

## 114<sup>th</sup> London Christmas Bird Count

It was a wonderful mild day to be out and about looking for birds on Saturday, December 16, our 114<sup>th</sup> consecutive London CBC. There was a bit of an easterly wind, but nothing too harsh, and the temperature ranged from about 2 to 8 Celsius. Although it was overcast for much of the day, no precipitation pestered us, and no snow covered our way, though I did almost lose my boots a couple times. We have had mild conditions before and in some ways, it is a welcome relief from snow covered or icy trails and roads. In some ways, because it meant that a lot of ground needed to be covered to find the birds which appeared to be scattered due to good access to wild food. Most water was open allowing for many waterfowl to remain. A number of interesting passerine species were also lingering. Most feeder watchers found the attendance at their feeders to be less than ideal, as the birds spread out foraging on wild foods rather than the offerings at the feeders. And field parties lamented that they had to go longer distances before finding a group of wintering birds. Still, we did exceedingly well, what with the efforts everyone made to gather the results.

But our total species was 83, just one shy of our best max. We also had 8 Count Week birds. The 26141 individuals are pretty high, higher than average, mostly due to the numbers of waterfowl. We had 53 routes this year, a new high for them, and 27 bird feeders. A few of the groups consisted of multiple generations, such as the Verbooms, and the Reads. By encouraging our kids and associates to join in the fun, the Count will continue to be successful.

The most amazing bird had to be a long-lingering Philadelphia Vireo, first found by Reuven Martin in late November, in Pottersburg Creek Park, and re-found just before the Count. We had a number of searchers out looking for it, and Rose Braxton and her team happened upon it on Count Day, to add it to our CBC bird list.

Also, a new species, a Black-billed Magpie, which had been hanging out at Dingman Constructed Wetlands, since about December 2, was located on Count Day by Jason McGuire's team. It is considered a "provisional" species in that the provenance of the bird is uncertain. Likely it may have been a member of the group seen on Fingal Line during the summer, but I will submit it with details and see what the CBC administrators say.

As can be seen on the Summary Chart, a multitude of species were found in higher-than-average based on the last 10 years. And a few species were in lower-than-expected numbers. I suspect most of these fluctuations were due to the mild winter so far this year but also to the increased participation in the Count.

Although we did have some cold blasts, which probably caused some of the typical wintering species to come down to these latitudes, many typically migrant species from around here were able to remain due to available food supplies. Some species were more obvious and sighted more easily as they were not hunkered and sheltered from cold.

Species which were down in number significantly, were species which are often variable in number, ones which sometimes come south in large numbers, such as winter finches, and do not flow in this way if the food supply and weather allows them to remain to the north. And food availability from insects to amphibians (see later), berries, seed, and even fish were in good supply and not under a foot of snow around here, allowing for birds to linger.

Also, to be noted, more parties were out, giving us better coverage. We had a new high for parties, hours in the field, and distance walked. This would help bring the totals up as well. A few more people were also out

owling, which increased the numbers of Eastern Screech-owl, and Great Horned Owls. Sue and I got a new record high of 15 of the smaller ones on our route, mostly due to the mild temperatures and slight wind.

Many passerine species were also found in higher than usual this year, again as noted on the summary chart. And the number of new record high counts for species from the 113 previous London CBCs, was quite impressive. Several waterfowl, thrushes and others were record high. Tufted Titmouse was near record high and Common Yellowthroat tied its high count. Check the chart for more information on the changes in numbers for this extraordinary year. A few details will follow here.

