

Oakland's Christmas Bird Count: The Familiar, the Stakeouts, and the Unexpected

Each Christmas Bird Count can be thought of as a single chapter in a long-running nonfiction serial, one that describes a search for the familiar, the stakeouts, and the unexpected. Over time, the serial chronicles and provides insights into an area's changing avian population.

Oakland's 2012 chapter began as owls went afield early on Sunday, December 16, and didn't end until the last of the count's 201 field observers and 15 yard-watchers laid down their binoculars and made ready to enjoy the compilation dinner. In between, birders detected 178 species and counted just over 100,000 individual birds, results comparable to Oakland's counts during the preceding ten years.

Finding the familiar underpins everything. For the first time in memory, observers detected all 162 species that had been recorded in at least eight of the last ten years. Only single examples of Heermann's Gull, Loggerhead Shrike, and Tricolored Blackbird were found and only two White-winged Scoters. No matter—one bird is much better than zero. And we can put off for another year the time that these species might join Cattle Egret, Ruddy Turnstone, and Lark Sparrow as having apparently winked out in our count circle.

Stakeouts—unusual species found prior to the count—provoke special efforts, for nobody wants to miss one on count day. This year provided a rich stakeout crop: a Ross's Goose at Arrowhead Marsh; a male Tufted Duck on Lake Merritt (backstory at www.goldengateaudubon.org/blog-posts/welcome-back-to-our-tufted-duck); a Long-tailed Duck near the USS *Hornet*; a Tropical Kingbird at Garretson Point; two Black-throated Gray Warblers, one back for at least its third winter in Emeryville and another near Lake Merritt; a Hermit Warbler in Montclair; a Clay-colored Sparrow in Berkeley; and Red Crossbills along Nimitz Way. Birders refound the Ross's Goose, the Tufted Duck, and the Clay-colored Sparrow, but the Tropical Kingbird remained a "count week" bird (found within the three days either side of count day), and the others were missed entirely.

Unexpected, and unusual, species found on count day included a Snow Goose (Berkeley waterfront), a second Ross's Goose (Golden Gate Fields), two Short-eared Owls (Bay Bridge toll plaza and Arrowhead Marsh), six Tree Swallows (Lafayette Reservoir), a Black-and-white Warbler (El Cerrito), four Hermit Warblers (a Berkeley residence, along Skyline Boulevard, and



This Tropical Kingbird, the first ever found for the count, was at Garretson Point on December 13. It was photographed the next day, but was missed on count day. Photo by Jerry Ting/www.flickr.com/photos/jerryting

two spots in Tilden Regional Park, but not the stakeout bird), and a Swamp Sparrow (Lafayette Reservoir).

High counts and low counts among familiar or soon-to-become-familiar species can provide insights into changes in bird populations or simply a sense of satisfaction. The latter category includes trying to ensure that Oakland retains its title as "California Towhee Capital of the World." Our total of 880 birds in 2011 was good enough to do so, but how about 2012's 689 birds—will they be enough? We won't know until later this year, after the National Audubon Society has analyzed all of the season's CBCs.

Populations of several species have been on the rise in the count circle. Red-shouldered Hawk, American Crow, Common Raven, and Pygmy Nuthatch come to mind, along with the Johnny-come-lately Wild Turkey, which was not detected until 2002. All these species, except Common Raven, hit all-time highs in 2012. Whether their population increases are due to range



The Oakland CBC's second-ever Clay-colored Sparrow appeared in late November. It was photographed on count day and earned "best bird" honors. Photo by Doug Greenberg/www.flickr.com/photos/dagberg

expansions or to a more widespread increase in numbers remains to be determined.

In terms of range expansion, though, Eurasian Collared-Dove is in a category by itself. This non-native species reached California in 2002, and it spread throughout the state faster than any other non-native, such as European Starling or House Sparrow. Twelve collared-doves appeared in the Oakland count circle last year, and this year there were eighteen, in four areas. It will be interesting to see how rapidly the species' population grows, and whether the numbers of Mourning Doves decline as a result of competition.

