

2012 Christmas Bird Counts

Between mid-December and early January, birders from across North, Central and South America take a break from the holiday season excess to spend a day in the fresh air, identifying and counting birds. Dating all the way back to 1900, Christmas bird counts represent the biggest organized birding event in the world and a holiday tradition for over 50,000 birders each year. They first began from a desire to count birds rather than shoot them. In doing so, they effectively gave birth to North America's modern conservation movement. The results help organizations such as Bird Studies Canada and the National Audubon Society in the U.S. to prioritize bird conservation actions.

We have two local counts. One is centred in Peterborough and the other in Petroglyphs Provincial Park on the north shore of Stony Lake. Both counts cover a circle 24 kilometres in diameter and take one day each 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 on the selected day. The Peterborough count, which took place December 16, usually produces about 50 species and 9,000 or so individual birds. The Petroglyph count, however, averages only 34 species and about 2,500 birds. This year, it was held on December 22. The count circle (including the six areas surveyed) can be viewed by going to: <http://goo.gl/maps/LmG0B>

Unfortunately, the Peterborough count took place under less than ideal conditions. The dull, wet weather made viewing conditions for the 37 participants difficult. Still, the number of species seen (58) was higher than usual, as was the number of individual birds tallied (11,199). These high numbers were clearly due to the mild weather which meant that most water bodies were free of ice, including large reaches of Chemong Lake. This, in turn, meant that numerous ducks, geese and gulls were still in the area on the day of the count. A healthy crop of seeds on white and yellow birch trees – in addition to offerings from backyard feeders – contributed to the high number of common redpolls tallied. Redpolls, like many other finches, choose to winter in central Ontario when seed crops fail in the north but are abundant in our region.

An entirely new species for the Peterborough count, a ruby-crowned kinglet, was found by Mike Oldham. Just as exciting was the northern hawk owl that Jerry Ball happened upon on Meadowview Road, west of Highway 7. Seven bird species turned up in record numbers this year. They were mallard (1264), ring-necked duck (3), common merganser (255), wild turkey (287), eastern screech owl (3), black-capped chickadee (1951), white-breasted nuthatch (102), yellow-rumped warbler (3) and dark-eyed junco (426). The 2 barred owls found tied the previous high. Some other numbers of note include 107 northern cardinals (highest in 20 years), 539 common redpolls (highest in 20 years), 19 red-tailed hawks (only half the 10-year average), 125 blue jays (lowest in 15 years) and 9 American robins (lowest in 16 years). Three additional species were recorded during the count period, which covers the three days before and after the actual count day. They were bufflehead duck, rough-legged hawk, hoary redpoll and pine siskin. One bird that was missed both during the count period and on the day of the count was the bald eagle. It was probably a matter of not being in the right place at the right time, since eagles have been seen in the Lakefield–Peterborough area fairly regularly this winter.

As for the Petroglyph count, the 30 participants were able to find an impressive 39 species, which is the second highest ever. As with the Peterborough count, open water on lakes such as Jack and Stony meant a number of ducks were still present. Strong winds, however, made hearing birds difficult

and probably forced some species to take cover. This, coupled with a general lack of natural foods, may explain why the numbers of individual birds (1989) was rather low.

An entirely new species for the count this year was the bufflehead duck. In addition, record highs were tallied for common goldeneye (17), common merganser (97) and wild turkey (65). The previous record was tied for common loon (1) and Cooper's hawk (1). The 366 common redpolls recorded was fairly close to being a record high, as well. On the negative side of the ledger, there were two notable misses. Barred owls, which have been recorded every year since 1995/96 failed to put in an appearance. This is a bird that is usually heard instead of seen, so the strong and noisy winds undoubtedly played a role here. For the third year in a row, no gray jays were found. Although single birds have been recorded in both Petroglyphs Provincial Park and the Kawartha Nordic Ski Trails earlier this winter/fall, no family groups have been noted for several years. Prior to 2010, the average count was 5, and they were recorded every year with the exception of 1990. Gray jays are one of many species that are expected to decrease in number as the climate warms, especially at the southern edge of their range such as here in the Kawarthas. They are dependent for winter survival and nesting success on supplies of stored food. Mild falls and winters may be causing perishable stored food to go bad, hence contributing to lower reproductive success.

