

LIVING

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A census for the birds

Annual Christmas count has tracked local numbers for 57 years

In 1900, American ornithologist Frank Chapman invited birders across Canada and the United States to head out on Christmas Day to count the birds in their home towns and then submit the results. The event was billed as the first ever "Christmas Bird Census."

His suggestion has evolved into what is probably the largest organized birding event in the world and has become a much anticipated holiday tradition for over 50,000 birders every year.

Today, Christmas Bird Counts (CBCs), as they are now called, are held in over 2,000 localities across

Canada, the United States, Latin America, and the Caribbean. There are two counts in the Kawarthas, one centred in Peterborough and one near Petroglyphs Provincial Park. Over the course of a calendar day, groups of birders do their best to count all of the birds within a circle 24 kilometres in diameter. By car, foot and ski, they are out from before dawn until nightfall making sure all of the roads and different habitat types in the circle are covered.

Their observations provide valuable information on the relative abundance and distribution of winter bird species over time and constitute the world's largest and oldest database on bird populations. The Christmas Bird Count is co-ordinated in Canada by Bird Studies Canada in a joint program with the National Audubon Society.

The long-term perspective made possible by this data is vital for conservation planning. It shows how bird populations are faring and informs strategies to protect birds and their habitat. A decline in a given species may indicate a problem such as habitat destruction or overhunting. In the 1980's, CBC data showed a decline in wintering populations of the American black Duck. As a result, conservation measures were taken to reduce hunting pressure on this species.

Last year, 371 Canadian Christmas Bird Counts reported results. In terms of overall abundance across the country, European starlings came out on top as the most common bird. They were followed by American crow, Canada goose, mallard, house sparrow, black-capped chickadee, and rock pigeon.

As already mentioned, one of the main uses of CBC data is to monitor the populations of wintering birds. For example, count data were recently used to assess the status of rusty blackbirds and short-eared owls by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC). Both of these species are experiencing a population decline. Among bird species that are going up in number, wild turkey figures prominently. Last year, 9,888 were counted on 104 counts across the country. Compare this to 15 years ago when only 146 were seen on 18

counts. In the west, Eurasian collared-doves are beginning to explode in numbers. In the Maritimes, northern cardinals are becoming well established with 144 seen on 13 counts in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. The cardinal is a recent in many parts of the East Coast. Last year also showed a rally in evening grosbeak numbers right across Canada. This species may be responding to increasing spruce budworm populations. CBC data from across North America is also showing a northward expansion of red-bellied woodpecker, Carolina wren, and northern mockingbird. Understanding how bird populations are changing will become critically important reference material as global climate change increasingly makes its impacts felt.

It's interesting to look at CBC data to see where the largest numbers of some of "our" summer birds are spending the winter. Here are a few results from last year for species that typically overwinter in the United States: common loon 935 (South Carolina), killdeer 3,711 (Louisiana), northern flicker 440 (Maryland), tree swallow 26,458 (Louisiana), eastern bluebird 923 (Ohio), American robin 10,339 (Alabama), yellow-rumped warbler 2,813 (Maryland), red-winged blackbird 5,000,000 (Oklahoma)



Karl Egressy photos

Clockwise from left: A short eared owl like this one was seen for the first time during this year's Peterborough Christmas bird count; three belted kingfishers were counted; another first for the local count was a red-bellied woodpecker.

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Peterborough CBC

This year, the 57th annual Peterborough CBC was held on Sunday, Dec. 14. A total of 51 species and

10,550 individual birds were recorded which is average for this count. The five most common birds of the day were black-capped chickadee (1,549), European starling (1,549), rock pigeon (1,092), mourning dove (886), and mallard (814).

Five species showed up in record numbers this year, namely Cooper's hawk (5), mourning dove (886), American crow (535), red-breasted nuthatch (66), and white-winged crossbill (379). The brightly marked male crossbills were especially nice to look at, because they allowed us to get quite close. Tying the old record were bald eagle (2), merlin (2), belted kingfisher (3), and hermit thrush (1). Other birds of note included a pied-billed grebe, three white-throated sparrows, and a brown-headed cowbird.

Probably the most noteworthy bird of the day was a short-eared owl, a new bird for the Peterborough count. The bird was seen on Bensfort Road near the landfill. Short-eared owls are crepuscular (dusk) hunters and have a wonderful, moth-like flight. It is classified as a species of Special Concern in Canada. Its decline appears to be linked to the disappearance of much of its grassland habitat. Grassland bird populations have shown steeper declines than any other group of North American bird species. Three trumpeter swans which were at Little Lake just prior to the count were also new species for the count.

