

Christmas Count, 1980-81.

The trend of ever-increasing numbers of reporting locations continued this year, with a record 39 reports received. All of last year's 36 counts repeated, and there were two new counts this year: Lucas, in Lucas County, and Tristate, in extreme southwest Iowa. Ames returned to the fold after a few years of reporting to American Birds but not Iowa Bird Life. Coverage of most areas of the state is now very good.

After some close calls in recent years, Davenport sprinted away from the pack this year with a tremendous 77 species, leaving Omaha and Cedar Rapids far back at 64. Iowa City was third at 60, the only other count to reach the 60's. As expected, the low counts were from the north and northwest, Eldora and Westfield recording 27 species.

Because of the increased number of reporting localities, one might expect the total number of species recorded to increase also, but the extent of the increase was totally unexpected: a new record of 127 species, easily eclipsing the old record set last year of 119. The number of observers and number of parties also set new records, but were only slightly higher. The increased number of species recorded was a result of the amazing eight species new to the count (see below).

Milder weather increased numbers of certain species wintering in the state, especially in the southeast, and large numbers of winter finches were recorded. Waterfowl were also found in large numbers where water was open, especially at Rathbun Reservoir. Details on population changes are given later.

Best Birds

First I will list the eight new species to the Iowa CBC:

Common Loon: Although not unexpected on extensive open water, the one reported at Rathbun was a first. It was accompanied by large numbers of waterfowl, including a Pied-billed Grebe.

Sandhill Crane: One was at Riverton, with Snow Geese. Apparently it had been there about three weeks, but hunting season had precluded observation.

Eastern Phoebe: One was found at Yellow River Forest, for an amazing, but not entirely unprecedented northern states' CBC record.

Sedge Wren: Another amazing record, but the description from Cedar Rapids strongly suggests this species. It was observed closely for 15 minutes, and small size, buffy color, streaked cap (no eyeline mentioned), and white streakings on back were all noted.

Veery: Perhaps most incredible this year was this report from Omaha of a Veery in Fontenelle Forest. It was meticulously described, satisfying this

at first highly disbelieving compiler. Incredible because in western Iowa the Veery is a rare spring migrant and almost unrecorded in fall. Perhaps not incidentally, a Yellow-throated Warbler was at an Omaha feeder until December 24, but was outside the count circle.

Curve-billed Thrasher: After the species above, this one hardly pales by comparison. What appears to be Iowa's second state record appeared at Solon in the Iowa City circle to be seen by many. Although its eye-color seemed somewhat abnormal (perhaps its whole metabolism was too), identification did not seem in doubt.

European Tree Sparrow: Not unexpected in the course of time, but its spread from St Louis, Illinois has been slow. This one was at Hampton, Illinois and was within the Davenport circle.

Hoary Redpoll: A bird with Common Redpolls was carefully studied at close range and meticulously described from Cedar Falls. Variability in plumage and overlap of plumage characteristics with Common Redpoll make conclusive identification difficult, but this bird had ~~an~~ immaculate rump and under-tail covert areas. Furthermore, its behavior was described in such a way that it was reminiscent of behavior I have seen in mixed flocks at Duluth.

The following are other good birds, which in normal years would be the best:

Greater Scaup: Two birds at Iowa City were the second count record, but better identification ability will probably prove this species to be regular amongst diving ducks in winter.

Varied Thrush: Fourth count record: one seen at Cedar Falls. This species is becoming more regular at feeders in the north-central United States.

Pine Grosbeak: Again at Cedar Falls: a single bird reported for a fourth count record.

Yellow-headed Blackbird: A seventh count record, represented by one bird at DeSoto NWR in the same place as the six seen last year. This species has been found the past three years in southwest Iowa.

White-winged Scoter: The two birds at Davenport were an eighth count record.

Peregrine Falcon: A welcome appearance at (where else?) Cedar Falls, it is only the ninth count record of this species, the first since 1972.

Deletions

These birds were deleted from the final tabulation, for reasons given. This year showed a marked, but continuing, improvement in documentation, with particularly good jobs done at Cedar Falls, Omaha, and Davenport.

Turkey Vulture: One reported from Marshalltown was only described as having

its wings in a "dihedral, and soaring in a wide circle". Wings of many raptors can have a dihedral appearance, especially when banking, but some information on the length of the observation, distance from the bird, and underwing pattern would have improved the credibility of the observation. While the identification may have been correct, the information submitted was insufficient to corroborate the unexpected occurrence of this species in winter.

