

A summary of the highlights of the birds found at Woolsey Wet Prairie from December, 2010 through January, 2012

During the last year or so, a surprising number unusual bird species, three of them either accidental or casual statewide, and one either casual or accidental locally, have been reported from Woolsey Wet Prairie. This is a summary their occurrence as well as highlights of other notable bird records from Woolsey during this time.

December, 2010-February, 2011: the most notable record from this season was the Grasshopper Sparrow photographed by Andrew Scaboo and Brandon Schmidt on December 19th. It was only the 5th record in winter for the entire state. More common, but locally significant were the Sedge Wren seen December 19th, and the House Wren seen twice in January. These are not seen every winter in nw. Arkansas. Finally, the record breaking cold and severe storms of early February, when Fayetteville reported the coldest temperature since records have been kept, also produced the highest counts of American Tree Sparrows ever. Here Woolsey must take second place to the Maysville area. But the 135 counted on February 13th was still an impressive number for this species.

March-May, 2011: the spring season was chock full of interesting birds. The most notable was the Northern Shrike found by Neil Nodelman and Joanie Patterson on March 6th, and seen again and photographed March 10th by Mike Mlodinow and Joe Neal. This was only the second record of this species in Arkansas. In second place was the Purple Gallinule found on April 26th (and probably again on May 12th). This was either the first or second record for northwest Arkansas, depending whether one goes by records reported to the Arkansas Audubon Society data base, or if one uses the e-bird data base. However, this is a rare but regularly occurring species in parts of southern Arkansas. A third very unusual phenomena, was the presence of at least one (four was the maximum) American Bittern from March 12th to May 12th. It is very unusual for this species to be present for such a long time at a given location in Arkansas. Note that a similarly long stay occurred in spring 2009 at Woolsey. Other locally rare or very uncommon species from the spring include Least Bittern (very rare), Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, Merlin, Sora, American Golden-Plover, Upland Sandpiper, Bank Swallow, Mourning Warbler, Palm Warbler, Willow Flycatcher, Great-tailed Grackle, Grasshopper Sparrow, Lark Sparrow, and Clay-colored Sparrow. Note that the approximate rarity of the fifty rarest birds seen at Woolsey last year is given as an appendix at the back of this article.

June-July, 2011: this season was relatively slow compared to the rest. By far the most notable record was that of two Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks that were photographed by Don Steinkraus on July 1st—only the sixth record for northwest Arkansas. This is a species that was almost unreported in the state only 25 years ago, and has been steadily increasing since then. At least two other notable species were seen, Bell's Vireo, and Great-tailed Grackle.

August-November, 2011: though other species were seen, and though the rarest sparrow was seen just outside of the period, this will be known as the fall of unusual sparrows. The rarest bird seen at Woolsey this fall, was a Cassin's Sparrow seen and photographed October 22nd. It was the second record for the state. It could not be found the next day or later. However, on October 23 two Henslow's Sparrow and a

Spotted Towhee were both found and photographed. Most unusual were the Henslow's Sparrows, which are almost never found away from their breeding or wintering grounds. Spotted Towhees are found more often—every year in the state, and almost every year in northwest Arkansas. Other birds of interest seen during this fall include Osprey, Merlin, Upland Sandpiper, Alder Flycatcher, Loggerhead Shrike, Bell's Vireo, Lapland Longspur, Palm Warbler, American Tree Sparrow, Clay-colored Sparrow, Vesper Sparrow, Grasshopper Sparrow, Le Conte's Sparrow, Nelson's Sparrow, Harris's Sparrow, and Western Meadowlark. The American Tree Sparrows were especially noteworthy, as in recent years they have been almost never seen before December.

December, 2011-January, 2012: so far this winter, the main feature has been the Brewer's Sparrow, which was first seen December 1st, and last seen December 12th. It was either the first or second record for the state, depending on whether a rumored record from this fall comes to fruition. An American White Pelican seen flying over, and the continued presence of Le Conte's Sparrows, and American Tree Sparrows into at least early January will interest some.

During its brief existence Woolsey Wet Prairie has turned up far more than its share of unusual birds. This has been especially true in the last year.

THE FIFTY RAREST BIRDS SEEN AT WOOLSEY WET PRAIRIE SINCE DECEMBER 2010:

Below is a list of the fifty rarest birds seen at Woolsey in the last year or so. There are many ways to define rarity. I define a species' rarity as its average annual peak frequency of occurrence; the lower this peak frequency is, the more rare the species is. In other words, the rarest birds are the ones with the lowest peak frequencies. I obtained from e-bird.com the peak weekly frequencies* (for northwest Arkansas**) of all the species that I knew to have occurred at Woolsey since last December, and ordered them from bottom to top, i.e. from rarest to commonest. The 50 rarest species in northwest Arkansas that occurred at Woolsey in the past year are listed below. Not all are truly rare. I'd use the following somewhat arbitrary classification: Species with a frequency of less than 4% are "rare"; those with one of 4% or higher but less than 8% are "very uncommon"; the rest of the birds listed are "uncommon" (in the 8 to 16% range)." Common" birds are in the 30 to 60% range, and include such species as Great Blue Heron, Red-tailed Hawk, mockingbird, and Song Sparrow. But, the most common species, "very common" birds exceed 60%. They include Turkey Vulture, American Crow, White-throated Sparrow, and the commonest species of all in northwest Arkansas, Northern Cardinal (78.0%).

*I actually used, not the highest (i.e. peak value) but the third highest value. It is not an uncommon practice to avoid the absolute maximum values, and to use a "near" peak value instead.

** I define northwest Arkansas as the nine counties comprising the northwest corner of the state: Benton, Washington, Crawford, Carroll, Madison, Franklin, Boone, Newton, and Pope Counties.

**Peak Weekly Occurrence Frequencies* For The 50 Rarest Species Found at Woolsey Wet Prairie
December, 2010 to January, 2011**

Species Name	Frequency (%)	Species Name	Frequency (%)
Brewer's Sparrow	0	Alder Flycatcher	6.0
Cassin's Sparrow	0	Vesper Sparrow	6.2
Northern Shrike	0	Great Horned Owl	6.5
Purple Gallinule	0	Bell's Vireo	6.8
Least Bittern	0.4	Northern Waterthrush	6.8
Black-bellied Whistling-Duck	0.7	Osprey	7.0
Nelson's Sparrow	1.1	Harris's Sparrow	7.3
Merlin	1.6	American Tree Sparrow	7.5
American Bittern	2.1	Greater Yellowlegs	8.3
Palm Warbler	2.2	Marsh Wren	8.3
Spotted Towhee	2.3	Le Conte's Sparrow	8.3
American Golden-Plover	2.5	Sharp-shinned Hawk	8.3
Clay-colored Sparrow	2.8	Hooded Merganser	8.5
Western Meadowlark	3.1	American White Pelican	8.8
Henslow's Sparrow	3.3	Lesser Yellowlegs	9.4
Great-tailed Grackle	3.6	Tree Swallow	10.0
Upland Sandpiper	3.7	Loggerhead Shrike	10.0
Yellow-crowned Night-Heron	3.8	Cliff Swallow	10.3
Lapland Longspur	3.8	Sedge Wren	10.3
Grasshopper Sparrow	3.8	American Pipit	10.5
Willow Flycatcher	4.3	Least Flycatcher	10.9
Sora	4.5	Rusty Blackbird	11.0
Lark Sparrow	5.1	Eurasian Collared-Dove	11.1
Bank Swallow	5.5	Least Sandpiper	11.3
Mourning Warbler	5.9	Pectoral Sandpiper	11.5