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CLOUDY WITH A CHANCE OF FISH

HOW A RAIN OF FISH IN
TEXAS WAS CAUGHT
LIVE ON CAMERA

BLACK RAINS

INKY SHOWERS
IN A SCOTTISH
VILLAGE

LOOK OUT BELOW!

PLUMMETING POO AND
INDIAN FIREBALLS



HAIL, FISH & VIDEOTAPE

A TEXAS FISH RAIN CAUGHT ON CAMERA

SHARON HILL and **PAUL CROPPER** investigate an astonishing shower of shad in Texarkana, Texas, uncover security video actually showing the event taking place and propose a theory that may explain this classic fortean phenomenon.

Rains of fish were a favourite of Charles Fort and cases regularly appear in the pages of *Fortean Times*. Evidence that fish actually fall from the sky has always been open to question, with sceptics arguing that flooding of waterways, “walking” fish, birds, and even hoaxes account for most of the reports. While many incidents are dubious, a recent event in Texas provided the first video evidence that fish do, occasionally, fall with the rain. The obvious question is: *how did they get up there?*

A STORM IN TEXAS

The city of Texarkana is located around 150 miles (240km) east of Dallas/Fort Worth in the State’s north-east corner and straddles the Arkansas border. Major rain events in that part of Texas are common from October through May, but what happened across the city on 29 December 2021 was certainly out of the ordinary (see **FT415:4** for the initial FT report).

The intense storm that hit the city around 4.18pm swept in from the west. Residents noted gathering dark clouds, then a trickle of raindrops, quickly followed by sheets of wind-blown rain and hail. Weather radar showed an area of very heavy to extreme precipitation that passed across the centre and north of town. The rain and hail lasted for less than 20 minutes, with the heaviest fall beginning around 4.19pm. Locals reported hailstones and, unexpectedly, dozens, if not hundreds, of small fish.

One cluster of fish reports came from the car yards and auto businesses spread along Summerhill Road. At Discount Wheel and Tire, employees closed the garage bay doors when the heavy rain commenced. Manager Tim Brigham told the *Texarkana Gazette*: “It was hailing, looked like there might be a tornado. And there were fish falling.” After the storm passed, about two dozen fish were found in the parking lot. Brigham had an



LEFT: Bobby Whisenhunt holds up one of the fish that fell in the parking lot of Discount Wheel and Tire. **FACING PAGE:** Some of the many photos posted on social media by Olivia Poulton and other Texarkana residents.

the back of pickup trucks on the lot. Brad took several photos of the fish after the rain ended. The *Gazette* reporter on the scene spotted dozens of fish strewn around the area even though business owners had tried to remove as many of the smelly remains as they could.

A mile and a half north, the local Texas high school soccer team was finishing practice that Wednesday afternoon to avoid the coming storm when one player discovered a fish on the sideline. He noted soberly to the *Gazette* reporter: “We weren’t looking for fish. We were leaving, so there are probably more out there.” Several days later, the school principal sent researcher Paul Cropper photos of fish that remained on the High School grounds.

Other Texarkana residents found fish in their yards and even on their rooftops over two miles away on the Arkansas side of town. Melissa Curry was the first to call the *Gazette* to report that fish had fallen on her property. Curry wondered if it could be a prank, but there seemed to be too many fish in odd places. The next day, on Magnolia Street, Jeanie Tucker found fish in her yard and on her roof. She remarked that the fish were all torn up, “There were just heads and bodies without heads.”

Witnesses jumped onto social media with their stories, images, and videos. Many shared photos of fish found in parking lots, on grass, along streets, in the beds of trucks, and most importantly, on rooftops. It was soon evident that this was a widespread event involving hundreds of fish appearing across an urban area that was miles from any sizeable waterway. Multiple witnesses had seen the fish *actually fall* with the rain.

