

TRANS-PECOS BIRD REPORT
WINTER – 2005 – 2006 (Dec. – Feb.)
Prepared by Jim Paton

Conditions in the Trans-Pecos were very dry and mild, with few cold snaps. El Paso received no measurable rainfall for the period until February. Flippo reported equally dry conditions in Big Bend, with less than an inch of precipitation falling anywhere in the park during the period. Due to good rainfall in the previous summer, conditions in some places were excellent for wintering sparrows; Brewer's Sparrows were in very good numbers in the El Paso area. Big Bend reported poorer food conditions. The mild conditions did not seem to translate into an especially high number of lingering or overwintering rarities. As with the fall, there was almost a total absence of montane irruptives. Away from Guadalupe Mountains National Park, bluebirds went nearly unreported. Notable rarities included two Varied Thrushes at Boot Spring in Big Bend National Park, Baird's Sparrows wintering again in grasslands around the Davis Mountains, and, in El Paso, a continuing Eurasian Wigeon, a Least Grebe, and a Glaucous Gull.

TBRC Review Species in Bold.

CAACKLING GOOSE – A Cackling Goose at Ft. Hancock Reservoir, 14Jan (JP), was thought to be a first for *Hudspeth*.

EURASIAN WIGEON – A male was spotted seven times between 5Jan and 16Feb at Rio Bosque Wetlands Park in El Paso (JS). This was the presumably the same bird seen here 10-11Nov. Eurasian Wigeon is nearly annual in the El Paso area in recent years.

CINNAMON TEAL – Perhaps a product of the mild weather, Cinnamon Teal were present at both Rio Bosque Wetlands Park and Tornillo Reservoir, *El Paso*, in early January. Typically the species is absent from the El Paso area until spring migrants arrive in mid to late January.

RED-BREASTED MERGANSER – Twenty on the McNary CBC on 17Dec – 18 at Ft. Hancock Res. (JP) and two at McNary Res., *Hudspeth* (BZ) – was a good regional total.

LEAST GREBE – One of the El Paso highlights was the cooperative Least Grebe that stayed at Crossroads Pond in west El Paso, 31Dec – 21Jan (BJ, JK, ph., m.ob). This is only the second record for *El Paso* with the first in 1985.

HORNED GREBE – The only report of Horned Grebe was of two at McNary Res. on 17Dec (BZ). This species is rare in the region.

AMERICAN WHITE PELICAN – This species continues to increase in winter in the El Paso area with the largest number being the 40+ birds at Ft. Hancock Res. through the period.

BROWN PELICAN – An immature Brown Pelican at Balmorhea Lake, *Reeves*, was a good find 7-11Feb (GW, ML). Though annual in the region with records from nearly every month, if not all months, most records are from summer.

AMERICAN BITTERN – One again wintered at Rio Grande Village, BBNP – 5Dec – 7Feb (m. ob).

WHITE-FACED IBIS – Good conditions prompted some White-faced Ibis to linger through mid-January in the El Paso area, a time when they are usually absent. One – twenty one were at Rio Bosque Wetlands Park 4-16Jan (JS), and 8 were at Feather Lake in El Paso on 9Dec (JS). Two were also present through the period at Balmorhea Lake, *Reeves* (ML, m.ob.).

TURKEY VULTURE – Any winter reports of Turkey Vulture for the region are notable as the species is essentially absent November-February, staying at least one hundred miles south of the border. There were three reports this season: 3Dec at Blue Creek, BBNP (R & AD), one at Rio Grande Village, BBNP on 29Dec, and four at Balmorhea Lake on 18Dec (ML, KB ph.).

OSPREY – Wintering Osprey are always notable. One was reported from Balmorhea Lake, 18Dec – 25Jan (ML ph., CL).

WHITE-TAILED KITE – White-tailed Kite is one of the more enigmatic species in the region, popping up here and there at all seasons, seemingly at random. Singles were at Cattail Falls, BBNP on 3Feb (PW), ten miles south of Pecos, *Reeves*, on 7Feb (GW), along 2810 southwest of Marfa, *Presidio*, on 16Dec (RD), and in *Jeff Davis* along RR 505 near US 90, 3-24Feb (ML, KB, ph.).

RED-SHOULDERED HAWK – Always a good find, one was reported from BBNP on 28Feb (GLE), where accidental.

BLACK-NECKED STILT – This species continues to increase in winter in the El Paso area. Twelve were at Feather Lake on 9Dec (JS) and up to twenty or more stayed throughout the period at Rio Bosque Wetlands Park (JS). Nine were on the El Paso CBC, 2Jan, though a few of these were in the New Mexico part of the count circle.

AMERICAN AVOCET – Two were at Rio Bosque Wetlands Park on 19Jan (JS). Rare in winter.

LESSER YELLOWLEGS – One at Rio Bosque Wetlands Park was seen seven times 3Dec – 12Feb (JS, JP). This species is less than annual in the region in winter.