Merlin: A bird seen in the Lucas circle was identified as a Merlin, but was deleted. It was described as "definitely not a Kestrel", and had a "white rump" and "swept back wings". The white rump would tend to eliminate Merlin and suggest perhaps Northern Harrier or even an accipiter, as accipiters ^{have} somewhat prominent white undertail coverts which at times and at certain angles can give the appearance of a white rump.

Merlins were also reported from Omaha and Shenandoah, with satisfactory descriptions.

Swainson's Hawk: Thankfully only one was reported, from Oakville, and as no details were submitted, deletion was automatic.

Ringed Turtle Dove: Cedar Rapids reported one of this species, but the compiler noted that "It seems probable that the bird was one which escaped from a local cage-bird shop." Escapes do not qualify for CBCs. See also Monk Parakeet, next.

Monk Parakeet: One was reported from Princeton, and as in the case of the Ringed Turtle Dove, the question is not identification, but provenance. There was no indication that the bird was from an established breeding population, if indeed any such exist. I must add here that this qualification must be kept in mind when reporting Wild Turkey and other game birds.

Northern Oriole: One was reported from Red Rock Lake unaccompanied by details and was deleted. This species is very rare in Iowa in winter, and when found, is virtually a feeder exclusive.

Field Sparrow: Sixteen were reported at Rathbun and eight at Burlington without details, and would have been deleted but for the well-documented reports of 18 other birds from Davenport (6), Muscatine (2), Oakville (9), and Princeton (1), thus confirming the fact that a few birds of this species lingered in southeast Iowa this year.

Chipping Sparrow: Six birds of this species were reported, and all deleted, as follows. One from Davenport was said to be in summer plumage, but this species changes plumage in winter, casting considerable doubt on the report (check Robbins' field guide). Four birds at Lucas were considered

questionable by the compiler, with no details affixed, and so were also deleted. Finally, one from Rathbun with no details was deleted. I have noted in previous CBC summaries that this species is very rare in Iowa at CBC time, and is also difficult to identify in fall and winter. Vesper Sparrow: This species may occur rarely in Iowa in winter, usually in the southeast, but must be documented. Accordingly the one report, undocumented, from Lucas was deleted.

I received a suggestion from a no-doubt frustrated compiler that I mail along with the CBC summary form a list of the birds to be expected on Iowa CBCs with birds needing documentation being marked with an asterisk. This is a good suggestion, and I will try to follow through for next year's count.

Notable Misses

Amazingly, there were a few this year, notwithstanding the record species total.

Ruddy Duck: This species has been recorded only four of the last ten years, but its absence this year is surprising in view of the large numbers of waterfowl recorded.

Red-shouldered Hawk: This is probably the most significant miss, and one which will undoubtedly bother raptor enthusiasts in Iowa. It had not been missed in the last six years, and prior to that not since 1937!

Red Crossbill: This bird has been reported six of the last ten years, and its absence is surprising in light of the large numbers of winter finches found this year. However it is somewhat of an individualist, being rather erratic and unpredictable.

Lapland Longspur: This is the first miss for this species since 1953, but is not too surprising in that Horned Larks, its usual companions, were also virtually absent this year.

Population Comments

Below I have listed species highs set this year by individual localities. For example, if you want to set a new record for Common Flicker, your count group must find more than the 629 at Davenport this year, a new record.

Whistling Swan	1, Clinton (tie with old record)
Common Pintail	1200, Rathbun
Redhead	40, Rathbun
Lesser Scaup	1000, Rathbun
Greater Scaup	2, Iowa City (Tie)
Red-breasted Merganser	150, Rathbun

Wild Turkey	60, Decorah
Bonaparte's Gull	4, Rathbun (most likely this species)
Snowy Owl	2, Red Rock and Spirit Lake (tie)
Common Flicker	629, Davenport
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	8, Davenport
Blue Jay	367, Davenport
Black-capped Chickadee	700, Cedar Rapids
Brown Creeper	74, Davenport
Varied Thrush	1, Cedar Falls (tie)
Hermit Thrush	1, Davenport and Lost Nation (tie)
Cedar Waxwing	367, Dubuque
Red-winged Blackbird	13485 Davenport
Northern Cardinal	517, Davenport
Pine Siskin	237, Davenport
American Tree Sparrow	2392, Shenandoah
Swamp Sparrow	37, Shenandoah

As can be seen, many of these new highs involve species which are found in Iowa ~~in winter~~ in greater numbers during milder winters, so-called "half-hardy" species. They are discussed in more detail below.

All totals ^{below} are Birds Per Party (BPP), figured on a statewide basis, keeping in mind that some bias is involved because some counts have more feeder watchers than others. The four numbers after the species name are the BPP for the last four years' counts, 1977-78, 1978-79, 1979-80, and 1980-81.

