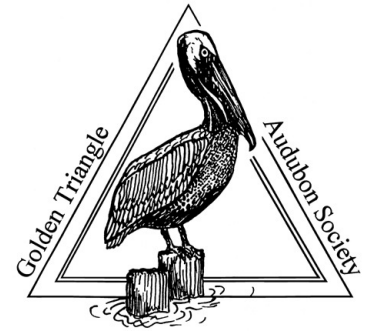


The Brown Pelican



The Newsletter of the Golden Triangle Audubon Society

Vol. 22 No. 1

January 2016

**Membership Meeting
Thursday January 21, 2016 7:00 p.m.
Garden Center, Tyrrell Park, Beaumont**

**Shangri-La Botanical Gardens and Nature Center
Presented by the Education Staff**

Nestled within 252 acres in the heart of Orange, Texas, Shangri La Botanical Gardens and Nature Center is a program of the Nelda C. and H.J. Lutcher Stark Foundation, a private foundation whose mission is to improve and enrich the quality of life in Southeast Texas and encourage and assist education. The unique ecosystem of Shangri La presents an ideal opportunity to further that mission as well as carry on the vision of H.J. Lutcher Stark, the man who originally developed it more than 60 years ago.

The formal Botanical Gardens contain more than 300 plant species in five formal “rooms” as well as four sculpture “rooms”. Adjacent to the Botanical Gardens is a bird blind which allows visitors to observe nesting birds in Shangri La’s heronry.

The Nature Center includes a hands-on exhibit called the Nature Discovery Center, a laboratory, and three outdoor classrooms located deep in the cypress swamp. The Orientation Center includes an Exhibit Hall, Discovery Theater, Children’s Garden, Exhibition Greenhouses, Cafe, and Garden Store.

We will plan on having the doors open by 6:00 p.m. and the program will start at 7:00 p.m. sharp. A light supper will be available from 6:15 p.m.

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Golden Triangle Audubon Society

Web Site for more information
www.goldentriangleaudubon.org

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Calendar of Events

Important Note: Field Trip notices published here should always be regarded as needing confirmation just before the date. Changes will always be posted on the web site at www.goldentriangleaudubon.org. Confirmation of the location will also normally be available at the Membership Meeting that is usually, but not always, two days prior to each trip, or by contacting Field Trip Committee chair, Steve Mayes at 409-722-5807 or sgmayes@hotmail.com.

Thursday January 21, 2016. Membership Meeting. Topic: Shangri-La Botanical Gardens and Nature Center. See front page for details.

Saturday January 23, 2016. Field Trip. A final decision will be made nearer the time, but we have tentatively selected Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge for this trip. Check the website or come to the January meeting to confirm the destination and details. We will probably visit both the main unit ("Old Anahuac") and the Skillern Tract, looking primarily for waterfowl but also raptors and sparrows. We may also bird some of the rice field areas in Chambers County, mostly north of IH-10.

On one memorable occasion (2012), this trip was spectacularly successful in seeing more than 35,000 geese, seven Bald Eagles and one Golden Eagle among other species. There are geese and Bald Eagles in the refuge area this winter, and duck numbers and variety have been increasing recently..

We plan to meet at the Visitor Information Station just beyond the entrance at 8:30 a.m. While it is not anticipated that this field trip will necessitate extensive walking, it is a 400 yard (1/4 mile) walk from the Skillern Tract parking area to the observation platform. All roads that we will use will be easily passable in ordinary vehicles. However, car-pooling is very desirable, especially for the drive round Shoveler Pond because there are only a few pull-offs and most will only accommodate only three or four cars. There is space to leave vehicles close to the meeting place.

To reach Anahuac NWR from

Winnie, take Highway 124 south to FM1985. (It is 11.0 miles from IH-10 and half a mile less from Highway 73.) Turn right (west) on FM1985 and proceed 11.0 miles to the well-marked Anahuac NWR Access Road on the left (south). The entrance to the Refuge is just over 3 miles down the access road. Watch along the entrance road, especially the west side, for Crested Caracaras, and nearer the entrance to the refuge on the east side for White-tailed Kites.

