

## **London Christmas Bird Count, Saturday, December 17, 2022**

The 114<sup>th</sup> consecutive London Christmas Bird Count is in the books. That is, the data that we have collected for this year is in the database for the Audubon CBC and can be used by researchers and statisticians who can help to preserve wintering areas for birds as well as to study population fluctuations, among other initiatives.

We had 50 parties in the field, which led to some great coverage. We also had 33 feeders being monitored. A total of 152 participants were involved.

Total number of species was 79, and a respectable number of individuals were tallied, almost 23,000.

Of great interest, two new species were added to our list of birds. This brings our total number of species to 188.

The conditions were generally mild leading up to the Count but were getting cooler so that still water was only partly open. Running water was mostly open though. In this type of winter, we always hope to get some lingering birds and this year was no exception. However, without the cold and snow, winter finches, Snow Buntings and other such species which are often variable in number were not in the area to be sighted on our Count.

Despite the birds being widely scattered, due to what appears to be easy availability of wild food at the time of our Count, the windy conditions of the day meant that most field parties were rewarded with a few occasional pockets of birds of a variety of species which were holed up in sheltered areas. But groups had to be out a bit longer and cover more ground for success. Field conditions varied throughout the day as a few snow showers came through the area. But with no snow on the ground conditions did not slow anyone up and the food crop seemed particularly good for keeping birds fed and congregated. The routes near open water were rewarded with a number of waterfowl species. And the driving routes had generally good driving conditions as the snow did not cause problems other than visibility at times.

A number of special species were found. Probably the best among those would be the two new species for our Count. Common Raven nest in Middlesex now in a few locations, and they have been seen and heard fairly often in the area throughout the year. What is very interesting is that not one but four parties, some quite far apart, actually found one. Usually if a new species is seen, it is by one party. Jason and Paul located one driving in their southwest route, Dave and Winnie found one near Lambeth, there was one in Killaly Meadows found by the Nagy group, and the McCrae party had one close by to the west of Adelaide Street. I considered the two near Adelaide where the Thames River crosses to likely be the same individual, and only compiled three overall, but despite that, all the teams were involved in the first sighting for a species on the Count. And believe it or not a second new species was counted this year. My party scared up a group of 5 blackbirds. Within the group we identified at least one as a Brewer's Blackbird.

As a result of the partially to mostly open water, waterfowl were noted in respectable number and variety. A Snow Goose was located at Sharon Creek Conservation Area by the Southwest driving route people of Paul and Jason. Komoka Pits and the surrounding areas, as well as routes along the Thames River, provided a number of unusual species courtesy of several field teams. A Trumpeter Swan, a pair of Shovelers, a Gadwall, Pintail and Redhead were found in the Komoka Pits and Komoka Park by Lucas and Mhairi. Our party found a Gadwall with a group of Mallards along the river. A Green-winged Teal was spotted along the north branch of the Thames by the McCrae group. So, it seems dabbling duck species had an unusually strong show. On a gravel pit pond which does not usually have open water for the Count, in the southeast driving area, Reuven found a White-fronted Goose, only the second time on the Count. A favourite waterfowl, Hooded Mergansers, were found in numbers by several groups. Interestingly, a larger than usual number of Tundra Swans were flying through the area, as at least 4 groups noted, and produced a new high total of 139. We have only had them on 12 Counts. And also interestingly, for the first time in a number of years, no Mute Swans were found, and neither were there any Cackling Geese located.

It was noted that feeder watchers generally found fewer birds congregating at their feeders. However, some feeder birds seem to be higher in number such as Hairy, Downy and Red-bellied Woodpecker, both Nuthatches and even Carolina Wren. It probably helps that the winter had been mild up to Count Day. But some typical feeder birds such as

American Tree Sparrow and Dark-eyed Junco, are lower in number at feeders, maybe as a result of the same milder conditions allowing them to remain somewhat farther north or out in the fields feeding on easily attainable wild foods. I thought the best feeder bird for rarity would be the several Tufted Titmice, but a Chipping Sparrow jumped the queue at the Jasevicius feeders. It is nearly impossible to find this rarity hereabouts in winter.

