

Montana's Christmas Bird Count (CBC) #117 was one of our coldest ever. Several counts had to reschedule due to temperatures well below 0 degrees F. In fact, 3 of 34 circles did not hold their counts. In spite of challenging conditions, we tallied 139 species (similar to last year) and 204,954 individual birds (approx. 31,000 fewer than last year), from 31 count circles (2 fewer than last year). Overall, we mustered 584 field participants for 1,180 party hours, which was nearly 115 fewer people and 170 fewer party hours than last year. Again this year, Missoula had the most field participants (79), while Little Rocky Mountains had the fewest (1) followed by McNeil Slough (2), both populated by longtime organizer Fritz Prellwitz and family. CBC #117 also had 129 feeder watchers who totaled 283 feeder-hours.

In spite of harsh weather we added a new species to our cumulative list—Western Bluebird—which brings our total to 216 species. In fact, 2 circles found Western Bluebird this year, Helena (2, with photographs) and Missoula (1). Documenting the Western Bluebird may fit with the nationwide pattern of detecting lingering neotropical migrants such as Swainson's Thrush, which were unheard of on counts before the last decade, but have been well documented in Montana (during CBC # 113) and elsewhere recently (The 115th Christmas Bird Count summary, <http://www.audubon.org/conservation/science/christmas-bird-count> ). In addition, Kalispell found a rare species—one with fewer than 20 accepted records—the Iceland Gull (*glaucoides* subspecies) at the Flathead dump. The bird was well-documented on count day (MBRC # 2017-006) and photographed 2 days after. The state has 11 accepted records of the species (through Oct 2016), 6 of which were on CBCs from year #106 through #115. Most CBC records have been from the Fort Peck area, except the first record (from Great Falls) and second (also from the Flathead dump, year #109).

This year we totaled 18.25 nocturnal hours of effort, which helped us tally 11 of 13 possible winter owl species (no Snowy or Boreal Owls were found this year; we would not expect Burrowing or Flammulated Owls during a CBC in Montana). Our owl tally included Barn Owl (2 at Missoula, which was a new species to that count after nearly 40 years, and count week Ninepipe), Western Screech-Owl (1 at Great Falls, also new to that count after more than 40 years), and 2 from Stevensville), Eastern Screech-Owl (1 each Billings and Fort Peck), Great Horned Owl (from 16 circles), Northern Hawk Owl (1 Glacier National Park), Northern Pygmy-Owl (6 circles), Barred Owl (1 each Missoula and Ninepipe), Great Gray Owl (1 Stevensville, count week West Yellowstone), Long-eared Owl (4 circles), Short-eared Owl (6 circles), and Northern Saw-whet Owl (1 Kalispell).

All falcons were found this year in Montana. Most numerous were Merlin (59 from 15 counts), American Kestrel (48 from 9 counts), and Prairie Falcon (38 from 13 counts). While these 3 species are expected, Ninepipe had 1 Gyrfalcon (expected but not found every year), and Great Falls had 2 Peregrine Falcons (perhaps the least expected falcon during winter).

Again this year, 2 counts tallied a non-established species that does not count toward our species total: Chukar at Clark Canyon Dam (5) and Upper Swan Valley (2). Chukar would only count if observed where it is considered established—the Pryor Mountains south of Billings (Montana Bird Records Committee minutes 2014). Unfortunately, no CBC circle occurs in that area. Tracking introduced or exotic species during the CBC provides important information to help determine if and when a species may be considered established in the future.

One species was observed only during a count week, Chipping Sparrow, so it also does not count toward our species total.

Stevensville found the most species—86, while Missoula (83) Bigfork (79) and Kalispell (76) were close behind. Counts with the most species generally have high habitat diversity, including water bodies that retained waterfowl.

Other species found on only 1 count included Greater Sage Grouse (20 birds, all from Big Hole), Spruce Grouse (1 Upper Swan Valley), Common Loon (1 at Helena and a count week bird was at Fort Peck), Double-crested Cormorant (2 Bigfork), Ferruginous Hawk (1 Billings), Sandhill Crane (3 Billings), Marsh Wren (1 Stevensville), and Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch (40 Fort Peck).