Low numbers were the order of the day for hairy, downy and pileated woodpeckers, mourning doves and black-capped chickadee. With the exception of blue jays, the high winds probably explain why more individuals of these common species weren't found. Most jays left Ontario this past fall because of a poor wild food crop – acorns, in particular – in many areas. Feeders alone are rarely enough to convince them to stay.

Peterborough CBC Results

The first number is the number counted this year, while the number in parenthesis is the average number recorded over the past 10 years. NR stands for "new record," ER for "equals record," CP for "count period" and NFC for "new for count."

Great blue heron 1 (0.7), Canada goose 1166 (696), American black duck 3 (5), mallard 1264 NR (821), ring-necked duck 3 NR (0.4), common goldeneye 104 (41), bufflehead CP (0.6), hooded merganser 4 (3), common merganser 255 NR (41), northern harrier 1 (1), sharp-shinned hawk 1 (3), Cooper's hawk 5 (4), red-tailed hawk 19 (36), rough-legged hawk CP (0.4), American kestrel 1 (3), merlin 2 (1), ruffed grouse 2 (8), wild turkey 287 NR (105), ring-billed gull 237 (136), herring gull 312 (303), Iceland gull 1 (0.4), glaucous gull 1 (2), great black-backed gull 3 (6), rock pigeon 1152 (968), mourning dove 470 (637), eastern screech owl 3 NR (1), great horned owl 2 (4), northern hawk owl 1 (0.1), barred owl 2 ER (0.7), belted kingfisher 1 (1), red-bellied woodpecker 2 (1), downy woodpecker 55 (49), hairy woodpecker 35 (36), northern flicker 1 (2), pileated woodpecker 5 (6), northern shrike 3 (7), blue jay 125 (297), American crow 214 (400), common raven 1 (1), black-capped chickadee 1951 NR (1759), red-breasted nuthatch 30 (22), white-breasted nuthatch 102 NR (64), brown creeper 6 (5), golden-crowned kinglet 2 (9), ruby-crowned kinglet 1 NFC, American robin 9 (229), bohemian waxwing 97 (218), cedar waxwing 30 (189), European starling 786 (1478), yellow-rumped warbler 3 NR (0.4), northern cardinal 107 (79), American tree sparrow 415 (323), song sparrow 2 (0.8), white-throated sparrow 7 (4), dark-eyed junco 426 NR (259), pine grosbeak 32 (14), house finch 107 (126), common redpoll 539 (81), hoary

redpoll CP (0), pine siskin CP (41), American goldfinch 522 (515), house sparrow 97 (275), Total birds: 11,199 (10473), Total species: 58 (54)

Petroglyphs CBC Results

Bufflehead 4 NFC (0.4), common goldeneye 17 NR (2), hooded merganser 17 (2), common merganser 97 NR (16), ruffed grouse 20 (24), wild turkey 65 NR (21), common loon 1 ER (0.1), bald eagle 10 (6), Cooper's hawk 1 ER (0.1), northern goshawk 2 (0.4), red-tailed hawk 8 (2), golden eagle 3 (0.2), herring gull 5 (1), rock pigeon 74 (64), mourning dove 5 (19), downy woodpecker 12 (20), hairy woodpecker 15 (36), pileated woodpecker 5 (11), blue jay 38 (254), American crow 8 (6), common raven 119 (107), black-capped chickadee 645 (847), red-breasted nuthatch 49 (103), white-breasted nuthatch 45 (66), brown creeper 5 (11), winter wren 1 (0.2), golden-crowned kinglet 21 (20), European starling 35 (27), snow bunting 9 (12), American tree sparrow 23 (18), dark-eyed junco 5 (3), pine grosbeak 39 (22), red crossbill 7 (11), white-winged crossbill 7 (18), common redpoll 366 (172), hoary redpoll 2 (1), pine siskin 4 (39), American goldfinch 134 (169), evening grosbeak 24 (44) Total birds: 1,989 (2231), Total species: 39 (33)

The Great Backyard Bird Count (SIDE-BAR?)

The Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) will take place from Friday, February 15 to Monday, February 18. The GBBC is an annual 4-day event that engages bird watchers of all ages in counting birds to create a real-time snapshot of where the birds are across the continent. Simply count the birds you see over a 15 minute period – or longer if you wish - in one place, and report your results on line. As the count progresses, anyone with Internet access can explore what is being reported from the Kawarthas or from anywhere in the world. Go to www.birdsource.org/gbbc/ for all the details. Last year, Peterborough observers submitted 84 checklists which was the fifth highest in Ontario. London was first with 233.