

Sea Rim State Park Christmas Bird Count – 29 December 2016

The Sea Rim State Park CBC was run on 29 December on a day when a strong north wind developed but with a cloud ceiling of approximately 4,000 ft in the early morning giving way to clear skies by mid-morning. The temperature was in the sixties throughout the daylight hours. The wind may have kept birds on the ground, and the total number of species seen, 150, was on the low side of normal. As with most counts in the area, sparrow numbers remained low, as they have all fall.

Waterfowl numbers were generally unremarkable. Blue-winged Teal numbers appeared low, while Northern Shoveler numbers were above average. Scaup numbers were low, perhaps reflecting difficulty in seeing flocks in the Gulf. Common Goldeneye is a species not often seen on this count, so we were pleased to see five in two different locations. Bufflehead on the other hand were in very low numbers, as were both Hooded and Red-breasted Mergansers.

Pied-billed Grebe numbers were low, likely attributable to birds sheltering from the wind out of sight in the marshes. No Horned Grebes were seen, and Eared Grebe was missed for the first time in many years. Anhingas were found again after two years of misses, although the species is not as easily found in the area as it was a few years ago. Somewhat unexpectedly, numbers of both American White and Brown Pelican were above average, with many of the White Pelicans being seen battling the winds.

Normally we find at least one American Bittern in McFaddin NWR, but there were none seen this year, even after searching areas where they have been seen consistently this winter. Otherwise, heron numbers were generally unremarkable, although neither Reddish Egret nor Cattle Egret were found.

It came as no surprise that Northern Harrier numbers were high, as they have been plentiful all fall. Bald Eagles are apparently still creasing as a wintering species in the area, and the probable first year bird was seen over McFaddin NWR. White-tailed Hawk is in the process of extending its range northward and eastward and we were not surprised to find two this year.

Common Gallinule numbers were high, many of them in Murphree WMA. While American Coot numbers did not match last year's massive numbers, there were many large mono-species flocks in the ponds in the marshes. While all expected small plovers were seen, the numbers were low. In part, this may reflect the current habitat along the shoreline east of Sea Rim. A beach ridge has developed to some significant elevation, and a good portion of it is becoming vegetated. The beach itself is not currently a sandy beach more than a mile or so east of Sea Rim, but covered with a layer of soft mud. However, it was nice to find four Whimbrels along that "beach" along with seven Long-billed Curlews. The two species are usually found in association with each other in that location, but we did not find any Whimbrel or Long-billed Curlews there in the last two years, although we did find Long-billed Curlews elsewhere last year. Ruddy Turnstones were not anywhere near as common as usual. We did not find any Long-billed Dowitchers, a common species just a little inland, although the 13 birds identified only as dowitcher species could have included Long-billed Dowitchers. Two American Woodcocks were the first seen on this count since 2011; this species has been found on many local counts this year.

Herring Gulls were relatively plentiful, and mostly adult birds. Sandwich Terns are hard to find in late December in southeast Texas, so missing that species was not a great surprise. The small local Black Skimmer colony may have moved on, as none were seen this year.

Mourning Doves have been scarce in Jefferson County this fall, and the low number seen reflects that. Inexplicably, White-winged Doves seem to have all but abandoned the Sabine Pass area, the first part of the local area that they colonized when they first spread northward and westward in the mid-nineties. They were frequent at Sabine Woods in the fall, and they can be found in large numbers in all other local urban areas.

Groove-billed Anis seem to be increasing locally, and this was the second consecutive year that we found this species on count day. Finding a Short-eared Owl in the count circle may require pre-dawn observation along Highway 87, which we were able to do this year for the first time in several years. The Golden-fronted Woodpeckers and their hybrid progeny have disappeared from Sabine Woods, and presumably the local Red-bellied gene pool contains the remnants of that population.

