

TRANS-PECOS BIRD REPORT
Winter 2007 – 2008 (December – February)
prepared by Jim Paton

It was a dry winter in the Trans-Pecos with average temperatures. Big Bend National Park (BBNP) reported its third driest winter in the past decade, with precipitation totals well behind those of the previous winter. There were a number of highlights. The montane irruption from the fall continued through the winter in the El Paso area, with good numbers of Red-breasted Nuthatches, Mountain Chickadees, and Red Crossbills present through the period along with lesser numbers of some other irruptive species. Something was up with White-winged Scoters, a species not seen the majority of years, as there were three January reports. Solitary Sandpiper overwintered in El Paso for a regional first, and Rio Grande Village in BBNP boasted an interesting assortment of records, mostly in January. Lastly, there were a number of good gull records for *El Paso* and *Hudspeth*.

TBRC Review Species in **bold**; cited observers listed at the end of the report.

swan species – An immature swan was at McNary Reservoir, *Hudspeth*, at dawn on 15Dec. The bird quickly departed before a careful study could be made, but the observer was leaning toward Trumpeter Swan (Barry Zimmer).

Eurasian Wigeon – The male noted in the fall returning to Rio Bosque Wetlands Park, *El Paso*, for the third winter was last seen on 15Dec (John Sproul).

White-winged Scoter – Accidental in the region, several decades worth of reports came in in January: an immature or female at McNary Res, 4-6Jan (Barry Zimmer, Carl Lundblad), another in similar plumage in west El Paso on 5Jan (John Kiseda), and yet another far to the east at Imperial Reservoir, *Pecos*, on 23Jan (Brush Freeman).

Least Grebe – Always a good find, one was a one-day wonder on 29Dec at the species most “reliable” regional site, Rio Grande Village, BBNP (Bryan Hale).

Aechmophorus grebes – Numbers continued strong at McNary Res., but, due to a toxic algal bloom which devastated fish populations, grebes totally deserted Balmorhea Lake, *Reeves*, by the end of the period (*vide* Mark Lockwood).

Brown Pelican – Less expected in winter than in summer, at least two Brown Pelicans hung around the El Paso area reservoirs through most of December. An immature was at Tornillo Res., *El Paso*, on 11Dec (Barry Zimmer) and an immature and an adult were at McNary Res., 15Dec (Barry Zimmer) through 23Dec when they were seen together flying out of sight to the east (Jim Paton).

Bald Eagle – Casual in El Paso, a subadult bird was there on 22Feb (Dan Allen).

Aplomado Falcon – Birds from the release program continue to show up in new spots. One of the more far flung was found on 26Feb about five miles south of Pecos, *Pecos* (Greer Willis).

American Avocet – Black-necked Stilt has increased greatly in winter in the El Paso area in the past decade and is now to be expected in small numbers at certain locations. American Avocet, however, is still much more rare in winter. One wintered at Keystone Heritage Park in west El Paso (Jim Paton, m.ob.).

Solitary Sandpiper – One of the more stunning finds was of four Solitary Sandpipers found along a canal in west El Paso on 1Jan (Jim Paton, ph.). Each bird was defending a small stretch of the canal and at least one remained into March for a first regional overwintering record. Solitary Sandpiper is very rare anywhere in the U.S. in winter and is reliably found then only in extreme south Texas and only in very small numbers.

Pomarine Jaeger – Any jaeger in the Trans-Pecos is a great find, so two Pomarine Jaegers found at Balmorhea Lake, 16-25Dec (Mark Lockwood) were doubly exciting.

Franklin's Gull – While the occasional bird lingers into November, winter Franklin's Gulls are rare in the region. One was at Keystone Heritage Park, El Paso, 2-7Dec (Jim Paton).

Mew Gull – A first-winter bird or birds was photographed on the following occasions: 15-23Dec at Ft. Hancock Res., *Hudspeth*, and McNary Res., from the fall through 7Dec at Keystone Heritage Park, and then again at Keystone on 10Feb (all Jim Paton). Despite numerous checks birds were not seen at Keystone on intervening dates, making it unclear how many birds were involved.