THE REPORTER SPOTTED DOZENS OF FISH STREWN AROUND THE AREA

employee collect them because they smelled bad. Other nearby businesses noticed the same phenomenon and recovered dead fish on their property after the storm had cleared.

At the Orr Maxx used car dealership, Brad Pratt and a colleague heard a loud thunderclap and then saw fish hitting the ground outside. Sales Manager Devin Sewell said he saw fish everywhere, including in





ABOVE LEFT: A photo of one of the fish that fell at Texarkana Regional Airport. ABOVE RIGHT: A truckful of fish recovered from the airport. BELOW: A cormorant swallowing a fish whole. Large flocks of cormorants were seen in the Texarkana area before and after the storm of 29 December 2021 – were they responsible for the fish fall?

Particularly notable were the reports from the Texarkana Regional Airport northeast of town. Employees shared videos pointing out multiple fish strewn across the fenced-off airport tarmac.

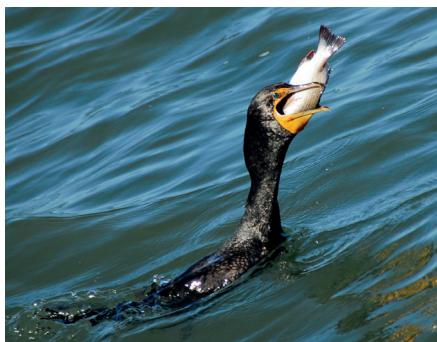
SHAD SHOWER CAUGHT ON VIDEO

A KSLA news crew interview with employees from Discount Wheel and Tire on Summerhill Road showed that the storm had been captured on their security cameras. Thinking their footage could have captured the rain of fish, Paul Cropper contacted the business who graciously shared their footage. It was a slim chance – the fish were small and, given the intensity of the rain, it was unlikely they would be visible. A few days later, the original digital files were transferred, and Paul set to work. Incredibly, a portion of one video between 4.16 and 4.20pm shows six objects that appear to be fish impacting the ground in the rear car park. The full sequence can now be viewed on YouTube (see Sources). The authors believe this is a fortan first – video footage of fish conclusively falling in a rainstorm.

The fish that fell in Texarkana seemed to be of one species and ranged in size from 2 to 7 inches (5 to 18cm) long. Dr Adam Cohen, Ichthyologist Collection Manager, and Dr Dean Hendrickson of the University of Texas Biodiversity Center in Austin examined photos of the fish and reported to Paul that the fish were Gizzard shad (*Dorosoma cepedianum*). This species is common in Texan reservoirs and rivers.

No fish were reported to be alive when they fell and none were reported as frozen. In many instances the eyes or the head were missing while the posterior parts remained intact. Some of the bodies had small holes or puncture marks. The condition of the fish suggested they suffered from the impact or were already decaying. Dr Hendrickson commented that shad are “notorious for quickly beginning to decay following death”.

COULD THE RAIN OF FISH HAVE BEEN THE RESULT OF A FLOCK OF BIRDS?



A THEORY EMERGES

Local resident Olivia Poulton collected about 30 fish from her yard and photographed several on her roof. She also froze some specimens that were in various stages of decomposition. Poulton's specimens were relayed to the University of Texas researchers at the end of January.

