

Plymouth, MA: 38th Christmas Bird Count: 21st December 2011

The count this year started with successful pre-dawn owling at a balmy 36°F temperature and calm winds. During the day, temperatures peaked at an all-time (since 1974) record 55°F with SW winds 5-10 mph and partly cloudy skies becoming overcast. There was a light rain in the afternoon. Only the coldest inland fresh water was initially frozen and all water thawed during the morning. Nut, berry and seed crops seemed plentiful, so feeder birds and irruptive species were notably sparse. On the other hand, lingering Marsh Wren, bluebird, Hermit Thrush, catbird, Yellow-breasted Chat and towhee were, well, lingering successfully! Small marine prey is abundant this year, so seabirds were well-represented in all coastal areas.

The tallied 106 species were above average and we have now exceeded the 38-year average number of species for 14 of the last 17 years. On the other hand, the total number of individual birds has been trending steadily downwards; our 12,348 (or 225 birds per party hour) continuing the low number of individuals seen for the last 6 years.



Second winter plumage (Kumlien's) Iceland Gull
(photograph by Dave McGlinchey, Manomet Staff)

I did not highlight any species except Yellow-breasted Chat (2) as “unusual” this year. Every species recorded this year has occurred in at least three previous years since 1974. Last year's Iceland Gull was back on the Plymouth boat launch as a 2nd winter bird and the Jenny Pond Lesser Black-backed Gull is back in its habitual winter home for an amazing 10th winter. The 10 highest all-year counts included waterbirds (22 Green-winged Teal, 46 Harlequin Duck, 489 Hooded Merganser, 284 American Coot); 121 of the ever-increasing Wild Turkey and 2 Yellow-breasted Chat. The four long-term low counts were of Mourning Dove, Blue Jay and Black-capped Chickadee (few feeder birds and very few fall migrants this year), plus the ever-decreasing Herring Gull.

Decreasing trends of large gulls (declining inshore fishing, closing dumps), starlings (dumps) and game birds except Wild Turkey, continue apace. Hooded Mergansers are increasing steadily, as are permanent residents which are expanding their ranges from the south. They include Red-bellied Woodpecker, Tufted Titmouse, Carolina Wren and Northern Cardinal. Northern Mockingbird (30) and House Finch (113) increased from the 1970's through the 1990's, but are now dropping back in numbers to perhaps (?) a more stable carrying capacity in SE New England. Wild Turkeys are doing just fine as they increase in farmland, woodlots and the suburbs.

Many thanks to all the participants (31) in the warm, wet outdoors and the feeder watchers who contributed to this year's count of 12,348 birds of 106 species. May your favorite coffee and hot chocolate shops always be open and may the evening-tally stewpots never run dry. I hope we see you next Christmas.

Trevor Lloyd-Evans (compiler)