Waterfowl was well-represented in both species and quantity. The rarer ones include Snow Goose (9<sup>th</sup> CBC), found on the Komoka Park team of Lucas Foester and Mhairi McFarlane, likely the same one seen by the nearby team near Delaware of Bernie VanDenBelt and Bill and Ted Maddeford. A Cackling Goose (10<sup>th</sup>) was reported on the Dump and vicinity route by Reuven. Reuven also saw a flock of Tundra Swans (13<sup>th</sup>) in his area. On the Komoka Pits, Lucas and Mhairi reported 5 Lesser Scaup (17<sup>th</sup>) and a large number of 101 Ring-necked Ducks (18<sup>th</sup>). An example showing how widely we had to search for birds came when I went down to Caverhill Park in Komoka and scoped roosting and feeding waterfowl at the close of the day. I was gob smacked to see the gravel pit lake crammed with hundreds of ducks of a number of species. I noted 2 pair of Great Scaup (12<sup>th</sup>), usually a deep-water species found on the Great Lakes in winter, and a horde of 78 Redhead Duck (24<sup>th</sup>), a new record high. Also, I found 14 Ruddy Duck (14<sup>th</sup>) in a small raft on the lake. And rather amazingly there were hundreds of Mallards, Canada Geese, Hooded and Common Mergansers which also appeared to be roosting there for the night. A Pied-billed Grebe was not found on Count Day but is a Count Week species, being noted before and after our day.

Our only Gallinaceous birds are Turkeys these days and Karen and Eric Auzins' feeders and "turkey farm" continued to horde many of them.

Sandhill Cranes have appeared on only 6 our Counts, a result of an up-tick in the species in recent years and local nesting in Middlesex and the surrounding area. It must have been exciting for the Delaware group, Bernie and/or the Maddefords to see 28 of them.

The gulls, especially those near the London Dump, held a different make-up in species, again likely due to the mild weather. The Ring-bills outnumbered the Herring by quite a bit. Reuven managed to find only one Iceland Gull (17<sup>th</sup>). We do our Count on a Saturday, so not as many gulls hang out at the dump. For that reason, it was not surprising that the day before the Count, Quinten Wiergersma found Glaucous, Lesser and Great Black-backed Gulls there. So they are Count Week birds.

Bald Eagles are still nesting in and near London, and there are 3 active nests in the Komoka/Delaware area, so no surprise that a number of adults and immatures were noted there but also a number of them were found along the river by a number of parties. Added together they are not a record we still are doing well with this species.

A Red-shouldered Hawk (24<sup>th</sup>) has eluded us on our Count Day since 2006, but Lillian and Gary Gould found and photographed one in Killaly Woods.

Also in this area, Killaly, Gord Payne and his group found a Barred Owl (2<sup>nd</sup>) and watched it drop down to consume a frog. I guess the amphibian croaked? I mentioned the good number of owls responding to callbacks or found on the Count. A roost of Long-eared Owls was found for our Count Week.

We had no less than three Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers (37<sup>th</sup>), one on the south branch located by Quinten, one on the north branch by Cathy's group and one in exactly the same location, maybe the same tree, as last year by Steven Taylor and Sawyer Dawson's team.

Only one Merlin (23<sup>rd</sup>) was seen this year by Gord Payne's group in Killaly. Kestrels continue in dwindling numbers and our downtown Peregrines were not located for this Count.

A species which showed up for only the second year was a Common Raven, which Joan Taylor and Ian Platt found being harassed by a mob of crows. It also croaked but via its voice.

I was pleased by the good totals for both Winter Wren (84<sup>th</sup>) and Tufted Titmice (31<sup>st</sup>) of 10 each, in a variety of places and even on one feeder report for the latter.

Wow, a lot of American Robins, which are usually found on our Count, were located but in such high numbers (648) we smashed the high number we had up till now (502).

Other thrushes included a sizable number of Eastern Bluebirds (34) and an amazing 6 Hermit Thrush, both greater than their previous highs of 23, and 5 respectively.

American Pipit was reported by Quinten from the dump area on December 15, so within Count Week.

Although not many "winter finches" and other typical winter species would be expected in such a mild year, we did get a number of Purple Finches reported, as well as a few Pine Siskin. Only one Snow Bunting put in an appearance on Reuven's route and one Horned Lark on Lucas and Mhairi's route. And Lapland Longspur was reported from the dump the day before the Count by Quinten, making it a Count Week species.

Sparrows put on a good show. There were a sizable number of Fox Sparrows (22<sup>nd</sup>) lingering, some at feeders and some in the bush, in total 3 individuals. As well, a Chipping Sparrow (12<sup>th</sup>), winter adult, was at the feeders of Carolyn Beacroft. And though we often strive hard to obtain any White-crowned Sparrows (50<sup>th</sup>) we got a new record of 23 on our Count. Swamp Sparrows were also in good numbers (11), but we usually do get some of that species every year.

