

Fall Migration Count -- 16 September 2017

(This is an expanded version of the report in the printed version of the October Brown Pelican. The detailed spreadsheet for the 2017 count and the historical summary will be posted on the Golden Triangle Audubon as soon as possible.)

While there have been other falls with "unusual" weather events, this will actually be the first time we have conducted a fall count after the event. In 2005, we completed the count well before Hurricane Rita, which was, for the Gulf coast at least, unusually late in the season. In 2008, Hurricane Ike made it impossible to conduct a count at all. It was therefore interesting to find that neither the number of species nor the number of individual birds counted was grossly out of the normal. We would note that the number of individual birds was appreciably below the long term average, and we refer to that below

The weather event this year was a hurricane (Harvey) that had decayed into a tropical storm, but stalled over the upper Texas coast for an unprecedented length of time, resulting in never-before-seen rainfall totals in excess of 35 inches over a five or six day period over the entire county, with many areas receiving over 50 inches. However, the usual problems in using bird count data to gain insights into bird population changes, short or long term, are still present. These are probably best expressed as a matter of too many variables. Even before migrant populations reach our local area, their movements may have been influenced by the weather that prevailed on their breeding grounds. Not so much the weather itself, but the effect of the weather on food availability and quantity. In poor conditions, breeding fails or is not even attempted, and particularly in the fall, that can make a large difference in the numbers of that species present. Differences between species make generalizations difficult and very approximate, but it is generally assumed that in Passerine species, approximately 75 or 80 percent of the birds seen in the fall are young of the year. These young birds, being inexperienced in life skills, especially finding food and evading predators, experience a very high mortality during their first winter. Some estimates suggest only ten percent of the young of some species survive their first winter. Spring populations, therefore, are subject to less fluctuation, because a much greater fraction of them are the more experience adult birds. Much more than in spring migration, where the urge to reach the breeding areas is strong, fall migration may be delayed if food resources are plentiful or unusually favorable weather prevails, the two often related, in the areas further north.

For birds that winter in our local area, the availability of food is of critical importance, and hurricanes and less serious weather events can affect that availability in subtle ways. Seeds can be stripped off grasses, bushes and trees by wind, or washed away by water before they are ripe. Insect and rodent populations can be affected in a myriad of ways. Quite frankly, not surviving the flooding seems to be likely to have more effect on these food sources than the effects of even hurricane force winds. We remarked last fall about the apparent low numbers of some of the characteristic species of the open areas of west Jefferson County. This was necessarily anecdotal, because the number of variables is such that one can never separate out the effects of any one variable. In west Jefferson County this year, the number of Northern Mockingbirds, while low overall, seemed to have returned to near normal outside of cities, after a very low count last year. But the number of Red-winged Blackbirds (and other "blackbirds" in the broadest sense) was extremely low again. We suspect that one important factor in the case of the blackbirds may be what appears to be a relatively small acreage of rice this year in the areas we are able to survey. Blackbirds in the fall are attracted to harvested rice areas where there are plentiful amounts of rice seed that fell to the surface during harvesting. There may well be other less obvious factors in play.

We must always remember that the area of our count, Jefferson County, is relatively small. If the food resources in the county are less plentiful for some localized reason, birds do not find any difficulty in moving to neighboring areas to find more plentiful supplies. It appears to us that there are larger acreages of rice in Chambers County, and more normal numbers of blackbirds in these areas. Blackbirds are mostly residents, but the more migratory species, including most of the species that are in our area only during the non-breeding ("winter" but actually fall, winter and early spring) find no physical difficulty in traversing long distances, and likely will do so if food resources are critically low where they are. Wintering site fidelity – the phenomenon where individual birds return to the exact same location in successive winters – varies from species to species, and there are many examples of complete fidelity, but equally, there are many species that are somewhat or extensively nomadic in winter.. What is never really known is whether failure to return one year results from mortality or from a "conscious" decision to winter somewhere else. But most of what we can reasonably hypothesize over applies to wintering species more than to species that merely migrate through.

We have focused on anecdotal evidence of the populations in one area of the county. A look at the county as a whole produces a slightly different picture. Although there are variations, the county-wide totals are not nearly as different from the long terms averages as are the totals in one area of the county for the few species we remarked on above. The resident species that did not find the plentiful food in west Jefferson County may well have moved elsewhere within the county. We are able to survey only a relatively small fraction of the area of the county, principally because of access issues, and we may be missing some trends as a result.

Looking at the individual birds and the numbers of them is always interesting, but we will mention only those that stand out. We have been watching the Least Grebes in Cattail Marsh in Beaumont for a good while now. There were some concerns when they

were not in exactly the same places as usual after Harvey, but by count day, they were back as usual. Harvey's rains obviously filled the cells at Cattail to overflowing, and it took some time to restore normal levels. The species is interesting in that they seem to breed continuously, and we are seeing young birds every month. The ones in Cattail Marsh are becoming more tolerant of humans than most of their species, and they are among the easiest of the species to see well.

