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LIVING

Big numbers

The concurrence of extremely mild fall and early winter weather, ice-free lakes and rivers, abundant natural food crops, and calm, sunny conditions on the day of the events contributed to excellent results on both the Peterborough and Petroglyph Christmas bird counts this year. Not only were many birds found in record numbers, but the overall diversity of species was far above average.



OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Drew Monkman

Our two local bird counts are part of the 1,800 censuses that take place during the Christmas season throughout North and Central America. Over the course of a single day, teams of volunteers go from dawn to dusk to identify and count all of the birds within a predetermined circle measuring 24 kilometres in diameter. By car, foot and (usually) ski, birders attempt to cover all of the roads and habitat types within their sector of the circle. Although the main purpose of the counts is to survey early-winter bird populations, they also serve as a welcome antidote to the general madness and consumerism of the holiday season. They also provide valuable information on the relative abundance and distribution of bird species, and constitute the world's largest and oldest database on bird populations. This information will become increasingly valuable as climate change impacts more and more on bird populations.

Peterborough CBC Results

This year, the 55th annual Peterborough CBC was held on Sunday, Dec. 17. In a circle covering the city of Peterborough and outlying areas, a record 63 species were found, four more than the previous high. The total number of individual birds (11,801) was nearly 3,000 above the average of the past 10 years. The five most common birds of the day were European starling (2,553), black-capped chickadee (1,759), Canada goose, (1,277), American goldfinch (941), and rock pigeon (655). These numbers represent record highs for starlings, chickadees and goldfinches.

Eleven other species either tied or surpassed record numbers this year, namely northern harrier (6), Cooper's hawk (4), merlin (2), wild turkey (67), ring-billed gull (284), lesser black backed gull (1), American crow (465), common raven (3), winter wren (6), red-breasted nuthatch (24) and hermit thrust (1). Other noteworthy birds of the day included a Bonaparte's gull and a Baltimore oriole, both new for the count, as well as a Carolina wren and a black-backed woodpecker. The latter species, a denizen of the boreal forest, has been showing up in central and southern Ontario in higher than usual numbers this winter. As for the oriole, it has been coming to a feeder in Fowler's Corners since at least November. This is a species that should be down in Costa Rica right now! However, at least one rather confused oriole turns up somewhere in Ontario most winters.

The balmy weather and abundant natural food also probably explain why red-tailed hawks, song sparrows, swamp sparrows, white-throated sparrows and robins were still around in good numbers. Because the Otonabee River was free of ice, Canada geese had not left, either.

A few species stood out by their low numbers or total absence, too. These included very scant showings by snow buntings, common redpolls and cedar waxwings, and no horned larks, pine siskins or pine grosbeaks. Abundant food in the boreal forest this year is apparently keeping some of the winter finches closer to home this year.

The following are the complete results. The first number is the number counted this year, while the number in parenthesis is the average number over the past 10 years. CW stands for a bird seen during the count week: Common loon 1 (0), great blue heron 2 (1),

Bird counts provide valuable information on the relative abundance and distribution of species, forming the world's largest database on bird populations



A grey jay (note leg bands), above. Inset photos, from left: a northern shrike, a northern harrier, a common merganser and a merlin. All were among the species noted in the annual Christmas bird counts in our area.

