

## Plymouth, MA: 41st Christmas Bird Count: 17<sup>th</sup> December 2014

As with last year, pre-dawn owling was supremely unproductive with a 100% overcast sky and near-torrential rain. Luckily, rain tailed off just after dawn with some fog and temperatures of 45° F rising to 50° F; winds were calm to NW 5 mph and skies were 25% clear by dusk. Visibility increased from 300 yards in fog at dawn, to the horizon by mid-morning. The ground was bare and all fresh and salt water was open. This is good in that everybody had waterfowl to count, although we obtain the highest waterfowl counts when interior New England is frozen solid and water birds concentrate near the coast.



The tallied 108 species (plus 2 ravens in count week) was well above average. Since 1974, the total number of individual birds has been trending steadily downwards; our 11,181 (or 183 birds per party hour) continued the downward trend of individuals seen. The peak circle count in 1976, for example, was 37,524 individuals. Declines are driven by diminishing wintering Canada Geese, American Black Duck, Common Eider and large gulls in the harbors; also we have lost the hordes of gulls and starlings at the open garbage dumps in “the good old days” before incineration and recycling!

I highlighted 2 Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers in downtown as “unusual” this year; also our 2<sup>nd</sup> ever Clay-colored Sparrow at White Horse Beach and 4<sup>th</sup> ever White-crowned Sparrow at Crane Brook, Carver. Two Snowy Owls and 7 “Ipswich” Sparrows on Plymouth Beach rewarded the long walk and over 500 shorebirds in the circle is high. The 7 highest all-year species counts were all land birds in 2014 including woodpeckers (2 sapsuckers, 90 Downy and 19 Hairy); sparrows (360 Song, 56 Swamp and 503 juncos); plus an amazing (minimum) of 210 Fish Crows (probably many more) in flocks, calling and flying S down the coast. The only record long-term low count - a paltry 134 Eurasian Starlings.



Decreasing trends of large gulls (declining inshore fishing, closing dumps), starlings (dumps) and game birds except Wild Turkey, continue apace. American Tree Sparrows (81) are in long-term decline and kestrels are gone. However, cormorants (Great and Double-crested), Hooded Merganser (117) and Gadwall (65) are increasing steadily, as are permanent residents that are expanding their ranges from the south. The latter include Red-bellied Woodpecker (21), Tufted Titmouse (188), Carolina Wren (81) and Northern Cardinal (177). Northern Mockingbird (11) and House Finch (79) increased from the 1970's through the 1990's, but are now dropping back to perhaps (?) a more stable carrying capacity in SE New England. Wild Turkeys (94) are doing just fine.

Many thanks to all the participants in the warm, damp outdoors; plus the feeder watchers (31 total participants), who contributed to this year's count of 11,181 birds of 108 species. May your favorite coffee and hot chocolate shops always be open early and may the evening-tally stewpots never run dry. I hope we see you next Christmas.

*Documentary photographs by Brad Winn (Savannah “Ipswich” Sparrow and Snowy Owl)*

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