One Wood Stork remained at the usual roost on Highway 90 just inside the Jefferson County line west of Nome. Double-crested Cormorants have generally not arrived by count time, but this year, one was observed and carefully identified in an unlikely place – a relatively small and probably not very deep pond on South China Road.

We were not able to access Sea Rim State Park this year – it was still closed after Harvey -- so numbers of the "true" shorebirds were all low. Brown Pelican numbers were low. No American White Pelicans were seen. Up until 2007, we almost always found at least one group of them, but only occasionally since then.

For the most part, heron numbers were normal. Great Egrets were particularly plentiful, possibly because they were unusually concentrated in various wet areas that were very accessible. Almost 3500 Cattle Egrets was a new high – there were large flocks everywhere in the western part of the county. They were mostly not associated with cattle but were obviously finding a plentiful diet of insects in the recently dried out fields suggesting that the water may have activated previously dormant eggs.

Eight Ospreys, which were spread over the southern half of the county, was a new high, so presumably fish were readily available. White-tailed Kites were more plentiful in the early years of this count than in the past few years, so finding four was encouraging. One Bald Eagle was reported as coming in to Cattail Marsh late in the date, so hopefully, we will have a nesting pair again this winter. The absence of any Swainson's Hawks for the first time since 2002 was both surprising and perhaps a little disturbing, as it looked as if the species was establishing (or reestablishing) in Jefferson County. A White-tailed Hawk following four last year was encouraging. The species' range seems to be expanding eastwards ever so slowly. There is country wide concern over an apparent reduction in American Kestrel numbers passing through Hawk Watch sites. Count day falls into time period where Kestrel migration is just getting under way, and minor disruptions or delays will make a difference locally. Nevertheless, in the early days of the count in the second half of the 1990s double digit numbers were routine whereas one or two in the whole county has become the norm. We recorded the first Peregrine Falcon since 2010.

Solitary Sandpipers were also recorded in larger numbers in the late 1990s, but not 2014-16, so it was nice to find two in separate areas this year. On the negative side, we missed Western Sandpiper for the first time ever, but this was likely explained by the lack of access to Sea Rim Park. The species is very much a shoreline dweller, and Least Sandpipers, more likely to be found in any middy area in the county, were in good numbers. Dunlins are just arriving by count time, so six in Cattail Marsh, the first on the count since 2010 was very welcome. On the other hand, Stilt Sandpipers were nowhere to be found this year.

Despite no access to Sea Rim, Laughing Gull numbers were very healthy. All tern species that can normally be found in the county were present, including a Common Tern and a Sandwich Tern, although Black Skimmers were not for the first time since the first count in 1996.

The number of White-winged Doves at 78 was the lowest since 2006, perhaps indicating the population has peaked, or possibly some disruption as a result of the rainfall. Mourning Dove numbers at 139 were an all-time low for the count. We will need to watch over the next few months to determine if there is some longer term trend, or perhaps again an as yet undetermined effect of the recent weather event. The complete absence of Inca Doves was the first miss in the history of the count. Eurasian Collared-Doves numbers were in line with recent counts, so whatever the cause, it did not affect all dove species.

Red-headed Woodpeckers were missed for the first time in many years, perhaps reflecting a somewhat reduced observer coverage of Beaumont, partly out of respect to those struggling to clean out damaged houses. Count day is about three weeks prior to the arrival of the first migrant Northern Flickers, so finding two was interesting. There are a very few Flickers around all summer, and it is not clear where the two we found were residents or arriving migrants.

Passerine migrant numbers in fall counts are very variable, and highly dependent on weather conditions that might bring an influx from the north and/or dissuade many from leaving for the long southbound Gulf crossing. Comments on individual species are generally not indicated here, unless species is unusually early or late, or unusually numerous. Flycatchers were not particularly numerous. Vireos were few. Catharus thrushes are very scarce in the fall, and we did not find any. A large flock of more than 30 American Robins was observed in Beaumont, boosting that total. Among the warblers, there were good numbers of Common Yellowthroats and Yellow Warblers. This is building up to be a very good year for Wilson's Warbler, with ten at Sabine Woods, and there have been good numbers most days this fall.