Kalispell had the most gulls with 4, while Bigfork had 3 and Fort Peck had 2 plus 1 count week gull. Most gulls were found on just 1 count: Mew Gull (1 Bigfork), California Gull (9 Fort Peck), Iceland (1 Kalispell), and Thayer's (1 Kalispell and count week at Fort Peck). All 3 sites had Herring Gull. Ring-billed Gull was found at Kalispell (1), Bigfork (4) and 1 at Missoula (the first for that count).

Lewis's Woodpecker was found on 2 counts: Eureka (2) and Stevensville (1, also photographed). Individual birds can occur here during winter, but not necessarily every year. American Three-toed Woodpeckers were found on 2 counts (1 each on Bigfork and Bozeman), but no Black-backed Woodpeckers were found this year.

The most widespread species were Bald Eagle (found on all 31 circles), Mallard (on 30 circles), Common Raven and Black-billed Magpie (each on 28 circles), Black-capped Chickadee and European Starling (each on 27 circles), and Common Goldeneye and Rock Pigeon (each on 26 circles). In spite of the cold, American Robin numbers (2,134 individuals found on 24 circles) were similar to most high counts since CBC #100. Many birders do not realize the species winters here every year, often in large numbers.

The most abundant species were Canada Goose (32,530), Bohemian Waxwing (25,918), Mallard (25,467), European Starling (19,028) House Sparrow (12,397), Rock Pigeon (11,555) and Horned Lark (7,022). All other species were less than 6,570.

Eurasian Collard Dove (6,568 birds from 24 circles) decreased from last year (6,820 from 27 circles). They still exceeded their previous highs of around 4,150, recorded during CBC # 113 through 115. Totals for this species have steadily increased since CBC # 108, when the bird first reached 500. Mourning Dove numbers (960 from 14 circles) continue to fluctuate; they decreased from last year (1,087) but were not as low as during 2 recent years (857 in CBC # 115 and 586 in CBC# 112). Since CBC # 103, the birds have averaged approximately 1,200, with highs scattered throughout the period (1,689 during CBC #108 and 1,554 as recent as CBC# 113).

Seven sparrow-type species were recorded. Dark-eyed Juncos of all subspecies (on 22 counts, totaling 1,621 birds), American Tree Sparrow (on 22 counts, totaling 481 birds), and Song Sparrow (21 counts, 413 birds) were fairly widespread and numerous. Most juncos were not classified to type (1,090 Dark-eyed), but 319 Oregon, 201 Slate-colored, 7 Pink-sided, and 4 White-winged were counted. Congratulations to Bowdoin, Fort Peck, Great Falls, and Stevensville for classifying all juncos to subspecies. Also seen were White-throated (5 counts, 5 birds), White-crowned (2 counts, 5 birds), and Harris's Sparrow (3 counts, 3 birds) as well as Spotted Towhee (2 counts, 3 birds). White-throated Sparrow was new to Fort Peck since counts started at their current site during CBC #76.

Red-tailed Hawks (880 from 23 counts) outnumbered Rough-legged Hawks (750 from 24 counts) this year. Harlan's Red-tailed Hawks (47 birds) were found on 10 counts, all of which also had reported non-Harlan's Red-tailed Hawks.

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

Photos:



Western Bluebird, new to the Montana Count, photographed count day (2 Jan 2017) in Helena by Sharon Dewart-Hansen. Also, 1 bird recorded count day in Missoula 26 Dec 2016.



Iceland Gull, well-documented on count day (1 Jan 2017) and photographed 3 Jan 2017 by Raylene Wall

New to the Fort Peck count (since CBC #76 began at this site), White-throated Sparrow photo by Nancy Ohlson, photographed count day 17 Dec 2016.



A wintering Lewis's Woodpecker, found throughout the season at Stevensville, and photographed count day (31 Dec 2016) by Kate Stone. The species was last recorded during CBC # 112 from Missoula (2) and Hamilton (1).

