

Southern Great Plains



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Each year, it seems as if the winter window narrows in the Region, even disappears in the southern portions of the Region. Nebraska's winter recalls Oklahoma's of 25 years ago, and Oklahoma's is now more like that of northern Texas. Bird distribution appears to be adjusting to the gradually warmer winters. Waterfowl stay farther north. Once crowding Oklahoma reservoirs by the thousands, few Common Mergansers now make it as far south as Oklahoma. While Trumpeter Swans may be on the rise in the Region, wintering Western Grebes and California Gulls are on the wane in Nebraska.

Perhaps because of drought conditions this season, gulls and shorebirds provided fewer highlights than usual—indeed, the season was most memorable for its lack of the unusual. Even irruptive species were scant, with exception of Pygmy Nuthatch and possibly Purple Finch.

Abbreviations: Hackberry (Hackberry Flats W.M.A., Tillman, OK); Harlan (Harlan Res., Harlan, NE); McConaughy (L. McConaughy, Keith, NE); Quivira (Quivira N.W.R., Stafford, KS); Red Slough (Red Slough W.M.A. McCurtain, OK); Sutherland (Sutherland Res., Lincoln, NE); Tenkiller (L. Tenkiller, Sequoyah, OK).

WATERFOWL THROUGH FALCONS

A Pink-footed Goose in Clay, NE 30 Jan raised the usual question of provenance (ph. PD). Unusual numbers of Greater White-fronted Goose lingered through at least 9 Jan in Clay, NE (60 birds; PD) and in Dawson, NE to 3 Jan (112 birds; SJD, JC); by 28 Feb, 10,000 had arrived in Clay, NE (RE). Mid-winter Snow Goose numbers were also high

in Nebraska, with 5000 in Gosper and Dawson 3 Jan (SJD, JC), 5000 in Clay 9 Jan (PD), an amazing 50,000 on the ground there 29 Jan (JGJ, PD) and 200,000 by 28 Feb (RE). The 62 Ross's Geese arriving with the Snows in Clay, NE were a bit early 31 Jan (PD).

This was a good season for swans. Numbers of Trumpeter Swan seem to be on the increase; about 40 were reported from Nebraska (fide WRS), 24 from Kansas (fide LM), and 4+ from Oklahoma—2 in Alfalfa, OK 20 Dec (CO) and 2–3 from Tulsa (RJ) and from Osage, OK 9 Jan–3 Feb (SM, JH, FS; m.ob.). Now the less-likely swan in the Region, imm. Tundras were located at Sutherland 3 Jan (SJD, JC; ph.), Ellis, KS 4 Dec (TM), and Comanche, OK 10 Dec (EBk), with 4 birds in Coffey, KS 13 Dec (DW), 3 in Texas, OK 11 Feb (GK), and 5 at Quivira 25 Feb (B&NB).

Some good duck counts included 19,500 Mallards at McConaughy 2 Jan (fide SJD) and 20,000 at Sutherland 25 Feb (SJD). Hanging n. were 2 Wood Ducks in Morrill, NE 9 Jan (KK), one in Jefferson, NE 11 Jan (RE), and one in Washington, NE 9 Feb (BB). A male American Black Duck in Clay, NE 9 Jan (PD) was the only one reported. A Blue-winged Teal in Lancaster, NE 24 Feb (RE) was record early by four days. Unusual were the 120 Ring-necked Ducks lingering as far n. as



These three White-winged Scoters (here 6 December 2006) in Tulsa, Oklahoma were among seven recorded in the area in early and mid-December. Photograph by Steve Metz.

Scotts Bluff, NE 30 Dec (P&DD) and the 2000 estimated 3 Jan at Lynne Lane Res., Tulsa (JWA, JCo). Greater Scaup were found scattered across the Region, with the better counts of 50–125 in Tulsa 3 Dec–21 Jan (JWA), 15 at McConaughy 2 Jan (fide SJD), and 15 in Shawnee, KS 21 Feb (DG).

