

The 101st Christmas Bird Count, 12/14/00–1/5/01

Robert H. Stymeist

A total of 190 species plus three subspecies, Red-shafted Flicker, Ipswich Sparrow, and Oregon Junco, were recorded on the thirty-three Massachusetts Christmas Bird Counts. One additional species, Gyrfalcon, was found during count period, although not on a count day. The total is eighteen species fewer than last year, which many of you will remember as having perfect CBC weather. This year the weather was *awful* for most of the counts. December was cold: 25 days of the month had below-normal temperatures. On Sunday, December 17, when five counts were scheduled, wind gusts exceeded 55 mph and the temperature ranged from 33 to 64 degrees. Heavy rain, thunder and lightning, as well as heavy fog are not good ingredients for a successful birding day, especially for the three coastal counts. Several compilers rescheduled count days, only to find yet another not-so-perfect day. On Saturday, December 30, the region was hit with another storm that lasted into the early hours of New Year's Eve. The best weekend was December 23-24, which had only three counts scheduled. Not many folks want to do a count on Christmas Eve.

A new count this year, the Oxbow NWR–Groton count, fielded thirty-seven observers and tallied a respectable 63 species for opening day. The gold medal went to the Cape Cod CBC, which despite the weather conditions recorded 125 species and record high numbers of four species: Gadwall, Mallard, Willet, and Lesser Black-backed Gull. On the flip side, observers there recorded the lowest number of Northern Bobwhite since 1949 — a total of one! The Mid-Cape CBC came in second on a very windy and cold day. The wind was a steady 20–40 mph out of the northwest, but the 25 birders worked hard and managed to find 122 species, including an Eared Grebe, the only Black-headed Gull of any of the CBCs, and the astonishing count of 20,290 American Robins. The bronze medal went to Martha's Vineyard with 121 species.



The stormy weather this season contributed to higher than normal numbers of seabirds in flight, but lower than normal numbers of birds on the water. Northern Gannets numbered 526 on Cape Ann, 642 on Cape Cod, 540 at Marshfield, and 1074 in Truro. Exceptional alcid numbers included 72 Dovekies on Cape Ann and 6339 Razorbills on the Truro count (see Mark Lynch's article on page 118). The rolling seas made it difficult to see seabirds sitting on the water and resulted in lower than normal numbers for many coastal counts.

It is interesting to note that just eleven species were seen on all thirty-three counts: American Black Duck, Mallard, Downy Woodpecker, Blue Jay, American Crow, American Robin, Northern Mockingbird, European Starling, Song Sparrow, White-throated Sparrow, and American Goldfinch. It's hard to imagine missing a Rock Dove or a House Sparrow, but Tuckernuck Island can even be hard on humans

in winter! It is also noteworthy to see how many of the 190 species tallied are represented by a single individual; this year there were nineteen: Great Egret, Black Vulture, Blue-winged Teal, Clapper Rail, Lesser Yellowlegs, Marbled Godwit, Red Knot, an unspecified dowitcher, Black-headed Gull (what's going on here?), Yellow-legged Gull (the jury is still out on this one), Thayer's Gull, Atlantic Puffin, House Wren, Ovenbird, Common Yellowthroat, Wilson's Warbler, Western Tanager, Dickcissel, and Evening Grosbeak, plus two subspecies, Red-shafted Flicker, and Oregon Junco.



An interesting phenomenon in this year's CBC was the exceptional number of certain sparrow species, despite the poor weather. The highest numbers were recorded in the western half of the state, and it is likely that locally abundant food resources accounted for this increase. Compare this year's CBC data to that of last year:



<u>Species</u>	<u>1999 (33 counts)</u>	<u>2000 (33 counts)</u>
Fox Sparrow	59	145
White-throated Sparrow	4,559	8,861
Dark-eyed Junco	13,824	38,171

New England winter bird populations have certainly changed during the last decade, and we have seen a dramatic increase in many species and a decline in just a few species. In the accompanying table, you can see what a difference ten years has made (and think of what the 2000 numbers could have been with better weather).

<u>Species</u>	<u>1990 (28 counts)</u>	<u>2000 (33 counts)</u>
Canada Goose	29,879	42,148
Cooper's Hawk	20	116
Ring-necked Pheasant	182	84
Wild Turkey	311	630
Lesser Black-backed Gull	2	35
Red-bellied Woodpecker	29	376
Carolina Wren	557	1,185
Eastern Bluebird	156	1,177
Hermit Thrush	44	221
American Robin	2,444	53,461
Northern Cardinal	3,762	5,357

Complete results of all thirty-three Massachusetts Christmas Bird Counts can be viewed on *Bird Observer's* web site at <<http://massbird.org/birdobserver/CBC>>. If you want a printed copy, please send a self-addressed envelope with 55-cent postage to Robert H. Stymeist, 94 Grove Street, Watertown, MA 02472-2829. Results of all the counts in North America are available on the Birdsource website (sponsored by the National Audubon Society and the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology). You can view the data going back to 1990 by visiting <<http://www.birdsource.org/>> and selecting Christmas Bird Count.



News from MassWildlife

Webpage Update — Check out <www.MassWildlife.org> for some recent additions. Wildlife Management Area maps are now posted as are write-ups to accompany the popular Pond Map series. Click on the Endangered Species icon and enjoy new materials and a new look for MassWildlife's Natural Heritage Program. Outdoor enthusiasts are logging on in record numbers, so plan your next wildlife outing or learn a little about what's in your own backyard and beyond by browsing through <www.MassWildlife.org>.

Wintering Falcons — It's the time of year when wintering peregrine falcons often appear in some Massachusetts cities. At least one peregrine is currently wintering in downtown Worcester, while birders are scanning the rooftops, spires and parapets of Lowell, Lawrence, Haverhill, Fitchburg, and other urban areas hoping to catch a glimpse of this ultimate predator. Should any of these birds linger into April, or be observed interacting with another peregrine, MassWildlife would like to hear about it. Pairs of peregrines can indicate a new territory being established. Contact Tom French, 508-792-7270 x163.

Winter Waterfowl Inventory — MassWildlife Waterfowl Project Leader H. Heusmann reports a total of 99,352 waterfowl counted along the Massachusetts coastline during the January 2001 winter aerial survey, down from 108,578 birds counted one year ago. Eider topped the species list with 47,457 individuals recorded. Black ducks accounted for 15,789 sightings, while 9,909 Canada geese were noted. Rounding out the census were bufflehead (5419), scoters (4418), goldeneye (4146), scaup (3161), mergansers (2750), mallard (2433), brant (1280), mute swans (679), and oldsquaw (384). There were an additional 611 waterfowl that could not be identified. The entire Massachusetts coastline, including Cape Cod and the offshore islands, was covered from the air with the exception of the greater Boston Harbor area, where ground crews from the TASL bird observer group censused the wintering waterfowl. The overall wintering population status for the 17-state Atlantic Flyway will be assessed when all data are compiled in February.

"For the first time in more than 30 years we sent a new crew of observers into the air," remarks Heusmann While the crew may have been new to the region, their techniques were state of the art. Voice-activated headsets recorded the spoken observations and numbers while a GPS unit simultaneously plotted the position of the plane. All species and group counts were substantially below the 10-year average, suggesting the crew's lack of knowledge of Massachusetts' coastal habitats may have resulted in fewer birds located. In contrast, the experienced TASL group, familiar with the haunts and habits of Boston Harbor's wintering waterfowl, recorded birds in numbers close to the 10-year average for that area. For more information, contact H. Heusmann, 508-792-7270 x122.