2026 Great Texas Birding Classic Rules

Updated 12/30/2025

ALL PARTICIPANTS MUST BE FAMILIAR WITH AND WILLING TO COMPLY WITH ALL GREAT TEXAS BIRDING CLASSIC RULES IN ORDER TO COMPETE IN THE TOURNAMENT. *Note: All tournament rules are subject to revisions.*

I. Counting Rules

A. Species Count

- Only **full species** may be counted, as defined by the **American Ornithologist's Union (AOU) Checklist (1998)** and annual supplements.

B. Identification Standards

- Birds must be **conclusively identified by sight or sound**.
- If a bird can only be identified to a species group, it may be counted as **one species**, provided no other species from that group appears on the team list.
    - *Example:* "*Dowitcher* sp." counts as one species. "Short-billed Dowitcher" plus "*Dowitcher* sp." still counts as **one** species.

C. Origin and Establishment

- Birds of questionable origin, and introduced or reintroduced species, may be counted **only if**:
    - They appear on the **current Texas Ornithological Society (TOS) checklist**, and
    - The population has been established in Texas for **at least 10 years**.
- Species **not countable** under this rule include (but are not limited to): Egyptian Goose, Black Swan, and Yellow-headed Parrot.
- Any disputes will be resolved by the **Great Texas Birding Classic judge**.
- **Exception:** Greater (Attwater's) Prairie-Chicken and Aplomado Falcon *are* countable for Great Texas Birding Classic purposes.

D. Condition of Birds

- Birds must be **alive, wild, and unrestrained**.
- Sick or injured birds may be counted.
- Permanently injured wild birds incapable of normal migration or seasonal movement **may not be counted**, including birds found or relocated to parks, yards, zoos, gardens, boat ramps, fish cleaning stations, or other unnatural settings where they may receive intended or unintended critical human support or protection.
- Eggs and nests **do not count as birds**.

E. Use of Recorded Sounds

- **Electronic or recorded bird calls may not be used** to attract birds or entice them to vocalize during the tournament or while scouting.
- Bird recordings and mobile apps **may be used for identification reference only**, under these conditions:
    - Sound must **not be audible in the field**
    - Use is restricted to vehicles or earbuds/headphones
    - Use may occur only when teams are **not actively birding** (e.g., between destinations)
- **Pishing and other bird sounds made b mouth are allowed.**

F. Artificial Lighting

- **Spotlighting is prohibited** at all times, including scouting.
- Small handheld flashlights may be used as a light source as needed **for personal safety** (i.e., while walking on trails).
- Q-beams and other high-powered lights are prohibited.

G. Nocturnal Flight Calls

- No more than **5% of passerine species** recorded by a team may be identified by nocturnal flight calls.

H. The 95% Rule (Identification Agreement)

- For **Intact Flock teams**, at least **two team members** must identify every species for it to count.
- **95% of all species recorded** must be identified by **all team members**.
- The remaining **5%** may be identified by **two or more members**.
- Any species identified by **only one team member never counts**.

Applies ONLY to the following Intact Flock categories:

- Adult Statewide Weeklong
- Adult Regional Big Day
- State Park
- Sunrise to Noon
- Texas Two-Stop
- Outta-Sight Song Birder

It is not necessary for all team members to identify the same individual bird.

- *Example:* If some team members hear a Belted Kingfisher and others later see a different individual Belted Kingfisher, the species counts unanimously.

Exceptions to the 95% Rule

The 95% Rule **does NOT apply** to:

- Any **Dispersed Flock** tournament
- **Big Sit! Tournament**
- **Lone Star Duo Tournament**

Additional clarification:

- **Dispersed Flock:** Team members will be remote from one another, so it is up to fellow members to accept or question any dubious identifications before adding them to the official checklist.
- **Lone Star Duo:** Both team members must identify every species for it to count. Identification by only one team member does not count.
- **Big Sit!:** Only one team member must identify a species for it to be counted.

Special Note – Roughwings & Gliders:
Youth team members must locate and identify birds **without assistance** from adults. Adults may assist **only with verification**, not identification or location.

I. Nesting Birds

- Disturbance to nesting species increases exponentially in relation to the number of people who know about a site.
- Do not share locations of nesting species.
- Nest harassment will not be tolerated.