Scoters, always Regional treats, included single Blacks 8 Feb in Osage, KS (DG) and 25 Nov–21 Jan in Tulsa (JWA, m.ob.), plus 4–7 White-wingeds 6–18 Dec in Tulsa (SM, JWA; m.ob.). Single Long-tailed Ducks were found at three locations in Nebraska—Harlan (G&WH; KS, JM), Scotts Bluff 30 Jan–6 Feb (AK, KD), and Keith 26 Feb (SJD)—and from four in Kansas: Coffey (ML, AM), Sedgwick (DV), Russell (MR), and Osage (DG). A Barrow's Goldeneye in Sedgwick, KS 8 Dec was a zootie (BG), ditto the young male Harlequin

Duck in Cedar, NE 27 Feb (SV; fide RD), the 4th for Nebraska. Common Mergansers, which now stay n., numbered up to 15,000 at McConaughy 1–3 Jan (SJD)—almost none were present in former Oklahoma haunts. However, Red-breasted Mergansers seemed more common, with rafts on lakes in Tulsa and Oklahoma (m.ob.). Among hybrid ducks were a male Mallard × Gadwall in Wagoner, OK 23 Dec (JWA) and male Hooded Merganser × goldeneye in Tulsa 26 Dec–3 Jan (JWA).

Tenkiller came through again, with four species of loons including a high count of 192 Commons 23 Dec, up to 8 Red-throats through the period, up to 4 Pacifics, and a Yellow-billed Loon discovered 26 Feb, all documented by Jim Arterburn. Unusual loons at other locations were Pacifics in McCurtain, OK 29 Dec (BH, m.ob.) through 26 Feb (DA) and in Wagoner, OK 21 Jan (JWA). Over 400 Horned Grebes also adorned Tenkiller 21 Jan (JWA). Western Grebes, on the other hand, were almost non-existent: only one could be found on McConaughy 1 Jan (SJD). American White Pelicans and Double-crested Cormorants wintered n. to Sutherland (SJD, JC, WF). An American Bittern was flushed in Cleveland, OK 11 Feb (DGu). Three Great Egrets lingered in Sedgwick, KS through 29 Dec (PJ), with mid-Jan observations for Tulsa (PR) and Oklahoma (JAG). A Black-crowned Night-Heron was located in Oklahoma City 21 Feb (BH, TU). Two juv. White Ibis lingered through 7 Dec at Red Slough (DA). Turkey Vultures appeared in Jan n. to Cherokee (RM), Butler (DV), and Leavenworth, KS (JS), with one arriving in Nemaha, NE 26 Feb (RE).

Quite a surprise was a White-tailed Kite in Greer, OK 22 Jan (MP). Outside Nebraska, Northern Goshawks were reported from Pawnee, KS 11 Jan (SS), Sedgwick, KS 9 Feb (DV), and Ellis, KS 11 Feb (PJ, ML, MG). Golden Eagles were noted e. to McCurtain, OK 12 Dec and 5 Feb (BH), Quivira 2 Jan (DKa), and Dakota, NE 10–11 Dec (BFH, PR). No small surprises were single Crested Caracaras at different locations in McCurtain, OK 18 Jan and 14 Feb (BH). Merlin has become so regular in the Region that we receive few specific reports; many have become town birds, with abundant access to juncos and House Sparrows. Peregrine Falcons maintained residence in at least two cities: Wichita, KS (PJ) and Tulsa, OK (JWA). Prairie Falcons wandered eastward to Seward, NE 17 Dec (fide JG), Dodge, NE 8 Dec (D&JP), and Tulsa 21 Jan (JWA).

A King Rail persisted into Feb in drying conditions at Red Slough (DA). Virginia Rails continued to be found wintering across the

Region n. to the Niobrara R., NE, where 2 were located 10 Jan (JED). Four Yellow Rails were located at Red Slough 20 Dec but not later (DA, BH); might they have wintered locally? Sandhill Cranes heading northward were seen as early as 4 Feb in Russell, KS (MR), with "thousands" along the Platte R., NE by 9 Feb (CG). A few small flocks were early, including 24 in Hall, NE 7 Jan (PD) and 12 over Lincoln, NE 8 Jan (TJW).

