natural wetland areas of Cattail Marsh. A Prairie Warbler in Sabine Woods seems in no hurry to move on, and could

well winter there. Canada Warbler is expected to be the most numerous warbler in Sabine Woods in late August and early September, and this year, they were still present even in mid-September. It was nice to have Wilson's Warblers around this year, after two very slim years for that species.

Although it was a relatively wet summer overall, the late summer was relatively dry and the showers in the days leading up to the count did not result in particularly wet conditions. Accessible shorebird habitat is not particularly plentiful in Jefferson County and the number of species and numbers and of shorebirds seen were not particularly high. However, there was enough water that herons were seen in relatively normal numbers.

A significant number of Least Grebes have been resident in Cattail Marsh for some time, with at least two families with recently hatched juveniles. We found two birds, adding that species to the overall count list.

Other noteworthy species included a Yellow-headed Blackbird that was also a first for the count. Not seen on count day, but seen within the count week at Sabine Woods was a Bell's Vireo, a rare species on the Upper Texas Coast, but most likely to be found in September.

More detailed results by area within the county, and more historical information are in the reports posted on the Golden Triangle Audubon web-site at www.goldentriangleaudubon.org

2016 Totals:

WHISTLING-DUCK, Black-bellied (43); WHISTLING-DUCK, Fulvous (6); DUCK, Mottled (28); TEAL, Blue-winged (875); SHOVELER, Northern (1); GREBE, Least (2); GREBE, Pied-billed (34); STORK, Wood (3); CORMORANT, Neotropic (151); ANHINGA (7); PELICAN, American White (11); PELICAN, Brown (60); BITTERN, American (2); BITTERN, Least (2); HERON, Great Blue (34); EGRET, Great (186); EGRET, Snowy (216); HERON, Little Blue (31); HERON, Tricolored (40); EGRET, Cattle (1881); HERON, Green (19); NIGHT-HERON, Black-crowned (8); NIGHT-HERON, Yellow-crowned (14); IBIS, White (167); IBIS, White-faced (36); IBIS, *Plegadis* (72); SPOONBILL, Roseate (50); VULTURE, Black (69); VULTURE, Turkey (110); OSPREY (4); EAGLE, Bald (2); HARRIER, Northern (1); HAWK, Sharp-shinned (1); HAWK, Cooper's (4); HAWK, Accipiter species (1); HAWK, Red-shouldered (9); HAWK, Broad-winged (6); HAWK, Swainson's (2); HAWK, White-tailed (4); HAWK, Red-tailed (6); CARACARA, Crested (12); KESTREL, American (3); MERLIN (1); RAIL, Clapper (52); GALLINULE, Purple (7); GALLINULE, Common (55); COOT, American (15); PLOVER, Black-bellied (8); PLOVER, Snowy (3); PLOVER, Wilson's (2); PLOVER, Semipalmated (7); PLOVER, Piping (1); KILLDEER (91); STILT, Black-necked (44); AVOCET, American (5);

