

London Christmas Bird Count December 18, 2021

Once again, for the 113th time, Londoners took to the fields and watched their feeders for our London CBC. We had 116 people in the field within about 45 parties, and some of them counted their feeders and were joined by another 28 at feeders. This is a considerable number of participants at a time when we are all gearing up for the Holiday Seasons. But it is a fantastic way to celebrate time together to enjoy the great outdoors watching for birds and taking part in this great Citizen Science project of the Audubon Society and Birds Canada. The number of hours and distances completed by these volunteers were much higher than the 10-year average, due to higher number of participants and resulting in better coverage of our Count area. Most CBCs in the area involve fewer than 10 parties, and fewer than 25 participants. The oldest participant is now Ann White, and we had some family groups with parents, kids and grandkids taking part.

Our total number of species was a paltry 73 species, down about 3 species, and the number of individuals was about 2000 below average. It is still rather good for an inland CBC. The ones along the Great Lakes often produce about 10 plus more species than we achieve. But our potential is exceptionally good, with 184 species being seen over all the years of our Count.

Weather for the Count was poor, to say the least, so I appreciate the efforts of everyone even more than usual. Mild weather had opened up the water and no doubt allowed some lingering species to persist, but the snow and freezing temperatures in the latter half of November was something that perhaps pushed many species and individuals out of our region. But not enough of that sort of weather apparently pushed birds which were wintering farther north to reach into our areas as will be seen by many of the misses and lower numbers on the Count.

The day began with stiff easterlies, which played havoc with those out in the pre-dawn period looking for owls. As light came a fairly steady snow began, and visibility was greatly reduced, and about 4 cm piled up as we walked or drove. I imagine some people had to go out and clean off the snow from their feeders. However, as the morning progressed, the temperature crept above zero by a degree, and while the precipitation continued, it took the form of pellets, freezing rain, and rain. Happily, it all finished by early afternoon, but by then most were finished their routes by this time and headed home to dry out. I think some areas actually had a bit of sunshine before sunset occurred.

Let us have a look at the details and trends of the Count, following along with the accompanying chart of the results. I am taking great liberties with the speculations as to the changes in numbers, and comparison to the 10-year averages.

With only a total of 7 sightings on London CBCs since 1909, 3 being in the last 10 years, Reuven Martin found 2 Snow Geese at Kirk Cousins Conservation Area. Cackling Goose totaled a new high count of 17, located in three spots. Two reports in Komoka area had flocks of 9 and 6 and there was one in Talbot Village Pond in southwest London, the latter seen by Soren Coulson and reported to eBird. The Komoka party included Mhairi McFarlane, Lucas Foerster, and Peter Burke. Besides the expected Mute Swans, Tundra Swans were noted at Komoka, including a flock of 10 at the ponds and 25 flying over the Denstedt property nearby. The Komoka party also found two Green-winged Teal, and two Gadwall at Komoka. At dusk, when waterfowl come in from feeding forays, so I was down there checking out the waterfowl and watched as ducks arrived, counting an amazing 135 Hooded Merganser floating in several large rafts with other waterfowl.

If you look at the totals for many of the waterfowl, however, you will see a number of them lower than the 10-year average, and a few fewer species than usual. I think that is related to the freezing over of the Komoka still water back in late November, when we got that below seasonal cold snap. This forced the lingering ducks out, and while apparently a few species of waterfowl did not go far and returned once the water opened in December, most had gone farther south by that point, so the numbers were down.

Gallinaceous birds, except for Wild Turkey were not represented on our Count, and they were counted just a few lower than the average. However, Sandhill Crane were noted in two locations with Dirk and the Verboom party reporting 2, and another 9 being seen in Komoka Park on the north side ponds. The latter group has been noted in the area since the fall.

The gulls at the dump were in good supply and a couple of rare ones were seen. Reuven has the job of finding and looking through the many gulls loafing on the fields or soaring over the dump. This year Quinten gave a helping hand after he finished his walk along the river. A much greater number of Herring Gulls were found, almost a record number, as well as two Kumlien's Iceland Gulls and one Lesser Black-backed Gull.

An exciting find for the Verboom party was a Golden Eagle on their driving route near Komoka, the first of that species since 2008. On the other hand, our Bald Eagle numbers were severely down from 46 last year to 15 this year which is below average to boot. We still have 4 or 5 nests close to London, and all produced young, so there could have been up to 25 if 5 nests were occupied and 3 young produced. Add to that our usual congregations from wintering birds, feeding on the waterfowl and fish in the river and ponds, we should get more than reported. But I think the poor flying weather for eagles in general, and perhaps the fishing being poor this year made for a lean total.