Snow Goose (331;369;659;1481): The steady increase in numbers reflects the propensity for this species to winter further north in greater numbers each year, especially in mild open winters.

Black Duck (0.3;0.3;0.45;1.3): The steady increase is independent of the Mallard numbers, and may indicate increased observer awareness, or possibly that Black Duck genes are increasing in the Mallard gene pool to the extent that Black Duck phenotypes are being expressed with greater frequency.

Red-tailed Hawk(2.8;2,7;0.8;2.8): Numbers are back to normal after last year's slump. There were more immatures in the state also, an indication that the mild weather and lack of snow cover allowed the population as a whole to winter further north.

Rough-legged Hawk (1.1;0.6;0.3;0.5): Although numbers increased after last year, they did not return to prior levels, possibly a cause for concern.

On the other hand, more birds may have stayed north due to mild weather. Bald Eagle (3.2;2.0;1.35;1.8): Also up over last year, but also not up to prior levels. At least in the southwest there seemed to be a high proportion of adults and total numbers seemed lower.

Northern Harrier (0.35;0.3;0.2;0.4): Again a recovery, in this case to prior levels, as in the case of the Red-tail. Open fields are probably a contributing factor.

Great Horned Owl (0.6;0.8;1.0;1.0): A steady increase, possibly due to better owling effort before daylight. This species is doing well, however.

Barred Owl (0.25;0.3;0.3;0.45): Again an increase, also probably due to better coverage. Indeed, population increase in this species would tend to be limited by habitat in Iowa.

Common Flicker (3.8;3.75;5.3;6.8): An 80% increase over the average of the prior three years. This migratory woodpecker probably remained in the state due to mild weather and (presumably) sufficient food supply. Resident woodpeckers (see below) maintained fairly steady numbers.

Red-bellied Woodpecker (0.4;0.4;0.5;0.5): Reasonably steady levels.

Red-headed Woodpecker (1.0;0.3;8.7;6.55): Numbers have been good the last two years, in comparison with the prior two cold winters. Numbers tend to fluctuate widely for this mobile woodpecker.

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (0.1;0.1;0.15;0.2): Along with Common Flicker, this migratory woodpecker also stayed in increased numbers in the state.

Hairy Woodpecker (2.1;2.8;2.6;2.4): This resident species shows a steady population, after a few years of increases (see last year's summary).

Downy Woodpecker (11,12,9,11): Again, rather steady numbers, although there was somewhat of a drop last year.

Horned Lark (33,36,2.4;1.0): As can be seen, a tremendous drop from the cold and snowy winters of 1977-78 and 1978-79. While open fields make them difficult to find, I believe that there were far fewer Horned Larks in the state this year.

Blue Jay (14;13;19;21): A 37% increase over the prior three-year average, probably due to mild weather conditions.

American Crow (34;23;35;57): A 64% increase over the prior three-year average, again a result of milder weather. Higher numbers were reported statewide, but the mild weather apparently allowed some larger concentrations to stay within the state, especially in the southeast, such as the 2878 at Oakville. These large concentrations tend to be the most strongly migratory (see also blackbirds) and normally winter in southern states.

Black-capped Chickadee (25;27;25;31): This species increased some 20% over its prior three-year average, not as large an increase as some other species, but it is not as migratory as some of the other lingerers.

Tufted Titmouse (4.1;3.1;2.1;2.2): The decline of the previous three years was arrested this year, but at a low level, suggesting problems for this species, possibly related to the increase in White-breasted Nuthatch (below).

White-breasted Nuthatch (7.7;7.5;7.9;9.45): The increase shown by this sedentary species may be due to increased survival of this year's hatch, or possibly

an increasing population may be ousting competing hole-nesters, such as the Tufted Titmouse, which occupies the same habitat.

Red-breasted Nuthatch (0.3;0.3;0.03;0.4): A good recovery after last year's virtual absence, even above the high levels of the prior two years. Most "northern invaders" increased in numbers this year, especially winter finches, discussed below.

Brown Creeper (0.9;1.05;1.0;1.5): Another species wintering in greater numbers further north than usual, showing a 56% increase over the prior three-year average.

American Robin (7.2;0.9;16;4.8): Numbers of this species have fluctuated remarkably the past four years, apparently without relation to the weather conditions. Even this year's berry crop was excellent. Although a "half-hardy" species, it would not be expected to remain north of Iowa in large numbers, but it is difficult to explain why it would leave the state this year. Perhaps a clue is presented by the corresponding decline in Cedar Waxwing this year, another berry-eater (below).

Golden-crowned Kinglet (0.1;0.3;0.4;0.4): A definite recovery from the two cold winters of 1977-78 and 1978-79.

