

Submitted by Bryon (Doc) Stone, aka Dr. Birdy (2/7/2021)

Note that the bird walks were all on closed tracts accessed with the permission of the Refuge staff.

We started at the Flying X Ranch before dawn. We listened for American Woodcock near the entrance, but heard none this year. We did hear our only White-winged Dove of the day. Most doves encountered on the refuge are Mourning Dove, although we did hear a Common Ground Dove singing in late morning at Eckhardt Tract, and we later saw a couple of Common Ground Doves along Cow Creek Road.

Our first sparrow of the day was a Rufous-crowned Sparrow that was singing before dawn near the Flying X ranch house. The weather was cool (mid-40's to start), overcast and mercifully non-windy until mid-morning. Jeff and I also had perhaps the best bird of the day when we heard a Bobwhite call several times at dawn. We soon found our only 2 LeConte's Sparrows of the day, then other species started to show, including Spotted Towhee, White-crowned Sparrows (abundant this year), Black-throated Sparrows, small numbers of Savannah and Vesper Sparrows, and eventually, the best sparrow of the day, a male Eastern Towhee that Jeff and I saw briefly but well in a shin oak motte north of the barn. We tried to get Randy on that bird, but it just wouldn't cooperate. There were 3 other towhees (2 males and a female Spotted) in that motte and we got to see them all multiple times, but the Eastern Towhee never gave us an encore. We left Flying X at about 0830 with 12 sparrow species, headed to Peaceful Springs, with high hopes, since we had already bagged one of the toughest of the 20 regularly-occurring winter sparrow species of central Texas.

Flying X sparrow tally:

1. Grasshopper Sparrow (6 or 7)
2. Field Sparrow (quite a few)
3. Black-throated Sparrow (5)
4. White-crowned Sparrow (as abundant this winter as Field Sparrows)
5. Vesper Sparrow (a few, like 10 or 12)
6. LeConte's Sparrow (2)
7. Savannah Sparrow (about the same as Vespers)
8. Song Sparrow (a few)
9. Lincoln's Sparrow (2, fewer than normal)
10. Rufous-crowned Sparrow (5 or 6)
11. Spotted Towhee (about a dozen)
12. Eastern Towhee (1 splendid male)

By the time we arrived at Peaceful Springs a little before 9 a.m., the wind had already started to pick up. We bagged a pair of Canyon Towhees near the ranch house for sparrow #13, then headed down to the spring, where we expected we would still have some good birding because it is relatively sheltered from the wind. The springs did not disappoint, and we added White-throated Sparrow (several), 3 Fox Sparrows and a single Dark-eyed Junco (a male Slate-colored) to bring us to 16 sparrow species for the morning. We hoped we might get Swamp Sparrow, but the tank no longer holds water, and it just hasn't been wet enough lately. We also hoped for Lark Sparrows, but no luck this year. We also had a male Cooper's Hawk doing a display flight over the tall trees at the spring, and later saw an adult pair flying out of the trees.

Peaceful Springs additions:

13. Fox Sparrow

14. Dark-eyed Junco

15. White-throated Sparrow

16. Canyon Towhee

We then headed over to Eckhardt Tract to try for Swamp Sparrow along Little Creek. Eckhardt Tract is adjacent to Shin Oak Observation Deck, a small area with a parking lot on FM 1869 which is open to the public except for a few weeks during late March and early April to allow Black-capped Vireos to get settled for nesting. By the time we arrived a little before 11 a.m., the wind had picked up quite a bit. This typically happens at Eckhardt by mid-morning. Between the strong wind coming out of the northwest, and very dry conditions along the creek, we had no luck with Swamp Sparrow, so we headed back to the Flying X for lunch and for our 12 noon Zoom call.

After lunch, Randy and Jeff searched again for the Eastern Towhee to no avail. The wind had also picked up quite a bit at the X, and places that had been quite birds in early morning were devoid of birds by early afternoon. So we headed to Cow Creek Road to try for Lark Sparrow, Chipping Sparrow, Harris's Sparrow and maybe a Swamp Sparrow at Refuge HQ.

We did find 4 Lark Sparrows along Cow Creek Road for Sparrow #17 for the day, but had no luck with our other targets. We tried the pond below the refuge HQ building (with consent of the refuge manager), which usually has Swamp Sparrow. We found record numbers of Song Sparrows there, and even a Common Yellowthroat and a Marsh Wren, but no Swampie. It was notably drier than usual, and the wind was still gusting, which didn't help either. One notable highlight along Cow Creek Road was the continuing presence of a large flock of Mountain Bluebirds (we counted 23 yesterday). This species is typically uncommon in winter in central Texas, but has irrupted in a major way this winter throughout all of central Texas and even to portions of the central and upper coast and into south Texas.

Cow Creek sparrow addition:

17. Lark Sparrow (4 birds in one location on the Travis County portion of Cow Creek Rd)

We still had a fair amount of daylight left, so we decided to drive up to County Road 211 in southwestern Burnet County where a large flock of Mountain Bluebirds and good numbers of Lark Buntings have been seen recently. We did find about 40 Mountain Bluebirds, some of which were being chased by a Mockingbird defending his "patch," but we dipped on the Lark Buntings, so we ended the day with 17 sparrow species and no "bonus sparrows."