

2016 Oakridge Christmas Bird Count

by Joel Geier, Count Coordinator and Compiler

The Oakridge Christmas Bird Count had to be postponed when an ice storm on December 14 produced dangerous driving conditions. The weather for our second try on December 29, 2016, turned out much better, with Oakridge temperatures rising to 57° F in bright sunshine by early afternoon. However, shaded parts of valley bottoms remained frosty, and access to elevations above 2,500 feet was hindered by lingering snow up to eight inches deep.

Forested areas seemed surprisingly quiet even where the sun was shining. Our total counts of Steller's Jays (14), Varied Thrushes (4), Chestnut-backed Chickadees (50), and Golden-crowned Kinglets (99) were well below average. We found no forest finches, such as Red Crossbills or Pine Siskins. For just the second time in seven years, we found no accipiters. Perhaps the Sharpies and Cooper's Hawks figured out ahead of us that there just aren't many songbirds in the forests this winter!

We had better luck in the residential areas around ponds and brush patches. Our counts for Fox Sparrows and Song Sparrows were the highest since this count was revived in 2009, after being discontinued in 1985. One of those Fox Sparrows was a well-described "Red" Sparrow, a new subspecies for this count and perhaps our rarest bird of the day.

Ruby-crowned Kinglets sallied after small flying insects that emerged in the afternoon warmth. Even a Spotted Towhee tried to do some aerial flycatching! Other birds that brought enjoyment included Wrentits (a life bird for one volunteer), American Dippers (found by four out of five teams), and Anna's Hummingbirds.

Two new species made it onto the count list this year: Clark's Grebe and Lesser Goldfinch. Clark's Grebe was considered to be a subspecies of Western Grebe prior to 1985, so even if some occurred in the earlier period of this count, they might not have been noticed. An adult Golden Eagle and three Purple Finches were the first records for those species in the "modern" period of this count. Wild Turkeys were found for the second time, increasing here as elsewhere in the Willamette Basin.

Our total of 58 species on count day was below the average for recent years. We guessed that the cold conditions earlier in December may have caused some birds to move to lower elevations. Species observed during the week of the count but missed on count day included Mountain Quail, Pine Siskin, and American Goldfinch.

Thanks to this year's field volunteers: Barbara Butzer, Grace Fowler, Julie Parker, Diane Horgan, Dave Braunschweiger, Mary Lee Sayre, Amy Weih, Alicja Nichols, Jeannie Cabello-Penn, and Wil Geier. Thanks also to The Ridge Homestyle Cafe for hosting our morning meeting, and to Brewer's Union Local #180 for hosting the countdown.