Though Cooper's Hawk were found in slightly greater numbers than usual, all other hawks were down from average, and we missed Northern Harrier entirely this year. One highlight for Count Week was spotting of a Red-shouldered Hawk in the Medway Valley just prior to our Count.

Though the number of Great Horned Owls continue in short supply, we had a bumper year for the little Screech-owl. We had more owl searchers in the field this year, which helped get our total to 21, twice our average, but the substantial number was what Sue and I had in our usual route. Despite the stronger easterlies and occasional light snow, we had 14 in about 20 stations. Usually, we might get up to 10 but this was the highest.

Besides Great Blue Herons, Belted Kingfishers, both of which came in at 19 sighted, were somewhat higher than average in numbers, likely due to the open waters in the area.

Woodpecker numbers trended higher a bit this year, but the addition of a Count Week Yellow-bellied Sapsucker was nice.

We were lucky to have a triumvirate of falcons, with about average numbers of all species including Peregrine, the latter hanging about in the downtown area.

We had somewhat higher numbers of Corvids which included Jays and Crows. No ravens yet, but maybe soon.

Chickadees and nuthatches were found in lower numbers this year. The feeders were generally not well-attended by them and other passerines, and field parties had difficulty locating the little guys likely

hunkering down from the wet windy weather. Exceptions in that ilk, include the numbers of Golden-crowned Kinglets, which seem to be much higher than average. Also great was the finding of not one but two Ruby-crowned Kinglets on the route along the Thames near the Forks, led by the Van Horik and Payne parties. Creepers, and wrens were about average in abundance this year.

Our only mimid this year was unexpected. A Gray Catbird was located on the Killaly Meadows route by Maria Cahoon. I think there was another one in the London area seen elsewhere just before the Count.

The number of robins was about half of the average, a really drastic drop, which could be explained by the weather, but more likely the lack of berry crops available this year, a fact which many field people noted. However, the finding of a Hermit Thrush in Komoka Park by the Komoka group was a highlight in that bird family.

You might not care much about these two alien and invasive species, House Sparrow and European Starling, but both species took a dive from their usual 10-year averages. The Starlings tend to move out during colder weather so maybe more left the area this year than usual. House Sparrows are perhaps down in numbers due to drop in available nesting conditions over the years.

New World sparrows were represented with the usual species. Average or slightly higher than average numbers were recorded for most species. A big plus was the finding of three Fox Sparrows in the Medway Valley along the west side between Fanshawe Road and Gainsborough by the party led by Gord Saunders. We have only once before had three found on the London CBC, a high count, at separate spots but in this case all three were together so a remarkable find for this species.

Blackbirds were represented by four groups of Red-winged Blackbirds. A single one seen along the Medway in the same area of the Fox Sparrows, and two seen in the section between Oxford and the Forks, picked up by the Van Horik/Payne-led groups. A third group of 40 was spotted by Bernie out near Delaware, and a fourth spot was at Wonnacott's Farm where the Verboom party had one at a feeder. This gave us a grand total of 44 which is much higher than our usual, which often is zero, but lately we have had an increase, mainly due to the large flocks that seem to be on the river flats near Delaware. The only other blackbirds were at the dump as usual, reported by Reuven on dump watch, the largest bird feeder we have.

The so-called winter finch list was scant this year. There were a few Redpolls, noticed by Reuven out at Kirk Cousins CA, by Reuven, and only 2 Purple Finches. But no Pine Siskins, or Crossbill species were found, nor any other such passerine. We had a somewhat below average number of House Finches this year too. As for species which have very fluctuating numbers from year to year, like Horned Lark and Cedar Waxwing, both were far lower than the 10-year average. And there were no Snow Buntings nor Lapland Longspurs in the area either. This led me to consider that the cone crop is suitable farther north and that some species are lingering farther north at this time.

Finally, our numbers of Northern Cardinal, higher by a bit from the average, could provide us with the title of Cardinal Capital for Canada. But other Counts like Hamilton and Toronto often challenge our totals.

So, there it is, another successful London CBC. If you have any questions or thoughts about the information herein, or would like to join the team, please contact me at the email below.

Our date is the first Saturday of the CBC period, so Saturday, December 17. I hope that the next year version will allow us to gather as in the past and have a gathering after the event. I really miss the sharing opportunities that provided. Again, thanks to all for participating in this worthwhile project.

Pete Read

Compiler London CBC

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