

**MATAGORDA COUNTY - MAD ISLAND MARSH  
CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT  
15 December 2008**



The 16<sup>th</sup> running of the Matagorda County – Mad Island Marsh Christmas Bird Count felt more like a survival adventure than a bird survey. Most of our Team had no idea of the timing and strength of the “Blue Norther” that was going to hit us during the morning of the CBC. Weather forecast the night before indicated heavy fog in the morning and a cold front arriving in the afternoon, but the front that arrived was much stronger and faster than predicted.

**Our team of 97 dedicated birders reported 233 species of birds which will make us Number One in the Nation again for species. Guadalupe River Delta – McFaddin Family Ranches placed 2<sup>nd</sup> with 217 species.**



The scene above greeted many of our teams at first light. A heavy fog had settled along the Coast and some birders had a hard time seeing the roads on which they were driving. Gradually the fog lifted and birds became active. It was actually pretty nice for about an hour with relatively light winds and low clouds. Then about 9 a.m. we observed a very dark frontal line to the north and we knew we were going to experience some pretty serious weather. Birders scurried for their vehicles, birds headed for cover, and the two boats with birders in the bay had to deal with it. Our East Bay boat (James Arnold's) decided to head for the harbor. We drove about 7 miles through 30 mph north winds, light rain and a drop of 30 degrees in temperature as we got out of the bay. The airboat in West Bay just decided to work through it.

This was one of the few CBCs I have attended that I felt the need to call birders to see if anybody was still out there. After taking a break at the harbor, finding some warmer gear and determining that the Count was still active, we continued our journey. It actually was not uncomfortable on the water once the rain stopped and we wore better gear. The wind made all birding challenging and the 97 birders did what we could on land and water.

### BEST BIRD

Our section leaders voted the E. Wood-Pewee as the Best Bird which barely beat out the Black-headed Grosbeak.



We had a nice collection of rare bird sightings and they will be discussed below:

The FULVOUS WHISTLING-DUCK has been reported 5 times during the CBC and is expected, but can be very difficult to find as they tend to hide in densely vegetated freshwater marshes. The Serrill family managed to locate one at Mad Island as it was flying with Black-bellieds.

WOOD STORKS are common during summer/fall in the area and occasionally one will linger. Jan Huebner found one on the Baer Ranch. This marked the 3<sup>rd</sup> time we have had one on the CBC.

The APLOMADO FALCON is probably this CBC's Best Bird year-in and year-out. Two were reported by Jared Laing and Heather Serrill. Heather is always looking for a photo opportunity and managed to get this nice shot of one on TNC.



PURPLE GALLINULE is another resident of the deep marsh that typically migrates south for the winter. Our team can occasionally find one lurking if they work the tall marsh vegetation. This year Jared Laing managed to sling a rock near one making it flush in the Mad Island area, and it became our 4<sup>th</sup> CBC record.

We posted our highest tally of FRANKLIN'S GULLS with 8 this year. They seemed to be everywhere with 5 of the 15 sections reporting them.

LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL was the only new species for the count this year. A number of this species were reported along the Coast this season and it's presence was expected, but it required a very knowledgeable birder to identify it. Thus, I was excited when Petra Hockey said she was going to do a "Sea Watch" during the count and she came through with this species and a couple more exclusives.

This is the 4<sup>th</sup> record for an E. WOOD-PEWEE on the CBC. All individuals have been identified by vocalization. This individual discovered by "Mr. Radar" Mark Scheuerman was also seen and described well, and eventually photographed. That is not its photo above, but one I caught during an earlier trip.

Mad Island is known for its high diversity of flycatchers. This year our Team was able to find another lingering neotrop. Martine Got well described an E. Kingbird on TNC for our 4<sup>th</sup> record.

The WOOD THRUSH used to be a species I doubted occurred with any regularity. Our Team has been successful at locating and occasionally photographing Wood Thrushes 9 times. This year one was well described by Michael Kennedy at the Lyondell-Basell property.

The TENNESSEE WARBLER is still one of those lingering warblers that I am yet to identify in winter. This year makes the 7<sup>th</sup> time our Team has adequately described one. Sandy Dillard and 4 other observers reported one in the Peninsula Section.

YELLOW WARBLER is an expected lingering neotrop that can be difficult to find. Two were located prior to the CBC and it took Brad Lirette lots of work to photograph the one below during the heavy winds of the day in the W. Roads Section.



