

## London Christmas Bird Count

**December 19, 2020**

What an amazing year for our 112<sup>th</sup> CBC on Saturday, December 19, 2020! With the threat of cancellation for the first time since 1909, it was a wonder we were able to complete it, but with extra efforts to be safe and to keep others safe, we met with success. We had a record number of 152 participants on 50 routes and watching 39 feeders. I had to scour the maps to be rather inventive at creating new routes to accommodate the folks new to our Count. We had a grand total of 80 species, higher than average, and a whopping total of individuals at 26733, much higher than the last few years.

The weather cooperated fairly well. Although there was a somewhat brisk wind out of the south at times, the temperature hovered around 0 and while it was overcast all day, and our glasses received a little mixed precipitation, overall conditions were good for getting around in the field. As well, there was no snow cover to impede our movements. I suppose since some of the area we walked had thin ice layers, one needed to have boots on to muck through at times. I know my group had that problem. Yay, for splash pants and Wellingtons.

Besides careful observation and good coverage, good timing and luck play a part in our success. But the weather plays a role in determining our sightings, too. If the fall and early winter is particularly cold and snowy, any lingering species would likely move on or perish. But if there is colder and snowier weather to the north, or food crops there are in shorter supply, we end up with more winter finches and other migrants. In fact, a number of those northern species did come down this year, likely due to food shortages, and were represented on our list. And since we had only had some limited cold and snowy weather, we have a few of those lingering species as well. I suspect most of both the irruptive and lingering species moved farther south this year, due to those couple of snowy and cold periods we suffered, after looking at our results.

Another interesting fact about weather is that if it is snowy and cold, the feeder watchers are incredibly pleased about the number of birds coming to their feeders, while the field crews curse how hard it is to find birds. This year, it was generally the opposite, perhaps due to our relatively good field conditions. The feeder participants thought their stations somewhat sparse for birds but I think some of us in the field did note that there were not as many passerines to be found. So looking at our results, a variety of factors including weather determined our results.

Let us run through the list to have a look at the goodies that our intrepid Counters found on our Day.

A local upswing in Canada Geese did not reach our record but was significantly higher than the last few years. This upswing was also noted in Mallard as well, but American Black Duck is at low numbers. This species is in general decline in Eastern North America, likely due in part to the increase and spread of Mallards through hybridization. These birds often linger in large numbers as they can glean food from spillage in agricultural fields if snow cover does not preclude that. Even with the cold snap freezing up much of the open water on ponds, there were small patches located with some lingering waterfowl species, waterfowl which we sometimes miss, unless luckily found on the river. Species included both scaup, Redhead, Ring-necked Duck, Ruddy Duck, and a Canvasback which was found the day after the Count, by Reuven Martin.

Of note, three swan species were recorded, but Tundra Swan was found the day after the Count, by Laure Neish at Komoka putting on our Count Week list. In the week following the Count Period, there have been many flocks of that species travelling through, perhaps owing to recent cold and snow to the north. We have breeding Mute Swans at Komoka, and the number had climbed to 8. I was driving by the day before the Count and had noticed 9 but did not check them closely. Reuven found a Trumpeter Swan the day after the Count, so I raced over to see that indeed one of the 9 was a Trumpeter. The group doing the area had noted that two swans were sleeping with their heads tucked, avoiding identification. But Mhairi McFarlane amazingly had taken a picture of the sleeping swans and by blowing the pictures up, we could see a couple of unmistakable details which made one of those sleeping swans the missing Trumpeter.

Wild Turkeys must have had a successful breeding season, as the numbers were double last year's numbers. The trend of other gallinaceous species continues at a low ebb, with no others found.

A fortunate find for the McCrae party on the North Branch of the Thames east of Richmond was a Pied-billed Grebe. No Sandhill Cranes appeared to be lingering, even though a good number passed through the area in the fall. Great Blue Herons were in much lower numbers this year.

