

Birds post Mega Freeze

By Martin Hagne

I think we all still, all too well probably, recall that awful deep freeze that Texas (and others) experienced last February. Broken pipes, no heat or lights or way to cook, damaged homes, injury or worse to people, livestock and pets.

What a lot of folks might not think about is the impact it made on wildlife, and the effects that we still see on them. Wild animals can normally handle pretty extreme temperatures, and other inclement weather, but the prolonged and deep freeze we experienced in February was more than many species could handle. That goes especially for smaller birds, whether they live here year around, or winter here.

I was receiving report after report of dead birds being found in yards, streets, beaches, and even inside buildings for weeks after the freeze. People were finding such birds as Eastern Bluebirds all huddled together inside nest boxes, where they had sought shelter. Such behavior is common in winter where birds huddle closely to keep warm. But this freeze was too much, and so many were found dead.

Insect feeding birds like flycatchers, if they survived the freezing temperatures, would have faced a habitat devoid of insects to feed on. Could they immediately leave and fly to “greener pastures” and find insects? Probably not, as the freeze was so far reaching, and they need food often. Same went for seed eating birds and those living off rodents or snakes, etc. They would all face an instant shortfall of food.

In the spring, people started saying... we don't see the bluebirds like we always do... where are they? I heard from friends up in northern states where they would report that the woods were eerily quiet in spring and summer. There were so few songbirds around, where normally the woods were alive with bird song. Although spring migration was pretty decent, with birds returning from the tropics to their breeding ground this past year, the local breeders and the birds that wintered in the freeze affected areas were not being seen in their usual numbers or at all! Things like Eastern Phoebes, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, to name a few, all seemed to be so few.

Now winter rolls around again, and the big question for most bird biologists is... will the wintering birds that were here last year return? Or did many or most perish. I think the many local Christmas Bird Counts (CBCs) will help us get an idea. Granted, to really understand what's happening you need at least several years' worth of data to compare and see trends, but I think it will be telling. If it's the case, it could take years or decades for the species to rebuild their numbers, all while facing even greater challenges each year.

It's hard to be a bird biologist and not see doom and gloom all over! But none the less, I'm going to go outside and watch some birds and enjoy nature, and let it rejuvenate the soul. Hope you do the same!