FRANKLIN'S GULL – One was at Keystone Preserve in El Paso on 12Dec (JP). The bird was also seen in nearby New Mexico over a wider span of dates. There are a handful of winter records for the El Paso area.

CALIFORNIA GULL – An adult at Keystone Preserve, El Paso, on 12Dec (JP) was the only report of this rare visitor.

GLAUCOUS GULL – The region's first Glaucous Gull was seen at several locations in west El Paso 21Dec – 1Jan (JP, ph., m.ob). This first-winter bird was seen in nearby New Mexico from at least 6Dec -2Jan. A second, slightly darker first-winter bird joined it for a few days in December, but this second bird was never reported from Texas.

EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE – Eurasian Collared-Dove ceased to be “news” in the Trans-Pecos several years ago, occupying every small town in the region by 2004. However, despite a presence just west of the park in Terlingua and Study Butte, Big Bend records have been few. One to two birds around Rio Grande Village starting on 1Jan (m.ob) indicates that it will soon be established there too.

LONG-EARED OWL – Two were found in a salt-cedar bosque just to the east of Ft. Hancock on 17Dec (JP), for a third *Hudspeth* record. Due to its secretive nature this species is certainly underreported.

BROAD-BILLED HUMMINGBIRD – A male continued from the fall at Zimmer's El Paso yard until 3Jan, just long enough to register on the El Paso CBC.

ANNA'S HUMMINGBIRD – Several residences in El Paso reported multiple birds through the first half of the period, par for the course in recent years. A male at Panther Junction, BBNP, 1Dec – 9Jan (MF) was a bit more unexpected.

RUFIOUS HUMMINGBIRD – A late female *Selasphorus*, presumed to be a Rufous, was a surprise at Panther Junction on 1Dec (MF).

ALLEN'S HUMMINGBIRD – An adult male Allen's Hummingbird that arrived at Lockwood's Alpine yard on 28Aug stayed through 15Dec.

LEWIS'S WOODPECKER – The only Lewis's Woodpecker reported was the bird from the fall at Frijole Ranch, GMNP, that was present through the period (JW, m. ob).

ACORN WOODPECKER – The four to five birds that were found in west El Paso in the fall were present through the period (JPo, m. ob). This is the second time in the past three winters that a small group has wintered here.

Empidonax FLYCATCHERS: It was a good winter for empids, with four species reported. Any winter empid aside from Hammond's, Dusky, or Gray at BBNP is noteworthy.

HAMMOND'S FLYCATCHER – One was reported on the Davis Mountains CBC, *Jeff Davis*, 17Dec. (KB)

GRAY FLYCATCHER – One to two were reported throughout the period in several BBNP locations (m. ob), fitting with the expected pattern.

DUSKY FLYCATCHER – One was at DMSP on 17Dec (ML) and an empid thought to be this species was in McKittrick Canyon, GMNP in mid-Dec (SL).

“WESTERN” FLYCATCHER – A silent “Western” Flycatcher was at Madden Tank, *Hudspeth*, on 17Dec (MS, JZ). This is the first winter record for *Hudspeth* for this species pair. Pacific-slope Flycatcher remains undocumented for the state. A Pacific-slope was documented with sonogram just south of Las Cruces, NM, 17-23Dec, 1995.

VERMILION FLYCATCHER – Nine on the McNary CBC on 17Dec was an excellent total for the western Trans-Pecos. The species continues to be hard to find in *El Paso* where it is annual at best. One spent much of the winter at Rio Bosque Wetlands Park (JS).

WHITE-EYED VIREO – Accidental in BBNP, one was on the nature trail at Rio Grande Village on 10Dec (DL).

PLUMBEOUS VIREO – One in El Paso on 22Feb (JP) was unexpected and was presumably a wandering wintering bird, rather than a very early migrant. El Paso does have previous winter records.

HUTTON’S VIREO – One in Memorial Park, El Paso on 2Jan (BZ) was a good find. The species is rare to casual in El Paso with a number of records in the last decade, indicating that the species is not as sedentary as is commonly believed. The closest possible breeders are in the Organ Mountains, NM, about forty miles away.

COMMON RAVEN – Corvids in the El Paso area are very much tied in winter to pecan orchards along the Rio Grande. Chihuahuan Raven and American Crow occur commonly in *El Paso* in pecans, but pecans are not cultivated in *Hudspeth* and any black corvid there in winter is notable. In addition, Common Raven is generally absent from the Rio Grande valley in the two counties. Two Common Ravens near Ft. Hancock on 17Dec (JP) were a good find.

WINTERING SWALLOWS were much in evidence in the western Trans-Pecos, continuing to rewrite prior notions of seasonal distribution.

TREE SWALLOW – On 17Dec, an astonishing total of 104 were counted at dusk coming into to roost at McNary Res. (BZ). Twelve were seen here during the day on 14Jan (JP).

