

Montana CBC #118, Rosemary H. Leach

Montana's Christmas Bird Count (CBC) #118 was cold and snowy in many areas, after having experienced a relatively warm and dry early winter. One count was cancelled and one did not report their data, but 32 of 34 circles completed the process. The highlight was a new species for the state—a Yellow-billed Loon at Great Falls—which brings our cumulative total to 217 species. The bird was viewed from 8-29 Dec 2017, including count day (16 Dec 2017, photo below).

This year we tallied 147 species (a few more than generally reported for counts of 32 circles) and 200,769 individual birds. Total individual bird numbers vary widely, depending on the number of large flocks of European Starlings and waxwings encountered. This year's total individual bird number was fewer than last year, even though one more circle was included this year than last year. Overall, we had 726 field participants (higher than the average for the last 4 years), who cumulatively totaled 1,356 party hours (which was about average for the past 4 years). CBC #118 also had 161 feeder watchers (about average) who totaled 372 feeder-hours (slightly higher than any of the last 4 years). Again this year, Missoula had the most participants (114), while Little Rocky Mountains had the fewest (2); McNeil Slough doubled their participant number—from 2 to 4!

Notable observations, including the number of times the species has been recorded on past CBCs if fewer than 15 include: Greater White-fronted Goose (3 at Miles City, reported on 7 previous CBCs); White-winged Scoter (Eureka-2, Helena-1, and on 6 past counts); Long-tailed Duck (Fort Peck-1, Great Falls-3); Common Loon (Eureka-1, Glacier National Park count week); Red-necked Grebe (Bigfork-1); American White Pelican (Great Falls-1, likely an injured bird, observed on 14 past counts); Sandhill Crane (Bozeman and Bigfork 1 each, count week in Helena, found on 11 past counts); Lewis's Woodpecker (Stevensville-1, found in the same area as last year); Varied Thrush (Libby-1); Fox Sparrow (Three Forks-1); Swamp Sparrow (Missoula-2, found on 8 past counts, photo below); Spotted Towhee (Park County-1, photo below); Western Meadowlark (Missoula-2); Yellow-headed Blackbird (Bigfork-1, found on 10 past counts); Brown-headed Cowbird (Bigfork-1); and Purple Finch (Fort Peck-1). Also of interest at Fort Peck was a hybrid Black-capped X Mountain Chickadee. While the bird did not count toward our species tally (each parent type was already represented), it was photographed (below) documenting the nice find.

In spite of few nocturnal hours of effort (6.6), we tallied 10 of 13 possible winter owl species (no Eastern Screech-Owls or Boreal Owls were found this year; we would not expect Burrowing or Flammulated Owls during a CBC in Montana). We missed Barn Owl, which is possible but not found every year (observed on 4 past counts). We found Western Screech-Owl (Stevensville-1); Great Horned Owl (from 16 circles, which was the same number as last year); Snowy Owl (from 5 circles); Northern Hawk Owl (1 again from Glacier National Park); Northern Pygmy-Owl (4 circles); Barred Owl (Troy-1); Great Gray Owl (Ruby Valley-1, Kalispell count week); Long-eared Owl (3 circles, and Missoula had a whopping 49 birds, thanks to ongoing research in the area); Short-eared Owl (3 circles); and Northern Saw-whet Owl (2 circles).

All falcons were observed this year except for Gyrfalcon (possible but not found every year). Most numerous were American Kestrel (99 birds reported from 11 circles); Merlin (55 from 15 circles); and Prairie Falcon (40 from 15 circles). Single Peregrine Falcons (perhaps the least expected falcon during winter) were found at Bigfork and Miles City.

Again this year, 2 counts tallied a non-established species that does not count toward our species total, but numbers are recorded when encountered: Chukar at Clark Canyon Dam (9) and Ennis (6).

Chukar would only count if observed where it is considered established—the Pryor Mountains south of Billings (Montana Bird Records Committee minutes 2014), where no CBC circles are located. Tracking introduced or exotic species during the CBC provides important information to help determine if and when a species may be considered established. We expect the Montana Bird Records Committee to consider if Chukar have become established in Beaverhead County during an upcoming meeting.

Two species were observed only during a count week, so they do not count toward our species total. Dusky Grouse was found in Missoula, where deep snow kept observers from surveying its usual CBC territory on count day. Pacific Loon was found in Helena, where the species had been observed for several weeks before and a few days after count day. Pacific Loons have been recorded on 3 previous state CBCs, and their presence is largely influenced by temperature. That is, arctic air cold snaps that occur just prior to count days generally ice-over water bodies and smaller rivers, and push the birds out of our state.

Bigfork found the most species—98, a new state record, followed by Missoula (85), Stevensville (81), and Kalispell (77). Soon we will break 100! Counts with the most species generally have high habitat diversity, including large water bodies that retained waterfowl.