J. AI and Identification Apps

- Team members must base identifications on **what they personally see or hear**.
- AI-assisted tools for bird sound identification, photo identification, or artificial intelligence-assisted equipment (e.g., Merlin, BirdNET, iNaturalist, AI binoculars) **may not be used as the sole basis for identification**.
- These tools may be used **only to confirm** an identification the birder already believes they have made.
- Auto-identifications without personal verification **may not be counted**.

II. Time

A. Tournament Window

- All tournaments must occur **April 15 and May 15, 2026** (on any date during that time period).

B. Checklist Submission

- Final team checklists must be submitted to **eBird within 48 hours** of the tournament day(s).
    - *Example:* A team competing on May 1 must submit their final team checklist (a single list) by **11:59 p.m. on May 3**.
- The final team checklist must be shared with the **tournament account (GTBCStaff)** using eBird's **"share w/others in your party"** feature (do not simply forward a link to the list).
    - If sharing a trip report in eBird, the team must also share all related individual checklists contained in that trip report for judging purposes.

C. Tournament Date Notification

- Teams must notify the Nature Tourism Manager (**gtbc@tpwd.texas.gov**) of their selected tournament date(s) **within 24 hours** of participation.

D. Tournament Length by Category

- **24-Hour Tournaments:**
  The following categories may bird for **up to 24 hours**, from **12:00 a.m. to 11:59 p.m.** on a single calendar day of the team's choosing:
    - Regional and Statewide Big Day (Dispersed and Intact Flock)
    - Big Sit!
    - Gliders Big Day (Dispersed and Intact Flock)
    - Human-Powered – Intact Flock
    - State Park – Intact Flock
- **Adult Weeklong – Intact Flock:**
  Teams may bird for **up to six (6) consecutive days**, from **12:00 a.m. on Day 1 through 11:59 p.m. on Day 6** (example: May 1 at 12:00 a.m. through May 6 at 11:59 p.m.).
  Teams are **not required to bird the entire time** and are encouraged to rest as needed during the birding week.
- **Texas Two-Stop – Intact Flock:**
  Teams may bird for **up to two (2) consecutive days**, from **12:00 a.m. on Day 1 through 11:59 p.m. on Day 2** (example: April 16 at 12:00 a.m. through April 17 at 11:59 p.m.).
    - Teams must select two distinct sites (see Rule III.E).
    - Teams may spend no more than 24 hours in a calendar day at either site.
    - All travel between the two sites must occur within the 48-hour tournament period.
- **Roughwings (Dispersed and Intact Flock):**
  Teams may bird for **up to 8 total hours** on their tournament day.
  The 8 hours **do not need to be consecutive** and may be split throughout the day.
- **Outta-Sight Song Birder – Intact Flock:**
  Teams may bird for **up to 12 total hours** on their tournament day.
  The 12 hours **do not need to be consecutive** and may be split throughout the day.
- **Sunrise to Noon – Intact Flock:**
  Teams may bird from official sunrise until 12:00 noon on their tournament day.

III. Geographic Area

A. Regional Tournaments

(Big Sit!, Roughwings, Gliders, Sunrise to Noon, Adult Regional Big Day Tournaments)

1. Teams must select **one of the nine Great Texas Wildlife Trail regions**. Refer to online regional maps to see county boundaries and determine which region to select.
2. The selected region must be indicated on the team's **registration form**.
3. At the time of observation, **both the bird and the birder must be within the same state, country, and selected region**.
4. Birds observed in bays or in the **Gulf of Mexico up to 200 miles offshore** may be counted.

B. Statewide Tournaments

(Adult Statewide Big Day, Adult Weeklong, Human-Powered, Outta-Sight Song Birder Tournaments)

1. At the time of observation, **both the bird and the birder must be within the state of Texas**.
2. Birds observed in bays or in the **Gulf of Mexico up to 200 miles offshore** may be counted.