Saturday January 30, 2016. Winter Hummer Home Tour. We will have a mini field trip to several people's houses to view their winter hummers. Details of where we will start at 7:30 a.m., and which homes we will visit – dependent on who has hummingbirds! – will be available at the January 21 Membership Meeting, and will be posted on the GTAS website at www.goldentriangleaudubon.org For more information, contact Jana Whittle (janafw@aol.com) or 409-722-4193.

Thursday February 18, 2016. Membership Meeting. Gerald Duhon on Birds and Birding in Ecuador.

Thursday thru Sunday February 12-15, 2016. Great Backyard Bird Count. Go to <http://gbbc.birdcount.org> for details on how to participate in this count.

Saturday February 20, 2016. Field Trip. Tentatively, this will be to Cattail Marsh in Tyrrell Park, Beaumont. Meet at the parking lot for Cattail Marsh at 8:00 a.m. The parking lot is accessed from the loop road round the main picnic areas in Tyrrell Park in Beaumont. Some birds can be seen with minimal walking, **but the group will probably make a leisurely three-or-so-mile hike round the various cells in the marsh.** If you are unable to walk that far, there will be someone near the entrance to help you identify the birds in the near cells. Walking is on the levees; the main ones are graveled, but some of the interior ones are mowed grass. This will be a good trip for beginning to intermediate birders, as most of the waterfowl and wading birds are relatively easy to study in the open water areas.

Directions to Cattail Marsh

From the south

Go "north" on US69/96/287 around the south side of Beaumont. Take Texas 124 (west towards Fannett -- left turn under the highway). Travel about a mile to the first light. At the first light, turn left onto Tyrrell Park Road and go about 1/2 mile. Turn left into Tyrrell Park through the nice new arch. Continue past the Garden Center on your left, past the clubhouse for the golf course further along on your right, and proceed about two-thirds of the way round the loop road. The Cattail Marsh parking area is accessed by means of a signed shell road on your right.

From IH-10

Exit at Walden Road on the west side of Beaumont; Go south on Walden Road for about 1/2 mile to the first light. At the light go straight across Highway 124 onto Tyrrell Park Road and follow the directions above.

Christmas Bird Count Results

By the time, you read this, the Christmas Bird Count period will have ended. However, many of the local counts take place near the end of the period and final results for some are still not available at press time. We present here brief summaries of the highlights of as many of the local counts as we can. We plan to post more complete accounts of as many local count as we are able on our website at www.goldentriangleaudubon.org.

Johnson Bayou (LA)

The Johnson Bayou area is very interesting ornithologically even though it will never produce the 200 or so species that some other coastal sites do. The oilfields in the area have lots of water, much of it brackish, in wet years such as this, and in fact, the high water made for small numbers of the puddle ducks especially teal, and relatively high numbers of diving ducks especially Ruddy Ducks and Canvasback. Nevertheless, the preliminary count on December 14 was 117 species with possibly one or two more when all reports are tallied. New to the count were a Say's Phoebe, seen along Long Beach, and a Lark Sparrow, seen in

Peveto Woods. A flyover Marbled Godwit was the first seen since before the late Ken Sztraky took the count over in 2002. Interesting species not seen very often on this count included two Common Loons and a Horned Grebe. Both White-tailed Kite and Crested Caracara seem firmly established in Cameron Parish now with five and three respectively on count day. The chenier on Gray Estate property between Highway 82 and the shoreline have always been good for sparrows, but this year's numbers were a little low, perhaps because the chenier is very wet. The eastern part of the chenier is coming back nicely from the hurricane damage, but the western end is now devoid of any trees and significant underbrush in many places.

Bolivar Peninsula

We had a great turn out and great weather for the Bolivar Peninsula Christmas count on December 17 and the co-compilers David Sarkozi and Steve Mayes want to thank everyone who came out as well as the Anahuac NWR, Houston Audubon, TOS and all the private land owners who helped out. The final count looks like it will be around 180 species (possibly a little higher) with some really nice highlights including: Pacific Loon, Northern Gannet, Whimbrel, Common Ground-Dove, Groove-billed Ani, Pileated Woodpecker, Tufted Titmouse, American Redstart, Dark-eyed Junco, Painted Bunting, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Pine Siskin and no doubt a few others.

