

Spring 2018 North American Migration Count

The 2018 Spring Migration Count was held on May 12 in generally favorable weather. That the number of species found was low by the standards of most recent years was, of course, a disappointment to those participating, but by almost mid-May, it takes an unusual weather situation to cause significant numbers of trans-Gulf migrants to descend into the areas near the shoreline where they are seen and counted. In favorable conditions, most overfly the few small woodlots near the shoreline and disperse into the more extensive woods of the Big Thicket. This year, there were relatively few migrants in Sabine Woods and nearby areas. However, a few passerine migrants were detected at places such as the wooded areas of Cattail Marsh, along with more than a few migrant shorebirds in the wetlands. In our part of the country, the value of the count is as much as a survey of the breeding birds of the open areas of the county. The account below, therefore, focuses to a large degree on such species, and some disturbing trends are commented on. Overall, the number of individual birds recorded was a little down, but this likely reflects a slightly reduced number of participants and a corresponding slight reduction in party hours.

Noteworthy among the ducks was a healthy number of Fulvous Whistling-Ducks, not quite a new high for the count, but certainly encouraging. The absence of any Lesser Scaup or Red-breasted Mergansers was a little unusual. Surprise at Cattail Marsh was a nice male Ringed Teal. This South American species is frequently kept in waterfowl collections and this particular individual is presumed to be an escapee. Although Cattail Marsh has been intensively birded recently, apart from sightings on the following day, it was not until June 1 that it was seen again. Mottled Duck numbers were on a par with those of recent years. The Blue-winged Teal is a migratory species, but mostly wintering much further south than the other ducks common locally in winter. Substantial numbers are passing through as late as May and this is reflected in the number observed.

Double-crested Cormorants are a wintering species, but it is unusual not to find any. Also all gone further north, in this case for the second year in a row, were American White Pelicans.

Defying anecdotal evidence to the contrary in both cases in preceding weeks, Great Egrets were present in large numbers, while Snowy Egrets were found in modest numbers. Little Blue Heron numbers have been variable in recent years and this was a low year, while Tricolored Herons are not as numerous as they were a few years back. Cattle Egret numbers seem to have stabilized or decreased slightly, while Green Herons are fewer than they were a few years back.

It used to be that sometimes we found one Osprey on this count, but six last year and four this year, suggests that they may be nesting locally. There are certainly White-tailed Kites in the area in winter, but once again, we did not find any. Perhaps they were nesting and staying hidden. This is the sixth year in a row that we have found one Swallow-tailed Kite, always a treat, but it seems to be a matter of chance. They probably are nesting in the river bottoms just north of Jefferson County, although we thought last year that at least one pair was nesting in mid-County. One Mississippi Kite is a

low number for a species that almost certainly nests in residential areas in the cities in Jefferson County. Similarly, Broad-winged Hawks certainly nest in the county -- mid County and Beaumont, but we did not find any. There is, however, an eBird report by an observer we do not know, of two on May 12 in the extreme northwest part of the county. Swainson's Hawks were the lowest since 2012. This species frequently feeds on large insects on the ground, and we wonder if the flooding caused by the massive rains of Hurricane Harvey in late August of 2017 may have washed away the eggs and larvae of many of these prey items. There are other species mentioned below that might have encountered a similar issue.

Shorebird numbers were generally very normal, excepting perhaps Whimbrels. Large flocks of Whimbrel migrate through the county and seeing or missing one of the large flocks makes a big difference in the total.

Gull and tern numbers can be very variable, as practical access issues leave large stretches of beaches from Texas Point west towards High Island not able to be surveyed. Black Terns were plentiful again, and for the second year in a row, large numbers of likely nesting Black Skimmers were very encouraging. Sandwich Terns are always mixed in with Royal Terns so it is probably not surprising that few Royals translated into no Sandwich Terns.

Mourning Doves have largely deserted the urban areas, pushed out by the increasing White-winged Doves. The reduced numbers were not alarming, although we wonder if the floods of Hurricane Harvey had some effects, not readily apparent, on the habitat in the open areas of the western parts of the county.

Crested Caracara numbers continued to increase. American Kestrels certainly nest in the neighboring counties to the north, but not, apparently in Jefferson County

The numbers of Eastern Kingbird and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, two species that share the same habitat, have been quite variable over the years, and may well be another indicator of a possible reduction in insect numbers.

