

2020 Iowa City Christmas Bird Count

Chris Edwards

The 70th annual Iowa City Christmas Bird Count was held on Sunday, December 20, 2020. It was a count like no other – the coronavirus pandemic had a significant impact on how the count was conducted, and in turn, on the results. Instead of birding in small groups, most participants birded alone or with family members, and were assigned smaller areas to cover. We did not meet for mid-day or evening compilations. Because of the changes, we had a lot more parties in the field, and broader coverage of the area, and as a result many species were seen in record or near-record numbers – more on that later.

Conditions & Effort

The count area is a 15-mile diameter circle centered on Hwy. 965 and Penn Street in North Liberty, encompassing North Liberty, Coralville, Solon, Tiffin, and portions of Iowa City, as well as Lake Macbride and most of the Coralville Reservoir. Temperatures on count day were slightly above average at 21-34° F, with light variable winds and sunny skies. Rivers and streams were mostly open, still bodies of water were mostly frozen, and there was about an inch of snow cover.

The count effort this year was unprecedented. Although I don't have complete historical records for participation, I'm fairly certain we set records for the number of field participants (46), field parties (32), hours by car (63), hours by foot (90), and miles by foot (114). In comparison, the prior ten-year averages are 31 field participants, 11 field parties, 38 hours by car, 22 hours by foot, and 20 miles by foot. We covered a lot of areas on foot that have not been covered in previous years. Our feeder watching effort (20 locations, 55 hours) was also the highest in over ten years, and our owl watching effort (5 observers, 5.3 hours) was slightly higher than normal. This overall level of participation resulted in high counts for many species.

Results

We found 72 species, the most since the record high of 81 species in 2012. We counted 28,866 individual birds, an all-time high, in part thanks to 11,297 Mallards. Our ten-year count average is 68 species and 12,767 birds. Three species that are considered rare on our count were found: one Savannah Sparrow at Hawkeye Wildlife Area (third record all-time), four American White Pelicans above the Coralville Reservoir dam (fifth record all-time), and a Merlin in Coralville (eighth record all-time). Other unusual species (seen on four or fewer counts in the last ten years) were Northern Shoveler, American Wigeon, Northern Pintail, Canvasback, Ring-necked Duck, Northern Saw-whet Owl, and Winter Wren.

Fully one-third of all species were counted at the highest level in ten years, including eight record high counts. Record highs were recorded for Trumpeter Swan, Mallard, American White Pelican, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Downy Woodpecker, Pileated Woodpecker, White-breasted Nuthatch, and Eurasian Tree Sparrow. Ten-year highs were recorded for Northern Pintail, Hooded Merganser, Ring-necked Pheasant, Wild Turkey, Bald Eagle, Barred Owl, American Kestrel, Black-capped Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Brown Creeper, Song Sparrow, Swamp Sparrow, Brown-headed Cowbird, Common Grackle, and Northern Cardinal. Still other species were seen in significantly higher numbers than usual, including Canada Goose, Great Horned Owl, Belted Kingfisher, Hairy Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Blue Jay, American Crow, Carolina Wren, European Starling, and Red-winged Blackbird.

A small number of species, primarily raptors and fruit-eaters, were seen in significantly lower numbers than usual: Mourning Dove, Northern Harrier, Cooper's Hawk, Rough-legged Hawk, Red-headed Woodpecker, Eastern Bluebird, American Robin, and Cedar Waxwing. Only a few common species were missed this year: Common Goldeneye, Herring Gull, Eastern Screech-Owl, and Yellow-rumped Warbler.

Special Awards

Mark Brown deserves special recognition for this trifecta from Hawkeye Wildlife Area: rarest species (Savannah Sparrow), most species (42), and most individual birds (13,352). Bravo! The Night Owl Award goes to Chris Caster for 2.5 hours owling, nearly half our total. Unfortunately, he didn't find an Eastern Screech-Owl in any of the usual locations – we'll need to discover some new spots next year. Energizer Bunny Awards go to Tucker Dangremond and Torin Waters, who put in an incredible 13.4 and 12.0 miles walked respectively, with honorable mentions for Jamie McCoy and Mark & Deb Rolfes who all topped 9 miles. Golden Feeder Awards go to Cindy Asmussen, Teresa Elliott, and Jan & Rick Hollis, who all recorded 17 species at their feeders. And finally, special recognition to James Huntington, who exhibited exemplary dedication to the CBC by delaying his chase for the Spotted Rail in Texas until after he found the Northern Saw-whet Owl in Hickory Hill Park. Thank you to *all* of this year's participants!