The Wild Turkeys put on a good show at the Auzins' feeders again this year, but other birds of note at their feeders included a single Brown-headed Cowbird and a Tufted Titmouse. This latter species was found in greater numbers than usual, scattered mostly along the waterways. The only other cowbirds were at the Westminster Dump, found by Reuven.

Sandhill Cranes have been noted in the last few years on the Count, likely due to the fact that they are now breeding in the area. I remember when my son and I found the first one back in 1998, and on the Count this year observers had a new high record of 12. This is only the second year of record for Turkey Vulture, found by two groups but from the locations that Reuven and Gord saw it, it sounds like the same bird. The first time for that species was 1974. We do not get Yellow-bellied Sapsucker each year, but the Northeast driving route with the Taylors, Sawyer and Jacob got one. A Ruby-crowned Kinglet showed up on Ron's Sunningdale Golf Course walk, and I heard that Gord P. found one at Killaly in Count week. For the second year in a row, a Gray Catbird was found, this year along the south branch, by Rose and Grace. One Purple Finch was reported from Greenway Park by Leslie's group. What could be nicer than to see a red Fox Sparrow in the snow (perhaps a male Cardinal?). Laure had one at her feeder for weeks and luckily it did not disappoint her on Count Day. For the second time ever on our Count, a Lincoln's Sparrow was discovered, on the south branch of the Thames on Quinten's route. The first was found on my route by Gavin and Rob, in 2005, when I was working on a cruise ship in Antarctica. Tough call whether I would rather have gotten a winter species like that, LOL, than to be where I was. Reuven in his Southeast driving route area found several Rusty Blackbirds. That species has only been on 12 of our Counts, and the last ones were in 1989.

Quite a few species seemed to be found in greater numbers than in the last few years.

For example, Bald Eagle set a remarkable new record high of 54, no doubt due to the lingering waterfowl and the open water which allows for finding food. Though seemingly an unbelievable number, given that there are at least 7 nests in the area of London, which produce from 2 to 3 young each year, it is perhaps understandable. Many more were actually reported, but given plumage, location, and timing, I whittled it down to that number.

Winter Wren, Northern Flicker, Pileated Woodpecker, Carolina Wren, European Starling, White-crowned Sparrow, Song Sparrow, creeper, House Finch, robin, White-breasted Nuthatches, goldfinch, chickadee, Hairy Woodpecker, Belted Kingfisher, Ring-billed Gull, Common Merganser, among others, were in higher numbers. Some of these were able to linger here due to a relatively mild winter, food availability, open water or other reasons. A new record high of Eastern Bluebird was established too. Those bluebirds were all found in the Komoka area. The ones my party found were in sheltered areas feeding on Hackberry fruit and also wild grapes.

Birds which are variable in number depending on the advance of winter, like winter finches, were in small numbers, with the aforementioned Purple Finch reported in Greenway Park, and a couple of reports of Pine Siskin being the only species noted. A few Snow Buntings were also found, as well as a small number of Horned Larks. Only one Northern Harrier and a single Rough-legged Hawk are perhaps indicative of birds not being pushed this far south at this point. Cedar waxwing, often variable in number, were in low numbers, but what was interesting was that the ones seen were seen as singles instead of in their usual flocking behaviour.

A number of other birds were missing as well, including our downtown Peregrine Falcon, and no rare gulls blessed us with their presence this year.

I don't remember the last time we did not have a rare gull or two at the Westminster Dump. It did not provide the same pattern of gulls as usual. No Glaucous or Iceland Gulls were seen by Reuven as he scanned the loafing gulls, but higher numbers of Ring-billed Gulls were noted, and fewer Herring Gulls than usual were found. I heard that there was a buildup farther north of gulls so perhaps they did not arrive in time for our Count. But despite the drop in gulls,

Reuven's large flock of starlings at the dump, about 1500, helped to solidify the sizable number of starlings this year, and his total of 36 Brown-headed Cowbirds bumped up their total.