Steve Mayes

Turkey Creek

Fourteen observers in five parties on December 19 found 73 species, a total only exceeded by the 74 in 1988 and 2010, and equaled in 1991. This result was something of a surprise as all observers gathered at the conclusion of the count indicated there were very few birds around. An inspection of the numbers revealed that this was due almost solely to the very low number of American Robins, 89 versus a long term average of 1,100, resulting in a total number of individual birds that was about one-half of recent normal. Low numbers of Chipping Sparrows and American Goldfinch did not help.

New to the count was a nice male Vermilion Flycatcher. Other unusual species included a sizable flock of Ring-necked Ducks on Lake Hyatt, only the second time that has happened, a Greater Roadrunner, a Greater Yellowlegs, and a Northern Harrier.

Beech Creek

On December 28, 12 observers in five parties reported an intensely disappointing 68 species. So far we have not discerned any satisfactory reason for this. It rained the night before, but it had essentially stopped by count time. A review of the spreadsheets suggests a combination of factors. There were not many duck species seen, nor many sparrow species. Apart from that, the observers just did not see very many of the species that we see sometimes.

Old River

The Old River CBC (TXOR) was held December 28 with 134 species being reported. Five of those were "write ins" Pine Siskin, American Redstart, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Ruby-throated Hummingbird (2) and maybe the strangest being a fly over Chimney Swift out in the marsh. Another bird that needs documentation is Lesser Black-backed Gull of which we had 7 sitting on an exposed sandbar.

Our birders braved very high gusty winds and cold temperatures on this count. I actually think this was a pretty good outcome seeing as how the Trinity River was still well out of banks which left a fairly large area not available to us. The tides right up to late Sunday night had been really high leaving little sandbar exposed until during the day on Monday.

Continued on page 6



EarthShare of Texas represents Audubon Foundation of Texas and the National Audubon Society in payroll contribution programs in workplaces throughout Texas. For more information about how you can support Audubon Foundation of Texas and the National Audubon Society at your workplace, call 1-800-GREENTX, or visit www.earthshare-texas.org.

A Storm Gathers for North American Birds – Birds and Habitats are Under Attack

Audubon's study reveals the devastation global warming will likely bring down on birds—and identifies the habitat strongholds they'll need to hang on.

By Michelle Nijhuis

Western North Dakota is famous for its birds. The land here is checkered with neat squares of farm fields and native prairie overlying a scatter of pothole lakes, their curving shorelines shaped tens of thousands of years ago by chunks of melting glaciers. This rich landscape provides critical breeding grounds for millions of birds, from the Mallards and Blue-winged Teal that pour out of the so-called “duck factory” to the Bobolinks of the tallgrass prairie.

But the region is changing fast. Even as birds continue to flock here every summer, expanding agriculture has eaten away at their habitat, and since 2008 the area has witnessed an energy boom of global proportions. Today the fields, prairies, and badlands are punctuated with hundreds of rectangles of raw, orange dirt, each studded with its own set of trailers, storage tanks, and nodding pumpjacks. Every day, companies use hydraulic fracturing to extract nearly a million barrels of oil from the Bakken formation, a layer of shale that lies about two miles beneath the prairie. Roughly 8,000 wells are operating already, and an additional 40,000 could be drilled and fracked in the next 20 to 30 years. In line at one brand-new convenience store, a woman carrying a hardhat sums up the prevailing attitude: “Patience are for doctors.” In the Bakken, the time is now, and the future is a long way off.

Yet the Audubon Report, a groundbreaking new study by Audubon scientists, suggests that this place will become even more important for birds as the planet warms. For the 26 grassland bird species whose breeding ranges are projected to decrease dramatically by 2050, North Dakota will become an increasingly rare island of viable habitat and suitable climate conditions, one of their few remaining refuges. Protecting a portion of the region for birds could mean the difference between survival and extinction for some species.