The local Crested Caracara population remains healthy, and it was nice to see three Crested Caracaras and two White-tailed Kites over Sabine Woods at the same time in the later afternoon. We were concerned when American Kestrels failed to show up in the local area in late September, but the number seen on count day was above average. Presumably they simply postponed their migration until the unusually warm weather in the northern part of the United States was replaced by more normal temperatures. Numbers of both Merlin (mostly along the beach) and Peregrine Falcons were also good.

Vermilion Flycatcher numbers continued to slowly increase, and a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher sighting was not as much of a surprise as it would have been if there had not been sightings in Chambers and Galveston Counties on Christmas counts there. A Couch's Kingbird at the end of Backridge Road was in the same location as one last year, and may have been a returning or remaining bird.

Two Horned Larks on the beach ridge close to the east boundary of Sea Rim State Park were only the second record for the count. A few winter annually in very similar habitat at Bolivar Flats, and it is perhaps surprising we do not find them more often. The Red-breasted Nuthatch seen at Sabine Woods is wintering there, perhaps the same bird as wintered there last year. Northern Mockingbird numbers were normal, somewhat assuaging fears earlier in the fall that numbers in the area were very low.

Carolina Wrens disappeared from Sabine Woods two years ago, but two this year will hopefully presage a "recolonization" even as House Wren numbers were low. Warbler numbers and variety were unremarkable except for a low number of Common Yellowthroats.

Sparrow diversity was especially poor; we can only hope that sparrows, which normally show up starting in early November, were simply very late in arriving this year. The absence of any White-crowned or Vesper or Lincoln's Sparrows is concerning. However, it was nice to find an Indigo Bunting for the second year in a row.

Finally, mention must be made of two count week sightings in Sabine Woods on December 30. A male Summer Tanager, and a female or immature male Western Tanager were seen, but have not been re-found subsequently. There are records of birds of both species wintering in prior years along the upper Texas coast, perhaps more Western Tanager records than Summer Tanager records.

Species seen (cw means "count week")