Gulls were well-represented. There was a slight decline in number of Herring Gulls, but an amazing increase in the numbers of Ring-billed, with many at the dump but also a good number along the Thames River. Other rarer gulls such as Glaucous, Lesser Black-backed and Iceland were found at the dump by Reuven Martin, who is a welcome addition to the southeast driving route. Hopefully he will continue the successes of the former "Martin team" which used to do the dump years ago. Two hybrids gulls were seen in Count Week, both involving Herring Gull. Brandon Holden noted a Herring Gull x Glaucous Gull and a Herring Gull x Great Black-backed Gull at the dump on the 18<sup>th</sup>.

Raptors were found in good numbers overall. Accipiter numbers are up sharply, as were Red-tails. The number of Merlins has risen since last year, probably owing to the fact they are nesting in our City. As well it was good to see so many Kestrels. A downtown Peregrine was noted by the Van Horik/Payne parties, and Reuven and Jason McGuire each reported one, in areas so separate and at different times, they are likely different birds. And we got a Northern Harrier, found by Julie Read and Claire McCann on the Komoka Creek flats. These are now encountered irregularly on the Count.

We had an abnormally high number of Bald Eagles this year at 46. It was a new record high count. It was extremely hard to collate the numbers as they do travel about a lot during the day and about 80 were reported. I look at sections of the river, and where known nests are located and the timing of the sightings and reported plumages to help with that. I think I have it about right, considering the River water was open and there were a lot of tasty lingering waterfowl, and they had accessibility to spawning fish, and given that we have at least 5 active nests that I know of. Adding to the ones we have nesting hereabouts, are the ones which have moved south to congregate in our area while conditions are good for them. Some folks reported congregations of them. We had 8 flying together over Komoka Creek.

Mourning Doves are back up a bit in numbers and more Rock Pigeons were also found this year. I think the relatively milder day allowed the latter species to be more out in the open. Often when it is very cold, they will hunker down in sheltered places and are not so visible. A greater number of kingfishers were noted, perhaps due to more field parties looking along water sources and more open water. As mentioned before, most running water was completely open.

Conditions for nocturnal observations of owls was good, at least in the morning and on my route, out of about 12 spots, we ended up with 9 screech and one Great Horned. However, the latter species was not found in as good numbers as usual in the field.

One notable owl was found. A Barred Owl was reported from Westminster Ponds on the day before the Count, but not seen on Count Day. However, as I looked at one of the field reports, I was gob smacked to see that one was seen on the Denstedt property near Komoka. Subsequent searches for the Westminster Ponds bird have turned it up a few times, but the one at the Denstedt property remains elusive for now. It is the first of its kind to be found on our Count Day, but in 2007 we did have it as a Count Week bird. There has been an irruption of that species in Southern Ontario this year.

We had several thrushes, with Robins leading the charge. We recorded well over 400 of these which is hundreds more than last year. Eastern Bluebirds occurred in about the same number as last year, mainly to the west of London. There was a Hermit Thrush reported from Springbank Park by the Welch party.

Perhaps because of having more feeder watchers, our numbers of feeder type birds were elevated this year. That includes the woodpeckers, as all the common ones were higher in number. We also found more Pileated than usual. While we did not have the luck of finding a Sapsucker on Count Day, there was one located after the Count in Gibbons Park, which means we have it during Count week. The number of Northern Flickers was down from several previous years.

Luckily, a Northern Shrike was added to our total species. It was found by a local birder, and reported to Bruce DeBoer in Killaly Flats when the two met.

Back to feeder birds. Jays, chickadees, nuthatches, cardinals, and others were all in higher numbers than last year, some of them significantly, but of course they were not all found at feeders, as our large number of parties were successful at uncovering troves of these great little wintering birds. Although we found considerably more Cardinals this year, we will not likely regain our once held honor of being Cardinal Capital of Canada, as a few other Counts have increased their numbers of War Birds in recent years.

Chickadees and Golden-crowned Kinglets remain the only species which have been found on every one of our London CBCs since 1909.

Red-breasted Nuthatches were found in a record high numbers, perhaps a result of lingering multitudes of these birds in the area, and 13 Carolina Wrens were found at feeders, which greatly increased our numbers of those birds to near record levels.

Just a couple of Tufted Titmice were discovered this year. One was found by Bernie Vandenbelt along the Thames near Delaware. Another one was down behind houses along the Medway Valley found by Eleanor Heagy and Cathy Griesbecht.