That’s just one of the critical findings from Audubon’s seven-year investigation into the expected effects of climate change on North American bird populations. And taken together, the news is grim indeed. By 2080, the climate model projects, dozens of avian species across the country could be hurtling toward extinction—and not just birds that are already in trouble. Both the American Avocet and the Yellow-headed Blackbird, familiar sights in western North America, may be under threat before the end of the century. In the Great Plains, the Chestnut-collared Longspur’s range could shrink by 70 percent, while suitable breeding grounds for the Baird’s Sparrow could disappear entirely. The Piping Plover, an icon of the Atlantic Flyway, may vanish from many eastern shores.

The numbers are stark: Of the 588 species Audubon studied, 314 are likely to find themselves in dire straits by 2080. Unless, that is, the oil boomers in the Bakken—and everyone else—start to consider the future. Unless we begin to reduce the severity of global warming and buy birds more time to adapt to the changes coming their way.

Global climate is changing in ways not seen for millennia, and we know humans bear at least part of the responsibility. We also know that these changes are affecting animals large

and small. For years scientists have been telling us that the ranges of bears, butterflies, and many other species are shifting north and toward the poles; that bird migrations are changing time and course; and that pollinators are trying to adjust to new flowering schedules. These alarming observations are only the beginning.

To make predictions about the effects of climate change on animals, scientists need years, if not decades, of solid, detailed data on where and when species have been in the past, and such data are very rare. Except when it comes to birds.

For more than a century, volunteer birdwatchers throughout the Americas have contributed observations to Audubon’s annual Christmas Bird Count. Begun as a way to assess the health of bird populations, data from the annual census are now key to predicting birds’ responses to climate change. Using hundreds of thousands of standardized observations from both the Christmas Bird Count and the North American Breeding Bird Survey, Audubon’s chief scientist, Gary Langham, and his colleagues were able to describe the “climate envelope” for each of 588 North American bird species—pinpointing the range of temperatures, amount of rainfall, and other climate characteristics of the habitats occupied by each species. Then they looked for each combination of characteristics within sophisticated computer projections of the global climate, finding the future climate envelopes—and, by extension, the potential future ranges—of the species and mapping them to a resolution of 10 square kilometers. The study projects, for instance, that the Baird’s Sparrow’s range will shrink more than 90 percent by 2050 to just a small area within the Bakken.

It’s the broadest and most detailed study of its kind for North America, and it’s the closest thing we have to a field guide to the future of these birds. “It’s really important new information,” says Stuart Butchart, head of science for BirdLife International, who wasn’t involved with the study. “It shows us which species we need to be most worried about, and it helps us understand the whole suite of new challenges that these species will be facing in the future.”

Those challenges are daunting. According to the Audubon analysis, which is currently undergoing peer review for journal publication, more than half of North America’s bird species will be “climate-threatened” or “climate-endangered” by the end of the century—under a range of future emissions scenarios. The 188 climate-threatened birds face losing more than half of their current range by 2080, although they have the potential to shift into new areas. The 126 climate-endangered species are projected to lose more than 50 percent of their current range by 2050, with no net gain from range expansion.

The study was done very conservatively, says Terry Root, a Stanford University biologist and Audubon board member who studies how wildlife responds to climate change. “The findings are showing us the best possible future, not the worst

possible future,” she says. And even in that best of futures, where North America is two to four degrees Celsius warmer, 314 bird species could struggle to find places they can survive.

“That was just a punch in the gut,” says Langham. “When you realize that only nine bird species have gone extinct in continental North America in modern times, and then you see that we’re looking at 314 North American bird species at risk by the end of this century—it just takes your breath away.”

Some bird species will be able to adapt to new climatic conditions, but certainly not all. And while many people assume that climate change will simply shift habitats farther north or to higher elevations, for the 126 climate-endangered species, including the Baird’s Sparrow and other Bakken familiars, their climatic ranges are not only shifting but also dramatically shrinking. If we stay on our current carbon-spewing path, some of those species may have nowhere to go.

As a field guide to the future, the Audubon Report will help inform conservation investments, highlighting places that will continue to serve as valuable habitats in the decades to come. The study suggests that some important North American bird ranges will persist in place, acting as what Langham calls “species strongholds” as the climate changes. The prairies and pothole lakes of North Dakota are one such stronghold. Another is Appalachia.

