

2016 Iowa City Christmas Bird Count

Chris Edwards and Diana Pesek

The 66th annual Iowa City Christmas Bird Count was held on Sunday, January 1, 2017. It was originally scheduled for December 18, but was postponed due to bitter cold and dangerous wind chills. The count area is a 15-mile diameter circle centered on Hwy. 965 and Penn Street in North Liberty. The total of 59 species was below the ten-year average of 65. The all-time high count of 81 species was set in 2012. Weather conditions on count day were favorable, with temperatures of 17-37° F and moderate S winds. Skies were clear throughout the day. Area rivers and streams were partly open, the Coralville Reservoir and other bodies of water were frozen, and there was no snow cover.

Highlights

Only one rare species was found this year, an adult Red-shouldered Hawk seen along Sugar Bottom Road. Several other uncommon species (not seen in most years) were found: Ring-necked Duck, Hermit Thrush, Common Grackle, and Brown-headed Cowbird.

Species seen in numbers significantly *above* the ten-year average were Canada Goose, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Rough-legged Hawk, American Kestrel (ten-year high), Herring Gull (ten-year high), Eurasian Collared-Dove (all-time high), Eastern Screech-Owl (ten-year high), Great Horned Owl (ten-year high), Barred Owl (ten-year high), Eastern Bluebird (all-time high), and European Starling (ten-year high).

Species seen in numbers significantly *below* the ten-year average were Mallard, Ring-necked Pheasant, Wild Turkey (ten-year low), Northern Flicker, American Crow (ten-year low), American Robin, Cedar Waxwing, American Tree Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco, Northern Cardinal, and American Goldfinch (ten-year low).

Common species (seen in most years) missed entirely were Horned Lark (third miss in 20 years, and third in a row), Fox Sparrow, Red-winged Blackbird, and Pine Siskin.

Species seen during the count week but not on the count were Greater White-fronted Goose, Redhead, Greater Scaup, and Long-tailed Duck. The latter would have been a first count record.

Some Interesting Trends

The Red-shouldered Hawk found on this year's count was only the second in the last 50 years. In the early years of the Iowa City count, from 1951-1966, the species was seen nearly annually, with a high count of six. But starting in 1967, none were seen until 2012 and 2016. This decline was noted on other CBCs throughout Iowa in the 1960s, and corresponded to a rapid decline in the species' population in Iowa and nationwide. This decline was due primarily to habitat loss and forest fragmentation, and pesticides may also have been a factor. This species is an interior forest specialist that requires large stands of mature bottomland forest habitat for nesting. It is currently listed as Endangered in Iowa.

Our three common resident owl species – Great Horned Owl, Barred Owl, and Eastern Screech-Owl – were all found in above-average numbers this year, and the combined 19 individuals were the highest since 1994. Our owling effort this year, at 3.4 party-hours, was about average for the last ten years, so perhaps these owl populations are increasing. On the other hand, we found no individuals of two wintering owl species – Long-eared Owl and Short-eared Owl – for the fourth straight year. From 1951-1983, these owls were found in most years (29/33 years for Long-eared, 26/33 for Short-eared). Since 1984 they have been found only occasionally (8/23 years for Long-eared, 9/23 for Short-eared). Habitat loss is likely responsible for long-term declines in these species. Much of the grassland in our area, favored by Short-eared Owls for roosting and foraging, has been converted to row crops or housing

subdivisions, and the dense conifer groves preferred by Long-eared Owls have become less common in our landscape.

The three most populous species on this year's count include one reintroduced species – Canada Goose – and two introduced species – European Starling and House Sparrow. It is hard to fathom now, but from 1951 to 1974, no Canada Geese were found on our count. The species was once common in Iowa, but nesting populations were extirpated by about 1900 due to hunting and habitat loss. Following a reintroduction effort by the Iowa Conservation Commission starting in 1964, the nesting population in Iowa was reestablished. From 1975 to 1994, about 100 per year were seen on our count. Now we are seeing an average of 2,500 per year – although it is difficult to determine a truly accurate number since the birds move around so much during the day.

Count Effort

This year there were 27 field observers, including 4 first-time participants, in 10 parties: Kyle Belcher, Mark Brown, Chris Caster, Jerry Denning, Chris Edwards, Linda Fisher, Jim Fuller, Peter Hansen, Kate Kostenbater, Andy and KT Long, Ken Lowder, Jamie McCoy, Ramona McGurk, Cheryl Miller, Mary Noble, Diana Pesek, Linda Quinn, Mark and Deb Rolfes, Linda Rudolph, Norbert Sarsfield, Jim Scheib, Bill Scheible, Joan Schnabel, Jane Slaymaker, and Sharon Somers. There were 8 feeder watchers in 7 locations, continuing a downward trend in recent years. Feeder watchers were Lauren Belcher, Anne Edwards, Linda Fisher, Jim Fuller, Rick Hollis, Jim Scheib, and Doug and Thane Somers.

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 Gus' Food and Spirits in Coralville, at which time we had 53 species. We did not meet for an evening compilation this year. We collected \$89 in donations for the National Audubon Society Christmas Bird Count program. Thanks to everyone who donated.

Nationally, this year marked the 117th 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

Cackling Goose	5	Eastern Screech-Owl	3	American Robin	9
Canada Goose	4,498	Great Horned Owl	10	European Starling	3,324
Mallard	163	Barred Owl	6	Cedar Waxwing	80
Ring-necked Duck	1	Belted Kingfisher	3	Yellow-rumped Warbler	1
Common Goldeneye	1	Red-headed Woodpecker	5	American Tree Sparrow	159
Ring-necked Pheasant	1	Red-bellied Woodpecker	64	Song Sparrow	7
Wild Turkey	5	Downy Woodpecker	74	Swamp Sparrow	1
Bald Eagle	75	Hairy Woodpecker	18	White-throated Sparrow	34
Northern Harrier	4	Northern Flicker	8	White-crowned Sparrow	4
Sharp-shinned Hawk	4	Pileated Woodpecker	2	Dark-eyed Junco	264
Cooper's Hawk	3	Northern Shrike	1	Northern Cardinal	190
<i>Accipiter</i> sp.	1	Blue Jay	80	Common Grackle	5
Red-shouldered Hawk	1	American Crow	241	Brown-headed Cowbird	4
Red-tailed Hawk	87	Black-capped Chickadee	173	Purple Finch	10
Rough-legged Hawk	10	Tufted Titmouse	30	House Finch	66
American Kestrel	31	Red-breasted Nuthatch	2	American Goldfinch	66
Ring-billed Gull	80	White-breasted Nuthatch	73	House Sparrow	441
Herring Gull	10	Brown Creeper	6	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	24
Rock Pigeon	305	Carolina Wren	2	TOTAL SPECIES	59
Eurasian Collared-Dove	33	Eastern Bluebird	57	TOTAL INDIVIDUALS	11,009
Mourning Dove	142	Hermit Thrush	2		