CAVE SWALLOW – Cave Swallow now clearly winters in the El Paso area, something that has apparently just developed in the last five years. Birds were present at Rio Bosque Wetlands Park all winter (JS), with a high of 50 on 30Jan. In addition, ten were at McNary Res. on 17Dec (BZ).

BARN SWALLOW – Four were at Balmorhea Lake on 18Dec (ML, ph. KB).

By the second week of February, on schedule, migrant Tree, Violet-green, Northern Rough-winged, and Cave swallows were reported from several locations.

RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH – Given that the irruption of this species was nearly nonexistent this winter, three in Boot Canyon, BBNP on 24Jan (ML) were notable.

VARIED THRUSH – A male was first found in Boot Canyon, BBNP on 17Jan (DL). Carpenter located and photographed two males together there on 2Feb and one bird was last reported on 17Feb. The species was last documented in the park in January, 1982.

GRAY CATBIRD – Rare at any season, one was at Sam Nail Ranch, BBNP, 1-19Jan (CB, m. ob).

SAGE THRASHER – Flocks of 50-60 could be found along the eastern escarpment of the Guadalupe (JW) and up to six were reported in various BBNP locations. For the second year in a row, the species was tough to find at Ft. Hancock. Birds can be found here enjoying Christmas cactus fruits (*Opuntia leptocaulis*) along with Northern Mockingbirds and Pyrrhuloxias. The numbers of Sage Thrashers here has dropped even though numbers of the other two species remain high.

BROWN THRASHER – Three reports were normal or slightly above normal for this rare migrant and winterer: one at Daniels Ranch, BBNP, 14Jan (GW) – 4Feb (EC), one at DMSP the entire period (ML), and one in Alpine on 19Feb (ML).

BLACK-THROATED GRAY WARBLER – One from the fall lingered in El Paso until 28Dec, for a first December record for the El Paso area (BZ). More expected but still of note were two in BBNP: one on 8Jan at Rio Grande Village (CR) and one on the Chisos Mountains CBC 28Dec.

OVENBIRD – Interesting was the report of an Ovenbird along the Window Trail, BBNP, on 30Dec (J & DC). It was thought to be the first winter record for the park. There is a late January record (25Jan1998) from El Paso.

SPOTTED TOWHEE – Spotted Towhee is not normally mentioned in these pages, but there was a complete absence of reports from *El Paso* and *Hudspeth* the entire period, despite much searching. This species was present, but in well below normal numbers, through the central Trans-Pecos. The species is typically a fairly common winterer here.

CASSIN'S SPARROW – Due to its secretive nature and a lack of quality habitat, Cassin's Sparrow is not usually found in *El Paso* in winter. Two in Franklin Mountains State Park on 2Jan (JP) were thus a good find.

BAIRD'S SPARROW – Three were found and photographed along 2810 about three to six miles southwest of Marfa, *Presidio*, on 6Dec (ML). Early in the morning birds could be found perched on roadside fences, warming up and allowing careful study. One was reported from this area on 17Dec (RD). In addition, one was in *Jeff Davis* along RR 505 two miles east of US 90 on 23Dec (ML). The species clearly winters in these areas, but lack of access limits birding to the roadsides and reduces the likelihood of finding birds on any particular visit.

FOX SPARROW – It was a good winter for Fox Sparrow in the Trans-Pecos. Up to four were at Rio Grande Village 23Jan – 22Feb (CL, m. ob), one was at Terlingua Creek, BBNP on 31Jan (EC), and one was in El Paso, 2-21Jan (BZ). All were of the expected "Red" *iliaca/zaboria* type.

GOLDEN-CROWNED SPARROW – One was photographed in *Hudspeth* north of Ft. Hancock on 17Dec at a private tank (MS, JZ) for a second county record. This species remains less than annual in the region.

VARIED BUNTING – Surprising were the male and two female Varied Buntings found along Terlingua Creek, BBNP on 31Jan (EC). The birds were presumably wintering.

RUSTY BLACKBIRD – Two male and two female Rusty Blackbirds were found at Rio Bosque Wetlands Park on 11Dec (JS). This was a first park record and is believed to be the first record of multiple birds of this species in the El Paso area.

CASSIN'S FINCH – The only report was of two at GMNP on 1Jan.

Cited observers: Cathy Bell, Kelly Bryan, Eric Carpenter, Jim and Dede Crusinberry, Rich Damron, Rob and Angie Dean, Mark Flippo, Bob Johnson, John Kiseda, Dan Leavitt, Greg Levandoski, Scotty Lofland, Mark Lockwood, Carl Lundblad, Jim Paton, Jane Poss, Cynthia Ryan, Marcy Scott, John Sproul, Patti Westbrook, Greer Willis, Jan Wobbenhorst, Jimmy Zabriskie, and Barry Zimmer.