

1978 Iowa Christmas Bird Count Summary

Even though a record 34 localities reported this year, the only new count was Eldora, but there were three returnees from previous years: Cedar Falls, Spirit Lake, and Wapsipinicon River Valley (a weather casualty last year). The only count from last year not reporting was Mason City, where perhaps everyone is frozen. Davenport, for the 26th straight time, led all counts with 69 species, but the last two years must be making them nervous. Due to the toughness of the Cedar Rapids compiler in eliminating three species for insufficient documentation, his count just failed to dislodge Davenport. Shenandoah also had 68 species, due to a good waterfowl count, and Dubuque was fourth with 64. These top counts must be glad waterfowl don't like Iowa City, as that locality was fifth with 60 species despite a lack of duck species.

This year also saw by far a record show of observers: 556, compared with the previous record of 484 in 1976. This is a healthy trend, allowing more parties (a record 195 this year) and thus better coverage and more statistically significant data for use in future analyses.

Despite these healthy factors, the total species list of 115 failed to meet the record 116 set in 1975. The reasons why a new record was not set are discussed below.

Species Comments

Two species were reported which would have made a total of 117 and set a new species record. These were not included because of absence (Turkey Vulture) or insufficient (Swainson's Hawk) documentation. One of the species eliminated at Cedar Rapids because of failure of the observer to supply details was Greater

Scaup, an entirely plausible species where waterfowl are present in late fall and early winter, especially in eastern Iowa. See under "Notable Misses" below for species seen during the count period and others which were missed this year.

In general, documentation is markedly improved, for which I am very appreciative. Compilers have the responsibility of gathering details on unusual or rare sightings and deciding whether to include them in their count tabulation.

Last year I went into some detail about Swainson's Hawk sightings in Iowa in winter. At the risk of being boring, herewith an addendum: Taking into account the fact that this is a species not listed for winter in Iowa or any of the surrounding states nor as far south as Oklahoma, Arkansas, or Louisiana, a somewhat incredible 18 birds have been reported (^{generally} and accepted) in Iowa CBC's through this year. No details were provided for nine of these, and details for four more were insufficient to eliminate Red-tailed Hawk. This leaves five birds for which the details equivocally raise the possibility of a winter Swainson's Hawk. Two birds at Des Moines in 1961 had "pale wing linings and dark flight feathers" and were in an area where the species had bred that summer.

~~These~~ These birds also had the usual characteristics considered to be diagnostic of Swainson's but which in fact are commonly seen in Red-tails in winter (dark breast with no belly streaks or underside streaking; barred or pale undertail; slight dihedral in flight).

One at Rathbun in 1975 had "light and darker contrasting of the underside of the wings", but this description ~~is not~~ ^{is not specific enough to} characterise a Swainson's. There were two reported from Omaha this year (by different observers), both possessing pale wing linings and

dark flight feathers. One of these was a dark bird, and ~~it~~ it is conjectural whether this field character holds up with dark birds. Presently I do not feel qualified to state unequivocally that this contrasting underwing pattern is completely diagnostic of Swainson's Hawk. Certainly it is not sufficient to allow what would be tantamount to a State seasonal record, considering, as stated above, that this species is not accepted as a winter/bird in Iowa and surrounding states. Finally, I would welcome comments on this problem.

Two counts reported Ruby-crowned Kinglet, neither with details. As this species is rare in winter in Iowa, documentation should be provided.

The Meadowlark dilemma continues, with northwestern counts probably correctly reporting all Westerns and some southeastern counts more questionably reporting all Easterns. Those birds which can be identified by call (this method is most reliable, as discussed in Bent's Life Histories: try to listen to some Meadowlarks this summer whose songs you can hear to get a feeling for the calls), song, or even plumage should be listed by species, and the rest as "Meadowlark sp." There is probably a significant movement of Westerns south and east in winter in Iowa. Even a few of the breeding meadowlarks in South Dakota are Easterns.

As far as sparrows are concerned, the situation here is much improved. The only Field and Vesper Sparrows reported were in the south and east, where a few undoubtedly occur in winter. Documentation for sightings from other areas is required, however. Lincoln's Sparrow was well-described from both areas reporting it, and, as expected, no Chipping Sparrows were reported.

Addendum to Table

Some submitted observations do not fit well into a Table based on species, and are therefore listed here. Additional races are listed numerically in the Table (Flickers, Juncos) as well as here. Where identification to species was not made, the sighting is also listed here (Duck sp., etc.). In such cases however, where failure to list a sighting in the Table would deprive a count of a species, observations were assigned arbitrarily to a species in the Table (Gull sp. at Burlington was listed as Ring-billed in the Table).

Duck sp.	Omaha	4676
Gull sp.	Burlington	12 (Listed as Ring-billed)
Butoe sp.	Iowa City	1
	Omaha	2
	Yellow River Forest	3
Owl sp.	Iowa City	2
Red-shafted Flicker	Omaha	2 (Listed as Common)
Shrike sp.	Dubuque	1 (Listed as Loggerhead)
	Marble Rock	1 (Listed as Loggerhead)
Blackbird sp.	Omaha	32
Oregon Junco	Omaha	2 (Listed as Northern)

Best Birds

Based on past CBC data, and in approximate order of merit, these were:

Marsh Wren: Third CBC record, but the first for 24 years. Brown's Annotated List gives a Jan 2, 1955 record, and several were counted this year at Squaw Creek.

