

35th Plymouth, MA Christmas Bird Count: 30th December 2008

Late December 2008 featured snow storms, rain and gales, but we were fortunate to sandwich our count between the serial storms and deep freezes. Temperatures for late night owling and dawn birding were around 30° F with mostly cloudy skies and 3 mph winds from the NW. The rest of the day was dry but blowy with winds NW 10-15 mph and stronger gusts. The daytime high temperature was 45° F; nearly all still, fresh waters were open, larger ponds were wholly open, running fresh streams and the sea were open. Even inland, snow cover from the last storm was patchy and seldom over two inches deep. Thus water birds of all types were well represented, but dispersed throughout inland and coastal wetlands. The observing conditions were windy but fair, although with reduced audibility for all those significant high-frequency chips. After three years of insect defoliation (2004-2006), 2007 and 2008 saw low numbers of defoliators and seed and berry crops were well above average. When this combined with a partial failure of E. Canadian seed crops, some irruptive seed and berry eaters were all over New England this Christmas period! The Pine Siskin count of 148 was the 2nd highest ever.

Our total of 101 species means that we have equaled or exceeded the 34-year average for 14 of the last 16 years. Coverage and party hours are stable, so maybe more species are surviving and lingering due to the warmer winters; or maybe we have better birders who know all the nooks and crannies of their areas. The 12,012 individual birds counted were somewhat below average numbers. Low temperatures on the count have remained steady (mean = 24° F) since 1974, while high temps. have increased from a mean of ca. 35° F in the 1970's to ca. 42° F since 2000.

Unusual birds for our circle included Eurasian Wigeon, Snowy Owl on Plymouth Beach, Yellow-breasted Chat and Baltimore Orioles on Manomet property. The grand total for the Plymouth count remains at 188 spp. Highest (or = highest) counts for all 35 years were recorded for Eurasian Wigeon (2), Double-crested Cormorant (24), Turkey Vulture (3), Bald Eagle (4), Red-tailed Hawk (15), Razorbill (190), Red-bellied Woodpecker (15), Horned Lark (67), Marsh Wren (3) and Baltimore Oriole (3). The long-term low counts were Common Merganser (119), Herring (471) and Great Black-backed (114) Gulls (we really miss those great, festering open dumps!) Also American Tree (8) and Field (1) Sparrows were at all time lows.

Decreasing trends over the years include large gulls, all game birds except turkeys, American Kestrel and American Tree Sparrow. Of the increasing species of the 1970-1990 period, two were back to the lows of the early years: Northern Mockingbird (27) and House Finch (121). Increasing trends in Plymouth include waterbirds, e.g. Canada Goose, Hooded Merganser, Common Loon and Great Cormorant; permanent residents such as Wild Turkey, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Tufted Titmouse, Carolina Wren, Northern Cardinal; also lingering southbound migrants like Hermit Thrush, Am. Robin and all warblers (excluding Myrtle).

Many thanks again to all who contributed to the count of 12,012 birds of 101 species in our 15-mile diameter Plymouth circle. I hope we see you next Christmas.

Trevor Lloyd-Evans (compiler).