Check out the accompanying chart for more ups and downs and rare species reported on the Count. Thanks so much Hugh Casbourn for formulating our Master Database which helps me to make the Summary Sheet.

We usually have a few Count Week birds on the list, but this year we had three, all of which would have been rather overwhelmingly good for our Count, which makes me utter "darn" under my breath. A day before, but not relocated for our Count Day, was a Palm Warbler seen by Jasper Soares in Canterbury Park. It would have been a first for us. What would have been a second sighting would have been the Common Loons, two of them, which Stephen Taylor saw flying over Springbank Park, just after Count Day. And also, just after the Count, a very remarkable, not one, but possibly two White-eyed Vireos were reported by Mike Moynihan, at the west end of Springbank, which of course, being so rare, would have been a mighty first for our Count. Interestingly, earlier in December a young White-eyed Vireo was seen in Killaly Meadows, by Sawyer Dawson, but not re-found on Count Day. What is up with that many of these vireos, our first in the winter season?

I was rather disappointed, as many of you probably were, that the Potluck needed to be cancelled. With the uptick in Covid cases looming over us, and the lack of interest in having a gathering, it was necessary. Usually besides the excellent food, and fun at our gathering, I get some pretty interesting stories of the day that make the Christmas Bird Count so special. But here are a few anecdotes and thoughts mentioned to me in the submissions I got in after the Count.

I am so glad that the Jasevicius family, a number of years ago, started to accompany Bill Judd, in his last years of doing his perennial route at the Bog. Rick Martin also regularly helps out with that route. They loved being with Bill and now are continuing his route. Bev mentioned that she was "excited to once again do the Sifton Bog with an eye on expanding our neighbourhood surrounds. Sons and now grandchildren plump our numbers and of course we are delighted that the grandgirls are enthusiastic hikers. They are using binoculars and are good observers." It's fun for me to watch the Jasevicius family learn more about birds while being together as a family and there's the satisfaction of knowing this tradition at the Bog will carry on. This three-generation team joins other multi-generation groups on the Count and securing the route for the future.

Quinten's discovery of a Lincoln's Sparrow along the south branch of the Thames must have been pretty exciting. It might have been puzzling to identify at first as it is a rare winter species and so similar to Song Sparrow, but his description showed his close scrutiny of the bird, only the second of its kind to grace the species list for our Count.

Ron Weir said that he has just over 100 Mourning Doves arriving first thing in the morning at his feeders. What a carpet they must make under the feeders. And what supply of bird seed must they go through.

Not countable, but Jason and Paul saw two Emu, near Cedarcroft, the Club property. They were likely more pleased to see the Raven, a Titmouse at Cedarcroft and the Snow Goose at Sharon Creek Conservation Area.

This was the 50<sup>th</sup> year that there was a McLeod party along the Thames between Hyde Park and Kilworth. Brad was proud to be doing this third-generation route and said that they were pleased to celebrate that event with a Tufted Titmouse, only the second time for that species for that route.

Morning started early for Sue and me as we did our usual owling route. Despite the light snow and somewhat brisk winds, we had a personal record number of screech-owls, 14, and a sizable number of Great Horned Owls, 3, calling back despite the wind. When the rest of my group arrived for the field walk, I was already up for almost three hours and wondered if I could get around the route. I was pleased that 2 of my grandkids, Aravyn and Oren, joined our almost 9 km walk, and they helped spot the birds very well. I have a record from 1975 of me doing this route with Bill Girling. I also had the pleasure of walking with Dr Bill Maddeford and learning the ropes from him on another occasion. Our 3<sup>rd</sup> generation on this walk joins that McLeod group and the Jasevicius family in that generation legacy. The Verbooms have

been doing their route at the Wonnacott Farm since the 1960s, so I suspect that it is now the fourth generation sustaining coverage of that area.

