

## 2002 Christmas Count Report

### **Eugene Christmas Bird Count, December 29, 2002: Reflections: Record birders, record birds**

*by Herb Wisner, Eugene Christmas Bird Count Compiler*

On a pretty nice day, sandwiched among a number of rainy ones, 115 bird counters were out in the field to add this year's statistics to the data from previous years. Home counters numbered 29. Several records were set, not the least of which was the number of participants! Special note should be made of the oldest person on the Count, Homer Roberts, 92, who helped his son-in-law, David Novack in the Lorane Highway/Spencer Creek area.

A note about tallying: if the numbers reported by each of the teams are added up, the total for some species is probably too high because of overlapping sightings. According to Christmas Bird Count protocol, I have made some adjustments in an attempt to report a (perhaps) more reasonable number.

If you missed the Count, read what follows to share in the fun. If you did participate, muse on your own reflections as you read mine.

Going down the page in checklist order we encounter the Great Egrets: 14 more than ever before! They are easy to see from West 11th at Fern Ridge Reservoir or below the dam at the north end of the lake. Turkey Vulture numbers didn't change much. It is interesting that they chose to hang around rather than withstand the travails of migration. They must have considered the number of menu items available here in the winter sufficient to sustain them.

Q: How do we count Canada Geese?

A: By the 1000s! With huge flocks going back and forth over the whole Count circle plus those in the fields, it's impossible to be sure of just how many there were. Hunting doesn't seem to make a dent. Anyway, there were more than ever before, no matter how we calculated the total.

Birders appreciate the opportunity to list Eurasian Wigeon on their year list, though numbers don't change a great deal. This year American Wigeon were way down from the high of 3,756 in 1985. Curious. Maybe the weather to the north has been mild enough to keep them there. Like exercising, why expend all that energy if you don't have to? Northern Pintails were similarly here in reduced numbers. Canvasbacks don't show here every year, but at least we had one to build up our total species list. On the other hand, Buffleheads were plentiful, and we had one more than the previous record. It's hardly significant, but it's nice to break records (well, except for starlings, House Sparrows, Rock Doves and Canada Geese!).

Osprey still hang around although one would think that competition from the large number of cormorants might adversely affect their supply of fish. According to observers in the Fern Ridge area, Northern Harriers were everywhere. Even accounting for possible overlap of observations, the 102 tallied beats the previous high of 94. It seems as though almost everyone tallied an accipiter. Only seven teams out of 24 failed to get either a Sharp-shinned or Cooper's Hawk. While American Kestrels were in ordinary numbers, the other two expected falcons, Merlin and Peregrine, beat their previous records. Semi-palmated Plovers have only been Counted three times previously.

Twenty-seven more Greater Yellowlegs than heretofore dined in West Eugene this year. Lesser Yellowlegs appeared for the first time. Red Phalaropes sometimes show up in the fall; this year's single is only the second time for our Count. We've sighted a Bonaparte's Gull only three times in the past. The Long-eared Owl (reported as "Long-haired" in the newspaper) was on stage for only the second time.

Anna's "Hummers" were seen in a number of areas, but the home counters usually get the lion's share of these sightings. Maybe more people are providing the right flavor of syrup since the 45 seen this time beat the record of 32 set in 1983!

Belted Kingfishers didn't set any records, but most of the teams in the field chalked them off on their lists.

The Lewis's Woodpecker was the first of its ilk to show on Count Day here since 1978. I hope its observers invited it to come back often! I recall that we once had the US record for Northern Flickers, and this year's total isn't far behind that number. Every team had two or more, and one team listed 38. Consider this a warning to make sure your walls are carpenter ant free come spring.

Steller's Jays outdid their 1976 high by 40 individuals. How about those two Blue Jays, the real McCoy's and not the imposters labeled by some as Blue Jays? We have only one previous show, in 1978. Scrub Jays outdid themselves, beating their earlier record of 724.

Swallows of any sort are not really expected during our winter months, so the Barn Swallows that showed were somewhat unusual even though they were not first timers.

Chestnut-backed Chickadees went for broke too, beating their previous high by more than 100. If all the Bushtits that were counted showed up in my backyard, I think every one would find a spot on the suet cake, and, hanging there, be impossible to count. White-breasted Nuthatches continue to be difficult to find in the numbers of yore. But Brown Creepers, with somewhat similar habits, tied their earlier numbers.

Kinglets held their own pretty well. But, if the Golden-crowned variety depended on me to count them, they would be out of luck. They should be required to fly down from the treetops to be seen by those of us who are hearing-impaired.

Varied Thrush populations jump up and down from year to year. They were well above average in numbers this time around, but far short of a record. It is interesting to note that they are unusual among thrushes in their willingness to eat the small seeds put out by us backyard birders. Most, if not all, thrushes go more for fruits and insects, etc. To polish off this discussion, we'll take note of the fact that Spotted Towhees (isn't it nice to have them back as a distinct species?), White-throated Sparrows, the Slate-colored form of Dark-eyed Juncos and Lesser Goldfinches all exceeded past glories. House Sparrows did too, but I'm not even going to mention them.

P.S. I must not leave out mention of the Ruff seen at Stewart Pond during Count Week. This species is almost unknown anywhere in the US.