

Turkey Creek CBC – 19 December 2009

December 19 turned out to be a good day for counting birds. It was quite chilly (about 35 degrees) at the beginning, but warmed up considerably, and remained clear all day, with light winds. A good turnout of 16 participants was able to find about 3600 birds of 67 species. The number of birds seen on this count in previous years has varied widely, often influenced strongly by the prevailing weather conditions. Sixty-seven species is, however, on the high side of normal, having been exceeded in only six prior years out of the 30 years that this count has been conducted.

The real scientific value of CBC data is derived from the large number of counts conducted over many, many years. However, it is always interesting to try to glean comparatively localized tidbits of bird distribution trends, even though all must be regarded as anecdotal rather than definitive. Here we do this by means of comments on the species and numbers reported.

Perhaps surprisingly, Wood Ducks are sometime not found on this count, but this year two groups each found ten, for a good total of 20. For the third time in this count, Hooded Merganser was found. Occasionally one, or more often a pair, elects to spend the winter on a small pond in East Texas.

The numbers of Vultures of both species detected was about average, although numbers seen have varied widely, probably strongly influenced by the cloud base. For the second year a row, an Osprey was found. This was the fourth time, all since 2000. Only one Sharp-shinned Hawk and no Cooper's Hawks were recorded. Accipiters are likely much more common than the count record would suggest, but the count circle contains lots of heavily wooded areas, in which the Accipiters are difficult to see. Five Red-tailed Hawks were seen after missing the species last year. Red-shouldered Hawk numbers were reasonably normal. Twelve American Kestrels ties the high for the count with three previous years.

Killdeer numbers at 24 were normal by comparison with recent years, but above the overall average since 1978. American Woodcock was recorded for only the 14th time in 30 years. The species was seen almost every year in the early days, then not as often, but in increasing frequency in recent years.

Mourning Dove numbers are above the 10-year average, although they do vary widely. Inca Doves expanded in range from southern Texas starting nearly 20 years ago now. This was the seventh count to find the species, and 10 is a new high count. The count circle contains very little in the way of concentrated human habitation, so we come to expect not to find any Rock Pigeons. Many other counts wish they had this problem.

Owls are, of course, difficult to locate. Barred Owls are almost certainly widely distributed in the count circle, but they are only detected on about 50 percent of counts. Finding one was welcome.

Belted Kingfishers winter along the Upper Texas Coast in good numbers, but the count circle is devoid of the larger open creeks and Bayous that they seem to prefer. Four is more than normal – there is a prior record of five, and another of four.

Woodpeckers are perhaps the quintessential family of birds of the Big Thicket. After two major hurricanes in three years, we expected woodpecker numbers to increase. But we missed Red-headed Woodpecker, a species that likes dying trees, for the ninth time. Perhaps in many areas, dying trees were felled more expeditiously, although nature has been allowed to take its course in wide areas. Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and Downy Woodpecker numbers were each the third highest on record. There is always a good chance that someone will find a Hairy Woodpecker in this count circle – it happens about 60 percent of the time – but it is always good to find one. Northern Flicker numbers were below the long-term average. Not surprisingly, Pileated Woodpecker has never been missed on this count, and 25 is actually the second highest on record.

Eastern Phoebes are numerous everywhere in south-east Texas this years, and 41 was the fourth highest ever.

Loggerhead Shrikes are a difficult species to find in this circle. Shrikes are very much birds of open areas, although they do want scattered trees or man made substitutes to perch on. We believe numbers dropped precipitously in the wake of Hurricane Rita in 2005, but in Jefferson County to the south, they appear to have staged a strong comeback in 2009. But, for the eighth year in a row, we failed to find one in the count circle.

White-eyed Vireo has been seen on 20 of the 30 years of the count, so it was nice to see two after missing the species last year. Blue-headed Vireo is rarely missed on this count and eight represented the high side of normal.

Fifty-one Blue Jays is about average, a welcome development after three low years with West Nile virus implications. Also, American Crow numbers were well above normal, in fact the third highest on record.

We were disappointed not to find Tree Swallows this year after finding them in two of the previous three years, but they may have been driven further south towards the coast by diminution in insect numbers in the wake of the significant freeze earlier in the month.

Carolina Chickadee and Tufted Titmouse numbers were unremarkable. Brown-headed Nuthatch numbers were on the high side of normal. Brown Creepers are hard to detect, and recorded on only about half the counts, so finding two was satisfying. Carolina Wren numbers were on the low side of normal, while 26 House Wrens was a new high. We don't always find Winter Wren, so four was a nice number. Sedge Wren was new to the count last year, and another was reported this year.

Golden-crowned Kinglets like to hide high in the tree tops, and can be difficult for many observers to hear, but we found five nonetheless. Eighty-five Ruby-crowned Kinglets was high confirming the suspicions that they are numerous all over the area this year. Blue-gray Gnatcatchers are essentially common along the Upper Texas Coast in winter, so it is surprising that the species was seen in only four of the last ten years. A single bird was seen this year.

