

THE CONCORD CHRISTMAS COUNT

by Wayne Hanley, M.A.S.

It's hard to believe that fifteen years of suburban growth would not reduce the bird population in an area. Yet a fifteen-year study of trends in the Christmas Counts within the Concord, Mass., district---which includes all or parts of other towns, such as Acton, Stow, Harvard, Littleton, Carlisle, Framingham and Bolton---indicates only minor fluctuations over the years. There have been, of course, bountiful years and poor years on such birds as Evening Grosbeaks and other erratics. But the stay-at-home birds of New England winters apparently have been finding the space to remain.

Peter Alden, who is a staff ornithologist with the Massachusetts Audubon Society, did the analysis. There were ups and downs in the totals. On snowy days there are fewer birds reported, the weather probably affecting the bird counters more than the birds. Also the number of persons counting birds has a correlation with the numbers of birds counted. In the year that 17 observers were afield, the total count was 5160 birds. The year that 64 observers participated, the total count was 38,721 birds.

There have been some shifts in the prevalence of certain species. Strangely, the declines seem to be among birds which one might suppose would benefit most from having human neighbors, because these species largely are birds that will visit feeders. "The Blue Jays' overpopulation in 1971 and sudden decline in 1972 are evident in the figures," Alden says. "In fact, several species, such as Blue Jays, Evening Grosbeaks, Purple Finches, Mourning Doves and American Goldfinches may have started a decline from highs in the 1968-1971 period. Only by continued help with censusing can we determine if the decline is temporary.

"The group of birds most poorly represented on counts are woodland owls. Only a minute fraction of those present are ever recorded, and statistics depend more on the whim of people than owls."

Meanwhile, a few unusual birds have appeared in the fifteen-year period within this inland birding area. As Alden asks:

"Do you think Thoreau, Brewster and Griscom in all their years of birding in the Concord area could imagine any of the following birds being present here in winter: Great Cormorant, Mute Swan, Snow Goose, Gadwall, Northern Shoveler, Peregrine Falcon, Sora, Red-headed Woodpecker, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Black-backed Three-toed Woodpecker, Eastern Phoebe, Boreal Chickadee, Wood Thrush, Bohemian Waxwing, Northern Waterthrush, Yellowthroat, Yellow-breasted Chat, Black-headed Grosbeak, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Vesper Sparrow, Lark Sparrow, White-crowned Sparrow and Clay-colored Sparrow?"

The Concord count area has had an unusual number of national high counts for a few species---which means that there are more birds of a particular species within a fifteen-mile radius of Concord center than in any other similar circle in America. The species in which national highs have occurred are Goshawks, Blue Jays, Black-capped Chickadees, Hairy Woodpeckers, White-breasted Nuthatches and American Goldfinches.

