

localnews

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LIVING

Find the food, find the birds

Annual count bountiful around city but seedless forests keep Petroglyphs bare

Every year, the annual Christmas Bird Count (CBC) leaves at least one indelible image in my mind. This year, it was the sight of an adult bald eagle perched high in an old elm tree on the bank of the Otonabee River, just south of Peterborough. The experience was particularly special because we had found the bird by scanning with our binoculars from the top of a hill at least a kilometre away.



Drew Monkman
OUR CHANGING SEASONS

The Christmas bird count came about over 100 years ago from a desire to count birds rather than shoot them. It effectively gave birth to North America's modern conservation movement. It is also an excellent example of what we call "Citizen Science," in which volunteers help to examine the state of our natural environment. The only way that bird population trends can be monitored on a North America-wide scale is to set up a systematic volunteer count and then have their sightings submitted to a central, online database.

The results from Christmas bird counts help organizations such Bird Studies Canada and the National Audubon Society in the U.S. to prioritize bird conservation actions. Birds are increasingly being seen as indicators of biodiversity and general environmental health. In this way, participation in a CBC is more than just a great day out birding.

Christmas bird counts are held throughout North America – and, increasingly, Central and South America, too – between mid-December and early January. Dating all the way back to 1900, they represent the biggest organized birding event in the world and a holiday tradition for more than 50,000 birders each year. 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. Our first local count took place in 1951 and has occurred every year since.

We now have two local counts, one centred in Peterborough and the other in Petroglyphs Provincial Park. Each covers a circle 24 kilometres in diameter and takes one day to complete. Working in small groups and covering the circle by car, foot and sometimes even snowshoe or ski, birders work from dawn to dusk to do their best to count all of the birds within the circle.

Rivalries between groups and the hope of finding a new species for the count add a degree of competition to the experience. In fact, each group keeps its results a secret until the official compilation takes place after the post-count supper. The Peterborough count, which took place Dec. 20, usually produces about 50 species and 9,000 or so individual birds. The Petroglyph count, however, averages only 35 species and about 3,000 birds. This year, it was held on Dec. 27.

This year's Peterborough count had the good fortune of excellent weather conditions. This made seeing and hearing the birds relatively easy. Numbers of individual birds were therefore quite high, although the number of species was only average. Some of the highlights included an American wigeon, which was a new bird to the count. A record number of wild turkey (87) and

white-breasted nuthatch (95) were also found. The previous record was equalled in the case of pied-billed grebe (1), ring-necked duck (1), Cooper's hawk (5), Merlin (2), red-bellied woodpecker (2), and common raven (5). With 1,748 black-capped chickadees for the day, we were only 11 birds shy of the previous record. Had we known at the time how close we were, I'm sure it would have been possible to drum up a few more of this abundant – and delightful – species.

As for the Petroglyph count, it was a different story. Only 26 species were found whereas the average is 35. The total of individual birds was only about half of what it usually is. So, why would the Peterborough count be so productive and its poor cousin to the north fare so poorly? It all comes down to food and habitat. The Petroglyph count circle is mostly forest, which means that there is very little habitat diversity. In addition, unlike the Peterborough count, there are very few houses. This, in turn, means a lack of bird feeders. Consequently, if the amount of wild food available is poor, bird numbers can be quite low. Such was the case this year. Most coniferous and deciduous trees produced poor seed crops this past summer and fall, which means that the trees are devoid of bird food. Seed-

dependent species such as crossbills, purple finches, common redpolls, evening grosbeaks, pine siskins, and pine grosbeaks were completely absent on the count, save three individuals of the latter two species. Other seedeaters like red-breasted nuthatches were only present in low numbers. Many birds whose survival depends on seeds are nomadic. This year, they simply left the province during the fall in search of food elsewhere such as in New England, Quebec, or the Maritimes.

However, the Petroglyph count was not the only one to come up empty-handed. The woods were deadly quiet for many counts across central Ontario, including Algonquin Park. In fact, Algonquin birders found the fewest number of birds since the count began 30 years ago. An average of just three birds per hour was counted by each party. Michael Runtz, a biology lecturer at Carleton University and former Algonquin naturalist lamented: "I had a total of 14 individual birds! Normally I'd have a couple of thousand."

