

December 28, 2004

53rd Peterborough Christmas Bird Count

Standing on the side of the road at 6:00 a.m. in the bitter cold, hands cupped to frozen ears in the hope of hearing an owl over the howling wind, may not figure among the Christmas traditions of most people. However, for legions of birders, December is nearly as much about braving the elements and counting birds as it is about reuniting with family and exchanging gifts. Christmas Bird Counts are held throughout North, Central and South America every year between December 14 and January 5. Dating all the way back to 1900, it has become a holiday tradition for over 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.

A Christmas Bird Count (CBC) 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 in 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. Considerable time is spent tactfully peering into people's yards to see what is coming to their feeder - which often brings some suspicious homeowner outside to ask just what you're up to! At the end of the day, the groups gather for a much-appreciated hot meal and to compile the results. However, there is a definite air of secrecy, so as not to divulge your "best sightings" until the compilation. Part of the motivation in doing a bird count is the hope of finding an uncommon species or maybe even a bird that is new to the count.

Although the Christmas bird 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. For example, CBC results show a severe decline in Evening Grosbeak numbers in eastern North America, the cause of which is largely unknown. On the other hand, results from the past 50 CBCs show a major range expansion northward for Mourning Doves. Both of these tendencies are corroborated by data from our local CBCs as well.

This year, the 53rd annual Peterborough CBC was held on Sunday, December 19 with 27 birders in nine different groups. A total of 51 species and 6710 individual birds were seen. On average, about 9000 birds are tallied of 51 species. With afternoon temperatures of -21C, the intense cold and wind were probably responsible for the lower number of individual birds.

Although no new species or record numbers were added this year, there were a variety of interesting sightings. The highlight of the day was finding a great gray owl on Hayes Line, west of Highway 7. There appears to be a major "invasion" of great grays into central Ontario this winter from the boreal forest of northern Ontario. It is believed that this phenomenon results from cyclic population fluctuations in the owl's prey species. When small mammals are abundant, a situation that results in years when tree seed production on trees is high, owls fledge more young than usual; however, when mammal numbers crash, the birds must move elsewhere to find food. The great gray owl tends to be quite tame and care must be taken not to harass the bird and possibly interfere with its hunting and survival.

Winter finches also figured prominently this year, although well below record numbers. Common redpolls, pine siskins and purple finches were all found. Hopefully, they are an early

indication of a larger finch invasion to come. Like the great gray, these species are referred to as winter irruptives and the years in which they are common are called “flight years”. Most irruptive species breed in northern Canada and winter only intermittently south of the boreal forest. The pine grosbeak, another irruptive species, has also been sighted in recent weeks, but only in the northern Kawarthas. Watch for them in fruit trees such as crabapples.

Other interesting sightings included one northern pintail duck, two bald eagles, five glaucous gulls, two Iceland gulls, and one white-crowned sparrow. In each case, these numbers equal the previous record. The gulls, both of which nest in the high arctic and occur here only in late fall and winter, were found in the vicinity of the Bensfort Road Landfill. This is a great spot for winter gull watching. Several other count notables were three rough-legged hawks, two great blue herons and two swamp sparrows.

As is the case most years, American robins turned up in respectable numbers, especially in the west end of the city near Jackson Park. The rail-trail between the park and Lily Lake is always a good place to find them. As long as they have a full belly - which often means buckthorn berries - the cold doesn't seem to bother them in the least!

An interesting low number to point out belongs to the house sparrow. Only 123 were found, compared to a 10 year average of 362. In 1981, 2209 were tallied! House sparrows appear to be in decline throughout eastern North America. This may be due to changes in agricultural practices and direct competition from another introduced species, the house finch.

The following are the complete results for the count. The first number is the number tallied this year, while the number in parenthesis is the average over the past 10 years. great blue heron 2 (1), Canada goose 51 (584), black duck 3 (10), mallard 471 (567), northern pintail 1 (0), common goldeneye 34 (58), bufflehead 4 (1), hooded merganser 5 (1), common merganser 2 (17), bald eagle 2 (0), sharp-shinned hawk 2 (3), Cooper's hawk 1 (2), red-tailed hawk 18 (32), rough-legged hawk 3 (0), ruffed grouse 8 (11), wild turkey 40 (6), ring-billed gull 98 (108), herring gull 32 (582), Iceland gull 2 (1), glaucous gull 5 (2), greater black-backed gull 5 (13), rock pigeon 651 (804), mourning dove 389 (367), great horned owl 1 (7), great gray owl 1 (0), downy woodpecker 32 (41), hairy woodpecker 26 (29), pileated woodpecker 1 (7), blue jay 285 (223), American crow 269 (271), black-capped chickadee 1238 (1086), red-breasted nuthatch 4 (7), white-breasted nuthatch 33 (45), brown creeper 2 (5), golden-crowned kinglet 5 (5), American robin 200 (135), cedar waxwing 148 (145), northern shrike 3 (7), European starling 277 (1361), northern cardinal 75 (59), American tree sparrow 435 (233), swamp sparrow 2 (0), white-crowned sparrow 1 (0), dark-eyed junco 132 (94), snow bunting 772 (254), purple finch 41 (2), house finch 225 (258), common redpoll 139 (379), pine siskin 31 (2), American goldfinch 380 (298), house sparrow 123 (362)

What to watch for this week

As the winter season begins, take time to record the exact points on the horizon where the sun rises and sets when observed from your home. Looking from the same location, do the same at the beginning of spring, fall and, especially, summer. You should also take note of the approximate height of the sun at noon. You will be surprised by the extent of the north-south movement of the sun over the year and the difference in mid-day elevation. You will also have a greater appreciation for why we have different seasons.

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