The drastic reduction in Loggerhead Shrike numbers is quite alarming. The species does feed on larger insects and small rodents and opportunistically on other items including small birds. Numbers appear to be reduced in all parts of the county, but particularly in the open western areas. Reduced populations are of concern throughout its range across the United States, especially towards the northeast. We hope the reduction we see in the results of this count might reflect only local after effects of Hurricane Harvey.

Barn and Cliff Swallows, and Purple Martins also seem to be in decline, but again, this year's numbers may reflect what we hope is a short-term local effect.

We are at a loss to explain the low Carolina Chickadee and Tufted Titmouse numbers, or for that matter low Blue-gray Gnatcatcher numbers except to note that Gnatcatchers were very scarce through the spring in the areas where they are usually numerous.

As we noted at the beginning, the weather situation essentially controls whether there is an array of migrant species visible in the coastal woodlots, and on count day this

year, there was not. We would note, however, that the usual species of warblers were present in areas of the county where they likely nest. Prothonotary Warblers were, if anything, more numerous than usual; Northern Parulas, Yellow-throated Warblers, Pine Warblers, and even Yellow-breasted Chats were present in areas, particularly in the western parts of the county where they likely nest.

Good numbers of Seaside and Nelson's Sparrows were found, and Savannah Sparrow numbers were high for mid-May, the latter suggesting that seeds and other sparrow food may not have been seriously depleted by Hurricane Harvey. Other seed-eating species: Northern Cardinals, Dickcissels, and blackbirds and grackles were reasonably normal.

Also found on the count were four Whooping Cranes from the reintroduced Louisiana flock. These birds are fitted with satellite transmitters. This is the third group that have been seen in Jefferson County in the past three years from the flock formed by releases in the White Lake area of Louisiana. This suggests that the habitat in Jefferson County is attractive to these birds, and we may see more in the future. The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries requests that no location information more specific than the county level be made public in any way, and we honor that request, so they will not appear in our area spreadsheets except in the total column. The area location will be retroactively added to the published records when there is no longer any need to withhold it.

Species Seen

WHISTLING-DUCK, Black-bellied (94); WHISTLING-DUCK, Fulvous (143); TEAL, Ringed (1); DUCK, Wood (4); DUCK, Mottled (44); TEAL, Blue-winged (99); SHOVELER, Northern (cw); TEAL, Green-winged (1); DUCK, Ruddy (1); BOBWHITE, Northern (1); LOON, Common (1); GREBE, Least (1); GREBE, Pied-billed (1); CORMORANT, Neotropic (77); ANHINGA (5); PELICAN, Brown (98); BITTERN, Least (9); HERON, Great Blue (24); EGRET, Great (289); EGRET, Snowy (76); HERON, Little Blue (62); HERON, Tricolored (29); EGRET, Cattle (502); HERON, Green (28); NIGHT-HERON, Black-crowned (6); NIGHT-HERON, Yellow-crowned (50); NIGHT-HERON species (4); IBIS, White (288); IBIS, Glossy (cw); IBIS, White-faced (15); IBIS, Plegadis species (43); SPOONBILL, Roseate (11); VULTURE, Black (66); VULTURE, Turkey (65); OSPREY (4); KITE, Swallow-tailed (1); KITE, Mississippi (1); HARRIER, Northern (1); HAWK, Cooper's (1); EAGLE, Bald (1); HAWK, Red-shouldered (5); HAWK, Swainson's (4); HAWK, Red-tailed (4); HAWK species (1); RAIL, King (6); RAIL, Clapper (32); RAIL, King/Clapper (2); RAIL, Virginia (1); SORA (9); GALLINULE, Purple (18); GALLINULE, Common (53); COOT, American (41); CRANE, Whooping (4); STILT, Black-necked (102); AVOCET, American (1); PLOVER, Black-bellied (56); PLOVER, Wilson's (5); PLOVER, Semipalmated (8); KILLDEER (104); SANDPIPER, Spotted (4); YELLOWLEGS, Greater (3); WILLET (39); YELLOWLEGS, Lesser (38); SANDPIPER, Upland (2); WHIMBREL (206); GODWIT, Hudsonian (cw); TURNSTONE, Ruddy (61); KNOT, Red (5); SANDPIPER, Stilt (313); SANDERLING (359); DUNLIN (130); SANDPIPER, Baird's (2); SANDPIPER, Least (56); SANDPIPER, White-rumped (148); SANDPIPER, Buff-