Early arrivals were a Pectoral Sandpiper at Red Slough 21 Feb (DA) and 65 Long-billed Dowitchers at Hackberry 27 Feb (L&MT). Franklin's Gulls that should be s. of the border are rare but apt to appear in several places in the Region during winter; this season, singles were at Tulsa 11 Dec (JWA), Sutherland 3 Jan (SJD, JC), and Jefferson, KS 23 Jan (TM). As in recent years, few California Gull reports came in, just 3–4 birds seen 1–2 Jan at McConaughy (fide SJD), where 415 Herring Gulls were counted 21 Jan and 653 on 26 Feb (SJD). Among them were 5 Thayer's Gulls 2 Jan (fide SJD); scattered reports of 9 Thayer's came from Kansas (fide LM). Three Lesser Black-backed Gulls frequented McConaughy 31 Dec–3 Jan (SJD), single first-winter birds were in Sedgwick, KS 23 Dec (PJ, ML, MG) and Lancaster, NE 26 Feb (LE), and an ad. was documented in Oklahoma 28 Dec (PV). Glaucous Gull reports included 3 at McConaughy 31 Dec–18 Feb (fide SJD, PR), one at Sutherland 25 Feb (SJD), and one at Keystone Dam, Tulsa 15 Jan–Feb (PR, m.ob.), plus 5 in Kansas (fide LM). Great Black-backed Gull is becoming regular at McConaughy, where 2 were found: a second-basic bird 31 Dec–2 Jan (SJD) and an ad. 26 Feb (ph. SJD); one was also seen in Douglas, KS 21 Dec (DF). Forster's Tern can now be said to winter in e. Oklahoma; up to 317 were seen in Wagoner, the high count 12 Feb (JWA). And our seasonal Black-legged Kittiwake came in Cedar/Knox, NE 6 Dec (MB), a first-winter bird.

DOVES THROUGH PASSERINES

A Band-tailed Pigeon is quite unexpected in Kansas, making the 3 observed at a grain elevator in Sheridan, KS 3 Dec (MC) all the more bizarre; this species does, however, sometimes flock with Rock Pigeons in winter. White-winged Doves are being found in numbers comparable to those of Eurasian Collared-Doves in the Region; Nebraska's 2nd for winter was in Scotts Bluff 17 Dec (LR, RH), while 98 were counted in a yard in Finney, KS 14 Jan (T&SS). Nebraska's 5th Inca Dove was seen in Sarpy Nov–26 Feb (fide CNK), while 2 were in Grant, KS 9 Dec (KH); Incas are now becoming established in an increasing number of

towns across Oklahoma (fide JAG).

Greater Roadrunners are also "running" northward; 2 were in Sedgwick, KS 29 Dec (fide PJ). Only 4 Snowy Owls were reported, 3 in Nebraska 21 Dec–1 Jan (DS, SJD, fide KS); the bird noted in Osage, OK 18–27 Dec (SM, WW, m.ob.) succumbed to gunshot injury. Westerly was a Barred Owl in Morton, KS 31 Dec (KG, MT); there are fewer than 10 records for the w. half of Kansas. Much tougher to observe in the Region are Northern Saw-whet Owls; singles were reported in Hall, NE 17 Dec (KS) and Riley, KS 4 Jan (RK). Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers were prominent in Nebraska, with one of the 9 reported (fide WRS) as far w. as Frontier 22 Feb (WF). Likely the same Black Phoebe that wintered last winter was noted at Broken Bow Res., McCurtain, OK through much of the season (DA, m.ob.). The southernmost Northern Shrike was in Cimarron, OK 3 Dec (SM), where rare but regular; 6 were reported from Kansas (fide LM). Purple Martins arrived 17 Feb in McCurtain, OK (TS, fide DA), with Tree Swallows following 28 Feb (DA).

A reduction in counts of Black-capped Chickadee, first noted in 2002–2003, continued in Nebraska, most notably from Lancaster w. as far as Scotts Bluff (m.ob.). This drop coincided with the arrival of West Nile virus, potentially the cause of the decline. In contrast, high chickadee numbers have continued in the Missouri R. Valley (BG, RSc), for reasons that are unclear (TEL, TL, TJW). Perhaps representing a mini-irruption were the elevated numbers of Pygmy Nuthatches on two nw. Nebraska Christmas Bird Counts: 104 at Harrison 1 Jan (fide EB) and 27 at Crawford 31 Dec (fide B&DW). Rock Wrens, rare in Kansas, were noted in Russell (DK) and Morton (SP), both 31 Dec. Far to the n. was a Carolina Wren in e. Cherry, NE 10 Jan (JED); this species continues to expand its range n. and w. in the Region. Again this winter, 2 Winter Wrens were seen in Cherry, NE along the Niobrara R. 10 Jan (JED), well n. of expected wintering areas. In the Nebraska Panhandle, a Ruby-crowned Kinglet in Scotts Bluff, NE 1 Jan–13 Feb (P&DD) was likewise unexpected.