Species seen:

WHISTLING-DUCK, Black-bellied (112); WHISTLING-DUCK, Fulvous (37); DUCK, Wood (5); DUCK, Mottled (27); TEAL, Blue-winged (232); TEAL, Green-winged (5); GREBE, Least (6); GREBE, Pied-billed (14); STORK, Wood (1); CORMORANT,

Neotropic (137); CORMORANT, Double-crested (1); CORMORANT, Species (40); ANHINGA (11); PELICAN, Brown (21); BITTERN, Least (1); HERON, Great Blue (34); EGRET, Great (266); EGRET, Snowy (197); HERON, Little Blue (26); HERON, Tricolored (71); EGRET, Reddish (2); EGRET, Cattle (3461); HERON, Green (10); NIGHT-HERON, Black-crowned (33); NIGHT-HERON, Yellow-crowned (10); IBIS, White (415); IBIS, White-faced (17); IBIS, Plegadis (88); SPOONBILL, Roseate (75); VULTURE, Black (37); VULTURE, Turkey (62); OSPREY (8); KITE, White-tailed (4); KITE, Mississippi (1); EAGLE, Bald (1); HARRIER, Northern (2); HAWK, Cooper's (5); HAWK, Accipiter species (1); HAWK, Red-shouldered (10); HAWK, Broad-winged (2); HAWK, White-tailed (1); HAWK, Red-tailed (4); CARACARA, Crested (6); KESTREL, American (2); MERLIN (2); FALCON, Peregrine (1); RAIL, Clapper (44); RAIL, King (2); GALLINULE, Purple (4); GALLINULE, Common (36); COOT, American (8); PLOVER, Black-bellied (8); PLOVER, Snowy (13); PLOVER, Semipalmated (7); PLOVER, Piping (7); KILLDEER (155); STILT, Black-necked (49); AVOCET, American (4); SANDPIPER, Spotted (10); SANDPIPER, Solitary (2); YELLOWLEGS, Greater (10); WILLET (18); YELLOWLEGS, Lesser (11); YELLOWLEGS, species (2); TURNSTONE, Ruddy (6); SANDERLING (55); SANDPIPER, Semipalmated (2); SANDPIPER, Least (80); SANDPIPER, Peep species (8); SANDPIPER, Pectoral (6); DUNLIN (6); DOWITCHER, Short-billed (1); DOWITCHER, Long-billed (11); GULL, Laughing (1454); GULL, Ring-billed (2); TERN, Least (2); TERN, Gull-billed (7); TERN, Caspian (1); TERN, Black (4); TERN, Common (1); TERN, Forster's (66); TERN, Royal (8); TERN, Sandwich (1); PIGEON, Rock (134); COLLARED-DOVE, Eurasian (32); DOVE, White-winged (78); DOVE, Mourning (139); CUCKOO, Yellow-billed (1); SCREECH-OWL, Eastern (1); OWL, Great Horned (2); OWL, Barred (3); WILL'S-WIDOW, Chuck- (2); SWIFT, Chimney (2); HUMMINGBIRD, Ruby-throated (16); KINGFISHER, Belted (10); WOODPECKER, Red-bellied (10); WOODPECKER, Downy (10); FLICKER, Northern (2); WOODPECKER, Pileated (1); FLYCATCHER, Olive-sided (1); WOOD-PEWEE, Eastern (6); FLYCATCHER, Acadian (1); FLYCATCHER, Traill's (3); FLYCATCHER, *Empidonax* (3); FLYCATCHER, Great Crested (3); KISKADEE, Great (2); KINGBIRD, Eastern (30); FLYCATCHER, Scissor-tailed (32); SHRIKE, Loggerhead (57); VIREO, White-eyed (17); VIREO, Red-eyed (3); JAY, Blue (99); CROW, American (4); CROW, Fish (4); SWALLOW, Tree (21); SWALLOW, N. Rough-winged (27); SWALLOW, Cliff (1); SWALLOW, Cave (3); SWALLOW, Cliff/Cave (1); SWALLOW, Barn (20); CHICKADEE, Carolina (7); WREN, Carolina (5); GNATCATCHER, Blue-gray (51); KINGLET, Ruby-crowned (1); ROBIN, American (38); CATBIRD, Gray (1); MOCKINGBIRD, Northern (126); THRASHER, Brown (5); STARLING, European (581); WATERTHRUSH, Northern (2); WARBLER, Blue-winged (1); WARBLER, Black-and-white (5); WARBLER, Mourning (3); YELLOWTHROAT, Common (14); REDSTART, American (2); PARULA, Northern (2); WARBLER, Yellow (16); WARBLER, Chestnut-sided (1); WARBLER, Pine (1); WARBLER, Canada (1); WARBLER, Wilson's (10); CHAT, Yellow-breasted (1); SPARROW, Lark (3); SPARROW, Seaside (28); CARDINAL, Northern (33); GROSBEEK, Blue (23); BUNTING, Indigo (4); BUNTING, Painted (8); BLACKBIRD, Red-winged (74); GRACKLE, Common (214); GRACKLE, Boat-tailed (93); GRACKLE, Great-tailed (399); COWBIRD, Brown-headed (244); ORIOLE, Orchard (5); ORIOLE, Baltimore (1); SPARROW, House (40); TOTAL (10439); Number of species (151); Number of Observers (14); Number of Parties (7); Number of Party-Hours (54.6); Party hours on foot (10.75); Miles on foot (1.6); Party-hours by automobile (43.85); Miles by automobile (584.7); Party-hours stationary/feeder watching (not incld in totals) (2.07)

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