Cedar Waxwing (2.4;8.6;13;8.7): This year showed a significant decrease, probably easier to explain than in the case of the Robin, as this species is more of a northerner, wintering further north than the Robin. This year it probably remained north in greater numbers.

House Sparrow (198;157;162;228): This is a 33% increase over the prior three-year average, suggesting that mild weather has allowed better survival of this year's hatch. There has also been a well-documented movement of the population center of this species from urban areas (big cities) to rural livestock-feeding areas (the midwest farm states).

Meadowlark (2.0;6.9;0.8;0.4): Continuing last year's disappearing act, these birds disappeared almost entirely this year, a far cry from the levels of 1977-78 and 1978-79. This is hard to explain, in that mild weather and open fields should retain numbers of these birds. Perhaps the "Horned Lark effect" operates here, in that open fields spread the meadowlarks out, making them hard to find.

Compilers are being more careful reporting meadowlarks, listing them as "sp." unless identified to species by song, calls, or plumage. My feeling is that there are few (if any?) Eastern Meadowlarks in the state in winter, except possibly in the southeast.

Red-winged Blackbird (28;38;22;93): Numbers were far above normal mainly because of the large group of 13485 (70% of the statewide total) at

Davenport. This situation parallels that of the American Crow, where mild weather allowed large concentrations to remain within the state.

Common Grackle (27;18;17;45): Strong increase again a result of large flocks remaining in the state, especially at Ottumwa (3000) And Davenport (5442).

Brown-headed Cowbird (1.5;1.0;0.8;19): Strong increase due to the large number reported from Ottumwa (3000). This species is normally far less common in winter than the two preceding, and the estimates of 3000 of each at Ottumwa seem a little suspicious. Careful estimates are of much value, especially in analyses such as this.

Evening Grosbeak (0.2;0.1;0.02;0.6): Although numbers are not great, this species increased markedly this year, paralleling the gains in other winter finches.

Purple Finch(3.3;3.7;0.7;6.7): This winter finch increased markedly ~~also~~, after last year's drought, this year's totals being two-fold those of the prior two winters.

Common Redpoll (3.1;0.1;0.0;0.3): This was not a redpoll year, even though some were reported, a gain from last year's absence. However this year's levels were only one tenth those of 1977-78, which reminds us that "winter finches" are not a homogeneous group, but invade at different times, sometimes coincidentally, to give us what we like to call a "winter finch year".

Pine Siskin (3.4;2.1;0.1;11): Obviously this was a Siskin year, in contrast to the redpoll case. Totals this year were three or four times those of the relatively good year in 1977-78.

American Goldfinch (14;12;13;18): An increase here, but only about 37% over the prior three-year average. Being a relatively sedentary species, the increase may reflect good survival of this year's fledglings, as well as a minor influx from the north.

Northern Junco (77;77;70;98): The 31% increase here is similar in magnitude to increases shown by other species mentioned above induced to remain somewhat further north than usual.

American Tree Sparrow (61;41;56;89): An even greater increase here (68%) than for the Northern Junco, indicating that the center of abundance of the wintering population was closer to Iowa than in some other years.

Harris Sparrow (3.9;1.7;1.7;1.4): Following the concern expressed last year, this species continued its decline. Possibly dry weather conditions in its breeding range may be a contributing factor.

Addenda to Table

Several localities reported birds unidentified to species, and I have listed these here, except for "Meadowlark sp.", which is included in the table. In cases where a listing here would deprive a locality of a species in the table, such as "Shrike sp." with no other shrikes reported, I arbitrarily assigned such listings to whichever species I considered most likely at that locality. I have noted these cases here, as well as additional forms such as "Oregon Junco".

Duck sp.	DeSoto NWR 3; Omaha 85; Rathbun 5000.
Scaup sp.	Muscatine 4 (listed as Lesser in table).
Accipiter sp.	Iowa City 2; Omaha 1 (listed as Sharp-shinned in table).
Buteo sp.	Ames 3; DeSoto NWR 5; Iowa City 1; Omaha 4; Shenandoah 1; Tristate 1.
Gull sp.	Davenport 22; Rathbun 4 (described as "black-headed" and listed as Bonaparte's in table).
Owl sp.	Ames 1; Iowa City 2.
Red-shafted Flicker	DeSoto NWR 2; Omaha 1.
Thrush sp.	Lost Nation 1 (listed as Hermit in table).
Shrike sp.	Marble Rock 1; Mason City 1 (listed as Northern in table).
Blackbird sp.	DeSoto NWR 75; Omaha 14.
Oregon Junco	Ames 4; DeSoto NWR 3; Omaha 5.