

GUADALUPE RIVER DELTA – MCFADDIN FAMILY RANCHES  
CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

14 December 2011



Impact of the worst drought in Texas history was the major theme of this years' count. The day was warm with numerous mosquitoes and very windy. All natural shallow freshwater sites were dry, the tidal marshes were very salty, and Green Lake was extremely shallow. Fifty four birders worked in 22 teams to survey private and public properties and reported 225 species which ties our All-Time High Species Count. Wilson's Plover, Piping Plover, Sandwich Tern and Wood Thrush were new species for the count and we missed Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, N. Bobwhite, Burrowing Owl, Least Flycatcher, Horned Lark, and Clay-colored Sparrow. Wood Thrush was voted as Best Bird of the Count by section leaders, and was photographed along River Road by Petra Hockey, Brush Freeman and Dennis Shepler.

### RESULTS

The major local story was the nearly dry Green Lake. Back during the droughts of the 50's Green Lake was reported to have completely dried, and was used to grow cotton. This is the driest it has been since. There were very few waterbirds in the count area outside of managed freshwater impoundments on the Guadalupe Delta Wildlife Management Area and tidal marshes. Green Lake is normally deep and muddy and holds only small numbers of birds. However, with the prolonged dry conditions associated with the drought, Green Lake dried out to only a few inches deep over thousands of acres. The result was site was inundated by over 100,000 shorebirds and ducks taking advantage of the food exposed within the very shallow water.

In association with the drought, most insectivorous birds were in below average numbers, but there were above average number of raptors and sparrows. There was a major invasion of coastal areas by Green-tailed Towhees who typically occupy semi-arid scrub and Harris's Sparrows which normally winter further to the north in the Blackland Prairie.

## RARE BIRDS



Charlie Brower found Black Rail and Nelson's Sparrow wintering in brackish habitat in an atypical setting bordering the barge canal. When his Black Rail tape did not work, a passing barge made enough noise to excite the local Black's into calling. This photo was taken by Diane Nunley in 2007 at a different site.



Whooping Crane populations are increasing and with high salinities in the bays cranes are moving away from tidal waters more than normal. A total of 14 Whooper's were reported by 4 teams. A pair was observed flying NE of Green Lake, 4 were observed flying over Hog Bayou on the wildlife management area, 4 were also observed flying near the salt water barrier on the river and 4 were observed briefly landing near river road. All sightings were at least 2 miles apart.



Wilson's Plover, Piping Plovers and Snowy Plovers were found foraging with 80,000 shorebirds on Green Lake. Most of the plovers occurred on an exposed road bed in the lake.

Another new species for the count was a Sandwich Tern. It was found by Jamie Ferguson and Bob Creglow along the shores of Hynes Bay.

Yellow-throated Vireo was totally unexpected when found along Hog Bayou by Dennis Haessley. Another unexpected find was a Tropical Parula located by David True and Bron Rorex in the same area. [The photo below was taken elsewhere.]



Another good find was an Am. Redstart photographed by Petra Hockey and Brush Freeman at the boat ramp on Hwy. 35. A few winter each year in riparian areas, but they are not easy to locate. It was found the day before during scouting and they returned during the count to tally the bird.



Western Tanagers are regular, but very rare during winters along the Coast. Most of their population winters in the tropics. The bird below is typical of most winter birds. Two young males were found on the count by Scott Holt and Beau Hardegree at the Hynes Bay Unit.



Rose-breasted Grosbeak are rare anywhere in the United States because this species mostly winters in the tropics. On a typical year, only 3 are found nationally. Dale Friedrichs found an adult male as the 3<sup>rd</sup> record for the CBC.



Rusty Blackbird photographed by Chet Burrier on the Womack Ranch.

We are at the edge of the range of the Rusty Blackbird and their occurrence is fairly rare. This species' population is declining nationally. The birds found by Chet was the 2<sup>nd</sup> record for the CBC.

