

## **Summary of Montana's 2015-16 Christmas Bird Count Narrative by Rose Leach, Montana CBC Compiler**

Montana's Christmas Bird Count (CBC) #116 included 698 field participants (nearly 100 fewer than last year but who contributed 1350 party hours) and 155 feeder-watchers (totaling 352 hours). Participants counted 140 bird species (totaling 235,979 individual birds) from 33 count circles during the period 16 Dec 2015 through 3 January 2016. The total species count was similar to last year. Conditions were variable, with clear skies and little snow cover in Lewistown, to a morning of heavy wet snowfall in Missoula. We added one new circle this year—Cut Bank, who found 29 species—including 1 Varied Thrush, 4 Snowy Owls, and no Red-tails but 14 Rough-Legged Hawks. Welcome, Cut Bank.

Without doubt, the highlight of the year put Missoula on the map, with likely the most rare species reported on a count day—a Fieldfare (19 Dec 2015). The bird was well photographed over the next several days, and was present through 23 Dec 2015. U.S. data through count #115 indicates that this is the first CBC record for the United States, although the species has been recorded from Canada 4 times, twice on count day (#92 and #104). The Fieldfare brings Montana's cumulative CBC species list to 216.

In addition, 4 other count week species were tallied, one of which was new to the state list. A male Western Tanager had been visiting a feeder near Hamilton, and was photographed there prior to count week. While a count week bird does not add to our total number of species recorded, the species is noted on our cumulative list. Similarly, 2 counts tallied non-established, introduced species—1 each Chukar (Ennis and Stevensville), and 1 Northern Bobwhite (Three Forks). These species do not contribute to the species total, because they are either not on the State List (Northern Bobwhite), or they are not established and therefore do not count in the area where they were recorded (i.e., Chukar is considered established and therefore counts only from the Pryor Mountains, see Montana Bird Records Committee minutes 2014). As with other exotics or introduced species, it is important to track numbers tallied during the CBC, which helps the Records Committee to determine if and when a species may be considered established in the future.

Other birds seen during count week but not count day included 2 species at Bigfork—Spotted Towhee and Brown-headed Cowbird; and an Eared Grebe at Great Falls. For context, The Bigfork birds (and Hamilton tanager) had been present for several days or weeks prior to their count days.

Bigfork again found the most species in a day—83, while Missoula (82) and Stevensville (79) were close behind. Bigfork only had 26 field participants (and 12 feeder-watchers), compared to 84 field participants in Missoula, but Bigfork has more deep, open water sites and perhaps other niche habitats than Missoula has, which helps keep Bigfork's species diversity high. Or, maybe they just have better birders! Little Rocky Mountains again had the fewest participants (1), while McNeil Slough had 2. Please consider joining long-time compiler and counter Fritz Prellwitz at these sites in the future.

Missoula had Montana's only Surf Scoter (photographed, found in the Bitterroot River near Slevin's Island), which has been recorded twice before at Bighorn River (# 99) and Great Falls (#106). Unfortunately, the scoter was taken by a duck hunter (legally) the next day, so other birders were not able to see it. Oddly, Missoula had the only count day White-winged Crossbills this year.

Other single species recorded during CBC #116 included Greater White-fronted Goose (14, Eureka, also recorded on 6 previous counts); Greater Scaup (113, Bigfork); Red-breasted Merganser (2, Kalispell); Ruddy Duck (5, Great Falls); Pacific Loon (2, Bigfork; also recorded during #115 and #95 from Bigfork and count week #105 from Glacier National Park); Western Grebe (5, Eureka); Ferruginous Hawk (1, Lewistown); Sora (1, Bozeman); California Gull (22, Fort Peck), 1 Lesser Black-backed Gull (also recorded from CBC #113, both times from Fort Peck); 1 Glaucous Gull (Fort Peck); 1 Barn Owl (Stevensville, also recorded there during # 100, and at Ennis during #112); 1 Great Gray Owl (West Yellowstone); 1 American Three-toed Woodpecker (Troy); 2 Black-backed Woodpeckers (Glacier National Park); 1 Northern Flicker intergrade (Great Falls); 1 Canyon Wren (Three Forks); Yellow-rumped Warbler (6, from Billings, as have been most other records); 1 Green-tailed Towhee (Ennis, recorded on 2 previous CBCs [#91 and 103], both in Park County); and 3 Hoary Redpolls (Eureka). Species listed above without further remarks had been recorded on many other previous counts.

