

London Christmas Bird Count Dec 14, 2019

It was a very successful Christmas Bird Count again this year for the 111th consecutive year. I have been organizing and compiling the CBC since 1983 and this one was quite a weird one as you will see below. Basically let me say, quantity low, quality high.

We had 136 participants this year. Our 41 teams set a record but we had fewer feeder watchers. The weather was so mild that bird feeders were not that well attended, but one species made up for that which you will be surprised at in the final paragraphs of this report. Our species total was 76 which is good for an inland count. Our total individuals were the lowest since 1989, in at 16 220. And that year we only had half the number of observers. I will discuss possible reasons below.

First the highlights. After all these years, remarkably, we added two new species to our Count. This brings our cumulative total number of species to 169, with 2 more from count week and one that was on our list based on a sighting close to our Count area. (In the early days of the count, there was no circle and people from the London Count just went to their favorite places to count. An American White Pelican was found in 1945, at Port Stanley and submitted along with our report that year. But I have excluded it from that species list.)

The first new species was a Slaty-backed Gull, in adult basic plumage, found at the London Dump on Manning Drive. It was with a myriad of other gulls loafing in fields nearby. Originally two were sighted on Friday, the day before the Count and one was luckily re-located on Saturday, by Tim Arthur and a number of others. The second species was also remarkable, a Wilson's Warbler, which of course should be wintering in Central America. It was found by the Read party along the river flats between Delaware and Komoka.

Let's wander through the highs and lows and other details of the count in the species taxonomic order.

At the Komoka Pits a number of interesting waterfowl species were noted by Lucas Foerster, Peter Burke and Mhairi McFarlane. They include our only 2nd record of White-fronted Goose (3-new high), our 8th year of reporting Cackling Goose (10), and 3 others spotted near Delaware by the VanDenBelt and Maddeford Party (13 is a new high). Also found at Komoka, a Green-winged Teal, our 11th year, and first since 2002, found by Peter Burke. As well, a pair of Ruddy Duck (12th) and a pair of Redheads (21st) were noted by the Read party. And speaking of waterfowl, Canada Geese were in higher than average numbers, Mallards were down a bit and Black Ducks have slipped to quite low levels. A new high number of Mute Swans was reported at 12. The ducks of winter, such as mergansers and goldeneye were in lower numbers than average.

As in recent years the only gallinaceous birds were Wild Turkeys and our observers found them in lower numbers this year, mostly at bird feeders such as at the Auzin's place.

A pair of Sandhill Cranes was noted by Bernie VanDenBelt out at Delaware. They have been nesting on the flats near there and are likely that resident pair.

The number and kinds of gulls were impressive at the dump. Besides the Slaty-backed, there were 2 Lesser Black-Backed, 2 Icelands, and a Glaucous Gull reported. The number of Great Black-backed Gulls was high as well as the number of Herring Gulls.

Raptors except for Bald Eagle (17) were in short supply on our CBC and there were no Harriers found.

Owlers were able to locate Screech and Great Horned during specific nocturnal owling searches and a number of the latter were found by field teams, but no other species were encountered.

A good number of species of woodpeckers were found and Laure Neish was lucky enough to find a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker in Komoka Park. However the numbers of woodpecker individuals are mostly lower than usual.

Recently the number of American Kestrels has been very low, this year at 4, but the number of Merlins has increased and it was 5, the same as the high count from last year. For the first time in several years our downtown Peregrines were not noted.

A Northern Shrike was reported by the Verboom party but no Horned Larks were found on the Count by any groups.

Pretty well all the normal winter and resident bird species were down in numbers, some, like Red-breasted Nuthatch quite a bit lower than average. A remarkable House Wren was found by Quinten Wiegiersma along the south Thames River. Seldom encountered, Ruby-crowned Kinglets were found by several parties and the number at 6 is tied with the high count.

There was a new high count of Eastern Bluebird at 22, as well. But the number of Robins, while high, was not at record levels.

