

2015 San Francisco Christmas Bird Count

Co-sponsored by Golden Gate Audubon Society and the Presidio Trust
December 29, 2015

RESULTS

- 128 observers were in the field and watching in their yards.
- 184 species and 73,095 individual birds were counted.

Compared to past years, 2015 provided a near record number of 184 species. Our total bird count was in the high range for this count. The calm, sunny weather on count day enabled us to get a great count of birds on land, on the bay and along the ocean coast.

El Nino, climate change, food shortages, or just part of a natural cycle of which we aren't aware?

For the second consecutive year a Brown Booby was sighted off Point Lobos. It is a seabird that is normally found in the Gulf of California and in the ocean off Baja California. This and the other boobys that occur in the tropic Pacific are making more frequent appearances along the northern California coast. If the pattern increases it could well mean we are seeing an impact of changes in ocean temperature or currents. But add to that our record numbers of Brown Pelicans (1390) and Heermann's Gulls (918) and we have the basis for interesting speculation. Both species should have all but abandoned their summer and fall residences along our coast and migrated to the coast of Western Mexico for their nesting season. With record numbers of both species it is apparent there is something going on. The one thing we do know is that these birds are not nesting this season, though most of them appear to be adults. With information from the San Francisco Christmas Bird Count and others along the California coast ornithologists might be able to develop theories of why this phenoma is occurring.

Over-wintering neotropical birds and others that usually winter to the south were a big part of the picture for the 2015 count. The birds that usually range from southern California to South America included the following: Tropical Kingbird (1), Violet-green Swallow (1), Barn Swallow (2), Nashville Warbler (8), Yellow Warbler (1), Palm Warbler (1), Black-and-White Warbler (1), Western Tanager (2), Baltimore Oriole (1), and Bullock's Oriole (1).

Other unusual birds included Greater White-fronted Goose (1), Harlequin Duck (2), Black-vented Shearwater (3), Ancient Murrelet (2), Cassin's Auklet (1), Rhinoceros Auklet (1), Burrowing Owl (1), Acorn Woodpecker (48), Tree Swallow (26), Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (1), and Lark Sparrow (1). Acorn Woodpeckers seem to have found a comfortable winter home in San Francisco. Since the City has very few oaks, this species has relatively limited feeding opportunities. But with the ongoing drought the acorn crop is limited in the oak woodlands of the Bay Area, so these resourceful birds found a niche in many of our parks.

BIRD HIGHLIGHTS

- Birds of the coastal scrub continue to be of concern.. We missed California Quail in San Francisco and only had 22 in San Mateo County. They were reported from San Bruno Mt. and the north end of the Peninsula Watershed. It seems only a matter of time before San Francisco's "official bird" is extirpated. Their status on the Peninsula north of Hwy 380 seems only slightly less precarious. Spotted Towhee, another bird that occurs almost exclusively in coastal scrub on the North Peninsula continues to decline.
- (not updated) Bewick's Wren, and Wrentit both appear to be trending within a range that may be sustainable in the short terms, but are both threatened with extirpation in coming years. The problem here is loss of habitat to ongoing urbanization, impacts of cats and dogs, and natural predation. Unknown are the reasons for the loss of species restricted to rocky shorelines. Ruddy Turnstone seems to be extirpated from the coast. Surfbird and Black Turnstone are species were both in lower numbers than in recent years. A single Wandering Tattler was found on count day.
- (not updated) 5-year averages for diving ducks continue to confirm these birds are in significant trouble. The most obvious was White-winged Scoter. Between 1983 and 1987, the first 5 years for the San Francisco Count, we averaged 206 birds. Our average for the past 5-year period is only 64 birds. Surf Scoters are down in the same period from an average of 5422 to 1298, to 1061.2 during the past 5 years. In 2012 we only counted 457 of them, an alarming drop in numbers. Since San Francisco Bay and the surrounding ocean waters are the central part of the Surf Scoter's winter range, this drop in numbers is alarming.
- Western Screech Owl, Loggerhead Shrike and Horned Lark are all species that have not been reported in recent years, so we believe they are now extirpated from the northern peninsula during winter. American Bittern remains a species we consider locally extirpated even though one was found near Candlestick in 2014 and we had one at Elk Glen Lake in Golden Gate Park last year. Ruddy Turnstone is in about the same shape as American Bittern. In 2015 we found only 1 and that was a surprise. California Clapper Rail, recently renamed Ridgeway's Rail, and Ruddy Turnstone seem to be the most likely species to follow. Ridgeway's Rail habitat is limited to a very small marsh at Herons' Head Park where the lone bird that was present for the past few years seems to be gone. As the Port of San Francisco and the Recreation and Park Department continue to restore bits and pieces of salt marsh along our bay shoreline there is hope this endangered rail will gain a foothold in San Francisco.
- The count for America Crows dropped from 2013's record high of 914, to 677 in 2014 and to bounced back up to 732 in 2015. We counted 828 Common Ravens

on count day, up from the 776 we saw in 2014. The meteoric increase in numbers of both species is very likely due to both species ability to adapt to an urban environment. We are uncertain about the actual numbers for each species since wind may have kept some birds in roosts during much of the day.

- (not updated) The unexplained drop in the numbers of Mourning Doves and Brewer's Blackbirds since the start of the San Francisco Count in 1983 turned around a little this year. Mourning Dove numbers increased to 351 birds. Between 1983 and 1987 we averaged 687.8 birds, so even the bounce in 2013 doesn't reduce our concern for this species. Troubling too is Brewer's Blackbird with a total of 618 birds in 2012 and 1215 in 2013. During the first 5-year period of the count we had an average of 2335.4 birds so the drop in numbers remains pretty consistent and significant. One possible reason for the decline was noted in San Diego where a scientist noticed Brewer's Blackbirds with feet that were clutched and withered. It is thought they have an undiagnosed virus that causes them to develop extensive sores on their feet, crippling them, preventing them from feeding and thus killing them. Birds in that condition have been noted locally. It is not known how extensive that condition is.

JUST WHERE DO WE COUNT BIRDS?

The 15-mile diameter San Francisco count circle is centered about a mile east of Lake Merced. It extends from the bay about a mile east of Candlestick Point to about 5 miles offshore of Fort Funston, and from the north anchorage of the Golden Gate Bridge to San Bruno. Birding teams will endeavor to census avian populations in 16 areas on land (**and 1 boat which will cover the bay**).

LOCALLY, data from previous Christmas Bird Counts has provided a basis for identifying significant wetlands, upland shorebird habitats and threats posed by feral cats and unleashed dogs in many of our parks. It has been used in testimony before various San Francisco Commissions and has formed some of the basis for comments made by the Golden Gate Audubon Society regarding various master plans and environmental impact reports. The information we gather will continue to give us a better perspective on avian diversity and distribution in the heavily urbanized north peninsula. It will also enable our conservation committee to take effective action on issues that affect our environment.

Report compiled by Dan Murphy