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1977 IOWA CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT SUMMARY

Reports were received from 31 localities this year, one less than in 1976. Losses were Pine Hollow (cancelled due to severe weather), North Linn County (probably also a weather casualty), and Webster City. Several other counts were definitely hampered by weather, Des Moines and Wapsipinicon River Valley among them. Much welcomed new counts this year are DeSoto NWR and Mason City. There were three name changes, two due to small shifts in count circles: Larrabee moved a couple miles south and became Cherokee, and Wheatland moved about 10 miles north and became Lost Nation. Bentonsport is now known as Keosauqua.

Davenport again led all counts with 67 species, but a close challenge was made by Dubuque with 64, an outstandingly complete count - an example of what can be done with close coverage by good observers.

Participants were down to 450 from last year's record 484, probably weather-related, as was the drop for the second straight year in the total species count. This year 111 were recorded, down from last year's 115 and the record 116 in 1975. The drop is apparently due to chance misses of a few rare species, as shown under "Notable Misses", below.

This year's prize for the most unusual happening on a CBC definitely goes to the Red Rock group, who were surprised upon returning to their parked cars by several officers of the law who were interested in their activities in the area. It seems a dead body had been located nearby and the entire birding group became suspects, were interrogated, and subsequently released after a two-hour delay. Little did Compiler Stravers suspect that the body was planted by the Shenandoah group, who wanted to delay the Red Rock count and beat them this year.

Species Comments

This section will discuss species reports about which I have some reservations, or would like to comment upon. All are marked in the Table with an asterisk. Of course, comments are welcome. Please do not construe this as personal criticism; it is meant to be constructive.

American Bittern: The DeSoto compiler reported an American Bittern the documentation for which included the following descriptive section:

"Bird flew in front of vehicle at about 30 yards and landed in tree approximately 150 yards away. Typical bittern outline. Broad short wings, dark brown coloration, slow measured wingbeats."

This does not eliminate Black-crowned Night Heron, which is as likely as American Bittern in the Missouri Valley in early winter. Indeed, the fact that the bird landed in a tree suggests that it was a Night Heron, the most likely species being the Black-crowned. Conclusive field marks for American Bittern (black whisker mark and dark primaries in flight) were not noted. Furthermore, the Night Heron flies with slower wingbeats than the American Bittern, and has shorter, broader wings.

Considering the above, I submit that this bird was just as likely to have been a Black-crowned Night Heron (*immature*).

Red-breasted Merganser: One was reported from Omaha with no details. Males are readily identified, but females must be carefully separated from female Common Mergansers. Details should be provided.

Northern Goshawk: One was reported from Lost Nation, also without details. Acceptance of Goshawk reports requires separation from Cooper's Hawk. Brown-plumaged birds are very difficult to separate in the field.

Swainson's Hawk: Only one was reported this year, from DeSoto NWR. It was identified as a dark-phase Swainson's Hawk on the basis of its generally brown coloration and its white throat. While the identification may be correct, I have doubts, based on the following:

(a) The dark phase is rare, even <sup>at</sup> among optimum occurrence times for the species.

(b) No mention was made in the details provided of tail pattern or underwing pattern. If well seen, this information could help eliminate, for example, an immature dark-phase Red-tailed Hawk (note that immature Red-tails do have barred tails) or one of the wide range of plumages of the Rough-legged Hawk, both species being very common this year.

(c) There has never been a specimen of Swainson's Hawk taken north of Texas in the central United States (see Browning, American Birds 28: 865).

(d) Specimens indicate that some 82% of those birds found in the United States <sup>in winter</sup> are immatures, which are very difficult, if not impossible, to identify in the field (see also Browning).

(e) If indeed any Swainson's Hawks occur this far north in winter, are we calmly identifying the 82% of these which are immatures as something else? Very few counts report "Buteo sp"; this year only Iowa City and Omaha did so. Furthermore, if only 18% of the Swainson's Hawks occurring in winter in the United States are adults, then one could assume that the 11 reports in the last ten Iowa CBC's could be extrapolated to include the 50 immatures which were misidentified as something else. I submit that there just are not this many Swainson's Hawks in Iowa in winter, if any.

Golden Eagle: The three individuals reported (with excellent details) may in fact be two, as Petersen suggests that the Princeton and Davenport birds may have been the same; their plumages appeared to be identical.

"Red-shafted" Flicker: Reported from three localities, but included with Common Flicker in the Table. DeSoto NWR had five, Mason City one, and Omaha three.

Savannah, Field, and Lincoln's Sparrows: The only report of Savannah Sparrow was from DeSoto, with excellent details provided. However a Field Sparrow was reported from Lamoni, but no details were given. A Lincoln's Sparrow was found at Oakville, well described. Details must be provided for each of these species, as well as Chipping Sparrow, which was not reported this year. See also Vesper Sparrow, below.