The deciduous forests of West Virginia, North Carolina, and Virginia are home to several species of vulnerable warblers, notably the Cerulean Warbler. The tiny sky-blue bird, which nests high in treetops, is thought by some to be the fastest-declining songbird in North America; its winter habitat in the northern Andes has been dramatically reduced by coffee plantations, while its summer habitat in Appalachia is being steadily fragmented by, among other things, coal mining and low-density residential development. As the climate changes, the Audubon analysis shows, much of the Cerulean Warbler’s current range in the eastern United States is likely to become unsuitably wet and hot, and Appalachia’s forests will become an ever more important refuge for it and other warblers.

Audubon North Carolina has already begun to promote the protection of Appalachian land for warblers, working with state parks and private landowners to conserve the largest remaining swaths of intact habitat. The climate study, says Curtis Smalling, Audubon North Carolina’s director of land bird conservation, emphasizes the importance of that work. “If we can save the biggest blocks across a wide elevation range, then we will be able to slow these declines, and perhaps give these species a chance to adapt,” he says. “Identifying these strongholds makes the need for protection even clearer.” For Smalling, the long-term perspective of the analysis is galvanizing. Like other conservationists on the ground, he’s most often dealing with emergency cases—species that are already critically endangered, for instance, or whose habitat is already doomed by development or climate change. The analysis not only highlights areas that will serve species for the long term but also points to now-common species that need preventive care. For instance, the study projects that the Ovenbird, a relatively common species that also breeds in Appalachian forests, will lose more than 90 percent of its climatic range in North Carolina by 2080. “The hard thing, but also the nice thing, is that this study lengthens our time horizon,” says Smalling. “It thus forces us to say, ‘Hmm, what

do we want this to look like 50 or 100 years from now?’” Of course, the future is impossible to predict with certainty.

To build the most accurate model possible, Langham’s team included only climatic variables and focused on birds within the United States and Canada. “If we included sea-level rise, prey base, species competition, all the complexities of ecology, it’d take decades, and birds might go extinct before we were done and even knew they were at risk,” says Langham. “What we have is a set of predictions that gives us a good idea of which species are most sensitive to the projected change in the near future. It allows us to make science-based management decisions, and adapt as we go.” That said, Langham’s team is already working to incorporate additional data to generate even more robust projections. Next they will try to clarify how places the current model points to as climatically suitable for species in the future could fall short in other ways: They could be covered with asphalt, or be impossible for a species to reach because of distance or fragmentation. The habitat could be covered in trees—a possibly insurmountable challenge for a bird adapted to life among grasses. “If the right climate conditions for a species are in boreal forest, but the species has no idea how to make a living in boreal forest, that’s a problem,” says Langham. That’s why strongholds in places like the Bakken—areas that provide habitat for many species now and will continue to do so for many decades—are critically important to conserve, he says.

Audubon scientists would also like to expand the study’s scope to Mexico and south to Chile, into the wintering grounds of many migratory bird species. They haven’t been able to do that yet because the detailed, long-term observations so important to the Audubon model aren’t widely available for countries to the south. Cagan Sekercioglu, a University of Utah ecologist who studies the causes and consequences of bird extinctions around the world, says that while globally available digital apps like eBird are helping researchers collect more observations from more countries, the data gaps remain significant. “For these kinds of studies to be useful for actual conservation actions, they have to be done at a very high resolution, with very detailed data,” he says. As other countries in the Western Hemisphere start contributing information, the models could forecast which wintering grounds to the south are most vital to safeguard. Despite the model’s limitations, Langham says its predictions are crucial. “There are always asterisks, always caveats,” he says. “But we can choose to not do anything—which means being wrong for sure—or we can use this tool to figure out what the future holds and guide conservation efforts that give birds a chance to adapt.”

In and around the Bakken oil patch, the Audubon Report adds another level of detail to what many conservationists and land managers already knew: The region’s grasslands are important, endangered, and all too often ignored. Karen Smith, a Midwest native who managed the Lostwood National Wildlife Refuge from 1977 until her retirement in 2001, remembers her first visits to the Dakota prairie. “Why do I love it? It’s like trying to explain why you fall in love with someone,” she says. “It’s the wide-open space, the uniqueness, the unknowns. We’re still discovering new microorganisms in prairie soil. It’s unbelievable.”

