

2024 Iowa City Christmas Bird Count

Chris Edwards

The 74th annual Iowa City Christmas Bird Count was held Sunday, December 15, 2024. 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 just above freezing at 32-33° F, with overcast skies and light south winds of 3-10 mph. Persistent fog hampered visibility all day, especially in the afternoon. Rivers and streams were partly frozen, and still bodies of water were mostly frozen. There was no snow cover, but there was some ice on the ground from a storm the previous day. The main roads were clear, but most secondary roads and walking paths were still icy.

Results

This year we found 70 species, right at the ten-year average. The species count has been trending up recently in large part due to the number of lingering waterfowl, but this year there were fewer waterfowl in the area. The record high for the count is 81 species found in 2012. This year we tallied 101,016 individual birds, the second straight year over 100K thanks to an estimated 90,000 Red-winged Blackbirds.

One rare species was found this year, a Turkey Vulture near the Coralville Reservoir dam, which was the fifth all-time record for this species and the first since 2011. A number of other unusual species were seen including Wood Duck, American Coot, Horned Lark, Winter Wren, and Golden-crowned Kinglet. Other nice finds, although not as statistically rare, were Trumpeter Swan, Redhead, Ruddy Duck, American White Pelican, Merlin, Northern Shrike, Fox Sparrow, and Yellow-rumped Warbler. Snowy Owl and Short-eared Owl were seen during the count week, but neither were reported after the ice storm that preceded the count.

Species recorded in significantly above-average numbers were Great Horned Owl, Barred Owl (ten-year high), Red-headed Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Golden-crowned Kinglet (ten-year high), American Robin, White-crowned Sparrow (ten-year high), White-throated Sparrow (ten-year high), Song Sparrow, Swamp Sparrow, Red-winged Blackbird, and Yellow-rumped Warbler (all-time high).

Species recorded in significantly below-average numbers were Canada Goose, Mallard, Lesser Scaup, Common Goldeneye, Common Merganser, Ring-necked Pheasant, Wild Turkey, Rock Pigeon, Mourning Dove, Ring-billed Gull, Bald Eagle, Red-tailed Hawk, American Kestrel, House Finch, and Northern Cardinal. Expected species that were missed this year were Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, Hooded Merganser, Rough-legged Hawk, and Red-breasted Nuthatch.

For the second straight year, an immense gathering of Red-winged Blackbirds was observed coming to roost in the miscanthus fields near the University of Iowa Hawkeye Commuter Lot in late afternoon. Fog limited visibility, but Eliza Willis and Janet Seiz calculated that about 1,000 blackbirds arrived every 20 seconds nonstop for 30 minutes, yielding a total estimate of 90,000 birds. Other field parties reported a total of 538 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 90,000 estimate.

Some interesting trends:

- Ring-necked Pheasants and Wild Turkeys continue to be detected in very low numbers, even lower than last year, and no Northern Bobwhites were found.

- Rock Pigeon numbers have shown major declines in the last two years compared to the prior fifty years. Only 62 were counted this year, compared to 726 just twelve years ago. Is this partly due to observer bias or does it indicate a serious population decline? Far fewer Mourning Doves were also recorded in the past two years compared to the long-term average. In contrast, while their numbers are still low, Eurasian Collared-Doves rebounded to a six-year high this year and were found by four parties.
- American White Pelicans are lingering into early winter more frequently, and have been found in four of the last five years after being recorded for the first time in 2006.
- Diurnal raptor numbers were down nearly across the board this year, no doubt in part due to the poor visibility.
- Most of our woodpeckers show increasing population trends in recent years. Most significant are Red-headed Woodpeckers (averaging 35 over the last three years compared to 13 during the prior thirty years) and Northern Flickers (averaging 52 over the last three years compared to 25 during the prior thirty years). They may be benefitting from the abundance of dead ash trees and the effects of the 2020 derecho.
- Merlins have been found in four of the last five years, and ten of the last eighteen years. Prior to that they were recorded only once in the first 56 years of the count.
- A record number of 11 Yellow-rumped Warblers were found this year, after being missed four straight years.

Count Effort

This year there were 36 field participants in 12 parties, including three first-time participants. They spent 72 total party-hours in the field, slightly below the 10-year average. More than 50 people signed up to participate, which would have been a record, but there were numerous cancellations because of the road conditions. Four parties spent a total of 4.5 hours owl watching, above the ten-year average. Field participants were Elizabeth Aubrey, Kyle Belcher, Becky Benson, Tom Bootsmiller, Fawn Bowden, Mary Bowler, Brian Broderick, Mark Brown, Chris Caster, Gerry Denning, Karen Disbrow, Mark Eads, Sandy Eads, Chris Edwards, Jim Fuller, Karole Fuller, Elizabeth Hill, Jim Kettelkamp, Mark Madsen, Salem McClelland, Jamie McCoy, Ramona McGurk, Beth Miner, Sarah Miner, Mary Noble, Jason Paulios, Robert Peck, Eli Perencevich, Marko Perencevich, Linda Quinn, Deb Rolfes, Mark Rolfes, Linda Rudolph, Janet Seiz, Jane Shuttleworth, Eliza Willis.

There were 13 feeder watchers in 7 locations, which is below the ten-year average of 11 locations. Feeder watchers were Barbara Beaumont, Kaci Carolan and Ed Kuhrt, Janet and Rick Hollis, Lorie Leo, Kathy and Van Martensen, Jenny Hollis Miller and Julius Miller, Cindy Spading, and Jim and Terri Stoner.

This year we met at the North Liberty Community Center for a noon meal and compilation. We collected \$100 in donations for the National Audubon Society Christmas Bird Count program.

Nationally, this year marked the 125th 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 this year!

SPECIES LIST

Cackling Goose 1
Canada Goose 1481
Trumpeter Swan 10
Wood Duck 3
Mallard 113
Redhead 5
Lesser Scaup 1
Bufflehead 1
Common Goldeneye 2
Common Merganser 2
Ruddy Duck 9
Ring-necked Pheasant 3
Wild Turkey 10
Rock Pigeon 62
Eurasian Collared-Dove 15
Mourning Dove 59
American Coot 1
Ring-billed Gull 2
American White Pelican 2
Turkey Vulture 1
Northern Harrier 1
Sharp-shinned Hawk 3
Cooper's Hawk 3
Bald Eagle 81
Red-tailed Hawk 24
Eastern Screech-Owl 1
Great Horned Owl 8
Barred Owl 9
Belted Kingfisher 1
Red-headed Woodpecker 32
Red-bellied Woodpecker 96
Downy Woodpecker 126
Hairy Woodpecker 31
Northern Flicker 63
Pileated Woodpecker 5
American Kestrel 9
Merlin 1
Northern Shrike 1
Blue Jay 146
American Crow 271
Horned Lark 1
Black-capped Chickadee 197
Tufted Titmouse 68
White-breasted Nuthatch 109
Brown Creeper 4
Winter Wren 1
Carolina Wren 6
Golden-crowned Kinglet 4
Eastern Bluebird 28
American Robin 94
European Starling 5500
Cedar Waxwing 180
House Sparrow 705
Eurasian Tree Sparrow 104
House Finch 63
Purple Finch 10
Pine Siskin 2
American Goldfinch 110
Fox Sparrow 2
American Tree Sparrow 239
Dark-eyed Junco 501
White-crowned Sparrow 56
White-throated Sparrow 72
Song Sparrow 39
Swamp Sparrow 7
Red-winged Blackbird 90000
Brown-headed Cowbird 5
Common Grackle 20
Yellow-rumped Warbler 11
Northern Cardinal 183