

LONDON CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT 2017

I think most people found the weather for the 109th CBC quite satisfactory, albeit it ranged from about -4 to -7 degrees Celsius. The light snow in the morning added a Christmas feeling and while there was a breeze it was not too bad. However, the heavier than usual snowfalls of the days leading up to the Count meant that field crews had to put up with walking in deep snow and some roads for the driving crews were quite poor. It was exhausting for walkers and a bit treacherous for drivers.

Our total numbers of species at 73 and individuals at 19806 were lower than the 10-year average, but that might be due to the colder and snowier weather in later November and up to the Count. It also might have persuaded some of the potentially lingering species and numbers of winter birds to move somewhat more south. A so-called polar vortex or two pushed cold weather well south of the US border too.

Our waterfowl tallies were down somewhat and in species numbers, due to most still waters frozen, but luckily, we had some open water on the Thames River and elsewhere and so we were able to get more than I thought we would. Three Northern Pintails (12th) were located, two at Springbank, found by Rose Welch and her crew and one at Greenway, found by Jason McGuire and Don Taylor. John Berry located three Cackling Geese (7th) near the Forks. Lucas Foerster and Peter Burke had 3 Ring-necked Ducks (16th) out near Komoka

Some Geese and Swans appeared to be migrating. Several Canada geese flew over a number of parties, heading southwest in various size "V" formations. Laure Neish and Dianne Weiler saw 35 Snow Geese (5th) fly by and Cathy Geisbrecht and Audrey Heagy saw 30 Tundra Swans (9th) in flight. Besides these unusual waterfowl, about average to slightly above average, figures for Bufflehead and Common Goldeneye were found and a lower than average number of Common Merganser were noted. Hooded Mergansers continued to be reported in good numbers as of late, but still fewer than average over the last 10 years.

No gallinaceous birds other than Wild Turkey were noted and along with Great Blue Heron, both were in lower than average numbers.

Raptors were not found in good numbers with a few exceptions. Accipiter species were well-represented with better than average numbers of them being sighted, much to the chagrin of the feeder watchers no doubt. The Wake Party along the Dingman Creek was treated to a juvenile Goshawk (18th) However, Buteo species were down in numbers from average. Again, deep snow and cold might have pushed them further south this year what with their food supply under snow.

The one huge exception was that I determined by checking age, location, timing, of the sightings of participants who saw them, and using some guesswork, that we had a new record number of Bald Eagles, at 40. Many more than that were reported, but they travel a lot over a day, and are quite conspicuous so it requires some careful thought. I think I am right, and given that there are at least 4 nests, and that plenty of food for them is in the area, it could be so.

Even though Falcons have been moved elsewhere in the taxonomic list of birds, I will deal quickly with them. It is odd that Kestrels are so much below average in numbers the last few years, that the numbers of Merlin are now almost as many. Our Peregrines downtown were seen a couple days before our Count but not on that day.

A very poor showing was made by gulls on the Count. Only Ring-billed and Herring were noted, and both in small numbers. The London Dump is certainly not as profitable as it once was. Little action is taking place on Saturdays, and though some gulls linger in the area, one has to find the group, which can be difficult.

Of note, two Wilson's Snipes (33rd and 34th) were found, one along the Komoka Park, by the Read Party, and the other by Maddeford/VanDenBelt party, along Gideon Drive west of London, about 2-3 km away. Amazing co-incident! See another such below.

More than average numbers of Mourning Doves were noted. I had 60 at our feeders that day. Recently as I write this, I think the cold weather and a number of raptors has reduced my population to the high 30s.

Owls were a pleasant surprise, both Screech and Great Horned numbers being up, likely as it was a good night for owl calling. And Ron Weir and Paul Roedding were able to hear a Short-eared owl near Sunningdale Golf Course which was a bonus for owl species for sure.

Interestingly our Kingfisher count was higher than average, despite the water being mostly frozen. Often, they leave the area with intense cold and freeze-up of the Thames, but just enough water must have been open on Count day.

Moving into some of our more common winter and resident birds, we note that many feeders were quite active. Some had White-throated Sparrows (Lucas Foerster, the Esseys), one had Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (Yeo feeders), White-crowned Sparrow (Karen and Eric Auzin) and there were a couple Tufted Titmice (Nunn's in Lambeth, and Diane Hayman)

But a good number of passerines were also found in the field. Another sapsucker was found by the Maddeford/VanDenBelt party out near Delaware. Other woodpeckers were either near average or in the case of Red-bellied, a new high record number. The number of dead ash trees might affect the numbers of woodpeckers as did the die-off of Elm.

The Garber/Tingle party found a Tufted Titmouse out near Woodhull and Sharon Roads. One was found by the McLeod party near Kilworth. Down on the river flats near Delaware, the Verboom and then the Reads found 5 Tufted Titmice, and with other sightings, it led to a new high total for these slowly territory-expanding birds.

Interestingly, Jays were way up and Crows were down in numbers this year. Smaller passerines including nuthatches, creepers and so on were generally at or somewhat below average numbers, except for Carolina Wren and Golden-crowned Kinglets which were found at elevated levels.

And kinglets and chickadees remain the only two species which have been found on every Count since we started the London CBC in 1909.

Thrushes were in good numbers. While Robins were down a bit, they were still in good numbers, especially in the Killaly group (Platt/Taylor/Baginski) finding 56 of them. The locating of a Hermit Thrush by the Weir/Roedding party near Sunningdale Golf Course was great and there were several parties which contributed to a new high count for Eastern Bluebirds, at 21 (Verbooms, McLeods, and Foerster parties).

An Eastern Towhee female was at a feeder just before the Count (Diane Hayman) so no luck on the Count again this year with that species. Amazingly within about 3 km of each other, two Vesper Sparrows (4th, 5th) were noted near Medway Road, one near Denfield Road and the other near Vanneck, by the Read and the Sperlich parties, at about the same time of day. A Fox Sparrow (17th) was noted along the Medway, north of Fanshawe by the Weir/Roedding party. Other sparrows had individual variation in results from previous years but of note, juncos were at quite higher numbers than usual.

Our Cardinal Count remains high, at 710, but still not at the 10-year average yet. I think the fewer number of overall feeders available has led to a decline in our results, rather than perhaps a decline in their population.

Oh wow, blackbirds didn't hang around much this year. Only one party, the Garber/Tingle party found any. A few cowbirds and grackles were found south-west of London. Perhaps the best feeder bird and a great one for the Count was at the Queen's feeders, an Eastern Meadowlark (30th), found at the very edge of the circle near Highbury. We have not had one in recent years but had a good number of them back in the 60s and 70s.

The only winter finch we had reported was from the Weir/Roedding party, and it was a Common Redpoll. No Purple Finches, crossbills, siskins, or other such species were noted. Goldfinches, however, were found in about average numbers.

To finish, the number of House Finches was up a bit and the number of House Sparrows was down again this year.

After the outing our Pot Luck was awesome. The food was marvelous and really hit the spot after spending a tough day sloggling in the snow, spinning tires on the roads and toughing it out watching feeders. Thanks to all for their food contributions. Our many thanks to Sue Read for co-ordinating the food items, and her first time helping in the kitchen, and as well thanks to Irma Simms for helping Sue in the kitchen. It was fun to go over the highlights and hear the adventures of the day, and ogle over the great sightings.

And of course, thanks to all of you who took part in the field or at your feeders. Our results contribute to bird conservation and so are very helpful. Thanks to all who participated in our London CBC and help make it one of the premier CBCs for participation in all the over 2500 Counts.

Pete Read
London CBC Compiler (since 1983)

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