Blackbirds were also well-represented although they were patchy in distribution and except for Brown-headed Cowbirds of which 251 were noted mostly around the city dump, were in short supply as is usual. A total of 14 Red-winged Blackbirds were found in total on three routes, while a couple of Common Grackles resided at a feeder for the Count. Rusty Blackbird was noted at the dump by Quinten, but for Count Week.

Interestingly, two warbler species have lingered hereabouts for the Count. Two Common Yellowthroat (15<sup>th</sup>), both a male and female were found at the Dingman Constructed Wetland by Lillian and Gary Gould. And a single Yellow-rumped Warbler was reported by Jason on the southwest route.

I don't think we will regain the Cardinal Capital of Canada this year with just 604 but time will tell according to what our main rivals like Hamilton and Toronto can turn up.

Feeders always contribute a respectable number of species and are important not only to survival of birds in the winter period, and for our enjoyment to watch, but also for the Count, as they draw in birds which might not be found elsewhere, especially those found in intercity neighbourhoods. The 27 strong feeder gang submitted 32 species and 1318 individuals. Mourning Doves (143), Downy Woodpecker (36), Blue Jay (62), Chickadee (89), Starlings (138), House Sparrow (144), House Finch (86), Goldfinch (152), Junco (133) and Northern Cardinal (67) contributed most to our grand total.

As mentioned, Karen and Eric had a flock of turkeys at their feeders, 77 of them. I see that by far Ron Weir had the most Mourning Doves, 71, which appear to be rather scarce elsewhere this year. Of note, two Tufted Titmice were found at Derk and Mariane Goetz's feeders by Tony Verboom. Purple Finch seem to be always scarce for our CBC, as most migrate a bit farther south if they come through here. But one was reported at Karen's feeders. One Fox Sparrow brightened Laure's day, a bird which has been hanging about since the fall. An unusual bird for our Count, the last one a few years ago, two Common Grackles were spotted at the Derk and Mariane's feeders by Tony Verboom.

I did not see any butterflies on our Count, as I did on a mild Point Pelee Count last year, but a few other crazy species turned up. Of course, the frog that was devoured by the Barred Owl was interesting, but a Garter Snake was seen by Dave and Winnie Wake on their route, and a toad was noted while Lissette Verbeen wandered on her route. If any of you other participants found "summer" species let me know.

In the past, everyone produced a checklist and sent it to me and this year there would have been 80 sent to me by email. This takes ages to transpose to an Excel file where I could compile the results. Glenn Berry came to the rescue and constructed an online submission form for each group, the feeders and the field participants. The route contacts and feeder folk sent in their data online, and it instantly went to a spreadsheet which saved a lot of time, and likely a few transposition errors on my part. Thanks so much to Glenn.

We had an extraordinarily Count this year due to a number of reasons. The mild weather caused fluctuations in numbers, many for an increase, and gave us some pretty great species. More participants put in more time and distance this year, and I am always glad to see more involvement, so that more people can enjoy winter birding. I hope all of you reading this can encourage others, especially young people, to volunteer for the CBC.

It was definitely a milder winter for the Count. Back in the late 70s and into the 1980s, we had mild winters too, and even a couple kinds of swallows and other summer species were noted on our Counts, but conditions got back to "normal" and we had snow and cold for most winters into the end of the century. Now though, the worries seem to be of global climate changes permanently disrupting the natural movements of our birds which probably resulted in all these higher numbers and lingering birds this year. It is of interest to note these changes, and to watch the results on the CBCs throughout the Western Hemisphere, over the next few years to study this worrying trend. Who knows, maybe next year will be abnormally cold?

All the participants must be thanked for their efforts beating about the bushes and intently watching their feeders. And thanks to Glenn, who worked on the online forms, our submission and tabulations were streamlined to produce more accuracy and to speed in finding the final results. Thanks everyone.

Pete Read

Compiler London Christmas Bird Count

Since 1983