

Hartland Christmas Bird Count 2024

The Hartland Christmas Bird Count (CBC) was held on December 21, 2023. It was the fourteenth consecutive year that this CBC was run, bringing the total years conducted to seventeen. The weather was completely unlike last year's nearly perfect weather. This year field counters struggled in blustery conditions with temperatures in the low twenties, light snow falling throughout the day and nearly constant northwest wind rising to 15 mph by afternoon. These adverse conditions undoubtedly impacted the total number of birds counted as well as the number of species found. The inclement weather forced field counters to spend much more time in vehicles than on foot which greatly decreased the effectiveness of their coverage. A few hardy counters trudged through the snow but poor visibility caused by blowing snow and birds remaining under cover made it extremely difficult to detect birds. Although the weather immediately preceding the count was unremarkable, the dry conditions of late summer and fall prevented Sebasticook Lake from completely refilling after the annual summer drawdown. Recent rain and snow melt had brought inflow streams to their usual levels but the outflow below the dam was barely a trickle which greatly reduced the number of waterfowl and other birds normally utilizing in the Newport floodplain below the dam.

The Sebasticook Regional Land Trust (SRLT) acted as the local sponsor for the count as it has done since the count was resurrected in 2011. A total of 30 birders contributed through field birding (18) or by watching their feeders (12). Despite a record high number of field hours logged (65), only 44 species were located which is the lowest total since 2019. Two additional count week species were also found. Total bird numbers (3662) were also slightly below average. The only species new to the count was the Fox Sparrow found at Paul and Maureen Greene's feeder in Newport. Two other species were tallied for only the second time, a Ruby-crowned Kinglet and mockingbird in Newport village. Evening Grosbeak made its third appearance on a count day in the same area at Jenn Everett's feeder. These four grosbeak along with a couple of Pine Siskin at the Greene's feeder were the sole winter finch recorded on the count. Winter finch "irrupt" southward in search of food in some years when their food staples are in short supply up north. The near absence of this group this winter definitely contributed to the low count totals. Winter Wren, first recorded in 2022 was noted for the third count in a row. Record high counts were posted for Snow Bunting (234), Horned Lark (34), junco (190) and cardinal (97). Bluebirds matched last year's high (7). The latter two species have shown remarkable climate change induced increases across Maine as our winter temperatures moderate. Notable low counts were recorded for starling (103) and Red-breasted Nuthatch (8). Greg LeClair recorded the most interesting mammal sighting when he watched three otters sharing an eel in Hartland. Gray squirrel numbers seemed higher than usual thanks to the recent boom years of acorns.

Thanks to all who participated. Field territories were covered a bit better than usual thanks to the contributions of several new out-of-area birders who joined the die-hards that travel to the Hartland circle to help out each year. SRLT greatly appreciates the volunteers who turn out to support this citizen science effort. We could not do it without all of you who are willing to give up a weekend day in the holiday season. Results provide critical information on how bird distribution changes over time by contributing to the National Audubon Society's CBC database which now extends 125 years. Hope you'll join us again next year. Please consider making a donation to support SRLT's conservation efforts by going to our website at www.sebasticookrslt.org. Happy New Year!