Vesper Sparrow: Five were reported from Ottumwa, without details. As this is not a difficult bird to identify when the white tail-feathers are seen, it should be simple to document. Identification becomes risky without seeing these white feathers. There are several Iowa CBC reports of this species, but only two were documented: one well-described at Clinton in 1962, and one poorly described from Davenport in 1964, when four were "closely observed by Elton Fawks". Such documentation depends heavily on the ability of the observer, who, however, may not be known to the compiler (in this case I am convinced).

"Oregon Junco": Reported from DeSoto NWR (1) and Omaha (4), but included with Northern Junco in the Table.

Best Birds

According to past CBC data, the following may be the best finds for 1977:

(a) Swan sp: This is the first Iowa CBC report of a swan, found at Riverton on the Shenandoah count. Some apparently were seen during the count period at Rathbun in 1971 (IBL 42: 12). The possibility remains that the Riverton swan was a Trumpeter (see longer note).

(b) American Bittern: The controversial DeSoto bird. If this bird was indeed an American Bittern, it would be the third Iowa CBC report. If a Black-crowned Night Heron, the second Iowa CBC report.

(c) White-fronted Goose: Also only the second Iowa CBC report, and also from DeSoto NWR. The first was reported from Omaha, indicating that these birds linger with Snow Geese.

(d) Pine Grosbeak: Although the third Iowa CBC report, this may be the "Bird of the Year" due to its general rarity at any time in Iowa. See under "Population Comments".

#### Notable Misses

Perhaps most surprising is Red Crossbill, in light of the increased numbers of finches in the State this year. It was however reported during the count period at Decorah. Two other species seen during the count period but missed on count day were Pied-billed Grebe and Bufflehead, both at Dubuque. These species and others which have been seen more than five times in the last ten years are listed below:

Pied-billed Grebe:	seen 8 years
Bufflehead	6
Hooded Merganser	8
Hermit Thrush	7
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	9
Yellow-rumped Warbler	6
Red Crossbill	7

#### Population Comments

Pine Grosbeak: This is only the third time this species has been recorded on an Iowa CBC, yet this year it was found at three localities (Cedar Rapids, Dubuque, and Yellow River Forest) for a total of 43 individuals. At present the invasion appears to be restricted to the northeast, but as winter progresses, more may be found further south and west. I have an unconfirmed report of one at Omaha. The previous reports were in 1964 (12 at Davenport) and 1954 (15 at Dubuque and 1 at Pine Hollow).

Other Winter Finches: Numbers are definitely up for three of these species, although hardly at invasion levels. This year's totals are about the same as those of 1975:

	1977	1976	1975	1974
Evening Grosbeak	24	2	134	11
Common Redpoll	450	20	432	4
Pine Siskin	462	53	599	15

Purple Finch numbers are about the same as last year's, but far below the banner year of 1974:

Purple Finch	500	632	<del>500</del>	1275
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Diurnal Raptors: Of the four most common in Iowa in winter (Red-tailed and Rough-legged Hawks, Bald Eagle, and American Kestrel), numbers of the first three were sharply higher this year, the Kestrel about average. Comparing this year's totals with the average number present 1974-76, Rough-legged Hawk was up 155%, Red-tailed up 58%, and Bald Eagle up 82%. There seem to be more immature Red-tails in the State this year, suggesting that the entire population may be wintering further north (immatures generally winter further south than adults). Possibly the rodent population is at a high level in this area, which also would explain the extremely high numbers of Rough-legged Hawks present. The Bald Eagle story seems to improve each

year, this year's total of 489 easily beating last year's CBC record of 297. The numbers of immatures seen would indicate good breeding success in recent years.

Field Flocking Birds; Included here are Horned Lark, Lapland Longspur, and Snow Bunting, all of which showed massive increases this year.

	<u>This year</u>	<u>Prior 3-year average</u>
Horned Lark	5063	680
Lapland Longspur	1624	145
Snow Bunting	574	84

The addition of the DeSoto count greatly helped the totals for Horned Lark and Lapland Longspur, but did not contribute to the Snow Bunting total, indicating that there indeed was a buildup in numbers of these species.

American Robin: This species also showed a marked increase over its prior three-year average: 1107 compared to the average of 219, a five-fold increase. At least in south-west Iowa, these birds were abundant around multiflora hedges in the Refuges.

Significant Decreases: Three species fell into this category:

	<u>This year</u>	<u>Prior 3-year average</u>
Mourning Dove	745	1297
Red-headed Woodpecker	116	690
Carolina Wren	9	26

The Carolina Wren probably is showing the effects of last year's severe winter, a well-known environmental hazard for this species. Heavy snows in much of the State have probably driven the Mourning Doves south as their ground-feeding habits were curtailed. Last year's Red-headed Woodpecker numbers were markedly increased despite the cold winter, probably because of birds moving south from Minnesota (see last year's CBC summary), thus increasing the prior three-year average. However this does not entirely explain this year's decrease.

Rock Dove: As suspected, this species does occur at all locations, being reported from all this year for the first time for a grand (?) total of 6933 individuals. We will now be able to chart its progress, hopefully downward.