Three counts had Varied Thrush—Eureka and perhaps surprisingly at Fort Peck (photographed) and Cut Bank (photographed earlier in the week). Two counts had Ruby-crowned Kinglet—Stevensville (recorded once before), and Missoula, where the species is somewhat regular (7 previous records). This is a good example of the benefit local knowledge of the nooks and crannies of your circle, and sending the same observers every year to those sites; newer circles will gain this insight with time.

The 2 most widely distributed species were reported from 32 circles and also during count week at Cut Bank, so all circles were represented—Bald Eagle, which totaled 798 birds, and Black-capped Chickadee (4,357 birds). Other wide-spread species were Mallard (31 circles, absent from Big Hole and Upper Swan Valley), Downy Woodpecker (30 circles, at West Yellowstone only during count week and absent from Clark Canyon Dam and Little Rocky Mountains), Common Raven (30 circles, absent from Fort Peck, Miles City, and McNeil Slough), and Black-billed Magpie (30, absent from Troy, Libby, and Glacier National Park).

Canada Goose was the most abundant species (47,108), followed by Mallard (25,337), European Starling (24,842) and House Sparrow (16,925). Eurasian Collared-Dove totaled 6,820 and was reported from 27 circles. The total was higher than the past 3 years, which had held fairly steadily at approximately 4,150. Mourning Dove totaled 1,087 from 15 circles, but the total birds was higher than the previous 2 counts, and much higher than the low of 586 from count #112.

Only 4 sparrows (excluding juncos) were recorded this year, and 2 were fairly widespread—American Tree (23 circles), and Song (20 circles) Sparrow. Also seen were White-throated (Bigfork, Bozeman, Three Forks), and Harris's (Great Falls, Ennis).

Horned Larks were found on 19 circles, but ranged from many thousand (4,629 at Three Forks and 2,474 at Cut Bank) to single digits. Most circles had several hundred or fewer.

Rough-legged Hawks (768 birds from 28 circles) outnumbered Red-tailed Hawks (637 birds from 25 circles), 32 of which were Harlan's Red-tailed Hawks. American Kestrel led falcons (111), followed by Merlin (79) and Prairie Falcon (41). Two Gyrfalcons were counted. Only 2 other years have recorded at least 100 kestrels since counting began in the state—count #113 (100) and #114 (127 birds).

Five Eastern Screech-Owls were tallied (from 4 circles), but no Western Screech-Owls were counted. Short-eared Owls totaled 39 birds, with a whopping 32 from Missoula. Also absent this year were Northern Hawk-Owl, Barred Owl, and Boreal Owl.

Fort Peck was again the gull capital of Montana, with California, Herring, Thayer's, Lesser Black-backed, and Glaucous Gulls, but no Ring-billed Gulls. Those were found at Bigfork, Billings, and Kalispell.

Thanks to all of the participants, who worked long and hard for our observations. Each contribution is important.

Photos:



Fieldfare, seen count day but photographed 21 Dec 2015 by Bob Martinka, Missoula, MT



Varied Thrush, Ft Peck, MT CBC, 19 Dec 2015,  
John Carlson photo



Western Tanager, photographed 10 Dec 2015 by Kate Stone  
but seen during count week, Bitterroot Nursery, Hamilton, MT  
Dec 2015.



Surf Scoter, Missoula, MT  
CBC, 19 Dec 2015, Slevin's  
Island, Dick Hutto photo



Car in deep, heavy snow and flat light, Missoula, MT CBC 19 Dec 2015, Rose Leach photo. We drove out and continued the count!