

**TRANS-PECOS BIRD REPORT**  
**FALL (AUGUST – NOVEMBER) 2006**

Prepared by Jim Paton

The fall in the Trans-Pecos was marked by both excess and absence. The excess was rainfall, especially in the El Paso area. Up to 16" of rain fell on parts of El Paso on 1 August, causing widespread flooding and extensive property damage. Abundant rains continued through mid-October with scattered locations in El Paso County receiving 40+" of rain for the period! August also brought heavy rain to Big Bend National Park and alone contributed over half of year-to-date rainfall totals in the park. For example, through November the Chisos Basin had recorded 16.05 inches of precipitation for the year, with 8.54 inches of that in August.

The effects of the rain on birds were less obvious. Good shorebird habitat was created in the Rio Grande floodplain in the El Paso area, though much of the best spots were just across the state line in New Mexico. Hummingbird numbers were reduced at feeders, presumably a result of increased natural food sources. Migrant passerines were also in reduced numbers as they were less concentrated in oases visited by birders. The good rains may continue to improve the condition of grasslands.

If the excess was rainfall, the absence was, for the third fall in a row, any push of montane irruptives. Jays, nuthatches, and winter finches were again conspicuously absent from lowland areas. Even in poor montane winters the occasional Western Scrub-Jay or Red-breasted Nuthatch can typically be found in lowland areas, but not this fall. Six TBRC review species were reported, two from the Big Bend National Park. The most notable of these was a male Black-vented Oriole seen on one day only in October, the first report in the region since 1970. Red-faced Warbler went unreported for the first fall in many years.

**Common Loon:** A Common Loon was picked up on a street in west El Paso on 12 Oct and later released near Rio Bosque Wetlands Park, *El Paso*, where it was seen several times before being found dead on 26 Oct (fide JS). The specimen was turned over to UTEP.

**Western Grebe:** Given the lack of surface water, a Western Grebe seen on 15 Oct at the Presidio sewage ponds (ML) was believed to perhaps be a first record for *Presidio*.

**Turkey Vulture:** In contrast to much of the state, Turkey Vulture is essentially absent from the region November-February. This year as many as six lingered near Rio Bosque Wetlands Park, *El Paso*, through 18 Nov with two there through 5 Dec (JS). In addition, another was nearby at Feather Lake on 19 Nov (JS).

**Gray Hawk:** A Gray Hawk at Pinnacles Pass, BBNP on 12 Aug (ML) was away from areas of known occurrence.

**Harris's Hawk:** Harris's Hawk appeared at two *Pecos* locations, away from its regular distribution in the region: 1 Nov about 14 miles southwest of Iraan and on 29 Nov about ten miles west of Ft. Stockton (both ML).

Red-shouldered Hawk: Very rarely seen in the region away from *Terrell* and *Val Verde*, an immature at Coyanosa, *Pecos*, on 8Oct (ML) was an excellent find. As was one in extreme western *Jeff Davis* on 10Oct (DL, JPO).

Broad-winged Hawk: A rare but regular migrant through the region, the only report this fall was one at Rio Grande Village, BBNP, on 6Oct (MF).

Zone-tailed Hawk: Zone-tailed Hawk is a very difficult bird to get in the El Paso area with only a few records for the county. Testifying to its scarcity there is the fact that one on 5Oct in El Paso was Zimmer's 400<sup>th</sup> species for *El Paso*.

Black-bellied Plover: A solid member of the rare but regular category, a Black-bellied Plover was nicely photographed adjacent to Rio Bosque Wetlands Park on 5Nov (CB).

American Avocet: One at McNary Reservoir, *Hudspeth*, on 20Nov was late (JP).

Lesser Yellowlegs: Rare this late, a Lesser Yellowlegs was at Tornillo Reservoir, *El Paso*, on 20Nov (JP).

Marbled Godwit: Always a good find for the region, and very late, was a Marbled Godwit that flirted with the state line in west El Paso, being seen in Texas as late as 14Oct for a rare El Paso area October record.

Wilson's Phalarope: One at McNary Res. on 20Nov (JP) was very late and it was presumably the bird present there on 17Dec (BZ). Winter records are very scarce for the region and it would be unprecedented if it stayed through the winter.

Laughing Gull: Annual in summer-early fall in recent years, this season's bird was an adult at Tornillo Reservoir, *El Paso*, on 3Aug (MI, BZ).

Lesser Black-backed Gull: A dark-mantled gull seen distantly and poorly photographed at McNary Res. on 20Nov (JP) had the proper structure and size for Lesser Black-backed Gull and was presumed to be that species. There are about four previous regional records. This would be a first for *Hudspeth*.

Sabine's Gull: Two reports were about average, both of juveniles in the expected migratory window: one at McNary on 10Sept (JP) and another at Balmorhea Lake, *Reeves*, 6-12Oct (SL, ML, RP).

