

...Counting on Christmas

(Continued from previous page)

We spend all morning admiring turkey vultures perched in trees and great blue herons wading in the water. At noon, we head back to headquarters. Raindrops plunk on the roof; it's foggy outside. Birders peel off soggy rain jackets as they come in for a break.

"What did you get?" someone asks a dripping man who walks in.

"Wet," he responds with a chuckle.

The birders munch leftover chili and discuss what they've spotted. So far, no one has recorded anything that's never been seen here before. But they have logged lots of birds, from Pepto Bismol-colored roseate spoonbills to pelicans, crested caracaras, white ibises and plenty of noisy sandhill cranes.

"There's still quite a few rocks to turn over," preserve manager Steven Goertz says as the birders head out for the rest of the day.

In the end, the Matagorda County-Mad Island Marsh Preserve circle reports 218 species, enough to retain the crown for the most species in the country. A count in San Diego comes in a close second with 213. It marks the 24th time this corner of Texas has come in first or tied for first—and the 15th straight year it has topped the list outright.

But the rain took a toll. A dozen species usually recorded here weren't seen. Still, they got some good ones—the scaly-breasted munia, with its checkerboard chest; a squat-looking bird with an impressively long bill called a green kingfisher; the rose-breasted grosbeak, the male of which looks like it's wearing a red bandana around its neck; the Western kingbird, with its

lemon-colored belly; and the tall, spindly wood stork.

They also found one that I've long wanted to see—the tallest bird in North America, the whooping crane, which stands nearly 5 feet tall and has a wingspan of 7 1/2 feet. Whooping crane numbers dropped to about 20 individuals in the 1940s but, thanks to conservation efforts, a population of about 600 now exists in the wild. They winter near here.

"It's an adrenaline rush," Ortego says of the count he helped start. "It's pride that you had the skills to locate an unusual bird when people are counting on you."

The count has scientific value as well. Biologists have seen a reduction in the raw number of birds in the past 50 years, and the counts provide evidence.

"For us, these data sets are important because the populations of birds that they monitor are not the subject of any formal monitoring program," says Lisa Gonzalez, executive director and vice president of Audubon Texas.

Since 1970, the population of birds in North America has dropped by 3 billion birds, or nearly 30%, she says.

Do You Count?

See if there's a Christmas Bird Count near you and learn more about signing up and participating at audubon.org.

Much of the loss is due to human activity. "Collisions and impacts are one of the major causes of bird loss, along with overall declines in habitat and a change in environmental conditions driven by climate change," Gonzalez says.

The public can help.

"Share the shore," Gonzalez says. "If you live or recreate along the coast, understand that it doesn't take a lot to disturb birds, especially nesting birds. When you're boating or fishing,



Playoffs! The Bronte Longhorns first 6-man playoff run came to an end in the area round on Friday, November 17. The Longhorns faced off against 6-man powerhouse Richland Springs and the Coyotes took the win by shutting out Bronte 46-0.

steer clear of islands where birds nest—and keep dogs on a leash."

Watch for birds that nest on the ground when you drive on beaches, and turn off unnecessary outdoor lights during spring and fall migrations. And, if you're willing to spend a day outside looking for a flash of feathers, consider joining a bird count in your area.

"It's a fun thing to say we have the No. 1 count, but the count would be fun even if we weren't No. 1," Reemts says. "It's just all about the experience of being out here and seeing stuff."

This article also appeared online at texascooppower.com.

Celebrate Texas State Parks' Centennial

Add a piece of park history to your Christmas tree this year and help Texas State Parks continue its 100-year celebration with a 2023 Texas State Park ornament.

This special ornament was designed and crafted with great attention to detail, made with vibrant colors on metal and features a laser-cutting technique used to create a distinct dot for all 89 Texas State Parks.

The ornament can be purchased exclusively for \$19.95 each and includes free shipping. Ornaments purchased by Dec. 10 are likely to arrive before Christmas. Taxes will be applied at check out.

Beginning in 2002, the Texas State Park ornament program has helped outdoor enthusiasts celebrate the diversity and beauty of the park system with a new ornament each year featuring natural, cultural and historical resources the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) protects. The ornaments include images of buildings, wildlife, plants and some of the many outdoor activities that visitors can enjoy at state parks across Texas. Visit

the Ornament Collection Page to see every state park ornament and its availability.

Anyone visiting the Texas State Capitol during the month of December can see the Capitol Christmas Trees — delivered by Eisenhower State Park staff — as well as the 2023 Texas State Park ornament. Texas State Parks has provided Christmas trees to the Texas State Capitol for more than 40 years.

Two 12-foot trees and one 7-foot tree were delivered to the House of Representatives November 27, while a 12-foot tree was also delivered to the Texas Senate Reception Room that same day. In addition, a 23-foot tree will be transported to the Senate Chamber December 4. The trees are all Virginia Pines grown and harvested from a tree farm near Eisenhower State Park. Texas State Park Police will escort the tree to the Capitol when it enters Austin.

(Continued on page 6)

Advertisement for The Observer/Enterprise newspaper. It features a large central headline: 'Don't miss even one issue of THE OBSERVER/ENTERPRISE Serving Coke County'. Below this, there are several smaller sections: 'Only \$35 in Coke County \$40 in Texas • \$45 in USA', 'Send check to PO Box 1329, Robert Lee, Texas 76945. Call or text (325) 277-9210 to use credit card.', '2019 Year in Review Issue', 'Saluting the Robert Lee High School Class of 2020', 'Saluting the Blackwell High School Class of 2020', 'Confirmed Cases of Covid-19 in Texas', and 'Special Oil & Gas Section' and 'Special Government Section'. The ad also includes contact information for the newspaper and a list of subscription rates.