Gulls generally occurred on single count circles, except for Ring-billed (193 birds on 5 count circles—Bigfork, Billings, Ennis, Great Falls, Kalispell), and Herring Gull (185 birds on 4 count circles—Bigfork, Fort Peck, Great Falls, Kalispell). Bigfork had the best diversity this year with 3 additional species: California Gull (12), and 1 each of Lesser-black-backed and Glaucous Gull. Billings also had the only Iceland (Thayer's type) Gull. Our state is missing our 40-plus year Fork Peck count compiler and gull expert, Check Carlson, who passed away during 2017. Thanks to Chuck for many years of service to Montana's bird distribution and knowledge, as well as his generosity and kindness in helping all of us who knew him.

In spite of increases in recently burned habitat in the state, we had only 2 American Three-toed Woodpeckers (both found in Glacier National Park), and no Black-backed Woodpeckers.

The most widespread species again this year was Bald Eagle, which was found on all 32 circles. Mallard and Black-capped Chickadee were found on 30 circles, and Black-billed Magpie on 29 (and 1 count week) circles. Common Redpoll, European Starling, and Rock Pigeon each were found on 27 circles. American Robin numbers were lower than last year, but still numbered 692 birds from 17 circles. Many birders do not realize the species winters here every year, often in large numbers.

Blue Jays (160 birds from 21 circles) outnumbered Stellers's Jays (116 birds from 13 circles) and Pinyon Jays (85 birds from 4 circles). Blue Jay numbers have been increasing since the late 1990s. Clark's Nutcrackers (270 birds) were found on 18 circles. Large groups of this species were seen this fall throughout the state.

The most abundant species again this year was Canada Goose (63,083, much higher than last year's 32,530). Other abundant species were generally fewer in number this year compared to last year: Mallard (15,647 vs 25,467 last year); European Starling (13,549 vs 19,028); Rock Pigeon (11,325 vs 11,555); House Sparrow (11,261 vs 12,397); Bohemian Waxwing (8,999 vs 25,918 last year). All other species were fewer than 7,120 individuals this year.

Eurasian Collard Dove (7,110 birds from 26 circles) was a bit higher than the past 2 years (65,000 to 68,000 birds). Totals for this species have steadily increased since CBC # 108, when the bird first reached 500. Mourning Dove numbers totaled 657 from 10 circles. Their numbers continue to fluctuate, from highs from 1,000 to 1,500 birds, to lows of 586 during CBC#112 and 857 during CBC # 115.

Nine sparrow-type species were recorded this year, 2 more than last year. Dark-eye Juncos (512) were tallied on 21 circles, with additional birds typed to subspecies—Slate-colored (127 on 8 circles), and Oregon (306 on 7 circles) Junco. Total junco numbers (948) were well below last year (1,621 birds of all types). Congratulations to Great Falls and Libby for classifying all juncos to subspecies. Also observed were American Tree Sparrow (422 from 23 circles, similar to last year); Fox Sparrow (1 at Three Forks, not found last year); White-crowned (7 birds from 3 circles, similar to last year), White-throated (2 birds from 2 circles and 1 count week bird, a bit fewer than last year); Harris's Sparrow (14 birds from 7 circles and 1 count week bird; more than 4 times as many as last year!); Song Sparrow (306 from 18 circles, a bit fewer than last year); Swamp Sparrow (2 birds, both at Missoula, none last year, photo below); and Spotted Towhee (Park County-1, photo below).

Rough-legged Hawks (931 birds from 27 circles) outnumbered Red-tailed Hawks (712 birds from 22 circles, including 37 Harlan's Red-tailed Hawks) this year. The Harlan's were found on 10 counts, all of which also had reported non-Harlan's Red-tailed Hawks except for 1 circle—McNeil Slough. Two circles had 1 each Ferruginous Hawks (Great Falls and Ruby Valley, photo below). Low numbers of this species can be found during winter, and are more likely east of the Continental Divide, as these 2 sites are.

Thanks to all of the participants, who worked long and hard again with challenging weather. Each contribution is important.

Photos below:



Yellow-billed Loon, Great Falls, Montana CBC (Giant Springs State Park), count day photo by Beth Hill, 16 Dec 2017, Montana Bird Records Committee #2018-004.

Black-capped X Mountain Chickadee hybrid, Fort Peck, Montana CBC count day photo by John Carlson,
27 Dec 2017.



Spotted
Towhee, Park
County,
Montana CBC
count day photo
by Ed Harper,
17 Dec 2017.



Swamp Sparrow (one of 2 widely separated individuals for the day), Missoula, Montana CBC count day photo by Eric Rasmussen, 16 Dec 2017



Ferruginous Hawk, Ruby Valley, Montana CBC count day photo by Nate Kohler, 4 Jan 2018.