

MEDICINE HAT INTERPRETIVE PROGRAM

Managed by Grasslands Naturalists

Thirty-first Annual Christmas Bird Count (2012)

Many thanks to the 35 participants who surveyed territories during this year's Christmas Bird Count (CBC) held on Sunday, December 16. In 2012, the Interpretive Program continued its efforts to recruit new, and to retain current, feeder watchers. As a result, there were 16 regular and 9 new feeder watchers who contributed to this year's count. Thanks to these folks as well. The culmination of the count ended up in a grand potluck supper at the Interpretive Centre where participants and friends met to wrap up the count with stories of the days events and to regale each other "with stories of the one that got away".

Count day temperatures were very mild for the second consecutive year (-8o/0oC and -1o/3oC, respectively) as were snow conditions; no one reported any difficulty accessing survey locations in 2012. This year, we decided to alter one territory (Ross Glen/Crestwood) slightly to make it easier to survey. It was divided into 3 parts: one was added to an existing area and one new area was created. This resulted in 24 territories as compared to 23 from prior years. All 24 territories were assigned; however, one territory went uncounted because of participant illness.

A total of 62 species was observed (second only in Alberta to Calgary who counted 65 species and just ahead of Edmonton who tallied 61) with 19,706 individual birds counted, which was up 3% from the 19,105 individuals reported last year and was 63% above the long-term 30-year average of 11,817. The 62 species observed in 2012 represented a new count high; the previous high of 61 occurred in 2002. Two species, Cackling Goose and Greater White-fronted Goose, were new to the count this year. Pine Siskin and Common Grackle were only seen by feeder watchers. Three species, Hooded Merganser, American Kestrel, and Varied Thrush, were seen during count week but not on count day.

There were record high counts for 5 species and 2 species tied their record highs; no record low counts were noted. There did not appear to be any particular pattern to the high counts as the species represented several bird "types". Three (Northern Goshawk, Merlin, and Snowy Owl) were raptors and 2 (Mourning Dove and Common Redpoll) would be considered "feeder" birds. The remaining 2 species (Golden-crowned Kinglet and American Robin) did not fit well into either of these groups but may be loosely affiliated with the other feeder birds.

Some like the American Robin may have been more numerous because of the mild fall weather conditions and good availability of chokecherry and other berries.

Regarding the Top Ten Species, Canada Goose placed first at 10,475 individuals, Mallard second at 2,419, and European Starling third at 1,277.

Only one species, Snow Bunting, was new to the Top Ten this year. The species that dropped out of the Top Ten, Bohemian Waxwing, fell just outside to number 11. Snow Buntings are usually found in large flocks in rural areas and when encountered can be quite numerous.

Common Redpolls continued their irruptive pattern again in 2012 easily outdistancing their total from last year and previous high count from 1985 (545 and 711, respectively). We generally see some Common Redpolls each year but 7 years (1984 – 405, 1985 – 711, 1989 – 357, 1995 – 438, 2001 – 344, 2011 – 545, 2012 – 1,259) stand out against the 31-year average/non-irruptive year average (184/57) and show the irruptive nature of this species. 1984-85 was the last time 2 consecutive irruptive years occurred before 2011-12.

Black-billed Magpies increased in 2012 after a small decline in 2011 from 2010 (534, 446, and 470, respectively) and appear to have rebounded from their record low count in 2008 (171). The count average since 2008 of 454 is only about 14% below the count average of 529 for years before 2008.

The Eurasian Collared-dove population (first reported in the City in 2003) increased again after a brief plateau last year. The 98 birds seen this year represented a 23% increase from last year but were still less than the high count of 112 from 2010.

Species generally seen on our CBC that were seen in 2012 but not in 2011 included the following: Northern Shoveler (2), Green-winged Teal (2), Redhead (1), Snowy Owl (4), and White-winged Crossbill (7).

Notable species absent from this year's count were Northern Pintail, Canvasback, Greater Scaup, Ring-necked Duck, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Copper's Hawk, Short-eared Owl, Pileated Woodpecker, Horned Lark, Purple Finch, Red Crossbill, and Evening Grosbeak.

Birders interested in the results of this and/or other Christmas bird counts can find them at <http://birds.audubon.org/historical-results> . Your comments are welcomed, and should be forwarded to the Nature Line at (403) 529-6225.

Good Birding! Bob Frew and Marty Drut, Compilers