This year the Oakland CBC received extensive media coverage, facilitated by GGAS Communications Director Ilana DeBare and made possible by the cooperation of many area leaders and count participants. Coverage kicked off with an early Saturday morning interview on KGO radio and continued with count day coverage by the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Contra Costa Times/Bay Area News Group*, the Center for Investigative Reporting, and Bay Cities News Service, with online news sites such as *Berkeleyside* and *Rockridge Patch* also reporting.

The compilation dinner gave more than a hundred diners a welcome opportunity to relive an enjoyable day in the field. We thank Jacqueline Craig and Mel McKey for planning and coordinating the dinner, and Marjorie Blackwell, Elinor Blake, Sophia Close, Maureen Lahiff, Janet Mandelstam, Fari Pour Ansari, Brian, Elyse and Jovita Villacencio, and Mark Welther for ensuring that everything came together properly that evening.

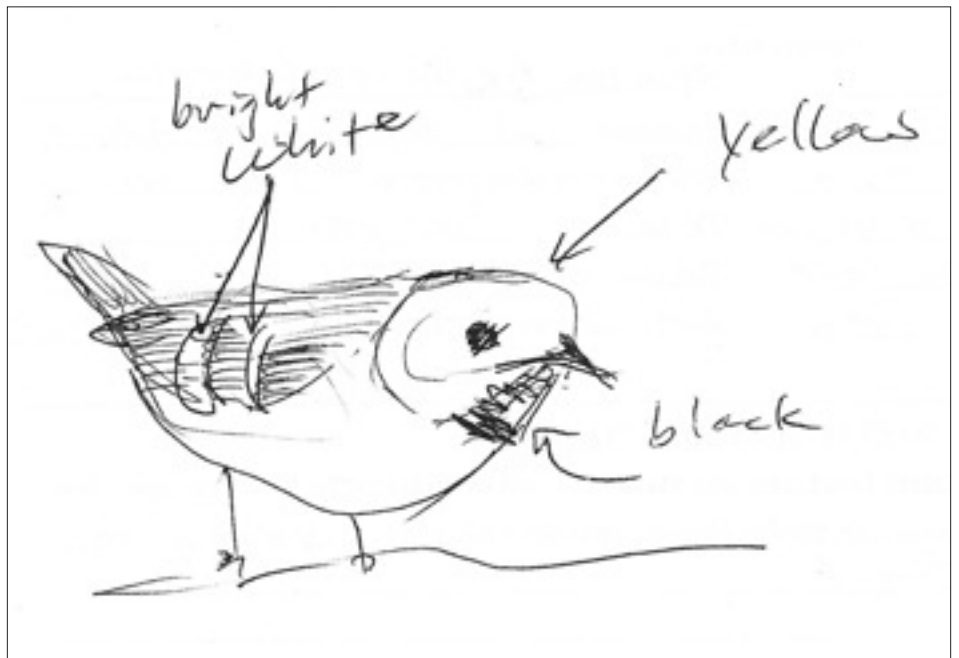
Our tasks as compilers again benefited from support by Golden Gate Audubon staff, the generosity of the skippers of our two boats, and especially from the efforts of our twenty-nine indefatigable area leaders. We thank them and the rest of the 216 CBC participants, plus anyone we inadvertently overlooked, for another successful count.

The next chapter of Oakland's CBC serial will play out on Sunday, December 15, 2013. We hope for fair weather, good birds, and your participation. See you then!

—Dave Quady and Bob Lewis, compilers



This Black-and-white Warbler along El Cerrito Creek was the first found on the Oakland count since 2005. Photo by Alan Krakauer/www.alankrakauer.org



In conjunction with written documentation, a simple sketch can adequately document a rarity such as this Hermit Warbler along Skyline Boulevard. Sketch by Anthony Fisher