C. Big Sit! Tournament

1. Both the bird and the birder must be in the **same state and country** at the time of observation.
2. All observations must be made from within a **single 50-foot-diameter circle**.
3. If a bird is detected from within the circle but cannot be identified:
    - A team member may temporarily leave the circle to confirm the identification.
    - **No additional species** detected while outside the circle may be counted unless:
        - An "anchor" team member remains in the circle and sees the species, or
        - The species is later identified from within the circle.
4. The **same circle** must be used for the entire tournament.
5. Each team must designate its circle location on the team registration form.
6. No two Big Sit! teams may use the **same circle on the same day**.
    - If conflicts arise, GTBC staff will work with teams to assign different tournament dates.

D. State Park Tournament

1. Both the bird and the birder must be in the **same state and country**.
2. All observations must be made from **within a single Texas Parks and Wildlife State Park**, designated on the team registration form.
3. Birds detected from within park boundaries may be counted **even if the bird itself is outside the park**, provided it meets Rule III.D.1.
4. Multiple teams may select the same state park.

E. Texas Two-Stop Tournament

1. Both the bird and the birder must be in the **same state and country**.

2. Teams must pre-select **two distinct sites** with clear boundaries and list them on the registration form.
    - Approved sites include public parks, wildlife refuges, nature centers, and similar properties.
    - Other sites require prior approval from the TPWD Nature Tourism Manager.
3. Observations may be made **only at the two designated sites**.
    - Birds seen during travel between sites **do not count**, unless also seen at one of the two sites.
4. Birds detected from within a site may be counted even if the bird itself is outside site boundaries, provided it meets Rule III.E.1.

IV. Travel

A. Transportation

- All vehicles may be used **except aircraft and airboats**.
- **Human-Powered Tournament Exception:** Only non-motorized transportation is allowed (e.g., walking, biking, kayaking, canoeing).

B. Intact Flock Team Movement

- Team members must remain within **direct, unamplified voice contact** at all times ("shouting distance").
- Electronic communication of any kind (phones, radios, texting, etc.) is prohibited.
- Team members are not required to ride in the same vehicle.

C. Dispersed Flock Team Movement

- Team members may be located anywhere in Texas or within their selected region, depending on tournament category.

V. Participants

A. Team Size

- Teams must consist of **3–5 members**.
- **Exceptions:**
    - **Big Sit!:** One or more members allowed.
    - **Lone Star Duo:** Exactly two members.

B. Non-Birding Participants

- Mentors, chaperones, drivers, and support personnel may accompany teams but **may not assist with bird identification**.

- Hired scouts **may not assist** any team.
- Non-birding participants do not pay entry fees.

C. Event T-shirts

- All team members on **sponsored teams** and all individuals who **pay an individual registration fee** will receive the official event t-shirt.
    - **Big Sit! – Independent Teams:**
      All registered team members receive an event t-shirt with their registration fee. There is **no limit** on the number of team members.
    - **Big Sit! – Sponsored Teams:**
      Sponsored Big Sit! teams receive event t-shirts for **up to 20 team members**.
      Any additional team members who want an event t-shirt must **order and pay for one separately** using the registration payment link.
- **T-shirts for all registered teams** will be sent to the following:
    - **Intact Flock Teams:** All team T-shirts will be mailed to the Team Captain listed on the team registration form.
    - **Dispersed Flock Teams:** T-shirts will be mailed to each teammate if individual addresses are provided; otherwise, all shirts will be mailed to the Team Captain, as listed on the team registration form.
- **Event t-shirts for non-birding participants** may be purchased separately through the registration payment portal (link provided once team registration is submitted).

VI. Conduct

1. Intact Flock teams must maintain **voice contact at all times**.
2. Team members may count **only birds they personally identify**.
3. All participants are responsible for knowing and following tournament rules.
4. Teams may not intentionally flush or drive into hiding any bird to prevent another team from finding it..
5. All federal, state, and local laws must be followed.
    - **Texas is a private-lands state. Trespassing is strictly prohibited.**
    - Permission must be obtained before entering private property.
    - Closed areas of public lands may not be entered (i.e., closed portions of National Wildlife Refuges).

VII. Outside Information

1. Teams may share information with other teams before and during the tournament.
2. All information received prior to or during the Birding Classic may be used.
3. **Hired scouts are prohibited.**

VIII. Ethics

- All participants must follow the **American Birding Association (ABA) Code of Ethics** at all times.

