

Dear 2012 Stevi Christmas Bird Count Participants;

The 2012 Stevi CBC was epic! Thanks to all of your efforts, we set a new Count record of 90 species recorded on this year's CBC! 90 is kind of a mythical number, only reached twice before in Montana (on the 2011 and 2012 Bigfork CBCs). So congratulations! It's always fun to be part of a record-setting performance.

The 48th annual Stevensville Christmas Bird Count took place on Saturday, December 29, 2012. The weather in the weeks leading up to Count Day was relatively warm, which resulted in considerably more open water than we often see at the end of the year. Precipitation during the fall had been largely in the form of rain, but there was about an inch of snow on the ground over much of the Count circle. Count Day was chilly, with temperatures ranging from 16 degrees at dawn to about 27 degrees in the afternoon. Skies were mostly cloudy, but no snow fell during the day. The sun peeked through occasionally, making for a pleasant afternoon.

We also set a record for number of participants, with 55 field observers and 28 feeder watchers to cover the 177 square miles in the Count Circle. Birds seemed plentiful in many areas, and counters tallied 16,857 birds representing 90 different species. The number of individual birds was the most since 1999, and was well above the average of 9,902 over the last 10 years. The number of species broke our old record of 88 set just last year.

We found one new species not previously recorded on the Stevi CBC, which raised our cumulative species total to 157 species seen over the 48 years of the Count. The newcomer was a female Rusty Blackbird found by Mark Lewing along the Bitterroot River on a ranch south of Florence. Mark led me back to the spot several days after the Count, and we found the bird foraging at the river's edge on the same gravel bar as on Count Day. We got great views of it through my scope, and even managed to get some decent photos to verify the identification. Other counters found several other species that are seldom seen in the Bitterroot Valley during the winter, including a White-throated Sparrow and a Spotted Towhee that had both been hanging around Judy Hoy's house since early December. Bob Danley and the crew at the Refuge found 1 Northern Shoveler, 2 Redheads, 2 Cackling Geese, 2 Ruddy Ducks and a Virginia Rail among the usual host of waterfowl wintering on the ponds there. Helen Atthowe found 3 White-crowned Sparrows at her feeders. New feeder-watchers Tom and Cherie Russell counted a Gray Jay at their place, which is a resident species that should be here, but for some reason was last tallied on the Count in 1997. Bob Petty and party found the Canyon Wren near the Kootenai Creek Trailhead, which has become a Count regular.

We set a new record for the number of Canada Geese, and also found lots of Mallards. Other than that, numbers of most waterfowl species were average to below average, although the species diversity was high. Raptor numbers in general were about average, but we did eke out new records for the number of Red-tailed Hawks and American Kestrels seen. We also found new record numbers of Great Blue Heron, California Quail, Eurasian Collared-Dove, Short-eared Owl, Belted Kingfisher, Common Raven, American Dipper, and House Sparrow. We tied the existing record for Merlin, Western Screech-owl, Canyon Wren, Pacific Wren (formerly called Winter Wren), Spotted Towhee and White-throated Sparrow.

The numbers for all the woodpecker species and most of the birds commonly seen around feeders were higher than they've been in several years, including all the nuthatches, both chickadees, House Finches and House Sparrows. Most years we only find Mountain Chickadees on the west side of the valley, but this was one of those odd years when quite a few east side feeder watchers reported them. The same pattern was evident with Brown Creepers, which were found scattered throughout the Count circle. The number of "winter finches" was mixed, with good numbers of American Goldfinches, Pine Siskins and Common Redpolls, but not many Red Crossbills and no Evening Grosbeaks. After two years of being completely absent from the Count, Bohemian Waxwings showed up in a big way when Deborah Goslin and party found a flock they estimated at 1100 birds up the Burnt Fork.

CBCs are great for looking at long term trends in bird numbers and winter distribution at local, regional and national scales. The Stevi CBC documents a number of such trends. For instance, wintering raptors were apparently an uncommon sight around Stevensville until the early to mid 1990s, when numbers reported on the CBC started to climb dramatically. Now it sometimes seems like there's one on every other power pole. House Finches, which are now one of our most common birds, first appeared on the Count in 1981, and rapidly increased after that. Mourning Doves were a rare find until the late 1980s, when their numbers started to increase. More recently, California Quail first appeared on the Count in 1994, and started to show up consistently in 2002. Their numbers and distribution continue to increase, and we now find them scattered throughout the non-forested parts of the Count circle. Eurasian Collared-doves first appeared on the Count in 2007, and were restricted to Stevensville proper for several years after that. Now we're finding them spread throughout the more open rural and suburban areas of the circle. Your efforts on the CBC help document these interesting changes in our bird community.

Field observers may have noticed that we didn't ask for the usual \$5.00 participation fee this year. National Audubon Society is no longer requesting that we collect this fee, but the tradeoff is that they will no longer publish a hard copy edition of American Birds, which reports the results for every Christmas Bird Count annually, and which used to be mailed to field observers. Instead, NAS will make American Birds available in an on-line only version. I don't know for sure, but I assume you'll be able to access it through the Christmas Bird Count website once it's completed, probably this summer or fall. If you're really interested you can also find the results of this and every other CBC ever done on the CBC website at <http://www.audubon.org/bird/cbc/>, without waiting for the release of American Birds. I hope you'll take a look.

As always, many thanks to all of you that squeezed in time to participate in the Stevi CBC around your plans for celebrating the holidays. Next year's Count will be on Saturday, December 28, 2013. I hope to see you all then. We'll start working towards breaking the 100 species barrier. In the meantime, thanks again for your help, and good birding in 2013.

Sincerely,

Dave Lockman, compiler
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