

2023 Iowa City Christmas Bird Count

Chris Edwards

The 73rd annual Iowa City Christmas Bird Count was held Sunday, December 17, 2023. 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 above average at 35-37° F, with overcast skies and W/NW winds of 10-16 mph. Rivers and streams and still bodies of water were open, and there was no snow cover.

Results

This year we found 74 species, above the ten-year count average of 69 species, and the fourth straight year with 72 or more species. The species count has been trending up in large part due to the number of lingering waterfowl in the area – this year 14 species were seen. The record high for the count is 81 species found in 2012. This year we tallied 113,528 individual birds, smashing the previous record of 32,612 seen just two years ago, thanks to an estimated 100,000 Red-winged Blackbirds.

No rarities were found this year, but a number of unusual species were seen, including Wood Duck, Green-winged Teal (ninth all-time record), American Coot, American White Pelican (seventh all-time record), Red-shouldered Hawk, Northern Saw-whet Owl, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Merlin (tenth all-time record), Hermit Thrush, and meadowlark species. The only expected species missed was Common Merganser.

Species recorded in significantly above-average numbers were Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, Green-winged Teal, Bufflehead, Ruddy Duck, Ring-billed Gull, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Northern Flicker, Eastern Bluebird, American Robin, European Starling, Pine Siskin, Red-winged Blackbird, Brown-headed Cowbird, and Common Grackle.

Many participants commented that the birding seemed slow this year. The numbers do bear this out for about a dozen species that are usually fairly conspicuous but were found in below-average numbers this year: Canada Goose, Rock Pigeon, Mourning Dove, Red-tailed Hawk, Rough-legged Hawk, American Kestrel, American Crow, American Tree Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco, Song Sparrow, and Northern Cardinal.

One remarkable occurrence this year was the immense gathering of Red-winged Blackbirds coming to roost in the miscanthus fields near the University of Iowa Hawkeye Commuter Lot between 4:00-5:00 p.m. We conservatively estimated 100,000 birds, but an accurate count was impossible because they arrived in huge flocks from all directions, landed in the nearby trees, and swirled around for many minutes before disappearing into the tall grass just before dark. Other field parties reported a total of 1,355 Red-winged Blackbirds seen elsewhere throughout the day, but presumably they all made their way to the miscanthus fields at dusk and were included in the 100,000 estimate.

Some interesting trends:

- Ring-necked Pheasants and Wild Turkeys continue to be detected in very low numbers, and no Northern Bobwhites were found.
- Eurasian Collared-Doves have become difficult to find on the count after being more common from 2010-2020.

- American White Pelicans have been found in three of the last four years after being recorded for the first time in 2006.
- Multiple Red-shouldered Hawks were found for the first time since the mid-1960s, when they were more common. They were recorded nearly annually until 1966, with high counts of six birds in 1955 and 1963. Then, possibly due to DDT exposure, they were not seen again until 2012.
- Eastern Screech-Owls have been found three years in a row, and Northern Saw-whet Owls four years in a row, after a multi-year absence for both species. If only we could say the same for Short-eared and Long-eared Owls; both species were recorded nearly annually until the early 1980s, then began a long decline. Short-eared has been found twice and Long-eared only once in the last 17 years.
- Merlins have been found in three of the last four years, and nine of the last seventeen years. Prior to that they were recorded only once in the first 56 years of the count.
- Yellow-rumped Warbler has been missed four straight years, after it was nearly annual during the previous 15 years.

Count Effort

This year there were 43 field participants in 15 parties, including five first-time participants. They spent 75 total party-hours in the field, which is right at the 10-year average. Field participants were Elizabeth Aubrey, Kyle Belcher, Becky Benson, Nick Benson, Tom Bootsmiller, Fawn Bowden, Cass Bowen, Jayden Bowen, Mary Bowler, Brian Broderick, Mark Brown, Chris Caster, Gerry Denning, Sandy Eads, Chris Edwards, Julie Englander, Jim Fuller, Karole Fuller, Rick Hollis, Sarah Lawinger, Jonathan Lewallen, KT Long, Nancy Lynch, Mark Madsen, Salem McClelland, Jamie McCoy, Jason McCurdy, Ramona McGurk, Bob McKay, Jenny Hollis Miller, Julius Miller, Mary Noble, Jason Paulios, Eli Perencevich, Marko Perencevich, Linda Quinn, Deb Rolfes, Mark Rolfes, Linda Rudolph, Maria Story, Jean Wiese, Jim Wiese, and Eliza Willis.

Four parties spent a total of four hours owl watching, slightly above the ten-year average.

There were 14 feeder watchers in 9 locations, which is below the ten-year average of 11 locations. Feeder watchers were Kaci Carolan and Ed Kuhrt, Julie Englander, Janet and Rick Hollis, Ken Lowder, Bill Madden, Kathy Martensen, Bonnie Mattaliano, Jenny Hollis Miller and Julius Miller, Pauline Obmascher, and Jim and Terri Stoner.

This year we met at the Coralville Library for a noon meal and compilation. We did not meet for an evening meal. We collected \$106 in donations for the National Audubon Society Christmas Bird Count program.

Nationally, this year marked the 124th 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.

Thanks to everyone who participated!

SPECIES LIST

Cackling Goose 2
Canada Goose 1211
Wood Duck 2
Northern Shoveler 85
Gadwall 69
Mallard 926
Northern Pintail 1
Green-winged Teal 5
Canvasback 2
Lesser Scaup 16
Bufflehead 7
Common Goldeneye 7
Hooded Merganser 8
Ruddy Duck 8
Ring-necked Pheasant 5
Wild Turkey 20
Rock Pigeon 68
Eurasian Collared-Dove 2
Mourning Dove 79
American Coot 8
Ring-billed Gull 612
Herring Gull 2
American White Pelican 1
Northern Harrier 2
Sharp-shinned Hawk 5

Cooper's Hawk 8
Bald Eagle 104
Red-shouldered Hawk 2
Red-tailed Hawk 46
Rough-legged Hawk 1
Eastern Screech-Owl 2
Great Horned Owl 4
Barred Owl 7
Northern Saw-whet Owl 1
Belted Kingfisher 3
Red-headed Woodpecker 20
Red-bellied Woodpecker 111
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker 4
Downy Woodpecker 115
Hairy Woodpecker 31
Northern Flicker 69
Pileated Woodpecker 7
American Kestrel 16
Merlin 1
Blue Jay 127
American Crow 191
Black-capped Chickadee 227
Tufted Titmouse 71
Red-breasted Nuthatch 3
White-breasted Nuthatch 101

Brown Creeper 6
Carolina Wren 3
Eastern Bluebird 49
Hermit Thrush 1
American Robin 258
European Starling 5313
Cedar Waxwing 143
House Sparrow 633
Eurasian Tree Sparrow 62
House Finch 144
Purple Finch 8
Pine Siskin 63
American Goldfinch 112
American Tree Sparrow 101
Dark-eyed Junco 389
White-crowned Sparrow 12
White-throated Sparrow 32
Song Sparrow 6
Swamp Sparrow 1
Meadowlark species 1
Red-winged Blackbird 10000
Brown-headed Cowbird 75
Common Grackle 1508
Northern Cardinal 183