**Northern Saw-whet Owl:** An adult was found and photographed at the Davis Mountains Resort on 24Oct (KB).

*Chaetura* species: A lone *Chaetura* in El Paso on 29Sept (BZ) was not felt to be clearly a Chimney Swift. Vaux's Swift remains frustratingly difficult to fully document for the state.

Broad-billed Hummingbird: The female at the Davis Mountains Resort, *Jeff Davis*, from the summer lingered until at least 19Aug (M&ME).

**White-eared Hummingbird:** Two birds were present during the summer at the Davis Mountains Resort with the last being seen on 17Sept (fide ML).

Allen's Hummingbird: An adult male Allen's Hummingbird was in west El Paso, 2-4Aug (JP).

Acorn Woodpecker: Once again, a small group of Acorn Woodpeckers was frequenting a west El Paso neighborhood with the first report in early November. Birds have been here for at least three of the last four winters and a June 2006 report from nearby suggests that perhaps this group is now resident. The neighborhood does have many suitable large oaks.

**Greater Pewee:** A Greater Pewee was at Cottonwood Campground, BBNP from 30Sept (DS et al, ph. BC) through at least 6Oct (DL). The last accepted park record was from August, 1991.

Great Crested Flycatcher: Less than annual as a migrant through the region, two Great Crested Flycatchers were reported: at Rio Grande Village, BBNP, on 31Aug (MF) and in El Paso on 4Sept (BZ).

Winter Wren: A nice push of Winter Wrens (at least 40g worth!) was scattered across the Trans-Pecos. The first was in the Davis Mountains Resort, 13-15Oct (RP), singles were at three different Big Bend NP locations in November, and one was in Alpine, *Brewster*, on 20Nov (ML).

Golden-crowned Kinglet: Though not noted elsewhere in the region, a little influx of Golden-crowned Kinglets was unusual in Big Bend in November. The first bird was at Rio Grande Village- Daniels Ranch on 8Nov (MF). By the end of the period up to five or more were being seen in a day at scattered locations in the park (CL).

**Varied Thrush:** A Varied Thrush was a one day wonder at Guadalupe Mountains NP on 15Nov (SH).

Gray Catbird: Gray Catbird is a rare migrant through the region, with the bulk of fall records coming from an early October window. The two records this fall fit nicely with that pattern: 6Oct along the Rio Grande Village nature trail (MF) and 17Oct in El Paso (BZ).

Tennessee Warbler: One was in El Paso on 30Oct (BZ). Rare in the region.

Hermit Warbler: Always a decent find as a lowland migrant, one was in El Paso on 30Sept (JP).

Grace's Warbler: Like Hermit Warbler, Grace's Warbler is unusual as a lowland migrant, with few records, so one in El Paso on 16Aug (BZ) was notable.

Pine Warbler: The best warbler of the season was the male Pine Warbler nicely photographed at Rio Grande Village near Daniels Ranch on 27Nov (CL). Pine Warbler is less than annual in the region.

Wilson's Warbler: A male Wilson's Warbler in El Paso on 19Nov (JP) was about a month late of expected late fall dates.

**Baird's Sparrow:** Baird's Sparrows were again reported from the central Trans-Pecos. One was spotted on 22Nov (DB) in a traditional location along RR 2810 about four miles southwest of Marfa. Additionally, explorations of a private ranch in west *Jeff Davis* uncovered up to four, 7-9Oct (DL, JPO, ML, KB). It is increasingly clear that the species is a regular migrant and wintering bird in appropriate grasslands around the Davis Mountains.

Fox Sparrow: Rare regionally and always a good find, the only Fox Sparrow reported was along the Window Trail, BBNP, on 27Nov (BH).

Northern Cardinal: Northern Cardinal is generally absent from *El Paso* with the closest reliable birds no closer than south-central *Hudspeth* along the Rio Grande. A male spotted at Rio Bosque Wetlands Park, 8-21Oct (JG, JS) was therefore a good find.

**Black-vented Oriole:** The rarity of the season was the adult Black-vented Oriole reported from the Rio Grande Village nature trail, BBNP, on 6Oct (MF). A bird seen at the same location in parts of 1968-1970 (last in October of 1970) remains the only previous Trans-Pecos record. If accepted by the TBRC, this would be only the third state record with the other being a bird in Kingsville, *Kleberg*, 17Jun – 4Oct 1989.

Baltimore Oriole: Paling in comparison to the Black-vented, but still an excellent rarity for the region, a male Baltimore Oriole was also at Rio Grande Village on 9Nov (BG, DH).

**Cited observers:** Devin Bosler, Charles Britt, Kelly Bryan, Bill Collins, Marc & Maryann Eastman, Mark Flippo, Brian Gibbons, John Groves, Corey Hadden, Scott Haywood, Derek Hill, Bill Howe, Marshall Iliff, Dan Lane, Daniel Leavitt, Mark Lockwood, Stephan Lorenz, Carl Lundblad, John P. O'Neill, Jim Paton, Randy Pinkston, David Sarkozi, John Sproul, and Barry Zimmer.