

Turkey Creek Christmas Bird Count – 17 December 2016

The Turkey Creek Christmas Bird Count was held on December 17 on what turned out to be a very windy day. The total number of species seen was 61, a rather disappointing number and the lowest since 2007. The number of individual birds was also very low, about one-half of the number in good years, and follows a lean year last year. This was not totally unexpected, as the September migration count in Jefferson County recorded very low numbers of some common birds, especially in the non-urban areas. At the time, we considered that there was some probability that the very warm late summer and early fall across the eastern half of the United States was causing our wintering birds to delay their fall migration. This may yet prove to be largely correct. The numbers of raptors, especially American Kestrel and Red-tailed Hawks has increased to normal. But sparrow numbers were, at the time of this count, still very low. This explanation probably doesn't explain the low numbers of Northern Mockingbirds, a species which is not appreciably migratory. The number seen on this count was exceptionally low, lower than any year other than 1993, when the number of party hours was half what it was this year. Whatever the cause, the birding in the count circle during the afternoon was very slow.

Somewhat unexpected, however, was the finding of both Purple Finch (two birds on the Kirby Nature Trail) and Fox Sparrow (one on the Turkey Creek Trail south of Gore Store Road). These are both species that have been increasingly difficult to find in our area in recent years, with significant evidence that the southern limits of their winter ranges are creeping northward.

Wood Ducks have become easier to find in the circle in recent years, and there were Ring-necked Ducks, a small number, on Lake Hyatt, one of the only two bodies of water in the circle worthy of the name. The water is not deep so the presence of Double-crested Cormorants is hit or miss, and this was a miss year. Strangely, Snowy Egret does not occur often in the circle, and one seen near Warren was only the third in the 39-year history of the count.

Black Vulture numbers were up from last year's low, and Turkey Vulture numbers were high. Strong winds do not seem to have dissuaded them from flying. On the other hand, they may have dissuaded Red-shouldered Hawks from flying as only four were recorded.

American Woodcock were seen again this year, after a dry spell prior to last year. Doves on the other hand were not present in normal numbers, with no Eurasian Collared-Doves, and an exceptionally low number of Mourning Doves. Woodpecker numbers were very low when compared to the past few years, but this may reflect a return to normal as the trees killed or damaged in the hurricanes in 2005 and 2008 are either removed or have recovered, leaving less woodpecker-friendly trees. Blue Jay and American Crow numbers were low, both species which are typically vocal and counted by voice, presumably less affected by the wind conditions.

Large flocks of Tree Swallows winter in Jefferson County, not far from the count circle, but had only been seen three times in the preceding ten years. Typically it is either none or a sizable flock.

Most of the woodland Passerine bird numbers were low this year, and the wind may have had a lot to do with that. Golden-crowned Kinglet numbers were apparently not as much affected, and were on the high side of normal, maybe because they are usually located by call. American Robins numbers in the count circle are very variable, and this year's number was squarely in the middle of the normal range at just under a thousand. As noted above sparrow numbers were very low, most especially White-throated Sparrows. Likewise, Northern Cardinals were scarce. American Goldfinch numbers vary quite a lot from year to year, and this year's 70 is perhaps on the low side of normal.

Birds seen:

DUCK, Wood (27); DUCK, Ring-necked (7); GREBE, Pied-billed (4); HERON, Great Blue (1); EGRET, Great (2); EGRET, Snowy (1); VULTURE, Black (39); VULTURE, Turkey (119); HAWK, Sharp-shinned (2); HAWK, Red-shouldered (4); HAWK, Red-tailed (3); KILLDEER (7); SNIPE, Wilson's (1); WOODCOCK, American (2); DOVE, Mourning (4); KINGFISHER, Belted (1); WOODPECKER, Red-bellied (30); SAPSUCKER, Yellow-bellied (15); WOODPECKER, Downy (14); WOODPECKER, Hairy (2); FLICKER, Northern (8); WOODPECKER, Pileated (17); KESTREL, American (13); PHOEBE, Eastern (19); VIREO, White-eyed (2); VIREO, Blue-headed (3); JAY, Blue (11); CROW, American (118); SWALLOW, Tree (113); CHICKADEE, Carolina (37); TITMOUSE, Tufted (18); NUTHATCH, Brown-headed (13); WREN, Carolina (28); WREN, House (9); WREN, Winter (4); GNATCATCHER, Blue-gray (4); KINGLET, Golden-crowned (14); KINGLET, Ruby-crowned (33); BLUEBIRD, Eastern (83); THRUSH, Hermit (10); ROBIN, American (986); CATBIRD, Gray (1); THRASHER, Brown (2); MOCKINGBIRD, Northern (4); STARLING, European (14); WAXWING, Cedar (103); WARBLER, Orange-crowned (6); WARBLER, Pine (44); WARBLER, Yellow-rumped (62); WARBLER, Yellow-rumped (Myrtle) (34); SPARROW, Chipping (83); SPARROW, Fox (1); SPARROW, White-throated (9); SPARROW, Vesper (2); SPARROW, Savannah (1); SPARROW, Song (2); SPARROW, Swamp (1); CARDINAL, Northern (32); MEADOWLARK, Eastern (21); GRACKLE, Common (2); FINCH, Purple (2); GOLDFINCH, American (94); SPECIES, total (61); INDIVIDUALS, total (2348); Number of observers (15); Number of parties (6); Party-hours on foot (17.45); Party-miles on foot (12.7); Party-hours by car (24.55); Party-miles by car (105.4); Total Party hours (42); Total Party miles (118.1).

Participants: Craig Geoffroy, Sherry Gibson, John Haynes, Sheila Hebert, Gary Kelley, Randy Lewis, Steve Mayes, Sherrie Roden, Christine Sliva, Charles and Wanda Smith, Harlan Stewart, Jeremy Stringfield, Jana and John Whittle.