When Smith arrived here nearly 40 years ago, much of the refuge's grassland was being taken over by aspen and other woody species. She started grazing and controlled-burn programs, a combination that helped restore many acres of grassland and encouraged Upland Sandpipers and other prairie birds to return to the refuge to breed. Smith still lives near the northern edge of the refuge, in an energy-efficient straw-bale house she built with her family and friends, and her front windows face Lostwood. But just beyond the low hills that surround her home, pumpjacks dip over new wells on the edge of the oilfields. Federal budget cuts have made it difficult for current refuge staff to maintain her decades of restoration work, and bit by bit, oil wells, gravel pits, and the new and wider roads that accompany them are popping up around her.

Kory Richardson, the current manager of Lostwood, is working to protect both the refuge and the prairie habitat around it. In North Dakota the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manages nearly 300,000 acres of wildlife refuges and holds conservation easements on hundreds of thousands of acres of private wetlands. The easements are primarily designed to prevent wetlands from being converted into farmland, but they also help protect wetlands and prairies alike—the habitat

strongholds that emerge from Audubon's climate model—from some of the worst effects of the oil boom.

Richardson oversees both the Lostwood refuge and 176,000 acres of nearby wetland easements. When an oil company proposes sinking a well within an easement, Richardson and others negotiate with the company and the private landowner over the placement of well pads, roads, and pipelines. The easements preclude agriculture, not oil wells, so in most cases, the Fish and Wildlife Service doesn't have any legal power to stop or even limit the oil development. But in many instances, the agency has convinced companies to avoid prairie potholes and other key habitats within the easements.

On the busy highways of western North Dakota, or on the frantic main streets of the region's towns and cities, it's easy to be daunted by the Bakken boom. There's no question that it's a pervasive, powerful force, and that Richardson and other managers have too little money, power, and time to protect wildlife from all of its impacts. But from the top of the latticed steel viewing tower in the middle of the Lostwood refuge, pothole lakes glint in the sunlight, and the region's vast open spaces dwarf even the multiplying well pads. There's still a lot of habitat worth saving.

Adapted from an article first published in Audubon in September-October 2014

Christmas Counts *(continued from page 3)*

Some odd birds missed on this count were things like Mottled Duck, White-crowned Sparrow, Clapper Rail, Dark-eyed Junco and Seaside Sparrow. We did have a count week Dark-eyed Junco from the day before the count.

David Hanson, Co-compiler.

Trinity River

The Trinity River CBC had 76 species, well below the average of 86. A new bird was added, Black-bellied Whistling Duck, while another one not seen in some 15 years was also seen - Northern Bobwhite Quail. We had 15 folks help out even though many areas were closed due to flooding issues. With all that water we only saw 2 duck species - Hooded Merganser and Wood Duck but couldn't even find a Pied-billed Grebe.

Stuart Marcus

Orange County

The Orange County count was held on January 1 as usual, with nine observers participating. Like many other counts this season, the sky was cloudy with intermittent very spotty rain. Nevertheless, eleven observers tallied a preliminary 133 species, the second highest since Ken Sztraky reinstated this count in 2002. Excellent cooperation from landowners including the Odom Interests and the Hawk Club Ltd as well as Pinehurst Gardens and the Brown Center enabled excellent coverage of the circle. We could have used more birders!

Highlights include Rusty Blackbirds, Barn Swallow, and Cave Swallow (for the second consecutive year). Many counts this year had difficulty finding ducks. We found most of the expected ducks, American Wigeon excepted, but mostly on some of the private land rather than the public hunting areas.

Sea Rim State Park

On January 3, a day that started with spotty rain, but cleared up nicely to be mostly sunny in the afternoon, 24 observers found a preliminary total of 159 species, including a good number of unusual and interesting species.

