

## Beech Creek CBC – 22 December 2009

On the Beech Creek Christmas Bird Count on December 22, ten observers found over 7,000 birds of 79 species. The number of species is on the low side of normal, not that there has been a normal year in the recent past. With extensive tree felling by Hurricane Rita in September 2005, and more by Hurricane Ike in September 2008, coupled with a complete drawdown of Steinhagen Lake in 2007/8, habitat conditions have been abnormal to say the least.

It was the waterfowl that were most obviously missing. Steinhagen Lake is full again, and the return of a large flock of Canvasback was welcome, even if they were in the middle of the lake. But none of the "puddle ducks" that historically have frequented shallow areas, especially around Martin Dies State Park, were there. It is always possible they were outside the circle in the Wildlife Management Area at the north end of the lake, where conditions are probably back to reasonable normality, as we did find good numbers of American White Pelicans and a few White Ibis, species that concentrate in that area. We did also see a couple of large flocks of Double-crested Cormorants on the Lake.

Pied-billed Grebes were found in good numbers and six Anhinga is a recent high. Oddly enough, the number of Great Blue Herons was high, while the number of Great Egrets was low. Snowy Egrets were found in usual numbers, while there were two Little Blue Herons, a species that is detected on about half of the counts. None of the "rarer" herons on this count – Cattle Egret., Green Heron, and the Night-Herons – were found.

Raptors were in very much normal numbers except for a record number (6) of Bald Eagles. Apparently, the staff at Martin Dies has not been seeing the eagles this fall and winter, but six were sighted – two adults by one party in the area to the east of the Neches south of the Town Bluff dam, and four others (two adults and two immature birds) by another party in the southern part of the circle. The two to the east of the Neches offer an interesting commentary. Normally, we almost apologize for including that sector in an assignment, because it has only one public county road in it. But the road goes almost to the river, and in addition to the eagles, the party that covered it saw several other species that were not found anywhere else on the count! They found 147 birds of 21 species along that road, including 25 Wilson's Snipe.

Of the other raptors, there were lots of Turkey Vultures. Black Vultures, Northern Harriers, Red-shouldered and Red-tailed Hawks, and American Kestrels were as expected. An Osprey was seen after a gap of two years which was almost certainly the result of the drawdown of the lake. Finding a Merlin is something that happens about 40 percent of the time. The failure of any Accipiter species to show up is not unusual, but one feels the birds must be present in the wooded areas, but never venturing out into the open.

Common Moorhens have not returned to the numbers of a few years ago, but American Coots, which were present in huge numbers last year, were not quite as numerous, but

still well represented. A Greater Yellowlegs was found for the second year in a row, and it was nice to have a couple of Spotted Sandpipers again after an understandable absence of two years. Wilson's Snipes, the ones referred to above and a more modest three around the lake, were nice to find. Last year, there were no gulls or terns; this year 20 Ring-billed Gulls and 30 Forster's Terns were perhaps more than previous norms.

Eurasian Collared Doves are apparently now firmly entrenched in the Town Bluff community, but Inca Doves were not found for the first time since 2003.

We struck out on owls last year, but, helped by one of our observers camping in Martin Dies, this year we found both Eastern Screech-Owl and Barred Owl. Fourteen Belted Kingfishers equaled the all-time high for this species set in 1985.

Woodpeckers are a specialty in the Big Thicket. The most obvious expectation in the wake of the hurricanes would be increased opportunities for woodpeckers, but in many of the areas we can cover, the fallen and dying trees are quickly removed. Woodpeckers are most at home on standing dying trees. We did find one Red-headed Woodpecker – about what we have normally done in recent years – while red-bellied were definitely present in above normal numbers. Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers were also in good supply, but Downy Woodpeckers and especially Northern Flickers were not. Always nice birds to see, Pileated Woodpeckers were found in above average numbers.

Flycatchers are, as their name implies, dependent on insect populations and even though they concentrate more along the immediate coast, it was a surprise to find below average numbers of Eastern Phoebes in a year when they are extremely numerous further south. White-eyed Vireo is a species that we seem to find in 60 percent of counts. The seven Blue-headed Vireos equaled the previous high count.

Corvids are more affected by West Nile Virus than other birds, so the numbers of jays and crows are of special interest. The picture is mixed with 54 Blue Jays being on the low side of normal, while 190 American Crows is the highest in many years.

Tree Swallow was a new species to the count a couple of years ago, so it was nice to have two groups find small flocks of them.

Chickadee numbers were somewhat on the high side, while Tufted Titmice, Brown-headed Nuthatch and Brown Creeper numbers were very much normal. While Carolina Wrens were found in normal numbers, the count set a new high for numbers of House Wrens, and found an above normal number of Winter Wrens. Golden-crowned Kinglets were present in good numbers, while Ruby-crowned Kinglets numbers were the highest in ten years. The record shows one previous period of about three years in which Ruby-crowned Kinglets built up to a very high peak and subsequently declined. Thirteen Blue-gray Gnatcatchers was a good showing, while Eastern Bluebirds were very normal.