All sparrow species numbers were up, particularly the rarer, White-crowned. Many of that species were found at feeders but some were found in the field. A large increase was also noted in Swamp Sparrow, with many contributed by the McFarlane/Lucas and the Read parties along the river near Komoka. And Julie and Claire discovered a Fox Sparrow on the flats near Komoka Creek, our only one on the Count.

Winter finches were somewhat represented this year. It was hoped that the influx of crossbills, Evening Grosbeaks, and others from the recent irruption of winter finches would linger for the Count, but it did

not happen as planned. There was one flock of White-winged Crossbills spotted on our Komoka Creek walk. Though only a few groups reported Redpolls, Reuven had a mob of almost 100 out near Regina Mundi, of which 2 were Hoary Redpolls, our third time for that species on the Count. Goldfinch were present in higher numbers than last year, and I already mentioned the increase in Red-breasted Nuthatches, both species which occasionally move south in numbers. As well, there were a good number of Pine Siskin found. Although not noted on Count Day, a green morph of that species was found at Lucas Foerster's feeders during Count Week.

For the second year in a row, no Horned Larks were found on the Count, though Chuck Sperlich and his wife did manage to get a small flock of 30 Snow Buntings. They also were the first to report a blackbird species other than Starlings, a single Common Grackle, seen on a wire near the intersection of Fanshawe and Hyde Park Road. A second of that species was at the feeders of the Wiltons.

Blackbirds are usually in short supply, but two separate incidences provided some remarkable results. At the Westminster Dump, besides many Starlings, Reuven found a flock of over 300 Brown-headed Cowbirds, almost 8 times our number from last year though not near the maximum we have had. Red-winged Blackbirds are a common nesting species but rare in the winter. We have had them on about 1/3 of our Counts. The total number seen on the 35 Counts was 90, with about 1 to 5 being the usual numbers and usually at bird feeders. But a large flock of about 93 was noted by two parties, the Verboom party near the mouth of Komoka Creek, and just across the river at the Belvoir Farm, by Bernie VandenBelt.

I wanted to share a few stories which were related to me with our bird lists. Several of us have found active beavers on the local waterways. Ken Clarke mentioned seeing several large trees along Stony Creek being chewed down. On our route, there is now a beaver dam on the Komoka Creek, and a lodge. Surprisingly, much of the construction included corn stalks from the nearby agricultural fields which would have been used before the harvest and the beavers were probably eating the corn as well. A couple of us walked over the creek on this dam, which was very well built and not damaged by us walking on it at all. The beavers were fast asleep in a nearby lodge. Lissette Verbeem mentioned they also saw a mink and muskrat on their route near Hyde Park. I heard from Chuck Sperlich that he watched a mink try to catch a mallard, from underwater. I imagine many of us saw deer, or their signs and perhaps signs of other creatures. I know most of you have stories of your routes, favourite memories of your walk, and the feeder people will hopefully have had some of their favourite visitors at their feeders.

Since we were not able to gather for our usual Potluck dinner after the Count, all information was sent to me via the internet. With hope we will be back to normal next year, as I really miss that social gathering and the round-up of our best sightings.

I want to thank all the participants for their efforts and encouragement this year. When I first took over compiling the London Count in 1983, we had very few participants and teams compared to this year. It made the Count a snap to collate, but I was glad to open this worthwhile activity to more and more observers over the years. I hope that everyone gets a lot of happiness out of participating in such a worthwhile project. I know several teams which have children and grandchildren taking over the routes. I hope such traditions continue. I encourage every team leader to promote their route to fellow birders and family members who may not be involved yet to keep our Count successful. Each route and feeder provide important data to a long-running event.

And a special thanks to Hugh Casbourn who excels at Excel and helped in developing the spreadsheet which I use to display the results. I appreciate his help with that, as I feel that it is more interesting than simply posting the results as a list of birds and numbers.

Have a safe and happy 2021, and set our London CBC date of Saturday, December 18 on your calendar.

Pete Read

Compiler London CBC

Since 1983