This seems to be the year for BLACK-HEADED GROSBEAKS. I have had one at my Victoria County home this fall and I have heard of several reports on the Coast. Dale Friedrichs described one well during this CBC on the Lyondell-Basell property for our 3<sup>rd</sup> record.

## RESULTS

233 species is an amazing total for the Weather in which we had to conduct the bird count. We missed a number of regular species like Ferruginous Hawk, Solitary Sandpiper, E. Screech-Owl, Rufous Hummingbird, Say's Phoebe, Black-and-White Warbler, Ovenbird, N. Waterthrush, Clay-colored Sparrow, Painted Bunting and House Finch. We also missed Groove-billed Anis which were spotted the day before and observed still there in mid January.

The Wildlife Management Area section had the most species with 157. Matagorda-East, Lyondell, W. Roads, TNC and the Rovers had 4 or more exclusives.

We have led the Nation for 10 years with the most highest counts of individual species. We normally get at least 20 high tallies. We might not be able to do it this year. Candidates for highest counts are the 3002 Am. White Pelican, 1201 Great Egret, 984 Roseate Spoonbill, 41 White-tailed Hawk, 216 Crested Caracara, 20 Yellow Rail, 112 Piping Plover, 289 Greater Yellowlegs, 116 Spotted Sandpiper, 1 E. Wood-Pewee, 477 Sedge Wren, 1 Wood Thrush, 44 Sprague's Pipit, 1 Black-headed Grosbeak, 23,459 Boat-tailed Grackle, 1226 E. Meadowlark.

## TRENDS

Weather is the Great Equalizer in CBC competition and it almost got us on our species tally. It did greatly reduce tallies of birds and it will be difficult to determine if changes in numbers were more “weather of the day” affected or impacted by the extreme drought which is occurring in many parts of Texas. Aside from the 12 species missed, 55 species had low counts and 45 had high counts. Last year we had 65 species with high counts and 25 species with lows: A Big Difference.

HIGH COUNTS: Am. Wigeon, Blue-winged Teal, N. Shoveler, N. Pintail, Redhead, Ring-necked Duck, Hooded Merganser, Green Heron, Roseate Spoonbill, Black Vulture, Turkey Vulture, Bald Eagle, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Crested Caracara, Aplomado Falcon, Peregrine Falcon, Yellow Rail, Purple Gallinule, Sandhill Crane, Snowy Plover, Semipalmated Plover, Piping Plover, Spotted Sandpiper, Ruddy Turnstone, Least Sandpiper, Short-billed Dowitcher, Wilson’s Snipe, Franklin’s Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Royal Tern, Eur. Collared-Dove, Burrowing Owl, Great Kiskadee, E. Kingbird, N. Rough-winged Swallow, Barn Swallow, Winter Wren, Sedge Wren, Am. Pipit, Tennessee Warbler, Yellow Warbler, Lark Sparrow, Am. Goldfinch, House Sparrow.

LOW COUNTS: Ross’s Goose, Cackling Goose, Canada Goose, Wood Duck, Mottled Duck, Canvasback, Surf Scoter, N. Bobwhite, Horned Grebe, Eared Grebe, Tricolored Heron, Cattle Egret, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, Osprey, Am. Kestrel, Merlin, Clapper Rail, Am. Oystercatcher, Long-billed Curlew, Red Knot, Bonaparte’s Gull, Ring-billed Gull, Gull-billed Tern, Common Tern, Forster’s Tern, Inca Dove, Short-eared Owl, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Black-chinned Hummingbird, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Belted Kingfisher, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Downy Woodpecker, Yellow-shafted Flicker, E. Phoebe, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Couch’s Kingbird, Loggerhead Shrike, Blue Jay, Horned Lark, Tufted Titmouse, Brown Creeper, E. Bluebird, N. Mockingbird, Chipping Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow, Grasshopper Sparrow, Le Conte’s Sparrow, Nelson’s Sharp-tailed Sparrow, Song Sparrow, Swamp Sparrow, White-throated Sparrow, N. Cardinal, Red-winged Blackbird.

Waterfowl = 7 species high and 8 low out of 28 species. The Mad Island Area was fortunate to receive an 8 inch rain in November which filled most impoundments and natural wetlands. Otherwise it would have been very dry and with much fewer water birds.

Divers = 2 low out of 5 species. Wave action made it difficult to get good counts.

Pelicans through Ibises = 2 high, and 3 low out of 23 species. We were able to make decent counts on most large waterbirds despite the weather because birds were concentrated in areas accessible to our Team.