Hermit Thrush was not found last year, but two showed up this year. Overall American Robin numbers were normal, but the distribution was not. Robins were not to be found around the western shore of the lake. Of the other thrushes, thrasher and mimic thrushes, Gray Catbird numbers were on the low side of normal, as were Brown Thrashers, but Northern Mockingbirds were normal. We hesitate to note that European Starlings were low! Everyone likes to find Cedar Waxwings, and all parties did, even if not in every sector. Overall numbers were normal.

We did not detect any "lingering" Neotropical migrant warblers. Of the wintering species, Orange-crowned Warbler and Pine Warbler numbers were both back to normal after the lows or recent years. The number of Yellow-rumped Warblers was about normal, while Common Yellowthroat is nice to find, and only found about 40 percent of the time.

Sparrow numbers and variety were disappointing. One Eastern or Spotted Towhee was clearly heard. Chipping Sparrow flocks seems more scattered than usual. Song Sparrows were in good supply, but no Lincoln's Sparrows were found and Swamp Sparrows were in the lowest numbers in 10 years, and White-throated Sparrows were lowest since 1999. On the plus side, Dark-eyed Juncos were above all recent counts except 2006.

With three groups seeing significant flocks, 1168 Red-winged Blackbirds beat all previous counts except a very large 3370 in 1994. Each year, we seem to have increasing difficulty locating Eastern Meadowlarks, and seven is a low number.

## **Beech Creek CBC Bird List – 22 December 2009**

DUCK, Wood (4)	COOT, American (1090)
TEAL, Green-winged (1)	KILLDEER (21)
CANVASBACK (336)	SANDPIPER, Spotted (2)
GREBE, Pied-billed (29)	SNIPE, Wilson's (28)
PELICAN, American White (113)	GULL, Ring-billed (20)
CORMORANT, Double-crested (424)	TERN, Forster's (36)
ANHINGA (6)	COLLARED-DOVE, Eurasian (13)
HERON, Great Blue (18)	DOVE, Mourning (56)
EGRET, Great (71)	SCREECH-OWL, Eastern (1)
EGRET, Snowy (8)	OWL, Barred (2)
HERON, Little Blue (2)	KINGFISHER, Belted (14)
IBIS, White (27)	WOODPECKER, Red-headed (3)
VULTURE, Black (27)	WOODPECKER, Red-bellied (84)
VULTURE, Turkey (110)	SAPSUCKER, Yellow-bellied (41)
OSPREY (1)	WOODPECKER, Downy (20)
EAGLE, Bald (6)	FLICKER, Northern (7)
HARRIER, Northern (2)	WOODPECKER, Pileated (24)
HAWK, Red-shouldered (13)	PHOEBE, Eastern (36)
HAWK, Red-tailed (4)	VIREO, White-eyed (1)
KESTREL, American (10)	VIREO, Blue-headed (7)
MERLIN (1)	JAY, Blue (54)
MOORHEN, Common (2)	CROW, American (193)

SWALLOW, Tree (25)  
CHICKADEE, Carolina (103)  
TITMOUSE, Tufted (39)  
NUTHATCH, Brown-headed (5)  
CREEPER, Brown (3)  
WREN, Carolina (40)  
WREN, House (20)  
WREN, Winter (6)  
KINGLET, Golden-crowned (23)  
KINGLET, Ruby-crowned (133)  
GNATCATCHER, Blue-gray (13)  
BLUEBIRD, Eastern (116)  
THRUSH, Hermit (2)  
ROBIN, American (1688)  
CATBIRD, Gray (3)  
MOCKINGBIRD, Northern (26)  
THRASHER, Brown (2)  
STARLING, European (8)  
WAXWING, Cedar (163)  
WARBLER, Orange-crowned (12)  
WARBLER, Yellow-rumped (125)  
WARBLER, Yellow-rumped.(Myrtle) (86)  
WARBLER, Pine (103)  
YELLOWTHROAT, Common (3)  
TOWHEE, Eastern/Spotted (1)

SPARROW, Chipping (275)  
SPARROW, Song (16)  
SPARROW, Swamp (7)  
SPARROW, White-throated (57)  
JUNCO, Dark-eyed (19)  
JUNCO, Dark-eyed (Slate-colored) (10)  
CARDINAL, Northern (129)  
BLACKBIRD, Red-winged (1168)  
MEADOWLARK, Eastern (7)  
GRACKLE, Common (48)  
COWBIRD, Brown-headed (40)  
GOLDFINCH, American (198)  
SPARROW, House (2)  
SPECIES, total (79)

Number of Individuals (7692)  
Number of observers (9)

Parties (4)  
Party-hours on foot (16)  
Party-miles on foot (11.5)  
Party-hours by car (25)  
Party-miles by car (199.7)  
Party-hours total (41)  
Party-miles total (211.2).

John A. Whittle  
January 12, 2010