Eastern Bluebird numbers were above normal, while 10 Hermit Thrushes was a good number of a species that is sometimes not detected. Counting American Robins in flocks is difficult, and there is always the risk of "double-counting." However, we believe 884 is about a normal count. In the early days of the count before 1995, Gray Catbird was seen on only six of 17 counts. Recently, it has been seen every year and the 2009 total is the fourth highest. Northern Mockingbird numbers were on the low side of normal. Brown Thrasher has been missed on only two of the 30 counts, but two birds is a low number nevertheless. Another problem that many other counts would like to have is that European Starlings are not always found in this circle. One, yes one, was found! Cedar Waxwing is a species that birders like to find, and they almost always do on this count. This year, every party saw some, and the recorded total of 314 as the second highest ever. After adding American Pipit to the species list for this count last year, it was nice to find three this year, perhaps the reflecting the wet conditions caused by the El Nino induced succession of storms across the southern United States this fall.

Perhaps not surprising after the freeze earlier in the month of the count, no lingering warblers were seen. Of the wintering warblers, Orange-crowned Warbler numbers were normal or a little above, while both Yellow-rumped and Pine Warbler numbers were very normal.

Eastern Towhee is nowadays seen infrequently in the area, and finding one again this year was welcome. Chipping Sparrow has never been missed on the count, and was seen by all parties. The total of 349 was "high normal." Field Sparrows seem to come in streaks. Overall the species has been seen about half of the time, but there have been periods of several years without them. Two were found this year. Savannah Sparrows are being found almost every year now, suggesting perhaps there are more open non-wooded areas. Three is actually below recent average, however. Perhaps the best bird of the 2009 count was Henslow's Sparrow, seen on the Sundew Trail in the Hickory Creek Savannah Unit of the Big Thicket National Preserve. This is the third find of a Henslow's, previous ones being in 1987 and 2001. Nine Song Sparrows represents a high number of a species that is found almost every year. Lincoln's Sparrow, on the other hand, has been found on only about half the counts and even was well above recent norms. Ten Swamp Sparrows are about what we have come to expect, while 61 White-throated Sparrows were very much on the low side. Dark-eyed Juncos are found almost always on this count – they were missed in 1981 and 1985 only – perhaps aided by their visual and auditory dissimilarities from other sparrows. The 42 recorded was high, nevertheless.

Only 64 Cardinals was very much below recent averages. Red-winged Blackbirds staged a comeback after being absent for four consecutive years. Eastern Meadowlark is not necessarily very easy to find within the count circle, but have been found except for four years in the 1994-98 period.

So far, there have not been any reports of southern incursions by Purple Finches or Pine Siskins, so not finding them was not a great surprise. American Goldfinch numbers were above both recent and long terms norms.

Yet another species that most count circles do not have difficulty with is House Sparrow, although the species does seem to require nearby multiple human or animal residences. The species has been detected in this count circle only 13 times out of 30, and not this year. The only extensive areas of human housing in the count circle are in Wildwood and in a corner of Warren.

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DUCK, Wood (21); MERGANSER, Hooded (1); GREBE, Pied-billed (2); CORMORANT, Double-crested (1); HERON, Great Blue (7); EGRET, Great (1); VULTURE, Black (77); VULTURE, Turkey (101); OSPREY (1); HAWK, Sharp-shinned (1); HAWK, Red-shouldered (10); HAWK, Red-tailed (6); HAWK, Buteo species (2); KESTREL, American (8); KILLDEER (24); WOODCOCK, American (1); DOVE, Mourning (51); OWL, Barred (1); KINGFISHER, Belted (4); WOODPECKER, Red-bellied (57); SAPSUCKER, Yellow-bellied (31); WOODPECKER, Downy (31); WOODPECKER, Hairy (4); FLICKER, Northern (3); FLICKER, N. (Yellow shaft) (5); WOODPECKER, Pileated (25); PHOEBE, Eastern (41); VIREO, White-eyed (2); VIREO, Blue-headed (8); JAY, Blue (51); CROW, American (210); CHICKADEE, Carolina (71); TITMOUSE, Tufted (39); NUTHATCH, Brown-headed (15); CREEPER, Brown (2); WREN, Carolina (29); WREN, House (26); WREN, Winter (4); WREN, Sedge (1); KINGLET, Golden-crowned (5); KINGLET, Ruby-crowned (85); GNATCATCHER, Blue-gray (1); BLUEBIRD, Eastern (220); THRUSH, Hermit (10); ROBIN, American (884); CATBIRD, Gray (6); MOCKINGBIRD, Northern (16); THRASHER, Brown (2); STARLING, European (1); WAXWING, Cedar (314); PIPIT, American (3); WARBLER, Orange-crowned (8); WARBLER, Yellow-rumped (175); WARBLER, Yellow-rumped(Myrtle) (46); WARBLER, Pine (82); TOWHEE, Eastern (1); SPARROW, Chipping (349); SPARROW, Field (2); SPARROW, Savannah (3); SPARROW, Henslow's (1); SPARROW, Song (9); SPARROW, Lincoln's (7); SPARROW, Swamp (10); SPARROW, White-throated (61); JUNCO, Dark-eyed (11); JUNCO, Dark-eyed (Slate-col.) (31); CARDINAL, Northern (94); BLACKBIRD, Red-winged (32); MEADOWLARK, Eastern (10); GOLDFINCH, American (187); SPECIES, total (67); INDIVIDUALS, total (3641); Number of observers (16); Number of parties (7-8); Party-hours on foot (28.75); Party-miles on foot (19.5); Party-hours by car (22.25); Party-miles by car (138.5); Party-hours stationary (0.5); Total Party hours (51.5); Total Party miles (158).

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