Raptors = 7 high and 3 low out of 18 species. Very good numbers. Increasing catfish ponds in the W. Roads Section are attracting large numbers of vultures and Caracaras. Major emphasis of ag landholders to manage for waterfowl also build up a major food

source for large raptors and the numerous blackbirds continue to feed many hawks and owls.

Shorebirds = 8 highs and 3 low out of 26 species. One of the most exciting parts of the CBC for me is to visit the Colorado River Delta during a falling tide. Extreme low tides exposes hundreds of acres of mudflats and shorebirds from throughout the County flock to the Delta during these situations. This year the timing of the front was a little late to have maximum exposure, but we were able to observe some very good numbers of birds on the mudflats.

Gull & Terns = 4 highs and 5 lows. Strong winds definitely made Gulf observations challenging and tended to force most birds to roosts.

Doves thru Woodpeckers = 2 high and 12 low. Canopy birds were difficult to locate in the wind and many low numbers reflected this. Despite the weather this was our best year for locating Burrowing Owls with 5 being reported.

Flycatchers thru Pipits = 7 highs and 10 lows. The few highs reported were associated with wetlands and lingering neotrops.

Warblers. We only had 11 species of warblers. This was the lowest tally of warbler species for the CBC during the decade.

Sparrows thru Blackbirds = 3 highs and 10 lows. Too much wind to determine what we had.

## TEAM WORK

Special thanks to: Marc Ealy, David Sarkozi, James Arnold, Melissa Gaskill for working the bays in boats all day in the weather; **Jim Hargrove, Charlie Brower, Sumita Prasad, Karen McBride, Ural and Terry Donohoe, Jerry McIntyre, Michael Kennedy, Bill Baker, Cathy Porter, Brad Lirette, Jean Martin, Bron Rorex, Jim Renfro and Marc Ealy** for being Section Leaders; Peregrine Fund for providing us the falcon photo for the T-shirt; Shawn Ashbaugh for developing the design of the T-shirt.

This Christmas Bird Count is The Number One in the Nation from our Team's perspective. It has shown national leadership in cooperative efforts between the birders, the landowners, the boat operators and the people of Matagorda County. It takes every bodies efforts focused on the end result to achieve our goals. Yes, we have a very diverse avifauna that is the product of a narrow forested corridor extending all of the way down the Colorado River to the Gulf that is bordered by an abundance of native prairies,

brushlands and wetlands. An added factor is geography creates diverse ecosystems being in close proximity. This diversity would not be possible unless the landowners managed their land to maintain the productivity of the habitats, and it would not be possible to survey them unless they liked our project and permitted us access. All the birds in the world would not mean anything unless the interest, skills and cooperation of the Texas birders would not show up to conduct the count. We would count very few water birds unless our boat operators would not donate a day from their busy schedule as well as the use of their boats. We get great support from Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, The Nature Conservancy, the South Texas Nuclear Project and Lyondell-Basel for use of equipment, land and staff. Lastly, we could not afford to pay for the Great Supper at the Wadsworth Community Center, provide counters with t-shirts and pay their CBC activity fees without the generosity of the sponsors.

**LEADERS:** David and Marilyn Sitz. David has developed a great relationship with the landowners of Matagorda County and he is the person who obtains permission for the birders to access the private property. Marilyn does the fund raising, arranges for the production of T-shirts and the catering at the banquet. She recruits volunteers to work at the banquet. This count would not be near as special without the leadership of Marilyn and her volunteers.

**SPONSORS:** Bay City Convention Bureau, Matagorda County Birding & Nature Center, Texas Parks & Wildlife Dept., Lower Colorado River Authority, The Nature Conservancy, South Texas Nuclear Project Operating Co., Lyondell-Basel, Celanese, Wells Fargo Bank, All Star Real Estate, City of Bay City.

**LANDOWNERS:** Lower Colorado River Authority, George Harrison, PCS Phosphate, Inc., Jack Miller, Carl Anderson family, Charlie Brower's family, Roy Poinsett, Eugene Welfel, Baer Ranch, Lyondell-Basel, South Texas Project Nuclear Operating Company, Julius Ledwig, Linda Joy Stovall, Bill Von Gonten, Smith Marsh, The Nature Conservancy of Texas, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Grover Ryman, Bill Doss, Ray Culver, Becca Sitz and John Jureczki.

**BOAT OPERATORS:** We appreciate the services and the boats provided by James Arnold, and the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department.

#### NEXT YEAR

This was another amazing CBC at Mad Island. We thank all of you who helped. Next year will be better. We promise it! Come join us to check it out and bring a friend on Monday, 14 December 2009.