Karl Egressy, special to The Examiner

Canada goose 1,277 (738), mallard 668 (573), common goldeneye 64 (57), hooded merganser 4 (2), common merganser 57 (22), northern harrier 6 (1), sharp-shinned hawk 3 (3), Cooper's hawk 4 (2), northern goshawk 1 (1), red-tailed hawk 46 (28), rough-legged hawk 1 (1), American kestrel 3 (3), merlin 2 (0), ruffed grouse 13 (10), wild turkey 67 (16), ring-billed gull 284 (124), herring gull 493 (506), glaucous gull 3 (2), lesser black-backed gull 1 (0), greater black-backed gull 6 (12), Bonaparte's gull 1 (0), rock pigeon 655 (880), mourning dove 363 (444), Eastern screech owl 1 (0), great horned owl 5 (5), barred owl 1 (0), downy woodpecker 45 (37), hairy woodpecker 32 (29), black-backed woodpecker 1 (0), northern flicker 2 (1), pileated woodpecker 8 (5), blue jay 201 (231), American crow 465 (292), common raven 3 (1), black-capped chickadee 1,759 (1,043), red-breasted nuthatch 24 (7), white-breasted nuthatch 58 (46), brown creeper 18 (5), Carolina wren 1 (0), winter wren 6 (0), golden-crowned kinglet 21 (6), hermit thrush 1 (0), American robin 97 (151), cedar waxwing 18 (129), northern shrike 6 (6), European starling 2,553 (1,261), northern cardinal 80 (59), American tree sparrow 175 (260), song sparrow 4 (0), swamp sparrow 2 (0), white-throated sparrow 9 (1), dark-eyed junco 257 (127), snow bunting 51 (402), common grackle 2 (0), brown headed cowbird 1 (0), Baltimore oriole 1 (0), purple finch 25 (6), house finch 136 (164), white winged crossbill CW (3), common redpoll 8 (218), American goldfinch 941 (274), house sparrow 664 (263). Total birds

11,801 (8,855). Total species 63 (51).

Petroglyphs CBC Results

The 21st annual Petroglyph CBC took place on Jan. 2. Thirty-one birders in six parties scoured the area between Apsley and Lasswade in the north and Stoney Lake in the south. A total of 39 species — two short of the record — were recorded. Two new species for the count, a northern saw-whet owl and a northern harrier, were welcome finds. The number of individual birds was 2,624, slightly above average.

Six species either tied or surpassed record numbers this year, namely Canada goose (20), American black duck (4), common merganser (60), red-tailed hawk (8), ruffed grouse (77), pileated woodpecker (26), and northern cardinal (1). The five most common birds of the day were black-capped chickadee (928), American goldfinch (537), red-breasted nuthatch (162), blue jay (161) and pine siskin (130).

As with the Peterborough count, several species were conspicuous by their absence. No redpolls, waxwings or evening grosbeaks were found. The absence of grosbeaks is somewhat troublesome since this was one of the most common species on the Petroglyph count throughout the '80s and '90s. This highly nomadic species has been declining in number, however, possibly as a result of fewer spruce budworm outbreaks in the boreal forest. Budworms are an important source of food for evening grosbeaks.

Here are the full results. Once again, the first number is the number counted this

year, while the number in parenthesis is the average number over the past 10 years. CW stands for a bird seen during the count week:

Canada goose 20 (0), American black duck 4 (0), common merganser 60 (3), bald eagle 3 (6), northern harrier 1 (0), red-tailed hawk 8 (1), rough-legged hawk CW (0), ruffed grouse 77 (25), herring gull 2 (1), rock pigeon 51 (26), mourning dove 21 (7), great horned owl 1 (0), northern saw-whet owl 1 (0), barred owl 6 (2), downy woodpecker 24 (25), hairy woodpecker 16 (46), black-backed woodpecker 1 (2), pileated woodpecker 26 (11), grey jay 4 (6), blue jay 161 (219), American crow 8 (5), common raven 81 (105), black-capped chickadee 928 (918), red-breasted nuthatch 162 (118), white-breasted nuthatch 88 (58), brown creeper 14 (19), golden-crowned kinglet 32 (37), northern shrike 1 (2), European starling 59 (31), American tree sparrow 80 (58), dark-eyed junco 19 (21), snow bunting 58 (56), northern cardinal 1 (0), pine grosbeak 1 (24), purple finch 59 (39), red crossbill 64 (13), white-winged crossbill 36 (61), pine siskin 130 (110), American goldfinch 537 (141), house sparrow 25 (10). Total birds 2,791 (2,591). Total species 39 (33).

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