

This past winter the Christmas Bird Count was held on Monday, January 2, 2017. This was the 18th year for the Vashon count circle and we had record turnout, with 89 people joining teams to count in the field, as well as 22 feeder watchers. While it didn't snow on us as it did last year, it was once again a very chilly day, with temperatures only barely making it above freezing. This, in combination with a brisk wind for much of the day, made for challenging conditions. But despite the cold, we came quite close to last year's record for party hours in the field, a testament to our steadfast participants!

Once again, most teams reported that it was a noticeably quiet birding day. This was borne out by the low overall numbers, with a total of 18,739 individual birds counted (down almost 14% from the historical average). The species count ended up slightly above average with a total of 116 species on count day, and an additional four records for count week.

We recorded two new species for our count, both of which were seen close to the southwestern edge of the count circle near Purdy. On count day, the team of Art and Alex Wang, Susan Boynton, and Amanda Flynn-Stach found a Semipalmated Plover in the Burley Lagoon. While this is not a rare bird for our area, they are mostly seen during migration, and are considered rare for this season. Typically, they spend the winter months in warmer southern climes (some go as far south as Chile and Argentina).

On the last day of count week, Ken Brown turned up an even more surprising find off the Purdy Spit—a female Common Eider. I believe that this is only the fourth record of this species for Washington, so a rare bird indeed. This arctic and subarctic species tends to remain as far north as possible in winter and is generally found in coastal marine habitats, so its appearance here, this far to the south and relatively distant from the Pacific coast, is certainly unusual.

In addition to these new species for the Vashon count, Bob Hawkins had a Northern Shrike in his yard (lucky guy!) at the beginning of count week. This is the third record for the count circle, and also the third for Vashon/Maury overall. Chazz Hesselein also had a group of 10 Mountain Quail out at the Port Orchard quarry at the tail end of count week. This is only the sixth time we've recorded this species, with the last sighting being a single individual six years ago.

There were record high counts for several species: Bald Eagle (87), Red-tailed Hawk (38), Eurasian Collared-Dove (20), Barred Owl (13), Anna's Hummingbird (168), Black-capped Chickadee (386), and Golden-crowned Sparrow (258). A few tied the previous high count: Red-breasted Sapsucker (20), Peregrine Falcon (3), Hutton's Vireo (10), and Lincoln's Sparrow (4).

Three notable no-shows were Sanderling, which was missed for the first time in the history of the count, Bonaparte's Gull, which had been seen in 15 of 17 past years, and White-throated Sparrow, which was counted in 14 of the 17 years. There were a couple of record lows or ties with the previous low count for species seen every year: Ring-necked Pheasant (1), Great Blue Heron (18), and Hairy Woodpecker (2).

The ponds in the area were not completely frozen as they had been the year before, but a hard freeze earlier in the season seems to have had an impact on the distribution of some of the typical freshwater species, notably Wood Duck and Pied-billed Grebe. Wood Duck (17) were only found on the Kitsap Peninsula, and they were down 36% from the historical average. Pied-billed Grebe (38) numbers were actually slightly above average, but the only one found on the island was by the boat team in Quartermaster Harbor. On the other hand, Ring-necked Duck (115) were up 31%. The dabblers were a mixed bag, with Mallard (539) and Northern Shoveler (25) both below their average, while Gadwall (7) Eurasian Wigeon (11), American Wigeon (3,557), Northern Pintail (26), and Green-winged Teal (53) were all above their mean.

Seabird species were generally down, some heavily so. The largest drop versus the historical average for the count was once again the Western Grebe (25), which, while not quite as dire as last year, is still down 98%. Other big declines were seen in Pacific Loon (3), down 95%, Common Loon (13), down 64%, Red-necked Grebe (33), down 59%, White-winged Scoter (227), down 52%, and Red-throated Loon (26), down 48%. Exceptions to the trend were Bufflehead (731), Common Goldeneye (602), Red-breasted Merganser (245), Brandt's Cormorant (46), and Pelagic Cormorant (38), all of which were up by at least 20%, with Common Goldeneye very near their record high of 619.

Shorebirds are often sparse in the Vashon count circle, and this year was certainly no exception. We did manage to tally seven shorebird species (including the surprise Semipalmated Plover), but the numbers of all the more common species were lower than normal, with the lone exception being Black Turnstone (24), which was slightly above its average.

Alcids were another area of big declines, with Pigeon Guillemot (16) faring the best at only 12% below average, while Common Murre (2) and Rhinoceros Auklet (3) were both more than 90% lower than their mean, and no Marbled Murrelet were detected. Despite missing Bonaparte's we did fairly well with gull diversity this year with six species found, and both Mew (387) and Thayer's Gull (11) significantly above their average numbers. We had one each of Ring-billed, California and Herring Gull, which are not always seen. Otherwise, Glaucous-winged and "Olympic" Gull combined (520) came in 15% lower than average.

This was once again an especially good year for both diurnal raptors and owls, with numbers above average for almost all species, and, as noted above, several record high counts or ties with previous highs. We had a male Northern Harrier at Wax Orchards Airport, and above-average counts for Sharp-shinned Hawk (8), Cooper's Hawk (5), and American Kestrel (2). For the daytime hunters, the only regularly found species with slightly below average numbers was Merlin (2). Our owling parties had good results this year, and managed to find Barn Owl (1), Barred Owl (13, with some seen by daytime field teams), and Northern Saw-whet Owl (1), as well as a count week Great Horned Owl.

Woodpeckers were seen in good numbers across most of the five regularly-occurring species (Hairy Woodpecker being the exception), with Red-breasted Sapsucker (20)

tying their high mark, and Downy Woodpecker (32) and Northern Flicker (121) both well above their average. Pigeons and doves were a bit low, with the marked exception being Eurasian Collared-Dove (20), which set another record high.

Passerine numbers were rather mixed, with some big drops and some large increases. For example, several finches were lower than average, namely Red Crossbill (7), down 83%, Pine Siskin (337), down 71%, and House Finch (112) down 48%. On the other hand, Purple Finch (45) were 10% above the mean, and American Goldfinch (153) had their second-highest tally of our count, at a whopping 180% above their historical average.

A few species typically seen in large numbers, American Crow (827), American Robin (1,462), and European Starling (522), were below their averages by 18%, 8%, and 54%, respectively, but Dark-eyed Junco (1,209) showed a 16% increase. Black-capped Chickadee (386) set a new record high, while Chestnut-backed Chickadee (247) were down 19%. On the sparrow front, Golden-crowned Sparrow (258) were also at a high, while Song Sparrow (218) were down 41%, with the lowest number recorded in the last 16 years.

We did have fairly good luck with some species that can be difficult to find or we don't see every year, including Hutton's Vireo (10), California Scrub-Jay (2), Hermit Thrush (4), Cedar Waxwing (93), Orange-crowned Warbler (1), Yellow-rumped Warbler (17), and Lincoln's Sparrow (4). The vireo and sparrow both tied previous high counts, while the jay, Yellow-rump and waxwing were either the second- or third-highest tallies.

All said, it was a very successful count. Thanks again to the many participants that made it happen.