Pride of place goes to a Pyrrhuloxia, found at the entrance road to the small cemetery on the north side of Highway 87 three miles west of Sabine Pass. In a classic case of what is known as the Patagonia Picnic Table Effect (named after a roadside rest stop in Patagonia, Arizona, where the first US record of Rose-throated Becard led to birders visiting the site also finding Thick-billed Kingbirds and Gray Hawks) birders later in the day found three Groove-billed Anis (there were actually four there) in the same location, and then next morning, three "count week" species that we missed on count day - White-crowned Sparrow, Inca Dove and Red-shouldered Hawk.

Other species new to the count were a Least Bittern in McFaddin NWR and a Couch's Kingbird at the end of Backridge Road.

Worthy of mention were three Bald Eagles in separate locations, three White-tailed Hawks also widely separated, and three Vermilion Flycatchers. Species we do not find every year included Reddish Egret, Yellow Rail (in McFaddin NWR), American Oystercatcher, Common Tern (along the beach), Short-eared Owl (in McFaddin NWR), Red-breasted Nuthatch (in Sabine Woods), and Indigo Bunting (two at Sabine Woods).

All of this was made possible with the cooperation of McFaddin and Texas Point NWRs (and especially Patrick Walther), the J.D. Murphree WMA, and the landowners of the properties south of the end of Backridge Road,

Bird Sightings – December 2015

For this column, we review, looking for rare and very rare species, all credible eBird and other submitted records for the Texas counties we have always covered – Angelina, Hardin, Jasper, Jefferson, Newton, Orange, Sabine, San Augustine and Tyler. We also review, looking for very rare or vagrant species only, records for Chambers, Galveston (High Island and Bolivar only) and Liberty counties in Texas, and Calcasieu and Cameron Parishes (west of the Calcasieu River only) in Louisiana.

The format of the listing is Species – Date – County-more precise location if available – (number) – Observer(s) with sometimes a comment on the reason it is noteworthy.

Commentary: Many of the interesting and unusual sightings in December are those in the various Christmas Counts. There are doubtless other sightings that we are not aware of at press time, as there is often significant delay in dissemination of Christmas Count results.

However, we will use this opportunity to comment on some of this season's trends, many of which are becoming clearer as the Christmas Count season advances. As a result of the El Niño this year, the entire area has experienced well above average rainfall, and many areas have much standing water. It has also been warmer than normal (although that seems to be changing in the early days of January).

The situation as far as ducks are concerned, the picture is very confused. One thing is clear. There are lots of Gadwall. But Northern Pintail and Green-winged Teal seem to be very much reduced in number. As far as Green-winged Teal are concerned, Cattail Marsh in Tyrrell Park, Beaumont seems to be an anomaly with lots and several Cinnamon Teal as well.

Perhaps the controlled (and therefore normal) water level in the cells there is the only relatively shallow water available. There are Canvasback around, and perhaps more Redheads than the long-term averages. Snow Geese seem to be plentiful if perhaps concentrated in larger flocks than usual.

The other major group that seems abnormal is that sparrow numbers and particularly diversity of species seems way low. Perhaps the colder weather will drive more down towards the coast.

Woodland birds seems very much normal excepting only American Robins. We have heard anecdotal reports that Robins are plentiful south of their usual southern limit, south of Corpus Christi and in the King Ranch. Certainly, the numbers recorded on the Big Thicket Christmas Counts were very low by historical standards. American Goldfinch numbers are very variable, but do seem to be on the low side. This is proving not to be an "irruption" year for woodland species such as nuthatches, although one Red-breasted Nuthatch is apparently spending the winter in Sabine Woods. Cedar Waxwings are few in number. Numbers of "overshooting" species such as Brown Creeper, and to a lesser extent, Pine Warblers have been pretty much normal. Eastern Bluebirds, often hard to find south of IH-10 and certainly south of Highway 73 are being seen in coastal areas in significant numbers.

Raptor numbers, especially American Kestrels, were slow to increase this fall, but are now at least normal if not above normal. Red-tailed Hawks, always late to build up, are very much average. Northern Harrier numbers were slower than normal to increase, but are now normal, except that the proportion of male "grey ghosts" seems high.