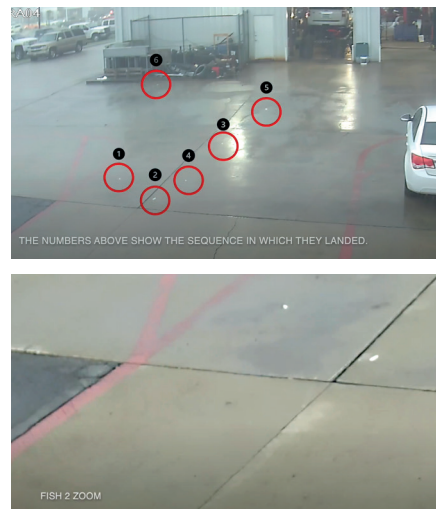
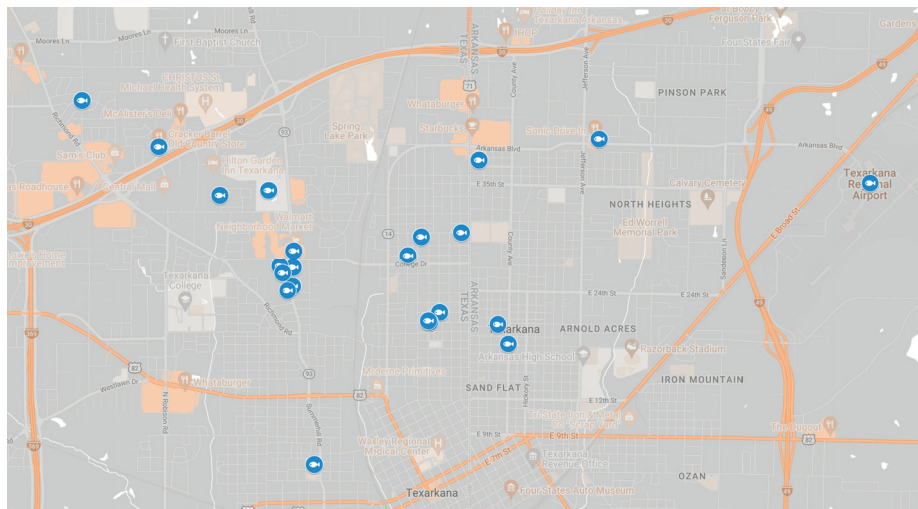
Dr Cohen said that lab colleagues who viewed the samples independently agreed that they appeared to have been partially digested – possibly by birds. Interestingly, Olivia had observed a large flock of cormorants in her Texarkana neighbourhood prior to the storm. On a video posted to TikTok, she recorded the cormorants landing in a nearby yard, disoriented, just after the hailstorm. Could the Texarkana rain of fish have been the result of a flock of birds, possibly cormorants, regurgitating shad across the city during the December rainstorm?

Other evidence supports this theory. Some witnesses reported that some of the fish seemed “slimy”. One photo shows many

fish squeezed together in a clump, as if they had passed through a gullet. The operations manager at the Texarkana Regional Airport also recalled that large flocks of cormorants were present in the area before and after the storm. He also commented that they fly from nearby Lake Wright Patman almost every day. Another witness from Summerhill Road reported that many birds were seen before and after the storm. He also said it was common for water birds to fly in large groups between Mill Wood Lake and Wright Patman.

Texas University scientists who had received the Poulton specimens advised the authors that the regurgitation theory was certainly possible. Dr. Cohen noted that most of the samples were more degraded anteriorly than posteriorly, and some lacked heads. Piscivorous birds – such as cormorants – typically swallow fish headfirst. While it was possible that the heads could have been lost by being physically detached, few individual heads were reported. Dr Cohen also stated that skin erosion noted by the ichthyology lab in the samples was consistent with effects from stomach acid. This contrasted with typical decay, which would also have affected internal organs. The variable condition of the specimens would be expected with the regurgitation hypothesis, since the fish would have spent different amounts of time in the birds' digestive tract. This evidence would contradict the often mooted waterspout scenario, which, Cohen says, “would have more likely pulled them all out within a short interval and deposited them in a short amount of time resulting in specimens of similar degradation.” Two puncture wounds in one sample also appeared consistent with beak impact.

Other sources support the bird regurgitation theory. A 2007 *New York Times* piece details how cormorants have a nasty habit of regurgitating stomach contents when disturbed, perhaps to lighten their weight to get airborne, to distract predators, or as an



ABOVE LEFT: Paul Cropper created a map showing the distribution of the fish across Texarkana. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Images from the video created by Paul Cropper from the security camera footage supplied by Discount Wheel and Tire: a fish fall filmed as it happened – a forteen first!

involuntary reaction triggered by a threat. Colin Grubel, the researcher featured in the article, claimed he'd been hit by the stuff on occasion, but reported to Paul Cropper that he'd not directly seen the birds regurgitate in flight.

