

Montana CBC #119, Rosemary H. Leach

Montana's Christmas Bird Count (CBC) #119 was cold and fairly snowy at most sites, and ushered in a rather brutal winter season state-wide. With some adjusting of count days, however, all 34 circles completed their counts and reported their data, a first for this number of count circles. Montana added 2 new species for the CBC. Most notable was a **Heermann's Gull**, which was also a new species for the state. The bird was documented and photographed on count day (29 Dec 2018, photo below) at our winter gull capital—Fort Peck. The bird was re-found on 30 Dec, but not reported after that date. Our 2nd new species was a **Nashville Warbler**, well documented on the Bozeman count with details in eBird, but not seen after count day (15 Dec 2018). This brings our cumulative CBC bird list to **219** species.

We totaled **147** species this year, which was similar to counts with 2 fewer circles. This may have resulted from harsh conditions that limited coverage of some areas. We tallied **213,252** individuals, which was about 12,500 more than last year, but about 8,000 fewer than the average of the last 4 years (221,247).

Total individuals observed here have fluctuated mostly with the number of **Canada Geese** (this year 71,228 birds from 28 circles) and **Mallards** (20,694 from 30 circles) observed, our **2 most numerous species** since #115. In particular, Canada Geese can vary by as many as 50,000 individuals. Other numerous species (greater than 10,000 individuals found) besides those above were **European Starling** (17,894 from 27 circles) and **Rock Pigeon** (10,633 from 28 circles).

A total **796** field participants tallied nearly 1,500 party hours and 8,300 party miles (all values higher than in the past 4 years). Feeder-watchers totaled **141** people and 354 hours, both values a bit lower than the average of the past 4 years. Again this year, Missoula had the most participants (95), while Little Rocky Mountains had the fewest (1); all participants are important for our generally under-birded state. Interestingly, there were no count week birds found that were not also found during a count day. Harsh conditions may have contributed to less effort before and after each count day.

Bigfork tallied the most species (**88**) followed by Missoula (85), and Kalispell and Stevensville each with 76 species. The highest number per count has also been at Bigfork (98 during CBC #118). This year was 10 fewer than their high count, but still above their recent average (82, average for the past 24 counts).

Rare (reported from 6 or fewer CBCs) species other than our new records included 2 **Savannah Sparrows**, 1 each from Cut Bank (with a photo, below) and Hamilton (with appropriate documentation). The species has been reported on 1 other CBC—4 birds reported from Stevensville during CBC #70. However, having more than single birds reported makes the report suspect (Marks et al. 2016). In addition, no accompanying documentation is available for that report.

Other rare birds reported this year included **Spotted Sandpiper**—now found on 6 counts (single birds from a wide range of years from Stevensville [3 times including this year], Helena, Missoula, Bigfork); **Western Bluebird**—with 8 from Helena this year, the second time recorded on a CBC. The other Western Bluebird reports (both during CBC #117), had 2 from Helena and 1 from Missoula. Finally, **Lesser Goldfinch**, found this year at both Hamilton (5 birds) and Three Forks (2 birds) was found only once before at Missoula (CBC#113, 1 bird), although other winter records have been documented. The species was recently removed from the Montana Bird Records Committee Rare list (2011), and has been found all year at several sites. Breeding in the state was recently established (2006). Because the identification can be confusing for less experienced birders, we still track the specie's occurrence closely.

Night effort and miles were a bit below the average from the past 4 years, but higher than last year. In spite of the increase in effort, the number of **owl species detected—6**—was much lower than last year's high of 10 species (of 13 possible species to be found during a CBC, we would not expect Burrowing or Flammulated Owls during winter). The most interesting find was 2 Great Gray Owls, 1 each from Missoula and Upper Swan Valley. The more expected species included 89 Great Horned Owls from 21 circles; 6 Northern Pygmy-Owls from 5 circles; 45 Long-eared Owls from 4 circles, with most (42) from Missoula, which includes a long-term study site for the species; 3 Short-eared Owls, all from Hamilton; and 4 Northern Saw-whet Owls from 3 circles.

In contrast, birders found all 5 possible **winter falcon species**, including 1 Gyrfalcon at Fort Peck and 1 Peregrine Falcon at Billings. Most widespread was Prairie Falcon with 38 birds from 19 circles. Most numerous was American Kestrel with 74 birds from 12 circles, and in between was Merlin with 45 birds from 16 circles.

The **most widespread** species this year was Black-billed Magpie, found on 32 circles (totaling 6,887 birds) and 1 Count Week circle, so 33 of 34 circles represented. The species was absent from Upper Swan Valley, where it is not found every year.