House Finches were found at the lowest level since 1985, not long after they invaded Middlesex County. Just a few Purple Finches were reported. The only others recorded in Southern Ontario at the time were in Long Point, according to eBird records. A single Redpoll was at a feeder as well, with no others reported except 2 in Hamilton and 2 in Toronto this winter. The lowest number of American Goldfinch since 1998 were reported.

Only 3 Snow Buntings were reported, flying over the Weir-Roedding party near Sunningdale .

Although somewhat higher than last year, American Tree Sparrows were in short supply. The lowest number of Dark-eyed Juncos was reported since 1993. We did get one White-crowned Sparrow at a feeder and a fair number of White-throated Sparrow and other sparrows.

Blackbirds were represented by one each of Red-winged Blackbird, on the South Thames by Quinten Wiegiersma, and a Common Grackle at Westminster Ponds, submitted by the McNeil party. And a large number of Brown-headed Cowbird were at the Auzin's feeder, and one other of that species in Weldon Park, reported by the Jarrett party.

No other warblers were reported besides the afore-mentioned Wilson's, I think only the third on any CBC from Ontario over all the years of reporting.

And one more great bird, a female Rose-breasted Grosbeak was coming to Daphne Lowe's feeders, only our 2nd ever for our CBC. I knew you would be surprised.

To finish off, the numbers of House Sparrow have dropped below 1000 and at 787 are the lowest since 1954.

So why are some of the species down below the 10-year average. All across southern Ontario, on the CBCs, observers are finding much lower overall numbers.

We had a major bout of snowy cold weather in mid-November, which seems to have shaken loose any lingering birds like robins, prompting them to leave for farther south. And even potential wintering birds like juncos, may have been forced to continue southward. And according to several CBCs farther north, some of these birds were lingering up there.

Winter finches definitely have not drifted their way south, apparently the food crops are good up north.

We had quite a wet uncomfortable day albeit fairly mild, and there was no snow cover, which perhaps decreased the number of feeder birds. Some weather conditions like wind and rain cause birds to remain undercover, and only visit feeders irregularly. With snow, they would like be clustered around the feeders for food.

Birds were scattered and not pocketed at wild food sources, so it was hard for field observers to find them. I heard a lot of people lamenting the long distances walked for little gain.

I am pretty sure the number of birds we saw was not influenced by the number of participants. Although our number of participants was less than as last year, it was similar to previous years of late. There were 7 fewer feeders in operation than last year. Although the number of parties was up by about 4, we did not travel as far or drive as far, though we did put in a number of more hours at it.

As always then, it is winter conditions that seem to be the major culprit in determining our results. If you look at the trends over the more than a century of our Count, there have been a number of mild years, which provided us some good number of birds, and harsh winters which have resulted in few birds being found.

I hope it was not a case where our usual winter birds were in short supply because of a poor breeding year, brought on by some environmental condition or habitat loss, or some other problem.

It is through comparison studies over many years that patterns emerge, which is why of course our CBC is an important tool in bird research. So perhaps look at this weird year as a blip in the continuum.

Our Pot Luck at the Riverside United Church was well-attended, and we had a lot of wonderful dishes to fill us up after a hard day out in the rain. While we gobbled up dessert, I asked each group for some highlights. Some of the highlights were some of the great experiences had by the group, and others were special birds. Lots of fun to discuss our day over great food.

Thank you to all who helped make the day possible, from the folks watching their feeders, to the folks out in the field, to those who helped in other ways. The Wakes for picking up the key, and helping set up the tables and chairs, and Sue Read for sorting out the foods. And to the others who helped with set up and take down. Now that all the parties and feeders have sent in their results, I have compiled and sent off the results to the Audubon Society. The results have also been posted on the Nature London Website. Included are columns indicating past results, averages, etc.

Until our next CBC on Saturday, December 19, 2020, have a great new year.

Pete Read
Organizer and Compiler London CBC
Since 1983