Field participants: Elizabeth Aubrey, Barbara Beaumont, Phyllis Black, Fawn Bowden, Mark, Navina & Russell Brown, Chris Caster, Brandon Caswell, LeAnn Dahn & Brian Smith, Tucker Dangremond, Jerry Denning, Karen Disbrow, Sandy & Mark Eads, Chris Edwards, Scott, Margaret & Sam Ekroth, Jim Fuller, Rick Hollis, Jenny Hollis Miller, James Huntington, Ken Lowder, Terri Macey, Mark Madsen, Jamie McCoy, Jason McCurdy & Nick Benson, Ramona McGurk & Marita Eicher, Jason Paulios, Diana & Larry Pesek, Linda Quinn, Deb & Mark Rolfes, Linda Rudolph, James Scheib, Sharon Somers, Maria & Ryan Story, Torin Waters, Eliza Willis & Janet Seiz.

Feeder watchers: Jan Allen, Cindy Asmussen, Barbara Beaumont, Kyle & Lauren Belcher, Katherine Carolan & Ed Kuhrt, Carlyn Christensen-Szalanski, Anne Edwards, Teresa Elliott, Linda Fisher, Jan & Rick Hollis, Jenny Hollis Miller, Kate Kostenbader & Ted Lepic, Milana Mitchell, James Scheib, Sharon Somers, Cindy Spading, Jim & Terri Stoner, Danelle Waters, Ben West.

Nationally, this year marked the 121st consecutive Christmas Bird Count. The results of all counts from 1900 to the present are available at www.audubon.org/bird/cbc. A table showing the results of every Iowa City count from 1951 to the present is available at www.iowacitybirdclub.org.

SPECIES LIST

Cackling Goose	19	<i>Accipiter</i> sp.	1	White-breasted Nuthatch	197
Canada Goose	5293	Bald Eagle	176	Brown Creeper	10
Trumpeter Swan	13	Red-tailed Hawk	86	Winter Wren	1
Northern Shoveler	14	Rough-legged Hawk	2	Carolina Wren	8
Gadwall	15	<i>Buteo</i> sp.	1	Eastern Bluebird	9
American Wigeon	6	Great Horned Owl	7	American Robin	8
Mallard	11297	Barred Owl	8	European Starling	2774
Northern Pintail	3	Northern Saw-whet Owl	1	Cedar Waxwing	73
Canvasback	4	Belted Kingfisher	5	House Sparrow	674
Redhead	1	Red-headed Woodpecker	4	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	106
Ring-necked Duck	4	Red-bellied Woodpecker	119	House Finch	153
Lesser Scaup	19	Downy Woodpecker	186	Purple Finch	3
Bufflehead	1	Hairy Woodpecker	31	Pine Siskin	34
Hooded Merganser	9	Northern Flicker	11	American Goldfinch	144
Common Merganser	5	Pileated Woodpecker	10	American Tree Sparrow	253
Ring-necked Pheasant	54	American Kestrel	33	Dark-eyed Junco	426
Wild Turkey	40	Merlin	1	White-crowned Sparrow	15
Rock Pigeon	269	Northern Shrike	2	White-throated Sparrow	40
Eurasian Collared-Dove	14	Shrike sp.	1	Savannah Sparrow	1
Mourning Dove	84	Blue Jay	216	Song Sparrow	62
Ring-billed Gull	439	American Crow	451	Swamp Sparrow	19
American White Pelican	4	Horned Lark	15	Red-winged Blackbird	3630
Northern Harrier	2	Black-capped Chickadee	412	Brown-headed Cowbird	108
Sharp-shinned Hawk	1	Tufted Titmouse	101	Common Grackle	201
Cooper's Hawk	2	Red-breasted Nuthatch	9	Northern Cardinal	416