Also widespread were **Bald Eagles** (1,070 birds), found on 32 of 34 circles (absent from Bowdoin and Little Rocky Mountains). Bald Eagles had been the most widespread species since CBC# 115. The species has steadily increased from single digits in the 1950s and 60s, to breaking 1,000 for the first time this year. Bald Eagles broke the 30 circle level—indicating widespread distribution—during CBC #100. Increases in Bald Eagles are a testament to conservation efforts and DDT bans since the 1970s.

The only other species found on 30 or more circles were **Common Raven** (31 circles and 3,677 birds) and Mallard (30 circles).

Mourning Dove numbers (651 from 12 circles) were similar to last year (657 from 10 circles). The species was around 1,000 birds for the 2 years before that (1,087 birds from 15 circles in CBC # 116 and 960 birds from 14 circles in CBC # 117). This year was also higher than the low of 586 birds from 15 circles in CBC # 112. **Eurasian Collared Doves** totaled 5,821 from 28 circles, down from last year's high (7,110 birds

from 26 circles). This was near the average of 5,764 for the previous 5 years (CBC # 114-118).

Other records of note were **Canyon Wren**—which reached its highest numbers for both individuals tallied (8) and circles where detected (5) since it was first reported from the late 1960s. Glacier National Park tallied both **Black-Backed Woodpecker** (5 birds, the only circle reporting the species) and **American Three-toed Woodpecker** (also 5 birds, and also found at Big Hole [1], Kalispell [1], and count week birds at Bozeman and Upper Swan Valley). **Lewis's Woodpecker** was again found on the Stevensville Count (1 bird, found in the same area as CBC # 117-118). The species has been found sporadically since the 1940s, with the longest continuous string of records from CBC # 99 through #106 (7 years). **Blue Jay** tied its high for the number of circles represented with 17 (14 on count day and 3 Count Week). The species has been found in double digits of circles represented starting in the 1990s. One **Lincoln's Sparrow** was recorded (at Three Forks, photo below). The species has been found every 3-5 years since CBC #94 and also twice during the 1970s, for a total of now 12 years of CBCs. Fort Peck had the only **Glaucous Gull** (1), but no **Ring-billed Gulls**, which were found on 5 circles, totaling 473 birds—our most numerous gull. Also found were 58 **Herring Gulls** from 4 circles (Fort Peck, Kalispell, Bigfork, Helena), **California Gull** (2 birds from Fort Peck), and the gull I am most likely to identify—260 gull sp. from Bigfork.

No Greater Sage-Grouse were reported this year, which was the same as last year. We know that the circles can produce the species, because the birds have been reported from a high count of 3 circles (with 47 birds tallied that year) as recently as CBC #109. The last CBC to produce double-digits of Greater-Sage Grouse was CBC #117, with 20 birds tallied from 1 circle (Big Hole). The highest number of birds within the last 15 years was 94 from a total of 2 circles (CBC # 106), but counts #110-114 were all single digit numbers of birds. It appears the status of this species of high conservation concern remains problematic at best.

A whopping 5 **Swamp Sparrows** from 4 circles were found this year—Missoula 2, and Ninepipe, Stevensville, and Three Forks 1 each. The species was reliably found throughout December at several sites this year (eBird maps), which is not the case every winter here. This year marks the 9th CBC year where the species has been documented. I did not include the CBC #50 record of 10 birds from Billings, which has been considered likely misidentified and has no supporting documentation (Marks et al. 2016).

Red-tailed Hawks (686 birds from 25 circles) out-numbered **Rough-legged Hawks** (563 birds from 29 circles). In addition, **Harlan's Red-tailed Hawks** (23 birds) were found on 8 circles, all of which had non-Harlan's type birds. We found 1 **Ferruginous Hawk**, from the Ninepipe National Wildlife Refuge Count. The species is more expected east of the Continental Divide except during winter, when a few individuals can sometimes be found in this area (the Mission Valley) as well in the Kalispell-Bigfork areas.

Thanks to all of our participants for another successful Montana Christmas Bird Count!

Citation: Marks, Jeffery S, Paul Hendricks, and Dan Casey. 2016. Birds of Montana. Buteo Books, 659 pp.

Photos—



Heermann's Gull, Count Day 29
Dec 2018, Fort Peck, MT CBC,
John Carlson



Savannah Sparrow, Count Day 1
Jan 2019, Cut Bank, MT CBC,
Kevin Barnes



Lincoln's Sparrow, Count Day 26 Dec 2018, Three Forks, MT CBC, Tom Forewood Jr.