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# LIVING

## Bird-count totals below average

Standing on the side of the road at 1 a.m., hands cupped to frozen ears in the hope that a barred owl will respond to your imitation of its call, may not figure among the



### OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Drew Monkman

Christmas traditions of most people. However, for large numbers of birders, the holiday season is nearly as much about braving the elements and counting birds as it is about reuniting with family and exchanging gifts. Dating all the way back to 1900, Christmas bird counts (CBCs) are held every year between mid-December and early January in more than 1,800 localities across Canada, the U.S. and Latin America. In Peterborough, the first count took place in 1951, and has been a holiday tradition ever since. Spending an entire day outside looking for birds is also the ideal antidote to the consumerism and general madness of much of the holiday season.

A Christmas bird count takes place during a single calendar day and covers the area of a circle measuring 24 kilometers in diameter. There are two counts in the Kawarthas; one centred in Peterborough and a second centred just north of Petroglyphs Provincial Park. The circle is divided up into a number of sectors, with each sector being covered by a different group of birders. By car, foot, snowshoe and ski, birders are out from before dawn until nightfall, recording not only the different species seen or heard but also the number of individual birds.

Part of the motivation in doing a bird count is the hope of finding an uncommon species, larger than usual numbers of a given species, or maybe even a bird that is new to the count. Although the counts are in some ways social events, they do provide valuable information on the relative abundance and distribution of bird species, especially since the data base goes back so many years.

This year, the Peterborough CBC took place on Sunday, Dec. 16, while the Petroglyph count was held on Saturday, Jan. 5. Unfortunately, the Peterborough count coincided with the first major snow storm of the year which made walking, driving, and seeing or hearing birds close to impossible for much of the day. Bird numbers were therefore quite low. Conversely, the weather did co-operate for the Petroglyph count. It's just too bad a number of the usual birds forgot to show up!

Much of the story of this year's bird counts across central and southern Ontario can be linked to the very poor seed crops this past summer and fall on most coniferous and deciduous trees. Consequently, wild food is quite scarce. Species such as crossbills, purple finches, and pine siskins were completely absent on both local bird counts, having left the province by mid to late fall. Other seed-dependent species, like red-breasted nuthatches, were only present in very low numbers.

The lack of wild food has had some positive effects, however, at least for humans. Because northern Ontario crops of native mountain-ash (rowan trees) were also generally poor this year, pine grosbeaks have been wandering south since



A female pine grosbeak (above) and a common redpoll (below). Both species were present in the Christmas bird counts in our area.

Karl Egressy, special to The Examiner

early November in search of the fruit of ornamental crabapples and European mountain-ash. Both of these familiar yard trees had reasonable crops in central and southern Ontario in 2007 and have been attracting dozens of these beautiful birds. They were particularly common on the Petroglyph count.

In many cases, pine grosbeaks have been returning to the same tree almost daily for winter refuelling. A flock of pine grosbeaks feeding in a snowy, fruit laden crabapple or mountain ash is a truly memorable winter sight. Some pine grosbeaks have also been showing up at sunflower feeders, especially outside of the city, where there are fewer ornamental fruit trees available.

The poor native mountain-ash berry crop also explains why bohemian waxwing numbers were high. Right now, you can see flocks of 100 or more of these birds eating buckthorn berries and crabapples in many parts of Peterborough.

As predicted by Ron Pittaway of the Ontario Field Ornithologists last September, common redpoll numbers, too, have been quite high in the Kawarthas this winter. The seeds of both white and yellow birch are these birds' favourite winter food and, since birch seed crops are very poor throughout Ontario, redpolls have been flocking to feeders in large numbers. Redpolls made a good showing on both bird counts.

### Peterborough CBC results

The heavy snow, strong winds, and poor visibility affected not only the number of species and individual birds, but also the number of observers brave enough to head out into the storm. Thirty-three species and 3,264 individual birds were tallied the day of the count by 21 field observers. Both of these totals were well below the average for the last 10 years of 53 species and 9,328



individuals. Another seven bird species were recorded, however, during the period immediately before and after the count.

The first number is the number counted this year, while the number in parentheses is the average number over the past 10 years: black duck 1 (6), mallard 332 (566), common goldeneye 33 (60), hooded merganser 1 (3), common merganser 7 (27), Cooper's hawk 2 (2), red-tailed hawk 1 (31), ring-billed gull 2 (152), greater black-backed gull 1 (12), rock pigeon 26 (895), mourning dove 161 (461), great horned owl 1 (5), downy woodpecker 21 (38), hairy woodpecker 23 (30), pileated woodpecker 4 (6), blue jay 66 (231), American crow 239 (309), black-capped chickadee 519 (1114), red-breasted nuthatch 5 (9), white-breasted nuthatch 24 (49), bohemian waxwing 325 (322), cedar waxwing 7 (101), northern shrike 1 (6), European starling 359 (1412), northern cardinal 42 (63), American tree sparrow 92 (251), dark-eyed junco 114 (146), snow bunting 562 (327), pine grosbeak 13 (31), house finch 28 (153), common redpoll 141 (219), American goldfinch 77 (326), house sparrow 4 (304). Total birds 3,264 (9,328) Total species 33 (53).

### Petroglyphs CBC results

Twenty-nine birders in six parties helped out with the 21st annual Petroglyph CBC, scouring the area bordered by Apsley in the north, Methuen Lake in the east, Stony Lake in the south, and Highway 28 in the west. A total of 31 species were recorded, four less than the average number of 35. In all, 2,391 individual birds were seen, which is a little below average. The six most common birds of the day were black-capped chickadee (846), blue jay (403), common redpoll (393), common raven (114), evening grosbeak (113), and pine grosbeak (87).

Unlike last year, when large numbers of birds were found in woodlands, far from feeders, nearly all of this year's birds were depending on human handouts. Blue jay numbers at feeders were particularly impressive, with some feeders providing food to three or more dozen of these birds.

When the Petroglyph count was first started, it was primarily to keep track of the relatively large number of bald eagles that overwinter in the vicinity of Stony Lake. Bald eagle numbers were

above average on the day of the count with nine birds tallied. In addition, a golden eagle was also seen. Although it has been observed on the count before, this species is still a rare winter visitor to the Kawarthas and one species I've yet to see myself here.

Owls, too, made their presence known. The above-average number of barred owls recorded was largely due to the efforts of Tim Dyson, who walked along the north shore of Stony Lake from midnight to 3 a.m., imitating the harsh "who cooks for you" call of this species. Tim was able to coax a response out of three birds, two of which actually showed themselves.

Here are the results of this year's count: bald eagle 9 (6), red-tailed hawk 4 (0), rough-legged hawk 1 (0), golden eagle 1 (0), ruffed grouse 5 (25), wild turkey 29 (1), rock pigeon 73 (26), mourning dove 10 (7), barred owl 5 (2), downy woodpecker 22 (25), hairy woodpecker 66 (46), black-backed woodpecker 3 (2), pileated woodpecker 15 (11), gray jay 5 (6), blue jay 403 (219), American crow 7 (5), common raven 114 (105), black-capped chickadee 846 (918), red-breasted nuthatch 32 (118), white-breasted nuthatch 72 (58), brown creeper 5 (19), European starling 13 (31), American tree sparrow 6 (58), snow bunting 10 (56), pine grosbeak 87 (24), common redpoll 393 (?••••), American goldfinch 17 (141), evening grosbeak 113 (104), house sparrow 20 (10). Total birds 2,391 (2,591) Total species 31 (35).

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