California Gull – It was an excellent winter for the species in *El Paso* and *Hudspeth*. In *Hudspeth* two first-winter birds were at McNary Res., 15Dec- 4Jan (Barry Zimmer) with an adult there on 23Dec (Jim Paton). In *El Paso* an adult was at Keystone Heritage Park, 4Dec, another adult there on 29Dec, and a first-winter there 28Dec – 1Jan (all Jim Paton, ph.).

Lesser Black-backed Gull – This species has become almost annual in the El Paso area in recent years. The first-winter bird from the fall continued at Keystone Heritage Park through 7Dec (m.ob.), another or the same was at McNary Res., 15Dec (Barry Zimmer), and an adult was at Keystone on 1Jan (Jim Paton, ph.).

Forster's Tern – Accidental in winter, a Forster's Tern was a surprise at Ft. Hancock Res. on 15Dec (Jim Paton). This was a first winter record for the El Paso checklist area.

Band-tailed Pigeon – Surprising, and just barely east of the Pecos River, were two Band-tailed Pigeons in Grandfalls, *Ward*, on 23Jan (Brush Freeman). This species is rarely reported in winter.

Groove-billed Ani – Casual at best in winter, a lone ani hung around Rio Grande Village, BBNP, 29Dec-14Jan, being spotted first at Daniels Ranch (Mark Flippo, m.ob.).

Violet-crowned Hummingbird – Continuing the trend from the strong fall showing, one or two birds were in Ft. Davis, *Jeff Davis*, in December. One was there on 22Dec (Linda Hedges) with another or the same at a different location there 24Dec – 2Jan (Carol Edwards, John Gee). It was found dead on the latter date with the specimen going to L.S.U.

Allen's Hummingbird – An immature *Selasphorus* wintered in Zimmer's El Paso yard, having arrived on 17Nov. By mid-Mar it had molted into adult male plumage, showing a full gorget to go along with its fully green back. *Selasphorus* hummingbirds are rare in winter in El Paso; one wonders how many might be Allen's. In a more unexpected location, a female-plumaged *Selasphorus* was at the Chisos Basin, BBNP, 15Dec – 1Jan (Deb Hurst).

Acorn Woodpecker – Part of a broader montane invasion involving a number of species, two pairs of Acorn Woodpeckers were found at separate El Paso locations: 28Dec (Dan Allen) and 4-10Jan (Jim Paton, Barry Zimmer). The species is rare and not annual in El Paso.

Couch's Kingbird – A Couch's Kingbird was in west El Paso, 1-13Jan (Jim Paton, m.ob., ph., audiotape) for a first *El Paso* record. The bird frequented a yard that was literally astride the Texas-New Mexico state line. The bird spent most of its time in NM, but was also seen often in Texas.

White-eyed Vireo – One at Rio Grande Village, BBNP, 9-17Jan (Ben Weinstein, Carl Lundblad) was rare, especially given the season.

Bell's Vireo – Accidental in winter, a Bell's Vireo at Rio Grande Village, BBNP, on 29Dec (Bryan Hale) was believed to be the first winter record for the park.

Hutton's Vireo – Hutton's Vireo is a rare visitor to El Paso in the fall and winter months. This winter's bird was in El Paso on 4Jan (Barry Zimmer).

swallows – winter swallow records continue to increase in the western Trans-Pecos. Cave Swallows have become regular locally in winter and were seen at several locations from McNary westward. There were several records of Northern Rough-winged Swallow as well. Barn Swallow continues to be rare to casual, but also appears to be increasing. Three were at Ft. Hancock Res. on 15Dec (Jim Paton) and 1-2 were at Rio Bosque Wetlands Park 10-12Jan (John Sproul). Lastly, eight Tree Swallows were at McNary Res. on 4Jan (Barry Zimmer).

