

## Turkey Creek CBC – 16 December 2017

Thirteen participants enjoyed reasonably nice weather for the fortieth Turkey Creek Christmas Count, although the wind was quite strong throughout the day. We continue to wonder about possible effects of extreme weather events on the avifauna within the count circle. The major hurricanes in 2005 and 2008 brought both extreme wind and some flooding. The hurricane of 2017 was without major wind effects by the time it reached extreme southeast Texas, but the 50 or more inches of rain in four or five days was unprecedented with the time span for which there are bird records, and the effects on riparian areas were certainly very substantial. Replacements for trees destroyed by wind take 25 to 50 or more years to grow. In many areas within the count circle, the habitat was beginning to look more normal until this year. The effects of extended flooding are less obvious. Lots of vegetation is uprooted and washed away, but it does not take long for new growth to cover the ground. But in the immediate aftermath, the species that grow are not the species that were growing there before, and that may affect the food value of the habitat. For many species of grasses etc. this year's seed crop was essentially washed away. However, the 69 species found was a somewhat above average total despite the fact that the major body of water in the count circle, the lake in Wildwood had been drained because of concerns over the integrity of the dam.

Paradoxically, the only species new to the count was a species associated with water, a Bald Eagle which flew over Lake Hyatt. Finding species new to the count is not easy with 39 years of history! But Bald Eagles are becoming increasingly common in Southeast Texas, and the species that should elicit more interest was Henslow's Sparrow. Three were seen in the young woodland just east of the Big Thicket National Preserve headquarters area, and another in the Hickory Creek Savannah Unit. The species has been seen in both locations in the last one or two years, so there is some hope that small populations may be becoming established winter residents in both areas. Other species of note seen on the count included a White-breasted Nuthatch. This species is apparently present in the area in very small numbers in the area. The vast majority of local sightings come from units of the Big Thicket NP and National Forests. Interestingly, a number of sightings have also turned up this year in the northern parts of Harris County. A Northern Harrier had presumably wandered a little north of its usual winter territory, while a Pine Siskin in the vicinity of Lake Hyatt was traveling in a flock of American Goldfinches. It is a little surprising that White Ibis had been seen on the count only once before, a single bird in 1999. The species is plentiful only a few miles south, but is found most often in rather wet pasture and moist soil situations

Among the more expected species, Turkey Vulture numbers were quite low. The wind may have kept them low, although they are one of the few species that copes well with wind. Somewhat surprisingly, in view of the situation in Wildwood, an Osprey was seen. The species was missed last year, but seen in the two preceding years. Perhaps this is the same bird.

Although only one was seen this year, this was the third consecutive year American Woodcock was seen after three years without. In the early days of the count, the species was seen regularly, so perhaps it is making a comeback. This was the first year since 2011 that Hairy Woodpecker was not seen, for only the seventh time in count history. Eight Pileated Woodpeckers was a low number for the count, although the elevated numbers over the last five or six years may well have been the result of the hurricanes in 2005 and 2008.

For the second or third year in a row, Northern Mockingbird numbers were low. We believe this is not something unique to the count circle, but something that has been evident over the entire southeast Texas region. It would be logical to ascribe this to effects of hurricanes and flooding, but the exact microscale reasons are not obvious to us. Yellow-rumped Warbler numbers were higher than in recent years, returning to the numbers seen in the earlier years of the count, when they were unaffected by the hurricanes. This species is very much arboreal, so is less affected by the effects of flooding.

DUCK, Wood (29); DUCK, Ring-necked (8); GREBE, Pied-billed (3); HERON, Great Blue (3); EGRET, Great (16); IBIS, White (8); VULTURE, Black (46); VULTURE, Turkey (47); OSPREY (1); HARRIER, Northern (1); HAWK, Sharp-shinned (1); EAGLE, Bald (1); HAWK, Red-shouldered (10); HAWK, Red-tailed (4); KILLDEER (12); WOODCOCK, American (1); SNIPE, Wilson's (2); COLLARED-DOVE, Eurasian (7); DOVE, Mourning (25); SCREECH-OWL, Eastern (1); KINGFISHER, Belted (2); WOODPECKER, Red-headed (4); WOODPECKER, Red-bellied (44); SAPSUCKER, Yellow-bellied (5); WOODPECKER, Downy (11); FLICKER, Northern (13); WOODPECKER, Pileated (8); KESTREL, American (6); PHOEBE, Eastern (23); VIREO, White-eyed (6); VIREO, Blue-headed (8); JAY, Blue (36); CROW, American (81); SWALLOW, Tree (4); CHICKADEE, Carolina (46); TITMOUSE, Tufted (23); NUTHATCH, White-breasted (1); NUTHATCH, Brown-headed (9); CREEPER, Brown (2); WREN, House (6); WREN, Winter (3); WREN, Sedge (8); WREN, Carolina (33); GNATCATCHER, Blue-gray (8); KINGLET, Golden-crowned (3); KINGLET, Ruby-crowned (98); BLUEBIRD, Eastern (38); THRUSH, Hermit (12); ROBIN, American (1083); CATBIRD, Gray (4); THRASHER, Brown (1); MOCKINGBIRD, Northern (10); WAXWING, Cedar (33); WARBLER, Orange-crowned (20); WARBLER, Pine (65); WARBLER, Yellow-rumped (296); SPARROW, Henslow's (4); SPARROW, Chipping (41); SPARROW, Field (10); JUNCO, Dark-eyed (4); SPARROW, White-crowned (3); SPARROW, White-throated (57); SPARROW, Savannah (2); SPARROW, Swamp (10); TOWHEE, Eastern (1); CARDINAL, Northern (32); MEADOWLARK, Eastern (13); SISKIN, Pine (1); GOLDFINCH, American (120)

SPECIES, total (69); INDIVIDUALS, total (2577);

Number of observers (13); Number of parties (5-6); Party-hours on foot (14.5); Party-miles on foot (9.25); Party-hours by car (26.1); Party-miles by car (162); Total Party hours (40.6); Total Party miles (171.25).

Participants: Michael Cooper, Andrea Cormier, Sherrie Gibson, John Haynes, Sheila Hebert, Thomas Hellweg, Gary Kelley, Steve Mayes, Sherrie Roden, Charles and Wanda Smith, Jana and John Whittle