Two Varied Thrushes offered a spice to Nebraska birding: one was in Scotts Bluff for a few days through 17 Dec (KD), and one was at McConaughy 26 Feb (SJD). Tardy or foolhardy was a westerly Gray Catbird in Lincoln, NE 6 Dec (fide TJW). How can we fail to mention the resident Curve-billed Thrasher, continuing its lonely stay in Sioux, NE (fide AK), now present since Oct 2002? Also lingering were an Orange-crowned Warbler in Johnson, KS 25 Dec–Jan (PW), an Audubon's Warbler

in Morton, KS 31 Dec (SP), and a westerly Spotted Towhee in Dawes, NE 31 Dec (fide B&DW). Rare in winter in ne. Kansas, a Field Sparrow appeared in Leavenworth 21–25 Feb (JS). Good numbers of Savannah Sparrows were found in midwinter in Kansas, where normally absent, notably 100+ in Montgomery 15 Jan (SS) and several in Pawnee 26 Jan (SS). Continuing a pattern of northward wintering were 5 Grasshopper Sparrows in Comanche, OK 20 Dec (VF, EBk) and 2 in McCurtain, OK 7 Jan (JAG, JWA, JCo). Up to 3 Henslow's Sparrows, ever enigmatic in winter, were detected at Red Slough 20 Dec–21 Feb (DA et al.). Single Lincoln's Sparrows n. of normal were in Omaha 28 Feb (PS) and McConaughy 2 Jan (fide SJD), while 3 White-throated Sparrows at McConaughy 2 Jan (fide SJD) were w. of typical areas. Somewhat out of winter range was a Smith's Longspur at Red Slough 18 Jan (DA). The only Snow Buntings reported were in Nebraska, where good numbers were noted (fide WRS).

Single lingering Yellow-headed Blackbirds were in Scotts Bluff, NE 17 Dec (fide AK), in Ellis, KS 1 Jan (TM), and in Tillman, OK 24 Dec (L&MT). The only Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches reported were the 30 at a regular wintering location in Sioux, NE 16 Dec (HKH). Adding to the small number of sightings eastward in winter in the North Platte Valley of Nebraska was a single Cassin's Finch at McConaughy 2 Jan (fide SJD). Few Red Crossbills were reported, all from Nebraska, the best count was 85 in Sioux 1 Jan (fide EB), easterly were 3 in Dodge 29 Dec (fide D&JP).

Cited observers (regional compilers bold-faced): NEBRASKA: Bob Berry, Elliott Bedows, Mark Brogie, John Cecil, Kathy DeLara, Roger Dietrich, Stephen J. Dinsmore, Phyllis & Dean Drawbaugh, James E. Ducey, Paul Dunbar, Rick Eades, Larry Einemann, William Flack, Carlos Grandes, Betty Grenon, Joe Gubanyi, Robin Harding, Glen & Wanda Hoge, Helen K. Hughson, Bill F. Huser, Joel G. Jorgensen, Alice Kenitz, Clem N. Klaphake, Ken Kranik, Thomas E. Labeledz, Tony Leukering, John Murphy, Don & Jan Paseka, Lanny Randolph, Paul Roisen, Rick Schmid (RSc), W. Ross Silcock, Kent Skaggs, Dave Stage, Phil Swanson, Steve Van Sickle, Eric Volden, Bruce & Donna Walgren, T.J. Walker KANSAS: Bill & Nancy Beard, Michael Cross, Dave Fischer, Bob Gress, Kevin Groeneweg, Dan Gish, Matt Gearheart, Kellye Hart, Pete Janzen, David Klema, Don Kazmaier (DKa), Ron Klataske, Mark Land, Terry Mannell, Robert Mangile, Aaron Mitchell, Lloyd Moore, Sebastian Patti, Mark Rader, Scott Seltman, Tom & Sara Shane, John Schukman,