The following is the complete

result for the count. It lists the number counted this year, followed in parenthesis by the average number over the past 10 years. CW stands for a bird seen during the count week but not on the count day.

Pied-billed grebe 1 (0.2), trumpeter swan 3 CW (0), Canada goose 39 (732), American black duck 7 (5), mallard 814 (578), common goldeneye 17 (60), common merganser 1 CW (20), lesser scaup 1 CW (0.2), bald eagle 2 (0.4), sharpshinned hawk 4 (3), Cooper's hawk 5 (2), red-tailed hawk 43 (32), American kestrel 1 (3), merlin 2 (0.6) ruffed grouse 3 (9), wild turkey 50 (28), ring-billed gull 77 (135), herring gull 438 (395), glaucous gull 1 (2), greater black-backed gull 8 (9), rock pigeon 1092 (870), mourning dove 886 (511), Eastern screech owl 1 (0.5), great horned owl 3 (5), barred owl 1 (0.4), short-eared owl 1 (0.1), belted kingfisher 3 (0.8), downy woodpecker 58 (40), hairy woodpecker 40 (32), pileated woodpecker 5 (6), northern flicker 2 (1), blue jay 361 (252), American crow 535 (344), black-capped chickadee 1549 (1135), red-breasted nuthatch 66 (15), white-breasted nuthatch 69 (51), brown creeper 1 (4), golden-crowned kinglet 9 (7), hermit thrush 1 (0.2), American robin 33 (120), cedar waxwing 189 (104), northern shrike 9 (6), European starling 1549 (1304), northern cardinal 72 (64), American tree sparrow 245 (258), white-throated sparrow 4 (2), dark-eyed junco 230

(165), snow bunting 338 (300), brown-headed cowbird 1 (0.6), house finch 142 (137), white-winged crossbill 379 (40), pine siskin 217 (26), American goldfinch 661 (367), house sparrow 183 (272)

Petroglyphs CBC
The 22nd annual Petroglyph CBC was held on Jan. 4. Seventeen birders in six parties scoured 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 38 species were recorded which is about three more than usual. The 2,779 individual birds tallied is about average. The five most common birds of the Petroglyph Count were black-capped chickadee (859), blue jay (437), red-breasted nuthatch (239), common redpoll (206), and American goldfinch (189).

Highlights of the day included a red-bellied woodpecker, which is a new species for the count. Record high numbers of wild turkey, rock pigeon and mourning dove were also found. No less than eight species of winter finches put in an appearance including three red crossbills and 80 white-winged crossbills. A great gray owl and a belted kingfisher were also interesting finds.

The first Petroglyph counts were done primarily to keep track of the relatively large number of bald eagles that overwinter in the vicinity of Stony Lake and Jack Lake. This year, only one bald eagle was seen. The bird was coming to a carcass set out by a trapper. The average number for the count is six eagles, while the previous high is 14. It's hard to know why only one bird was seen this year. It may be that more eagles were actually present but simply not showing themselves.

Petroglyphs CBC

Bald eagle 1 (6), northern goshawk 2 (0.1) red-tailed hawk 1 (2.7), ruffed grouse 7 (33), wild turkey 51 (4), rock pigeon 89 (41), mourning dove 93 (14), great gray owl 1 (0.0) barred owl 3 (3), belted kingfisher 1 (0.1), red-bellied woodpecker 1 (0.0), downy woodpecker 31 (25), hairy woodpecker 69 (49), black-backed woodpecker 2 (2.4), pileated woodpecker 13 (17), gray jay 3 (6), blue jay 437 (282), American crow 8 (5), common raven 94 (115), black-capped chickadee 859 (998), red-breasted nuthatch 239 (172), white-breasted nuthatch 57 (77), brown creeper 29 (21), golden-crowned kinglet 11 (40), bohemian waxwing 11 (8), northern shrike 1 (1), European starling 9 (58), American tree sparrow 14 (54), dark-eyed junco 2 (24), pine grosbeak 43 (19), purple finch 12 (36), red crossbill 3 (10), white-winged crossbill 80 (26), common redpoll 206 (179), pine siskin 75 (63), American goldfinch 189 (231), evening grosbeak 2 (81), house sparrow 8 (15)

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