breasted (7); SANDPIPER, Pectoral (41); SANDPIPER, Semipalmated (56); SANDPIPER, Peep (160); DOWITCHER, Long-billed (28); DOWITCHER species (30); PHALAROPE, Wilson's (13); GULL, Laughing (312); GULL, Franklin's (2); GULL, Ring-billed (9); TERN, Least (66); TERN, Gull-billed (1); TERN, Black (42); TERN, Forster's (10); TERN, Royal (37); SKIMMER, Black (151); PIGEON, Rock (91); DOVE, Eurasian Collared- (20); DOVE, Inca (1); DOVE, White-winged (186); DOVE, Mourning (199); CUCKOO, Yellow-billed (10); SCREECH-OWL, Eastern (3); OWL, Great Horned (cw); NIGHTHAWK, Common (32); SWIFT, Chimney (9); HUMMINGBIRD, Ruby-throated (4); KINGFISHER, Belted (1); WOODPECKER, Red-headed (1); WOODPECKER, Red-bellied (25); WOODPECKER, Downy (6); WOODPECKER, Pileated (3); CARACARA, Crested (13); FALCON, Peregrine (2); WOOD-PEWEE, Eastern (3); FLYCATCHER, Acadian (1); FLYCATCHER, Empidonax (1); FLYCATCHER, Great Crested (6); KINGBIRD, Eastern (40); FLYCATCHER, Scissor-tailed (18); SHRIKE, Loggerhead (26); VIREO, White-eyed (27); VIREO, Yellow-throated (2); VIREO, Red-eyed (16); JAY, Blue (98); CROW, American (21); CROW, Fish (19); CROW, Species (19); SWALLOW, N. Rough-winged (1); MARTIN, Purple (130); SWALLOW, Tree (4); SWALLOW, Barn (180); SWALLOW, Cliff (503); SWALLOW, Cave (8); SWALLOW, Cave/Cliff (5); CHICKADEE, Carolina (10); TITMOUSE, Tufted (6); WREN, Marsh (9); WREN, Carolina (12); BLUEBIRD, Eastern (9); VEERY (1); THRUSH, Gray-cheeked (2); THRUSH, Swainson's (4); ROBIN, American (24); CATBIRD, Gray (5); THRASHER, Brown (9); MOCKINGBIRD, Northern (351); STARLING, European (276); WAXWING, Cedar (15); OVENBIRD (1); WATERTHRUSH, Northern (1); WARBLER, Prothonotary (5); WARBLER, Tennessee (1); YELLOWTHROAT, Common (37); REDSTART, American (2); PARULA, Northern (3); WARBLER, Bay-breasted (1); WARBLER, Yellow (2); WARBLER, Pine (2); WARBLER, Yellow-throated (3); CHAT, Yellow-breasted (2); SPARROW, Nelson's (3); SPARROW, Seaside (25); SPARROW, Savannah (18); TANAGER, Summer (1); TANAGER, Scarlet (3); CARDINAL, Northern (122); GROSBEAK, Rose-breasted (3); GROSBEAK, Blue (3); BUNTING, Indigo (3); BUNTING, Painted (9); DICKCISSEL (169); BLACKBIRD, Red-winged (347); MEADOWLARK, Eastern (86); GRACKLE, Common (285); GRACKLE, Boat-tailed (98); GRACKLE, Great-tailed (455); GRACKLE, Gt./Boat-tailed (30); COWBIRD, Bronzed (2); COWBIRD, Brown-headed (51); ORIOLE, Orchard (27); FINCH, House (10); SPARROW, House (155); TOTAL INDIVIDUALS (9366); TOTAL SPECIES (162); Number of Observers (14); Number of Parties (7); Number of Party-Hours - Foot (8.4); Number of Party-Hours - Car (56.75); Number of Party-Hours - Stationary (1); Total Party-hours (60.55); Number of Party-Miles - Foot (5.6); Number of Party-Miles - Car (308.1); Total Party-Miles (313.7);. Cw indicates seen within the three days before or after count day, but not on count day itself.

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