

1979 Iowa CBC

This year's count was a record-breaker in most respects. Although a record 36 localities reported, Sac County was the only newcomer (and very welcome), With Mason City's return after last year's absence, ~~last year's~~ record of 34 was thus eclipsed. Wapsipinicon River Valley changed its name to Waterloo.

As usual, Davenport topped all lists with 68 species, but Omaha was alone second at 67, and DeSoto NWR third at 64. Three other counts reached 60: Clinton at 61, and both Cedar Rapids and Shenandoah at 60.

The overall species total was 119, a new record, eclipsing the previous high of 116 set in 1975. More comments below regarding species deleted from various reports.

Comments on Species Validation

This year I found myself in a dilemma regarding several reported species, and, in an attempt to be fair and consistent, I deleted species from some counts and not others, and entirely deleted two species. Reasons for these decisions are hereby tendered in an attempt to ~~encourage~~ encourage local compilers to document species either unusual in their areas or difficult to identify.

Greater Scaup: This species was reported from Cedar Rapids, but while I received no documentation, same was forwarded to the American Birds compiler. As this is a rare but plausible species, and the compiler is well aware of the problems of its identification, I accepted the record pending its acceptance for American Birds.

Turkey Vulture: Three were reported this year. Last year I deleted this species from the Dubuque list for lack of documentation, and must do the same this year for Marshalltown. It was reported also from Eldora, but the details given suggest the possibility of an immature Bald Eagle, in that the bird had a "two-toned underwing pattern, blackish with silver-gray linings". A third report, from Davenport, was well-documented and accepted.

Broad-winged Hawk: The two reports of this species caused me problems. One was from Cedar Rapids, again documented for American Birds, but not for me. I accepted this record also, pending acceptance for American Birds, due to the compiler's reputation ^{in screening records,} ~~see Tompkins~~, and for reasons outlined below regarding status of this species in Iowa in December. The second report was from Rathbun with no details and, ^{WMS} thus deleted, not even being mentioned as unusual. The rather skimpy evidence for this species' occurrence in Iowa in December is based on DuMont's observation of a permanent resident pair in Polk County 1928-1930, and other sightings in December of 1925 and 1932. Brown also noted that there have been occasional winter records, as late as January 7, and in Illinois

Behlen states that "most winter records are highly doubtful", but cites two December records, one from the extreme northeastern part of Illinois. Furthermore, one was reported on the Hannibal, Missouri CBC in 1977 and accepted with this comment by the American Birds compiler: "Incredible, but I can find nothing wrong with the details."

Merlin: This species was reported from Red Rock Lake and Spirit Lake, neither report with accompanying ~~details~~^{details}. However I accepted both, but will not in future without details, as this species must be well seen and is rare in early winter in Iowa. One was well-documented for the count period from Alleman.

Ruby-crowned Kinglet: This species was reported from three localities, with documentation and thus accepted from Cedar Falls and Iowa City and without same and deleted from Spirit Lake. As noted in last year's CBC summary, sightings of this species must be documented.

Yellow-headed Blackbird: Also very rare in Iowa in winter, this species was reported from DeSoto NWR, well documented and accepted, and from Ottumwa with no details and deleted. This species should be easy to describe if well seen and of the male gender.

Brewer's Blackbird: A difficult species to identify in winter, and also rare at that time, being primarily a fall migrant in Iowa. In fall and early winter it is most similar to young Common Grackles, which may not as yet have noticeably "keeled" tails nor very long tails. ~~The greenish gloss and~~ This species was reported from DeSoto NWR with good details and accepted, and from Marshaltown (13 birds) and Spirit Lake (130) without details and deleted.

Dickcissel: I agonized over this report also. Again from Cedar Rapids, it was reported to be a female coming to a feeder with a flock of House Sparrows. In my experience in North Carolina, this was exactly how this species occurs (rarely) in that state in winter, and so I am in sympathy with the report. However no plumage details were given, and as female Dickcissels are not dissimilar to female House Sparrows, and Iowa is further north and west than North Carolina (even though we have infinitely more Dickcissels in summer), I had little choice than to delete it from the CBC list. However I suggest that the observer forward a note with identifying details to the Editor of Iowa Bird Life for publication.

Chipping Sparrow: This species was reported from two localities, Princeton and Lost Nation. The Princeton bird was said to have been "well observed", but this does not constitute an acceptable description of identifying field marks, and the record was deleted, as was ~~one of 6 birds from North~~ the record of six birds from Lost Nation, forwarded without details. This species may occur in winter but would be but a rare straggler, and must be carefully

described. Remember that in winter it does not look like it does in summer.

Rest BIRDS

Apart from the Dickcissel report already discussed, there were four other species reported for the first time on Iowa CBCs, a rather amazing fact, eclipsing such other noteworthy reports as Snowy Owl, Townsend's Solitaire, and Bohemian Waxwing.

Ross' Goose: One was finally picked out from among the Snow Geese at DeSoto NWR, although it is probably regular there. Identification is difficult however.

Greater Scaup: Also probably regular, but difficult to identify unless seen well. Two were seen at Cedar Rapids.

House Wren: One was seen at Yellow River Forest with a good description which adequately eliminated Winter Wren.

Northern Oriole: I despaired when I received a note that one at Mason City had been coming to a feeder unbeknownst to the counting group, but by remarkable coincidence another bird had been noted coming to a feeder in Omaha and was included in the count. In recent years increasing numbers of this species have been lured into wintering at feeders in the southeast^{U.S.} when fruit is provided.

Notable Misses

As might be expected in a record count, few birds fit this category. Most obvious were:

Carolina Wren: This species finally seems to be extirpated as a winter bird after last year's crash following two harsh winters. This is the first time it has been missed in 13 years.