SANDPIPER, Spotted (4); YELLOWLEGS, Greater (1); WILLET (18); YELLOWLEGS, Lesser (4); SANDPIPER, Upland (3); TURNSTONE, Ruddy (3); SANDERLING (78); SANDPIPER, Semipalmated (3); SANDPIPER, Western (7); SANDPIPER, Least (9); SANDPIPER, Peep species (18); SANDPIPER, Pectoral (1); SANDPIPER, Stilt (11); SANDPIPER, Buff-breasted (15); DOWITCHER, Long-billed (8); GULL, Laughing (907); GULL, Ring-billed (3); TERN, Least (11); TERN, Caspian (8); TERN, Black (4); TERN, Common (3); TERN, Forster's (303); TERN, Royal (122); SKIMMER, Black (95); PIGEON, Rock (211); COLLARED-DOVE, Eurasian (17); DOVE, White-winged (162); DOVE, Mourning (448); DOVE, Inca (4); CUCKOO, Yellow-billed (2); SCREECH-OWL, Eastern (1); OWL, Great Horned (2); OWL, Barred (2); NIGHTHAWK, Common (5); SWIFT, Chimney (10); HUMMINGBIRD, Ruby-throated (48); HUMMINGBIRD species (1); KINGFISHER, Belted (15); WOODPECKER, Red-headed (8); WOODPECKER, Red-bellied (21); WOODPECKER, Downy (15); WOODPECKER, Pileated (4); FLYCATCHER, Olive-sided (2); WOOD-PEWEE, Eastern (42); FLYCATCHER, Yellow-bellied (1); FLYCATCHER, Acadian (4); FLYCATCHER, Traill's (2); FLYCATCHER, Least (4); FLYCATCHER, Empidonax (11); FLYCATCHER, Great Crested (3); KISKADEE, Great (2); KINGBIRD, Eastern (11); FLYCATCHER, Scissor-tailed (26); SHRIKE, Loggerhead (74); VIREO, White-eyed (38); VIREO, Bell's (cw); VIREO, Yellow-throated (2); VIREO, Blue-headed (cw); VIREO, Warbling (5); VIREO, Red-eyed (35); JAY, Blue (131); CROW, American (19); CROW, Fish (4); CROW, Species (6); MARTIN, Purple (1); SWALLOW, Tree (35); SWALLOW, N. Rough-winged (1); SWALLOW, Bank (7); SWALLOW, Cliff (2); SWALLOW, Barn (39); SWALLOW species (2); CHICKADEE, Carolina (24); TITMOUSE, Tufted (2); WREN, Carolina (15); WREN, House (2); GNATCATCHER, Blue-gray (65); BLUEBIRD, Eastern (27); THRUSH, Swainson's (1); ROBIN, American (8); CATBIRD, Gray (3); MOCKINGBIRD, Northern (161); THRASHER, Brown (9); STARLING, European (661); OVENBIRD (3); WARBLER, Worm-eating (3); WATERTHRUSH, Northern (15); WARBLER, Golden-winged (2); WARBLER, Blue-winged (2); WARBLER, Black-and-white (21); WARBLER, Prothonotary (6); WARBLER, Tennessee (4); WARBLER, Mourning (1); WARBLER, Kentucky (4); YELLOWTHROAT, Common (10); WARBLER, Hooded (15); REDSTART, American (17); PARULA, Northern (4); WARBLER, Magnolia (1); WARBLER, Blackburnian (3); WARBLER, Yellow (6); WARBLER, Chestnut-sided (3); WARBLER, Pine (1); WARBLER, Yellow-throated (3); WARBLER, Prairie (1); WARBLER, Black-throated Green (4); WARBLER, Canada (15); WARBLER, Wilson's (1); CHAT, Yellow-breasted (1); SPARROW, Lark (1); SPARROW, Seaside (48); TANAGER, Summer (6); TANAGER, Scarlet (1); CARDINAL, Northern (79); GROSBEAK, GROSBEAK, Blue (41); BUNTING, Indigo (9); BUNTING, Painted (3); BLACKBIRD, Red-winged (471); BLACKBIRD, Yellow-headed (1); GRACKLE, Common (1400); GRACKLE, Boat-tailed (205); GRACKLE, Great-tailed (436); COWBIRD, Brown-headed (267); ORIOLE, Baltimore (9); SPARROW, House (41) TOTAL (11720); Number of species (174); Number of Observers (15); Number of Parties (9); Number of Party-Hours (194.69);

Participants: Mary Carter, Michael Cooper, Howard Davis, Linda Davis, Craig Geoffrey, Sherry Gibson, John Haynes, Sheila Hebert, Thomas Hellweg, Harrison Jordan, Denise Kelley, Gary Kelley, Michael Lester, Randy Lewis, Steve Mayes, John Whittle. *John A. Whittle*