Seen in our Core Counties (listed above)

Canvasback	Dec 9	JEF-TP (2) HS
Eared Grebe	Dec 11	JEF-TP (1) JM
Lsr Black-backed Gull	Dec 11	JEF-TP (1) JM, JHH
Stilt Sandpiper	Dec 5	JEF-TP (4) MC, TH, SM
	Dec 11	JEF-TP (8) JM, JHH
American Woodcock	Dec 5	JEF-Edgewater Picnic Area (1) SM
Ruby-thr. Hummingbird	Dec 1-2	JEF-Nederland (1) HS
	Dec 4	HAI-Rose Hill Acres (JM)
	Dec 12	JEF-Beaumont (1) RL
	Dec 27 on	JEF-Nederland (1) JJW
Black-chinned Humming.	Dec 5 on	HAI-Rose Hill Acres (1) JM
	Dec 20 on	JEF-Nederland (1) JJW
Anna's Hummingbird	Dec 4 on	HAI-Rose Hill Acres (1) JM
Rufous Hummingbird	Dec 1	JEF-Nederland (1) HS
	Dec 2	JEF-Nederland (2) HS
	Dec 24 on	JEF-Nederland (1) HS
Buff-bellied Hummingbird	Dec 29 on	JEF-Nederland (1) JJW
Vermilion Flycatcher	Dec 25	JAS-Inman Addition (1) T. Robertson (unusual so far N)
Ash-throated Flycatcher	Dec 3	JEF-TP (1) J&L Bryan
Red-breasted Nuthatch	Dec 18-30	JEF-SW (1) TH, MC, SM (prob there all month)
Brown-headed Nuthatch	Dec 6	JEF-Edgewater Picnic Area (2) RL (unusual so far south)

Fox Sparrow	Dec 16	ANG-Kurth Lake Rd (1) Laura Wilson
Dark-eyed Junco	Dec 3	JEF-PI (1) JAW (unusual loc.)
	Dec 5	JEF-PI (2) J&L Bryan
	Dec 12	JEF-TP (1) RL (unusual location)
Brewer's Blackbird	Dec 9 on	JEF-WJC, Willis Rd (100) JAW (unusually high number)
Pine Siskin	Dec 13	HAI-Rose Hill Acres (2) JM

Nearby Counties (very rare species only)

Bell's Vireo	Dec 19	CAM-Mud Lake area Dan O'Malley
Ovenbird	Dec 12	GAL-HI-Smith Oaks (1) John Romano
Nashville Warbler	Dec 7	ANWR-East Unit (1) Stacey

Abbreviations used: ANG – Angelina County; ANWR – Anahuac NWR; BTNP – Big Thicket National Preserve; CAM – Cameron Parish, LA; CHA – Chambers County; GAL – Galveston County; HAI – Hardin County;; HI – High Island; HS – Harlan Stewart; JAS – Jasper County; JAW – John Whittle; JEF – Jefferson County; JHH – John Haynes; JJW – Jana and John Whittle; JM – John Mariani; J&R – Jessica Barry and Randy Lewis; MC – Michael Cooper; RHRC – Rene Hebert and Rita Czek; RL – Randy Lewis; SAB – Sabine County; SPHW – Smith Point Hawk Watch; SW – Sabine Woods; TP – Tyrrell Park including Cattail Marsh; WJC – West Jefferson County.

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Unfortunately, almost all the local and regional telephone Rare Bird Alerts have been discontinued in favor of various Internet distribution.

The Texas-wide Rare Bird Alert, maintained by Houston Audubon Society, is available on their web-site at <http://www.houstonaudubon.org/> Email alerts are also available for a fee. Most rare bird sightings in Texas are posted on the TEXBIRDS listserv. Archives of the listserv are at www.freelists.org/archive/texbirds. It is not necessary to subscribe to the listserv to view the archives, which include all recent postings. Postings for the last two weeks are also available at <http://birding.aba.org/maillist/TX>.

Transcriptions of many current and recent email alerts are available on the Siler's Birding on the Net at <http://birdingonthe.net/hotmail.html> Detailed information (maps and text) on birding sites on the Upper Texas Coast is also available on the Web at <http://www.texasbirding.net..>