#### TRENDS

**HIGHS (68 species):** Cinnamon Teal, N. Shoveler, Am. Green-winged Teal, Bufflehead, Ruddy Duck, Least Grebe, Eared Grebe, Am. White Pelican, Brown Pelican, Great Blue Heron, Tricolored Heron, White-tailed Kite, N. Harrier, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, Harris's Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, Crested Caracara, Black Rail, Whooping Crane, Snowy Plover, Semipalmated Plover, Black-necked Stilt, Am. Avocet, Willet, Lesser Yellowlegs, W. Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, Dunlin, Stilt Sandpiper, Short-billed Dowitcher, Long-billed Dowitcher, Laughing Gull, Herring Gull, Royal Tern, Inca Dove, Com. Ground-Dove, Short-eared Owl, Com. Pauraque, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, N. Flicker, Great Kiskadee, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Loggerhead Shrike, Green Jay, Brown Creeper, N. Mockingbird, Long-billed Thrasher, W. Tanager, Green-tailed Towhee, Spotted Towhee, Field Sparrow, Vesper Sparrow, Lark Sparrow, Fox Sparrow, White-throated Sparrow, Harris's Sparrow, White-crowned Sparrow, N. Cardinal, Red-winged Blackbird, E. Meadowlark, W. Meadowlark, Rusty Blackbird, Bronzed Cowbird, Brown-headed Cowbird, Lesser Goldfinch and House Sparrow.

**LOWS (56 species):** Wood Duck, Mallard, Blue-winged Teal, Red-breasted Merganser, Anhinga, Great Egret, Little Blue Heron, Reddish Egret, Cattle Egret, Green Heron, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, White-faced Ibis, Am. Kestrel, Clapper Rail, King Rail, Virginia Rail, Sora, Com. Gallinule, Black-bellied Plover, Killdeer, Wilson's Snipe, Rock Pigeon, Eur. Collared-Dove, Barred Owl, Belted Kingfisher, Pileated Woodpecker, E. Phoebe, Vermillion Flycatcher, White-eyed Vireo, Blue-headed Vireo, Blue Jay, Am. Crow, Tree Swallow, N. Rough-winged Swallow, Cave Swallow, Barn Swallow, Carolina Chickadee, Carolina Wren, Bewick's Wren, House Wren, Sedge Wren, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Gray Catbird, Sprague's Pipit, Cedar Waxwing, Orange-crowned Warbler, Myrtle Warbler, Pine Warbler, Palm Warbler, N. Waterthrush, Olive Sparrow, Le Conte's Sparrow, Seaside Sparrow, Swamp Sparrow, and Com Grackle.

Waterfowl numbers were about normal with most marsh birds like herons, egrets, ibises and rails being much below average with much of the marsh either dry or salty. Hawks occurred in above average densities



Shorebird numbers were extremely low everywhere because of high tides, except for the birds on Green Lake which were spectacular. Densities like in the photo below were spread over thousands of acres.



Woodpeckers occurred at normal levels, but insect eaters like the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher photographed by Petra Hockey were in below average densities. Swallows, wrens, and warblers were in below average numbers.



However, sparrows occurred in much higher numbers than normal. This was a major invasion year for Green-tailed Towhees. This species was found only once before on the count and we had 17 this year. Spotted Towhees typically average about 3 on this survey and we had 61! Field, Vesper, Lark and White-crowned occurred at twice their average. The Harris's Sparrow below photographed by Diane Nunley normally only average 1 per year, and we had 69!



All participants enjoyed the count this year. Windy and warm conditions made it challenging finding birds amongst all of the mosquitoes. Even though resident bird numbers were generally low, there was anticipation all day of finding some western birds displaced by the drought. Just about every birding team found something unusual.

## THANKS

This is a very special count because of the habitats it covers where 3 ecoregions merge. It is successful because of the large amount of cooperation we get from the landowners who generally provide us access and as in the case with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Dow, Jess and Walter Womack, and Beverly Fletcher. They also provide staff and equipment to help us with the count. We would also like to thank John Hubbard, Larry Seydler, Frank Pagel, Gene Colville, Don Walden, Dan Kaspar, the Negley Ranch, and the Landgraf, Spandau and Joe Hawes families for providing us access to their lands. Lastly, we thank the 54 birders who spent their day and huge amount of energy in searching the landscape for every species which we could locate.

At the end of the day, our tired, wet and excited birders gathered under the oaks in the river bottom at the Weed Prairie Hunting Camp on the Jess Womack Ranch. We were treated to an excellent meal cooked by A.D. Blackmon, David, and CB. Lyondell-Basell Corporation provided funding for most of the food and activity fees.

**THANKS TO ALL FOR A GREAT JOB!!**

Data from the CBC is available upon request.

Hope to see you at our next Christmas Bird Count in 2012.



Sunset photo by Petra Hockey