My team even got a new species after all these years, a Brewer's Blackbird. Initially we did not know what we had until we put our combined experiences together for the identity of the Brewer's Blackbird. Rob accidentally startled up a group of blackbirds near a wet spot at the foot of the high valley bank, and noted the smaller than grackle size, yellow/pale eyes and other differences between them and similar species like Red-winged Blackbird and Cowbird besides the grackle. Two of us got a good look at one which stopped in a low bush. It had a somewhat glossy purplish head with green gloss on the body and a pale yellowish eye, features which both I and our other adult birder Jeremiah saw. I tend to go for the most common species when I see a different potentially rare species than usual and talked myself and our group into Rusty Blackbird, it being more likely. But upon contemplation, and in discussing plumages of the two species with local experts and pulling upon previous experiences, determined it to be a Brewer's Blackbird. The other birds that we saw with it did not show themselves well, so we listed them as Blackbird sp. though they could have been Rusty or Brewer's, I guess. Pretty exciting and yet embarrassing that I didn't realize it immediately, since having seen such a plumage twice before in winter, once in 1990 and once in 2007. And I have also seen the species in various places in the breeding season.

Sawyer and Gord P. had been doing the route along the Thames north of the Forks for a number of years and decided on a change for this year. Sawyer joined up with the Northeast driving route, and I think he is glad he did. Sawyer was pleased to work with Stephen and the rest of the team, as he was pretty pumped to see the Sapsucker. Also, he noted that at one point he and the others jammed into Jacob's Mini Cooper. I know how tall some of them are, especially Sawyer, and it reminded me of the fad years ago involving Volkswagen Beetles with arms and legs and bodies stuffed in a small space. He also mentioned the shortbread cookies that Catherine made which I imagine were a big hit with the group. I think Gord enjoyed doing Killaly, too, even though he had to walk about 20 km to complete the route, and perhaps like me, had a good rest the following day.

Dave Wake, who along with Winnie does the route along the Dingman Creek, sent me a little note about his participation over the years. His words are as follows. "I believe my first Christmas Bird Count was in 1965. My parents and I joined Frank Cook for a route that included Springbank Park. There was fresh snow on the ground, and it turned to freezing rain while we were out. That did not deter me from returning for subsequent counts. I think I have been part of almost every count since then. I may have missed one or two along the way."

I know many of you enjoy doing the CBC every year, hoping for the unknown adventure and rare birds and having your own traditions for the day which makes it special. And even if no striking birds are seen the time given to the project is worthwhile and of course increases our knowledge of birds. If you are part of a multi-generational team which I did not mention, sorry. Please let me know about your family experience with this worthwhile winter pastime.

One new innovation I tried was to have people submit eBird checklists, but what I found was that it was rather too complicated. I ended up with at least 20 to 25 extra checklists to go over, as people shared all their multiple checklists for the day instead of compiling their lists for submission. It seems to be best that people continue to use eBird to make checklists if that is what they want to do, but then to compile their checklists onto my submission forms.

So, overall, it was a very good Count for species and individuals. Our number of participants continues to be high. But if you can please help gather in a few more people to enjoy the day, that would be helpful. I am especially interested in finding more feeder watchers, as the areas of London with homes are not well covered. And some of the wild areas in and around London could use more people, especially in order to take over from us older folks when we have retired from our routes. I was glad to have a third generation join me, hopefully securing the future of my route.

Thanks to all who took part and enjoy birding in the New Year.

If you enjoy helping to do research like the CBCs, you might also like to take part in the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas. We are going to be starting our 3<sup>rd</sup> year of this extremely important project, one which has pinpointed important bird areas across Ontario. As with previous atlases, the work leads to protection of such places. Some of our Region is in need of

more coverage, and certainly we need more volunteers to get the job done. Birding is enjoyable on its own, but there is a sense of pride in doing something worthwhile to help birds and in so doing, one can explore new birding areas and learn more about bird behaviour. You can contact me for more information or go to [www.birdsontario.org](http://www.birdsontario.org) to learn more.

Anyway, once again, I must thank you all for participating this year in the London CBC. I hope to see you sign up again next year for more birding fun.

Pete Read

Compiler London Christmas Bird Count

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