Max Thompson, Don Vannoy, Daniel Williamson, Priscilla Wilson. OKLAHOMA: David Arbour, James W. Arterburn, Eric Beck (EBk), Jeff Cox (JCo), Vic Fazio, Joseph A. Grzybowski, Dick Gunn (DGu), Berlin Heck,

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Texas



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It has become a tired refrain of this column, but for much of the state the key word was *dry*. Across much of the Trans-Pecos, no measurable rain fell for the entire period. It was not quite as bad for most of the remainder of the state, but below-average precipitation was the rule. This has resulted in reservoirs across the state falling to levels as much as 5 m below normal. This drought was combined with above-average temperatures for most of the winter. For north-central Texas and the Rolling Plains, the disastrous results were many large wildfires that burned thousands of hectares and even three small towns. Large wildfires also spread through the Panhandle near the end of the period, resulting in nearly 400,000 hectares burned. These hot fires removed virtually all avian habitats in their wake. In the long term, however, much of the area that burned in the Panhandle was in grassland habitats, and these fires have the potential to have a beneficial effect on the overall health of these prairies.

The dry conditions obviously have a depressing effect on avian populations. Frugivores were in very low numbers or absent from virtually the entire state. Particularly noted was the absence of American Robins, bluebirds, and Cedar Waxwings. Likewise, there was no real invasion of montane species

or finches. The only species to make an unexpectedly strong showing in the state was Rusty Blackbird. In strong contrast to the 2004–2005 winter season, the Lower Rio Grande Valley was fairly quiet. Still, there were a few rarities to add some spice to the season. There was definitely a horse race for what was the more unexpected bird this season in Texas: the Snow Bunting on South Padre Island or the Rufous-backed Robin near Bastrop!

WATERFOWL THROUGH GREBES

By Feb, when the last lingering Fulvous Whistling-Ducks have retreated and migrants have yet to arrive, the species is quite rare away from extreme South Texas; thus 6 at Bear Creek Park, Harris 1 Feb (SAI), 12 at Hornsby Bend in Austin, Travis 5 Feb (BL), and 2 present 13 Dec–10 Feb at Brazos Bend S.P., Fort Bend (BGo et al.) were all notable. A Brant in Plainview, Hale 14 Jan (ph., †JB) was just the 6th for the South Plains. Two ad. and 3 imm. Trumpeter Swans in Hutchinson 26–31 Dec (BP, ph., †LBa) and another reported near Childress, Childress 19 Jan (DS) were potential indicators of the success of recent reintroduction programs in the n. states. Three Tun-

dra Swans located s. of the normal wintering range in McLennan 31 Dec during the Waco C.B.C. were seen until 7 Feb (FB, JMu); an imm. in Morris 11–13 Feb provided only the 3rd report for ne. Texas and first since 1984 (DB, LBr). The Eurasian Wigeon reported from the fall at El Paso was seen sporadically until 15 Feb (†JSp). Blue-winged Teal were unusually conspicuous in nw. Texas, with singles at Muleshoe N.W.R., Bailey 18 Dec (AHe), at L. Meredith, Hutchinson 29 Dec (RaM), and elsewhere in Hutchinson 31 Dec (BP). A White-winged Scoter in Harrison 22–31 Dec (DB) was notable, as this species is casual in the Pineywoods. Long-tailed Duck sightings included singles at Corpus Christi, Nueces 14 Dec (JMc), Thompson Park, Potter 21 Feb (BMu), and Hagerman N.W.R., Grayson 9 Dec (BGI et al.), with 2 present at the latter location 13–26 Dec (BGI, TR, RR). An exceptionally large group of 200 Hooded Mergansers was at Hagerman N.W.R. 10 Dec (BGI et al.). Common Mergansers were found e. of their normal winter range at Hagerman N.W.R. 10–12 Dec (BGI et al.), L. Texoma, Grayson 31 Dec–2 Jan (GCo, TR et al.), and Lake O' the Pines, Marion 31 Dec (m.ob.).

Two Red-throated Loons at L. Meredith,



This second-winter Slaty-backed Gull made a one-day appearance at a private landfill near Houston, Texas on 22 February 2006. It provided the fourth record for the state and the first record of a bird not in adult (or near-adult) plumage. Photograph by Martin Reid.