

2017: A LANDMARK OAKLAND CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

Shortly after six folks rolled up to Redwood Regional Park at 2:30 am on Sunday, December 17, to meet one owl who had arrived even earlier, three observations were made: Strong westerly winds that had buffeted the Bay Area for several days had abated, a carpet of stars was lighting up the clear sky and a spontaneously singing Northern Saw-whet Owl had become the first bird of the day. Oakland's 77th annual Christmas Bird Count was off and running.

As the day unfolded, 284 field observers and 37 feeder watchers took part in the count. With gorgeous weather, three species found that had never before been recorded on the Oakland count and a record-high number of field observers, this count was truly a landmark event. Over the last 20 years, only 13 new species had been found on count day.

Off the end of the Berkeley Pier the North Boat photographed a Fork-tailed Storm-Petrel, which was chosen at the compilation dinner as the best bird of the count. For good measure the boat also reported a jaeger (thought to be a Pomarine) and a Common Murre, a species not recorded since 2006. Our only past records of jaegers are of a Pomarine in 1965 and a jaeger not identified to species in 1977. Onshore and nearby, Berkeley's César Chávez Park boasted a Lapland Longspur, also new to the count.

Rhinoceros Auklet was the third species new to the count; two birds were seen off Alameda's Ballena Bay, where a single bird had been reported two days earlier.



Lapland Longspur by Rick Lewis



Fork-tailed Storm Petrel by Mark Rauzon

Perhaps the strong westerly winds in the preceding days and herring runs in various parts of the bay contributed to the near-shore presence of the jaeger, storm-petrel, murre and auklet.

Other unusual count-day species included a Lesser Yellowlegs, four Ross's Geese and four Snow Geese at Martin Luther King Jr. Regional Shoreline, five other Snow Geese scattered among three different locations, single Common Gallinules at two separate locations, 24 Snowy Plovers in and near protected areas of Alameda's Crown Memorial State Beach and 41 Surfbirds at a traditional roost in Emeryville.

Unusual land bird species included 11 Tree Swallows spread among three different areas, a Barn Swallow at San Leandro Bay, a House Wren at the Tilden Park Golf Course, and a Nashville Warbler and Black-throated Gray Warbler on Bay Farm Island. A Long-tailed Duck, a Ferruginous Hawk and a Swamp Sparrow were found during count week – the period three days on either side of count day.

Altogether we recorded 112,914 birds on count day, some 15,000 above our recent average, thanks in large part to a record high count of Bufflehead. And we recorded 181 species, our most since 2013. That figure is two above our recent average and only two below our all-time high species count. Bonaparte's Gull and Heermann's Gull, normally found on count day, eluded us then but were recorded during count week.

After a count we are often asked, "What does it all mean ... what did you learn this year?" A single Christmas bird count yields only short-time-scale ans-

wers. For example, we had low counts (since 1974) of Cinnamon Teal, Northern Pintail, Lesser Scaup, Barrow's Goldeneye, American Goldfinch and Brewer's Blackbird. And compared to the same time period we had high counts of Bufflehead, Anna's Hummingbird, Brandt's Cormorant, Black Phoebe, Say's Phoebe, Hutton's Vireo and Orange-crowned Warbler. But what, if anything, is common within each of these two species groups and might explain this year's numbers? Drawing meaningful conclusions would require close study of bird counts over long periods of time and adjusting results to account for varying levels of birding effort.



Snow Geese (one wearing USGS band) in Oakland by Gail West. Originally banded when too young to fly in 2011 on North Slope of Alaska!

And even then it's tough. In recent years we've recorded dramatically fewer birds overall than on counts 30 years ago. Red Knot, Ruddy Turnstone, Loggerhead Shrike and Tricolored Blackbird— all species formerly dependable if only in small numbers – seem to be winking out in our area. Why? It seems likely that habitat loss, within our count circle and in other areas that the birds experience during their lifetimes, has contributed greatly to these declines. But deeper explanations remain elusive.

What we can do, though, is notice, and sometimes marvel at, the year-to-year variations. Numbers of both Greater and Lesser scaup vary greatly, and we're used to it. But last year our South Boat recorded more than 14,000 Greater Scaup. This year it recorded none. Wow!

Last year we recorded 800 Chestnut-backed Chickadees, more than any other US count, and we led the world in numbers of Greater Scaup, Great Horned Owls, Hermit Thrushes and California Towhees, with 797 found. This year we recorded many fewer Greater Scaup, a few more Great

Horned Owls, many more Hermit Thrushes and only 712 California Towhees. But for now we still retain the title we've held every year since 2008 as the *California Towhee Capital of the World*. We'll have to wait until October to learn whether we'll continue as titleholder for the 10th consecutive year.

In 2016 the Oakland count attracted 269 field observers, more than any other Christmas bird count. With that figure, the Oakland count led the world in numbers of field observers for the third straight year, which interested the National Audubon Society enough to engage a reporter and a photographer to document our 2017 count.

Links in the sidebar will lead you to the National Audubon Society's story, to Berkeleyside's coverage of the count, to Ilana DeBare's quick post-count summary and to Maureen Lahiff's very personal and reflective description of what the count means to her. We think you'll enjoy them all.

We thank all who participated in this year's count as well as those who made the compilation dinner so enjoyable, and hope they will all return on December 16 for Oakland's 78th count. We hope you'll join us, too.

Dave Quady and Bob Lewis

Bob and Dave have led the Claremont area of the Oakland CBC since the '70s. They agreed to co-compile the count 15 years ago, but only if the other did at least half the work. Happily, it's worked out that way, including at their favorite part of the day: the CBC Count Dinner.

2017 Oakland CBC in the news!

National Audubon Society:

[Oakland's CBC has another banner turnout](#)

East Bay Times:

[Annual CBC draws more than 300 volunteers](#)

Berkeleyside:

[Local CBC turns up rarities](#)

Golden Gate Birder:

[Best holiday gift: The CBC](#)

[Big, sunny Christmas Bird Count in Oakland](#)