Common Redpoll: This was the first miss for 12 years, but it is not expected to occur every year in any case. Winter finches were notably absent this year, as discussed below.

Lincoln's Sparrow: This species has been recorded in 16 of the last 22 years, but it is an irregular winter resident in Iowa.

Population Comments

Waterfowl: The relatively mild weather was conducive to large increases in this category mostly because of ~~some~~ ^{larger areas of} open water. The increases in numbers were most obvious among diving ducks, which winter as far north as open water permits. Taken together, Common Goldeneye and Common Merganser numbers were up five-fold from the average number over the last three years. Snow Geese also showed a 2-3 fold increase, but Mallards were up only about 50%. Large numbers of the latter species winter in the southwest part of the state and are somewhat independent of large areas of open water.

Diurnal Raptors: Red-tailed Hawks were present in normal numbers, whereas both Roughlegged Hawks and Bald Eagles were low, both down about 50% from their prior

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four-year averages of Birds Per Party (BPP; note that some bias occurs in this figure due to inclusion by some compilers of feeder-watchers in total parties). Light snow cover north of Iowa may explain the low Roughleg numbers, but Bald Eagles might have been expected to be higher along with waterfowl numbers. My impression is that there were fewer immatures this year.

Gallinaceous birds: Even though only eight Gray Partridge were reported (down from last year's 291), one compiler noted that the species is doing very well, but lack of snow cover made them hard to find. Ring-necked Pheasants were in normal numbers, down from last year's high levels, but Bobwhites may be in trouble, down three-fold from their prior three-year average of 3.5 BPP. Last year's severe winter probably is significant in this decline.

Gulls: These birds were up some 4 to 5-fold over the normal levels, mostly due to open water as in the case of waterfowl, discussed above.

Owls: Noteworthy in this group were the 52 Great Horned Owls reported on the North Linn count, and the ^{statewide total} ~~count~~ of seven Saw-whet Owls. ~~reported.~~

Woodpeckers: Of the two species which enter the state in fall and winter from further north, Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers increased two-fold and Common Flickers were up some 1.5 fold over their respective 3-year averages. This possibly indicates that fewer continued on south due to the milder weather conditions. The four resident species (Pileated, Red-bellied, Hairy, and Downy) continue to ^{do} well, maintaining last year's increased levels over prior years. The summer resident Red-headed Woodpecker remained in very large numbers, 8.7 BPP compared with average levels of only 1.2 BPP in recent years. This year's levels were higher even than the great year of 1977 when 6.2 BPP were recorded.

Field Flocking Birds: Lack of snow cover and mild weather was probably the reason for this year's crash in numbers in this group. Horned Larks had 2.3 BPP versus 36 last year, Lapland Longspur 0.3 versus 9.1, and Snow Bunting 0.6 versus 4.6 last year.

Red-breasted Nuthatch: Only six were reported statewide this year, down from the relatively constant levels of the past three years of 34-56 birds, or about a ten-fold drop in BPP.

~~None. Most notable was the already mentioned absence of Carolina Wrens.~~

Thrushes: American Robin numbers exploded some 16-fold over last year, probably because of mild weather and abundant wild berries, but Eastern Bluebirds remain low in numbers. Only 26 were reported statewide, as against 26 and 58 the previous two years, but even this is better than the single bird reported in 1976.

Golden-crowned Kinglet: After two low years related to harsh winters, this species gained ground significantly this year, with a four-fold increase in BPP over the prior two years.

Cedar Waxwing: A significant increase in BPP over the prior three-year average was seen ^{for} this species this year, of about 2-3 fold. Availability of wild berries probably was important in this increase.

Meadowlarks: Total meadowlarks reported this year were 158 (0.8 BPP) compared with last year's very high level of 6.9 BPP. However last year's total was unusual, as the average level is about 3.2 BPP, ~~and~~ ^{but} this year still showed a marked decline of some four-fold over usual levels. With relatively mild weather it raises the question whether last year's tough winter reduced the meadowlark population drastically, possibly most significantly among those ~~populations~~ ^{birds} which breed north of Iowa and normally move into our State in winter.

Winter finches: Again, a drought this year in this group. Here is a table showing occurrence of these birds over the past four years:

	<u>1979</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>1977</u>	<u>1976</u>
Evening Grosbeak	5	20	25	2
Purple Finch	136	711	511	632
Pine Grosbeak	0	0	43	0
Common Redpoll	0	11	468	20
Pine Siskin	14	415	466	53
Red Crossbill	10	0	0	183
White-winged Crossbill	0	0	0	15

Of those species which are reasonably regular in some numbers (Purple Finch and Pine Siskin), both were markedly lower this year, Purple Finch some four-fold compared with its prior three-year average and Pine Siskin was essentially absent compared to its levels of the previous two years. Redpolls were absent this year, but a few Red Crossbills were found for the first time in three years.

Winter resident sparrows: The following table shows the levels of these species over the last four years:

	<u>1979</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>1977</u>	<u>1976</u>
Northern Junco	14252	14976	11770	14451
Am. Tree Sparrow	11277	7964	9396	13635
Harris' Sparrow	335	328	591	491
Wh.-crowned Sparrow	46	105	154	102
Wh.-throated Sparrow	45	45	41	101

As can be seen, last year's concern about the decline in Tree Sparrow numbers was alleviated somewhat this year, although the 1976 levels have not been regained, as is true for all five species, although most noticeably in the case of the three Zonotrichia species. Harris' and White-throated Sparrows remained low and White-crowned Sparrow declined about 50% from last year's levels. On the other hand, Northern Junco seems to be doing well.