

2018 Iowa City Christmas Bird Count

Chris Edwards and Diana Pesek

The 68th annual Iowa City Christmas Bird Count was held on Sunday, December 16, 2018. The count area is a 15-mile diameter circle centered on Hwy. 965 and Penn Street in North Liberty. The total of 64 species was slightly below the ten-year average of 66. The all-time high count of 81 species was set in 2012. Temperatures on count day were above average at 21-51° F with light NW winds and clear skies. Area rivers and streams were partly open, the Coralville Reservoir and other bodies of water were mostly frozen, and there was no snow cover.

Highlights

This was a very unusual year. There were no rare species found this year, and only a few uncommon species (meaning they are not seen most years.) They were Snow Goose, Canvasback, Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser, and Killdeer.

Only a few species were seen in numbers significantly *above* the ten-year average. They were Mallard (ten-year high), Common Goldeneye, Common Merganser, Herring Gull (ten-year high), Red-headed Woodpecker (ten-year high), and European Starling.

In contrast, there were many species seen in numbers significantly *below* the ten-year average, some of them historically so. They were Wild Turkey, Rock Pigeon (lowest since 2003), Mourning Dove, Ring-billed Gull, Northern Harrier, Cooper's Hawk, Rough-legged Hawk, Hairy Woodpecker, American Crow (lowest since 1969), Horned Lark, Black-capped Chickadee, American Robin, Cedar Waxwing, House Sparrow (lowest since 1972), Eurasian Tree Sparrow, House Finch (lowest since 1993), American Goldfinch (lowest since 1982), American Tree Sparrow (lowest since 1969), White-crowned Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco (lowest since 1971), and Northern Cardinal.

Common species (seen in most years) that were missed entirely were Sharp-shinned Hawk, Eastern Screech-Owl, Northern Shrike, Fox Sparrow, Swamp Sparrow, and Yellow-rumped Warbler. A Great Blue Heron was seen during the count week but not seen on the count.

Discussion

It is difficult to explain the low numbers for so many species this year, and it is undoubtedly due to multiple reasons. One factor is our count effort. There were 29 field participants, only a slight decline from the 20-year average of 32; but only 49 party-hours were spent in the field, compared to the 20-year average of 66 party-hours – a 25% decline. Our feeder watching effort has also declined over time, with 9 feeder locations this year compared to the 20-year average of 13 locations.

Another factor may have been the late fall and early winter weather pattern. November was much colder than average, and there were two snowfall events late in the month. This may have pushed lingering fall migrants, such as Fox Sparrow and Yellow-rumped Warbler, to our south. Then temperatures moderated and December was much warmer than normal. This may have left the bulk of some other species, such as American Tree Sparrow and Dark-eyed Junco, still to the north of us.

Some irruptive species such as Rough-legged Hawk and Northern Shrike, whose movements are influenced by prey availability to our north, seemed to be scarce in Iowa throughout the winter. And populations of fruit-eating species such as American Robin and Cedar Waxwing vary greatly in our region each winter due to food availability.

Another possible factor is the long-term decline of many species due to habitat loss and fragmentation and other causes. But Audubon's CBC trend analysis tool shows that only two species listed above are showing long-term declines in Iowa: House Sparrow and American Tree Sparrow. (See <https://www.audubon.org/conservation/where-have-all-birds-gone>.) In summary, winter bird distribution and abundance are interesting but extremely complex subjects.

Count Effort

This year there were 29 field observers including two first-time participants: Elizabeth Aubrey, Kyle Belcher, Fawn Bowden, Mark Brown, Barry Buschelman, Theresa Carbrey, Chris Caster, Jerry Denning, Karen Disbrow, Seth Duncan, Sandy Eads, Linda Fisher, Jim Fuller, Karole Fuller, Therese Guedon, Peter Hansen, Rick Hollis, Nancy Lynch, Terri Macey, Jamie McCoy, Ramona McGurk, Mary Noble, Jason Paulios, Linda Quinn, Deb Rolfes, Mark Rolfes, Linda Rudolph, James Scheib, and Donna Warner. Two parties spent 2.0 hours in the field owl-watching.

There were 9 feeder watchers including three first-time participants: Cindy Asmussen, Barbara Beaumont, Chris Edwards, Linda Fisher, Janet Hollis, Milana Mitchell, James Scheib, Cindy Spading, and Ronnye Wieland. Feeder watchers spent 18.5 hours watching.

This year's count was organized by Diana Pesek, and the results were compiled by Chris Edwards. On the day of the count we met for lunch at the North Liberty Community Center, and for an evening meal and compilation at Gus' Food & Spirits in Coralville. We collected \$101 in donations for the National Audubon Society Christmas Bird Count program. Thanks to everyone who donated.

Nationally, this year marked the 119th consecutive Christmas Bird Count. More than 70,000 observers from all 50 states, every Canadian province, the Caribbean, Central and South America, and many Pacific Islands participate in this annual bird census. The results of all counts from 1900 to the present are available online at www.audubon.org/bird/cbc, through a cooperative project of the National Audubon Society and the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology.

SPECIES LIST

Snow Goose	1	Red-tailed Hawk	69	American Robin	15
Cackling Goose	9	Rough-legged Hawk	1	European Starling	2155
Canada Goose	3327	Great Horned Owl	4	Cedar Waxwing	41
Gadwall	8	Barred Owl	3	House Sparrow	283
Mallard	1020	Belted Kingfisher	1	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	3
Canvasback	4	Red-headed Woodpecker	27	House Finch	38
Redhead	2	Red-bellied Woodpecker	76	Purple Finch	15
Lesser Scaup	1	Downy Woodpecker	85	Pine Siskin	14
Bufflehead	2	Hairy Woodpecker	12	American Goldfinch	55
Common Goldeneye	13	Northern Flicker	10	American Tree Sparrow	58
Hooded Merganser	3	Pileated Woodpecker	4	Song Sparrow	6
Common Merganser	65	American Kestrel	26	White-throated Sparrow	27
Ring-necked Pheasant	4	Blue Jay	145	White-crowned Sparrow	1
Wild Turkey	10	American Crow	107	Dark-eyed Junco	166
Rock Pigeon	166	Horned Lark	2	Red-winged Blackbird	115
Eurasian Collared-Dove	26	Black-capped Chickadee	137	Brown-headed Cowbird	1
Mourning Dove	110	Tufted Titmouse	38	Common Grackle	4
Killdeer	1	Red-breasted Nuthatch	5	Northern Cardinal	156
Ring-billed Gull	33	White-breasted Nuthatch	78	TOTAL SPECIES	64
Herring Gull	12	Brown Creeper	5	TOTAL INDIVIDUALS	8930
Bald Eagle	80	Carolina Wren	6		
Northern Harrier	1	Eastern Bluebird	35		
Cooper's Hawk	1	Hermit Thrush	2		