IX. Scoring and Checklists

A. eBird Requirement

- Each team must submit **one official cumulative team checklist** via eBird.
- The checklist must include (entered in the "Comments" section of Step 2: Date and Effort):
  - Team name
  - Tournament category

B. Submission Rules

- Only **one final cumulative checklist per team** is accepted. Your score is based on your cumulative total number of species for your entire tournament day(s), so only a single final checklist is required for each team.
- The official cumulative checklist must be shared with the **"GTBCStaff"** event account in eBird using the "**share w/others in your party**" function on your checklist.
- Checklists are due within **48 hours** of the tournament day(s) (see Rule IIB).
- NOTE: Although we encourage team members to submit personal eBird checklists from each site visited to help support eBird's data collection, for the purposes of the Birding Classic's final records and judging, all teams must share only **one final cumulative team checklist to GTBC Staff via eBird**. Do not share a checklist for each site visited. Do not submit a checklist for each team member.
- See Checklist area of website for further instructions.

C. Determining Winners

- Winners are determined by the **highest number of species identified** within each tournament category.

D. Documentation of Rare Species

- Species listed as uncommon, scarce, rare, or accidental during spring migration for the region you are birding based on the TPWD regional checklists require additional documentation within your eBird checklist.
- Documentation should include information required for the TBRC Bird Report Form. Teams can add these details on the checklist itself by using the "Add Details" button next to each bird needing additional documentation.
- **ADDITIONAL LISTS OF BIRDS NEEDING DOCUMENTATION:** Birds listed on the:
  - Texas Bird Records Committee Review Species list

- Species not yet documented for Texas list
- Specimens Not Located list

X. Prize Categories

1. Certificates are awarded to members of the winning team in each individual tournament category.
2. Individual prizes are awarded to winning regional **Roughwings and Gliders** teams.
3. The Adult Statewide Weeklong winning team's name will be engraved on the **Roger Tory Peterson Trophy** which will reside for the following year in the offices of the team sponsor. If the sponsor does not have space for trophy display or an independent team wins the tournament, TPWD will display the trophy at their offices for the year.
4. Winning teams in certain tournament categories will be eligible to win Conservation Grants. These winning teams will work with Birding Classic staff to determine which birding enhancement, avian habitat restoration, or acquisition projects will receive the grants.
    - Number of grants awarded and grant amounts are dependent on funds raised through registration fees and sponsorship dollars.
    - Tournament categories eligible for Conservation Grants are dependent on number of teams registered in tournament categories.

XI. Call of Foul

1. A team may submit a written protest to the TPWD Nature Tourism Manager if they observe what they perceive to be an infraction of the Great Texas Birding Classic Rules by another team.
2. The GTBC judge and staff will review all protests.
3. Initial standings may change following review.
4. Final decisions are **binding and final**.

XII. Eligibility, Fees, and Deadlines

A. Eligibility

- Open to all birders of good character.

B. Registration and Fees

- All teams must pay registration fees to compete.
- Teams may register as **Independent** or **Sponsored**.
- Drivers and chaperones do not pay entry fees.

C. Deadlines

- Registration forms and payments are due by **April 1, 2026**.

- Late fees apply:
    - Independent teams: **$25 per person**
    - Sponsored teams: **$200 per team**

Tournament Category	Independent Teams	Sponsored Teams
Adult Regional Big Day (Dispersed and Intact Flock), Adult Statewide Big Day (19 years old and older), Adult Statewide Weeklong (19 years and older); Texas Two-Stop (all ages); or Lone Star Duo (all ages) Tournaments	$50 per team member *	$1000 per team
Big Sit! **, Gliders (14-18 years old)*, Human-Powered, State Park, Sunrise to Noon, or Outta-Sight Song Birder Tournaments	$30 per team member *	$500 per team **
Roughwings (13&under) Regional Tournaments*	$20 per team member *	$250 per team

* Drivers, mentors and chaperones are free but may purchase event t-shirts through registration payment portal.

** Sponsored Big Sit! team fee includes t-shirts for the first 20 members only, and additional event t-shirts may be purchased through registration payment portal. All independent Big Sit! Team members who register and pay receive an event t-shirt (number of team members allowed is unlimited).