



Surfbird seen by Emeryville team.

Calvin Lou

2016: JUST ANOTHER WONDERFUL OAKLAND CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

BY DAVE QUADY AND BOB LEWIS

After 2015's memorable 75th anniversary count a letdown seemed inevitable, and our expectations dropped further when a terrific rainstorm moved in three days prior to count day. But when owlers began "work" in Redwood Regional Park at 2:30 a.m. on Sunday, December 18, the stars were brilliantly clear. Later on, the day warmed to 54 degrees under bright sunshine, no rain fell, and the 302 participants in Oakland's 76th Christmas Bird Count enjoyed good birds and another wonderful Oakland Christmas Bird Count

Altogether we found 116,055 birds, some 20,000 above our recent average, and 179 species, near our recent average. Total numbers were buoyed by a record high count (since 1974) of 24,000+ Greater Scaup, with more than 14,000 of them found by our South Boat. Numbers of scaup have fluctuated greatly over the years—in the 1970s, three consecutive counts recorded 14,000+, 91,000+, and 35,000+ scaup, respectively, so the fact that this year's total

of 26,084 scaup is more than twice last year's total does not represent a trend. The actual, highly discouraging trend is this: On average, numbers of scaup, and numbers of all duck species in total, have declined 50 percent from the 1970s to recent years.

Besides Greater Scaup, we also had record-high counts of Green-winged Teal, Least Sandpiper, Forster's Tern, Hairy Woodpecker, Peregrine Falcon, American Crow, and Pygmy Nuthatch.

Among the notable species recorded on count day were a Snow Goose, a Brant, two Red-necked Grebes, and two Common Gallinules. A lone Cattle Egret at the Oakland Airport was likely the same bird present there last season, when it broke an eleven-year-long drought since the last Cattle Egret. It was gratifying to again find Snowy Plovers—25 of them—present in Alameda, and 29 Surfbirds present along the Bay shoreline.

Swallows, especially Tree Swallows, are being seen in increasing numbers on Bay

Area Christmas bird counts, almost certainly a sign of warmer winters. We found Tree Swallows in two areas this season; our two House Wrens and two Blue-gray Gnatcatchers may also owe their presence to warmer winters. Wilson's Warbler, with three found on Bay Farm Island—our first since 2004—was selected as the count's Best Bird. Disappointingly, a male Black-headed Grosbeak spending its third winter

2016 OAKLAND COUNT RECEIVES PROMINENT LOCAL NEWS COVERAGE

San Francisco Chronicle
[Eagle-Eyed Teams Tally Birds for Annual 1-Day Audubon Count](#)

East Bay Times
[Early Birds Get the Numbers on Oakland Avian Life](#)

San Jose Mercury News
[Yuletide Bird Count](#)



(left; middle) Ilana DeBare; (right) Alan Krakauer

Counting in Redwood Park; some of the 145 attendees at the count dinner; House Wren at Point Isabel.

in Claremont Canyon was not seen on count day. Present the day before and two days after count day, it joined a female Western Tanager on our list of notable count week birds.

Varied Thrush and Pine Siskin are among the species that seem to be present in the Bay Area in unusually low numbers this winter. We found fewer Varied Thrushes than in any other one of the last dozen years, and only two Pine Siskins, one each found by two of our 33 feeder watchers. We had record low (since 1974) counts of Mourning Dove, House Sparrow, Red-winged Blackbird and Brewer's Blackbird. And for the first time in the last ten years we missed Virginia Rail and Heermann's Gull entirely.

Different than these species, whose numbers fluctuate from year to year, are the formerly more common species that we now record only in low and generally declining numbers. Tricolored Blackbird numbers in California have decreased precipitately, and we have missed it in our last three counts. Is it gone for good, we wonder. The continuing presence of White-winged Scoter, Loggerhead Shrike, and Rock Wren, each down to a small handful of birds in recent years, also appears to be in serious question. Loss of habitat no doubt plays a major role in these declines.

On the brighter side, the Oakland count found more Steller's Jays and more Chestnut-backed Chickadees than any other count in the United States in 2015, plus more Ridgway's Rails (12) and more California Towhees (797) than any other count in the world. This season we found 17 rails and 784 towhees ... come November,

we'll know whether either figure was high enough to retain bragging rights, but for now our crown as California Towhee Capital of the World remains in place.

There's one other measure that merits distinction. Two seasons ago the Oakland count had more observers (257) in the field than any other Christmas count in the world, and we retained that title in 2015, with 277 field observers. This season we had 269 field observers, including more than 70 folks who were new to the count. We hope they enjoyed their experience enough to bring them back for Oakland's 77th Christmas Bird Count, on December 17, 2017.

We hope you'll join us, too.

The success of Oakland's CBC depends heavily upon its 29 area leaders, and on the experience they bring to their task. There is some area leader turnover almost every year, but this season marks several significant



Townsend's Warbler; counting in Emeryville.

transitions. Bob Hirt has led the Emeryville area for 36 years (and other areas for five more years) so it's hard to begrudge his decision to call it a day. Long-term leaders attract long-term companions: Lew Cooper worked the Emeryville area with Bob for 30 years, and Calvin Lou has worked it for 27 years and counting. Alan Hopkins, the eponym of a Redwood Regional Park count area, earned that honorific for leading the same area for about as long as Bob led Emeryville.

Finally, George Peyton, the leader in the North Boat area for 44 years (less one year weathered out) along with Pete White, expects to take his last cruise next season. The late Ed Jepsen provided his boat in that area for 36 years, Noel Diefendorf did the same for five years, and John Egland stepped in with his boat this season. Jim Labbe, who has volunteered his boat and his time in the South Boat area for nine years, kindly encouraged John to provide his boat in the North Boat area. We thank Bob, Lew, Alan, George, and Noel for their many years of service as we welcome John to the count. And we hope Calvin, Pete, John, and Jim will continue to take part with us for many years to come.

Many thanks also to the office and dinner volunteers who helped make the day such a success!

Dave Quady and Bob Lewis have led the Claremont area of the Oakland CBC since the 1970s. They agreed to co-compile the count a decade or so ago, but only if the other did at least half the work. Happily, they've both done so, including at their favorite part of the day: the CBC Count Dinner.

(above) Alan Krakauer; (below) Ilana DeBare