Most tree species produce seeds on a cyclical basis. However, there are usually some that produce more seeds in years when other produce fewer. This



Record setters

KARL EGRESSEY photos

Among the species spotted in record numbers during this year's bird count were (top to bottom) the white-breasted nuthatch, wild turkey, Cooper's hawk and merlin.



year, however, it seems the trees all got together and conspired to skip seed production completely. An exception to the seed production rule can be found in non-native species such as European buckthorn and ornamental crabapples. These trees usually produce good fruit crops every year. This probably explains why bohemian waxwings were recorded both on the Peterborough and Petroglyph counts. Many of these birds are probably still present in the city and surrounding area.

PETERBOROUGH RESULTS

The first number is the number counted this year, followed in parenthesis by the average number over the past 10 years. CW stands for "count week" and refers to a different species seen immediately before or after the count day.

Pied-billed grebe 1 (0.3), Canada goose 108 (518), American wigeon 1 (0.1), American black duck 8 (6), mallard 920 (618), ring-necked duck 1 (0.1), common goldeneye 37 (56), bufflehead 1 CW (1), common merganser 13 (18), bald eagle 1

The Great Backyard Bird Count

Another opportunity for Citizen Science is coming up soon. **The Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) will take place from Friday, Feb. 12 to Monday, Feb. 15.** It is an annual event that engages bird watchers of all levels of expertise to create a real-time snapshot of where the birds are across North America. **Simply count the birds you see for 15 minutes – or longer if you wish - in one place, and report your results online.** You can also submit photos, if you wish. Go to www.birdsource.org/gbbc/ for the details.

Online maps and lists are updated throughout the count, making it easy to see how your birds fit into the big picture. It's always interesting to see what others are reporting. **Last year, participants turned in more than 93,600 checklists online,** creating the continent's largest instantaneous snapshot of bird populations ever recorded. I encourage everyone to participate. The GBBC can also give kids a taste of what it is like to be a scientist!

(0.5), northern harrier 1 (1), sharp-shinned hawk 3 (3), Cooper's hawk 5 (3), red-tailed hawk 39 (32), American kestrel 2 (2), merlin 2 (0.8), peregrine falcon 1 CW (0), ruffed grouse 5 (8), wild turkey 87 (37), ring-billed gull 40 (122), herring gull 194 (377), greater black-backed gull 3 (9), rock pigeon 984 (862), mourning dove 742 (548), eastern screech owl 1 (0.5), great horned owl 5 (4), belted kingfisher 2 (1), red-bellied woodpecker 2 (0.3), downy woodpecker 54 (40), hairy woodpecker 41 (33), northern flicker 1 (1), pileated woodpecker 6 (5), blue jay 290 (263), American crow 526 (358), common raven 5 (5), black-capped chickadee 1748 (1188), red-breasted nuthatch 24 (16), white-breasted nuthatch 95 (52), brown creeper 3 (4), golden-crowned kinglet 5 (8), American robin 169 (131), bohemian waxwing 912 (190), northern shrike 13 (6), European starling 1287 (1227), northern cardinal 93 (67), American tree sparrow 261 (275), white-throated sparrow 1 (3), dark-eyed junco 189 (178), snow bunting 399 (334), brown-headed cowbird 1 (0.7), house finch 141 (130), American goldfinch 298 (391), house sparrow 314 (266)

Total birds 10,084 (8,803) Total species 51 (51)

PETROGLYPHS RESULTS

The first number is the number counted this year, followed in parenthesis by the average number over the past 10 years.

Bald eagle 5 (6), ruffed grouse 16 (33), Herring gull 1 (0.1), rock pigeon 74 (41), mourning dove 10 (16), great horned owl 1 (0), barred owl 1 (3), downy woodpecker 9 (25), hairy woodpecker 34 (49), pileated woodpecker 10 (17), gray jay 4 (6), blue jay 203 (282), American crow 2 (5), common raven 49 (114), black-capped chickadee 670 (998), red-breasted nuthatch 76 (172), white-breasted nuthatch 60 (76), brown creeper 4 (21), golden-crowned kinglet 5 (40), bohemian waxwing 57 (8), northern shrike 1 (1) European starling 24 (58), northern cardinal 1 (0.2), pine grosbeak 1 (19), pine siskin 2 (63), American goldfinch 189 (231)

Total birds 1,519 (2,773) Total species 26 (35)

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