WHISTLING-DUCK, Black-bellied (7); GOOSE, Greater White-fronted (70); GOOSE, Snow (1980); GOOSE, Ross's (4); GADWALL (666); WIGEON, American (24); DUCK, Mottled (46); TEAL, Blue-winged (6); SHOVELER, Northern (429); PINTAIL, Northern (70); TEAL, Green-winged (958); CANVASBACK (65); REDHEAD (6); DUCK, Ring-necked (3); SCAUP, Greater (12); SCAUP, Lesser (150); SCAUP, Species (41); BUFFLEHEAD (1); GOLDENEYE, Common (5); MERGANSER, Hooded (11); MERGANSER, Red-breasted (7); DUCK, Ruddy (157); GREBE, Pied-billed (28); GANNET, Northern (11); CORMORANT, Neotropic (192); CORMORANT, Double-crested (133); CORMORANT species (1); ANHINGA (2); PELICAN, American White (1135); PELICAN, Brown (219); HERON, Great Blue (80); EGRET, Great (137); EGRET, Snowy (72); HERON, Little Blue (8); HERON, Tricolored (25); HERON, Green (3); NIGHT-HERON, Black-crowned (50); NIGHT-HERON, Yellow-crowned (2); IBIS, White (441); IBIS, *Plegadis* species (113); SPOONBILL, Roseate (65); VULTURE, Black (92); VULTURE, Turkey (63); OSPREY (15); KITE, White-tailed (7); HARRIER, Northern (54); HAWK, Sharp-shinned (2); HAWK, Cooper's (1); EAGLE, Bald (1); HAWK, White-tailed (2); HAWK, Red-shouldered (1); HAWK, Red-tailed (51); RAIL, Yellow (3); RAIL, King (1); RAIL, Clapper (10); RAIL, Virginia (4); SORA (1); GALLINULE, Common (62); COOT, American (3105); STILT, Black-necked (31); AVOCET, American (326); PLOVER, Black-bellied (64); PLOVER, Snowy (12); PLOVER, Semipalmated (13); PLOVER, Piping (8); KILLDEER (96); YELLOWLEGS, Greater (11); WILLET (91); YELLOWLEGS, Lesser (1); YELLOWLEGS, species (3); WHIMBREL (4); CURLEW, Long-billed (7); GODWIT, Marbled (20); TURNSTONE, Ruddy (1); SANDERLING (93); DUNLIN (746); SANDPIPER, Least (52); SANDPIPER, Western (9); SANDPIPER species (6); DOWITCHER, Short-billed (34); DOWITCHER, species (15); SNIPE, Wilson's (25); WOODCOCK, American (2); GULL, Bonaparte's (10); GULL, Laughing (206); GULL, Ring-billed (665); GULL, Herring (51); TERN, Gull-billed (2); TERN, Caspian (30); TERN, Forster's (348); TERN, Royal (124); PIGEON, Rock (63); COLLARED-DOVE, Eurasian (35); DOVE, Inca (1); DOVE, White-winged (1); DOVE, Mourning (14); ANI, Groove-billed (2); OWL, Barn (5); OWL, Great Horned (5); OWL, Short-eared (1); KINGFISHER, Belted (26); WOODPECKER, Red-bellied (3); SAPSUCKER, Yellow-bellied (1); WOODPECKER, Downy (6); FLICKER, Northern (6); CARACARA, Crested (6); KESTREL, American (22); MERLIN (4); FALCON, Peregrine (5); PHOEBE, Eastern (46); FLYCATCHER, Vermilion (5); KINGBIRD, Couch's (1); FLYCATCHER, Scissor-tailed (1); SHRIKE, Loggerhead (53); VIREO, Blue-headed (1); JAY, Blue (17); LARK, Horned (2); SWALLOW, Tree (362); NUTHATCH, Red-breasted (1); WREN, House (5); WREN, Winter (1); WREN, Sedge (25); WREN, Marsh (8); WREN, Carolina (2); GNATCATCHER, Blue-gray (37); KINGLET, Golden-crowned (20); KINGLET, Ruby-crowned (17); CATBIRD, Gray (7); THRASHER, Brown (5); MOCKINGBIRD, Northern (39); STARLING, European (416); PIPIT, American (6); WAXWING, Cedar (130); WARBLER, Black-and-white (1); WARBLER, Orange-crowned (16); YELLOWTHROAT, Common (6); WARBLER, Pine (4); WARBLER, Yellow-rumped (91); WARBLER, Yellow-r. (Myrtle) (23); SPARROW, LeConte's (1); SPARROW, Nelson's (3); SPARROW, Seaside (14); SPARROW, Field (1); SPARROW, White-throated (5); SPARROW, Savannah (95); SPARROW, Swamp (6); SPARROW, species (55); TANAGER, Summer (cw); TANAGER, Western (cw); CARDINAL, Northern (11); BUNTING, Indigo (1); BLACKBIRD, Red-winged (678); MEADOWLARK, Eastern (8); GRACKLE, Common (309); GRACKLE, Boat-tailed (201); GRACKLE, Great-tailed (333); COWBIRD, Brown-headed (6); GOLDFINCH, American (2); SPARROW, House (18); SPECIES, total (150); INDIVIDUALS, total (17315); Observers (23); Parties (7); Party-hours total (49.50); Party-miles total (164.25); Party-hours on foot (12.00); Party-miles on foot (5.75); Party-hours by car (31.00); Party-miles by car (117.50); Party-hours by airboat (4.00); Party-miles by airboat (35.00); Party-hours by 4-wheeler (2.50); Party-miles by 4-wheeler (6.00).

Participants:

Mary Carter, Michael Cooper, Liz Dennis, Nancy Fisher, Sherry Gibson, Bill Graber, John Haynes, Sheila Hebert, Thomas Hellweg, Gary Kelley, Steve Mayes, Karen McCormick, Julie Mills, Vern Mills, Frank Ohrt, Sherrie Roden, Monique Slaughter, Christine Sliva, Harlan Stewart, Willis Sylvest, Patrick Walther, Jana and John Whittle.