White-fronted Goose: Seen two years in a row, but only the third CBC record. Probably previously overlooked among other geese.

Yellow-headed Blackbird: Fifth CBC record. One was also at a Marshalltown feeder during count period, but was not recorded on count day.

Osprey: Seventh CBC record and first for seven years. Two were reported, with best details from Iowa City. The Rathbun bird was at close range and photographed, but the photo has not been seen.

Merlin: Ninth CBC record, but only the third in the last 10 years.

Notable Misses:

Most significant in this category were two species reported during the count period but not seen on count day. A Townsend's Solitaire was at Des Moines and White Pelicans at Keosauqua, on the Des Moines River. There have been four previous CBC records of the Solitaire, but the only previous CBC record of White Pelican was the sedentary loner on the Mississippi River in 1975.

Red-breasted Merganser was not reported this year, even though it has been seen nine of the last 10 years. Red Crossbill (seven of the last 10 years) also was not reported, but neither were many other winter finches.

Population Comments

Diurnal Raptors: After last year's high populations of Red-tails, Roughlegs, and Bald Eagles, this year saw a return to normal levels for the latter two, while Red-tails stayed high. In terms of Birds Per Party (BPP; figured on a statewide basis), there were 2.7 Red-tails (same as last year); 0.6 Roughlegs (1.1); and 2.0 Bald Eagles (3.2). Prior three-year averages for these species are 2.1 for Red-tails, 0.7 for Roughlegs, and 2.35 for Bald Eagles.

Gallinaceous Birds: Perhaps the big story of this year's CBC is the apparently incredible increase in the Gray Partridge population from a three-year average of three birds (absolute count) to this year's total of 291. There were even 7 at Iowa City (considered by Halmi not to be locally raised). Perhaps the population is at a peak and range expansion is taking place.

Ring-necked Pheasant also increased dramatically and surprisingly in light of the weather conditions the past two winters, more than doubling the last three years' average BPP. Is it possible that some Pheasant and Partridge are entering the State from the north and west as Prairie Chickens once did? The Bobwhite, primarily more southern in distribution, maintained a steady population.

Mourning Dove: This species was at normal levels after last year's decline, which is also surprising in light of the heavy snow cover in Iowa this winter.

Woodpeckers: Three species are steadily increasing in numbers, suggesting an increase in breeding populations also. Pileated Woodpecker shows the largest increase, having doubled its numbers in three years. Both the Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers are increasing also, but more so the Hairy. In terms of BPP, the Hairy has increased each year for the last four years (1.6 to 2.8), as has the Downy (8.0 to 11.8). As can be seen, the Hairy is increasing at a greater rate. Red-headed Woodpecker remained at a low level of 0.8 BPP compared with the high in 1976 of 6.1.

Field Flocking Birds: Included here are Horned Lark, Lapland Longspur, and Snow Bunting, but see Meadowlarks, below. All maintained their very high levels of last year, even increasing in the case of the Snow Bunting. Horned Lark had 36 BPP versus 33 in 1977 and 8 in 1976; Lapland Longspur 9.1, 11.4, and 1.5; and Snow Bunting 4.6, 3.75, and 1.1. Heavy snowcover and cold weather north of Iowa has probably caused this phenomenon.

Carolina Wren: This species has declined disastrously due to severe winters. From 29 birds reported in 1976, ~~10~~ there were only three this year, a decline of some 95% in terms of BPP.

Amazingly, however, one was at Sioux City!

American Robin: This species returned to usual low levels ^(0.9 BPP) from last year's high of 7.2 BPP.

Golden-crowned Kinglet: Despite much concern (in, for example, American Birds) about winter's effect on this species, it recovered its normal levels this year (58 birds versus 18 last year).

Meadowlarks: Taken as a group, Meadowlarks were about double their levels of their prior three-year average this year (6.9 versus 3.2 BPP). This is probably related to the increase in Field Flocking Birds (see above).

Sparrows: Several observers noted a decline in American Tree Sparrow, especially relative to Northern Junco. While the latter remained constant in numbers (79 BPP versus the prior three-year average of 78), Tree Sparrows declined to 41 BPP from 61 last year and 87 and 81 the previous two years. Thus there seems to be a three-year decline in progress. Perhaps harsh winter conditions have reduced the population, or at least sent them further south than usual. However during the normal migration periods the population seemed low, suggesting that indeed the population is reduced. For some species, wintering habitat conditions may determine subsequent breeding population levels more than conditions during the breeding period itself. Perhaps this is happening to the Tree Sparrow. Harris Sparrow was also reduced in numbers from 3.9 BPP ~~this year versus a~~ (prior three-year average) to 1.7 this year.