Mennobart van Eerden, the chair of a Cormorant Study Group in Holland, also supplied information, saying that cormorants feed their young via regurgitation. When large flocks were common in Holland, the village of Muiderberg would regularly be the target of bird vomit from a colony that lived nearby. On 1 February 2022, a timely news video from the Netherlands surfaced, entitled "It's raining fish in Enkhuizen, and it's all because of those cormorants" and supporting a similar explanation for the Texarkana event. The Dutch video shows residents collecting carcasses that were dropped by cormorants as they exited the nearby waterways.

CONCLUSIONS

With the testimony of so many witnesses and the dozens of photos, plus the impressive video sequence from Summerhill Road, it is clear that hundreds of shad did fall across Texarkana in the rain on the afternoon of 29 December 2021.

We can confidently exclude deliberate distribution of the fish via fall from an aircraft as weather conditions were unsuitable and there is no record such an event occurred. Deliberate dumping of fish from persons on the ground can also be excluded for multiple reasons – the spread and number of fish, the presence on all types of properties, including private and restricted locations, the multiple eyewitness reports, and the video footage.

The default explanation for fish rains, repeated by every source that covered the story, was that waterspouts pick up fish from their habitat and deposit them miles away. This mechanism, however, has never been documented to occur and can be considered

hearsay. According to the *Dallas Morning News*, National Weather Service meteorologists saw no indications and heard no reports of waterspouts or flooding that could have accounted for the fish. No tornadoes were sighted via radar or on the ground.

The storm front moved through the Wright Patman lake area prior to encroaching on the city, but the storm movement indicated it was not feasible for updrafts to entrain fish and drop them in the locations reported. Charlie Woodrum of the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration responded to a request for information, saying that the storm cell probably did not produce any waterspouts. He added that they had inquired with a local campground at Wright Patman lake to confirm no unusual weather occurred on 29 December.

Prior to the Texarkana event, one of the better documented cases of a "fish rain" took place in the Cross Creek Ranch community of Fulshear, Texas, on 16 January 2018 (see FT365:20-21). Residents found dozens of fish had fallen after an afternoon ice storm. The areal extent of the fish reports was less than the Texarkana event (only a little more than a square mile) but the type of fish was the same. Fulshear is about 300 miles (483km) south-southwest of Texarkana. We suspect that local water birds were the likely source of fish in that case.

For the Texarkana fish rain, the authors reject the commonly repeated cause of fish falls being a waterspout and tentatively conclude that the deposition of fish was the result of birds (probably cormorants), dropping or disgorging fish on the ground or in the air. This explanation is consistent with the presence of birds, the type and condition of the fish, the carcasses appearing in clusters around town, and with known bird behaviours.

The weakness of the explanation is that cormorants have not been directly observed to vomit in flight, and the distribution of fish (at least four miles in extent) and timing of

the reported fish falls would mean that a significant number of birds moved en masse over the town and ejected their meals. It's not as pleasant an explanation as a waterspout, but it's the most reasonable one.

Some fish samples from Texarkana have been preserved in the hope that funding could be found to test for the presence of bird DNA. This would provide strong supporting evidence in favour of the bird regurgitation theory and a potential explanation for one of nature's most perplexing phenomena.

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❖ **SHARON HILL** is an independent researcher of anomalous natural phenomena. She runs the website spookygeology.com.

❖ **PAUL CROPPER** has investigated all manner of strange phenomena since the mid-1970s and has co-authored with Tony Healy *Out of the Shadows* (1994), *The Yowie* (2006) and *Australian Poltergeist* (2014).