Mountain Chickadee – Birds continued in evidence in El Paso through the period with one day maxima of 5-10 birds for the best influx there since the 2000-2001 winter. More unusual was an outlier in Esperanza on 15Dec (Barry Zimmer) for a *Hudspeth* first.

nuthatches – Red-breasted Nuthatches continued through the period in El Paso with numbers slowly dwindling over the winter, a typical pattern for invasions there. Red-breasted Nuthatches were reported from as far south as the Chisos Mountains, BBNP. El Paso also had several reports of White-breasted Nuthatch which is rare and irregular there.

Winter Wren – Rare in the region, one was at McNary Res. on 15Dec (Barry Zimmer) for a third *Hudspeth* record.

Gray Catbird – Rare in winter, one was at Rio Grande Village, BBNP, 9-11Jan (Carl Lundblad).

Northern Parula – One hung around Rio Grande Village, BBNP, 9Jan-11Feb (Carl Lundblad, m.ob.).

Palm Warbler – A “Western” Palm Warbler was a good find at Rio Grande Village, BBNP, 11-17Jan (Carl Lundblad, m.ob.).

Wilson’s Warbler – A male was at McNary Res., 23Dec (Jim Paton) for a third winter *Hudspeth* record.

“White-winged” Junco – Accidental in the region, with at least one previous well-documented El Paso record, a “White-winged” Junco was reported at Davis Mountains State Park, *Jeff Davis*, 24Dec-8 Mar (Sheridan Coffey, Martin Reid, Brady Surber).

Northern Cardinal – In contrast to most of the region, Northern Cardinal is rare in El Paso. El Paso falls in the center of about a 200 mile wide zone where the species does not nest. Typical cardinal sightings in El Paso are of lone birds, some of which may stay for an extended time. A male was in west El Paso, 29Dec-2Jan (John Kiseda).

Indigo Bunting – Interesting was the male Indigo Bunting found 26Feb at Rio Grande Village, BBNP (Petra Hockey). All four species of small *Passerina* buntings have been recorded from Big Bend in winter, but always sporadically and unreliably.

Bronzed Cowbird – Accidental in winter with no known wintering spots, one was in El Paso on 16Jan (Jim Paton). Small numbers do frequent livestock pens at NMSU in Las Cruces, NM in winter, so it is certainly possible that small numbers could winter in El Paso among the very large blackbird flocks there.

Bullock’s Oriole – A male in El Paso, 6Jan (Jim Paton), was the first of three oriole species to be reported this winter from the Trans-Pecos.

Baltimore Oriole – A male that hung around Rio Grande Village, BBNP, for a week, 14-21Feb (Jan Allen, m.ob.) was a first winter record for the park.

Scott's Oriole – BBNP had two records of Scott's Oriole this winter: two males and a female in Telephone Canyon on 31Dec (T&C Jervis) and one first-year bird at Rio Grande Village-Daniels Ranch, BBNP, on 3Jan (Mark Flippo).

Cassin's Finch – After a few in the fall in El Paso, none were reported there in the winter. However, some did move farther east and south. One was at The Post near Marathon, *Brewster*, on 22Feb (Petra Hockey) and four males and a female were at the Chisos Basin, BBNP, 13Feb (Mark Flippo).

Red Crossbill – El Paso enjoyed a good invasion of the species, with numbers undiminished through the period. By March, singing was noted in several parts of town and breeding was suggested though not yet confirmed.

Lawrence's Goldfinch – The region had its first winter record since the big irruption of 1996-1997. On 13Dec, two males and four females were spotted along RR 1832 south of Balmorhea in *Jeff Davis* (Fred Evans, Tom Johnson). In March, single birds reported from *Jeff Davis* and *El Paso* indicated some sort of movement into the state had occurred.

Cited observers: Dan Allen, Jan Allen, Sheridan Coffey, Carol Edwards, Fred Evans, Mark Flippo, Brush Freeman, John Gee, Bryan Hale, Linda Hedges, Petra Hockey, T & C Jervis, Tom Johnson, John Kiseda, Mark Lockwood, Carl Lundblad, Jim Paton, Martin Reid, John Sproul, Brady Surber Ben Weinstein, Greer Willis, Barry Zimmer