



Tara MacIntire

This Blue-gray Gnatcatcher in Tilden Park might be asking, "Where are all the other birds?"

Misses Marked 2018's Oakland Christmas Bird Count

BY DAVE QUADY AND BOB LEWIS

During the week preceding count day, forecasts of rain and high winds created a sense of foreboding that continued into the early hours of Sunday, December 16, as early-rising birders set out to seek owls. Along Telegraph Avenue few vehicles broke the silence and ambient light bouncing off low clouds obviated the need for flashlights. Playing a bit of tape elicited a single call from a distant Barn Owl. Moments later Berkeley's City Bird silently flew in and circled overhead, so at 3:30 am Oakland's 78th annual Christmas Bird Count got underway.

Thick cloud cover made dawn a non-event, but it nonetheless marked the usual ramp-up of birding activity as teams met up in the field and began

to bird their assigned areas. Although winds gusted to 18 mph, the weather was mild during the morning: temperatures in the 50 – 60 degree range, moderate winds and no rain. Our two boats were able to get onto San Francisco Bay, our field observers provided good coverage over the complete count circle and 34 yard watchers contributed mightily-- producing, for example, more than half of our record high 22 White-throated Sparrows. Rainfall began about 2:15 pm, but by that time many teams had done their job, and by 3:00 pm most folks had called it quits

Our "good birds" of the day were a varied lot. They included single Long-tailed Ducks from two different areas, a juvenile Ferruginous Hawk detected in two adjacent areas (and chosen as the count's Best Bird), 18 Snowy Plovers, 35 Surfbirds, a House Wren, a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, two Black-throated Gray Warblers (one reported by a yard watcher) and a Western Tanager. Besides White-throated Sparrow, record-high numbers

(since 1974) were recorded for Cackling Goose, Green-winged Teal, Semipalmated Plover, Great Blue Heron, White-tailed Kite, American Crow (2,486 birds) and Common Raven (453 birds).

In recent years we've experienced a record-high count for one or the other of these two corvids several times, so let's examine their population trend. From 1974 through 1990 we averaged fewer than 200 total crows and ravens a year ... over the following 10 years we averaged more than 700 total crows and ravens annually, and since 2010 the annual average has been nearly 1,800 birds. That has been quite a population increase, and there's no sign that it has topped out.

MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE OAKLAND CBC

On December 21 KQED Science provided a glimpse into the count. Listen at <https://www.kqed.org/science/1935746/your-guide-to-science-and-nature-events-this-holiday-season>



Eleanor Bricecetti



This adult male Summer Tanager (photo on 12/13) evaded detection on count day.



Christmas Bird Counters

This year's story, though, is not about high counts, either of species or of birds. It is instead about misses – of birds and of species. We recorded lower numbers of birds in most species groups (gulls being the main exception): 35% fewer ducks than the preceding 10-year average, 30% fewer shorebirds and waders, 25% fewer finches and sparrows, and 35% fewer warblers. Our total of 85,269 birds was nearly 12,000 below our 10-year average.

These misses were not from lack of effort. Our 261 field observers spent very nearly the same number of party-hours in the field than in the past 10 years (down only 3%). So the bird-watchers were there, but the birds were not.

This year we recorded no white geese – Snow or Ross's, no Bonaparte's Gulls and no Pine Siskins. Most years we record a few of each, and their absence might be attributable to seasonal variation or the vagaries of winter migration. We also recorded no Red-heads, White-winged Scoters, Ruddy Turnstones, Red Knots, Loggerhead Shrikes or Tricolored Blackbirds. These species are in a different category: Species present in small numbers during most recent years, but declining range-wide and at risk of – or in the process of – winking out in our area. Habitat loss almost certainly played a big part in these declines.

Perhaps the most galling misses are count week birds: species that were recorded within a three-day span on either side of count day, but missed on count day. This year we had five of them. Two – Common Gallinule and Rock Wren – have each been found in only one or two locations within the count circle in recent years, and they can be elusive, as they were this year. Luck happens.

A juvenile Yellow-bellied Sapsucker found and photographed in Moraga on December 11 was also seen on the next two days, but not subsequently. A lovely adult male Summer Tanager found in Claremont Canyon on October 30 was missed for more than a month, then seen again in early December, including on December 13. It continued at least through January 12, but evaded us on count day. Finally, a male Black-headed Grosbeak, hanging out for its fourth winter at feeders in Claremont Canyon, was seen on December 15, but not on count day.

In 2017 the Oakland Christmas Bird Count recorded more Band-tailed Pigeons, Spotted Sandpipers, Western Gulls, Great Horned Owls, Hutton's Vireos, Ruby-crowned Kinglets and California Towhees (with 712) than any other count. 2018's count recorded many fewer of each of these species; we'll have to wait until the fall to learn how well we did compared with other counts.

Most prominently among these species, we'll await word whether 2018's 526 California Towhees were enough to retain the title we've held every year since 2008: *The California Towhee Capital of the World*.

While it's very gratifying to surpass other counts in the numbers of various bird species they record, it's far more important that our participants enjoy their experience, and come back for the next year's count. We are very proud that for four straight years – 2014 through 2017 – Oakland had more field observers than any other count in the world. We hope that 2018's 261 field observers extended our streak one more year.

We thank all who participated in this year's count – especially our boat captains and area leaders, as well as the folks who made the compilation dinner so enjoyable. And we hope they will all return on December 15 for Oakland's 79th count. We hope you'll join us, too.



Dave and Bob toast another successful Oakland CBC