

Oakland CBC Sets Record Species Count

Unlike the year before, the weather was glorious when midnight Saturday gave way to Sunday, December 18, 2011, and Oakland's 71st Christmas Bird Count began. Before daylight, a hardy handful of enthusiastic owlers took advantage of the weather and detected more owls than on any count since 2001. The owlers' numbers swelled after dawn to 205 field observers, who blanketed Oakland's 15-mile-diameter count circle on land and on water, while another 15 folks counted birds around their feeders and yards.

By sunset, participants had found 183 species, more than on any previous Oakland count. One reason: Of our 163 "regular" species—those recorded at least eight of the last ten years—we missed only three: Red Knot, Short-billed Dowitcher, and Bonaparte's Gull. Another reason: We found four species new to the count, one of which, a Clay-colored Sparrow, was chosen as the count's best bird. Another, a Red-necked Phalarope at Bay Farm Island, was only the second phalarope ever recorded on the count. The non-native Eurasian Collared-Dove, already well established throughout California, made a splashy debut in three coast-side areas. A European Goldfinch found on private land completed the quartet. This non-native bird understandably puzzled its discoverer until he turned to the "Exotic Finches" page in "big Sibley."

Other notable species included Hammond's Flycatcher (Dunsmuir House, Oakland), Ross's Goose (Bay Farm Island, Alameda), Red-necked Grebe (North Boat), Common Gallinule (Oakland International Airport), two Wandering Tattlers (South Boat and Berkeley waterfront), House Wren (Berkeley), Nashville Warbler (Bay Farm Island), Black-throated Gray Warbler (Emeryville, present for at least its third winter), and Western Tanager (Bay Farm Island). All had been recorded no more than three times in the last 10 years. One big miss: Tufted Duck, which is rare anywhere on the West Coast but has been present on Lake Merritt most winters since 1994. A tuft-less male was seen the day before, but missed on count day.

However, birders found only 87,391 individual birds, 7 percent fewer than our recent 10-year average. And only once in the first 60 Oakland CBCs were fewer birds counted. Why so few birds? Perhaps the main short-term culprit was the mild, dry fall across much of western North America. Several other CBCs noted that waterfowl and other migratory species have apparently been slow to push south. But we shouldn't lose sight of the larger, long-term trends: declining bird populations overall and diminishing local habitat inexorably reduce the numbers of birds to be found.

Yard watchers often make important contributions, sometimes finding species that field observers miss. That was the case again: like last year, a yard watcher in Albany noted an *Amazona* sp. parrot, probably a Red-crowned Parrot.

KQED-FM's *Quest* radio program enabled the public to participate vicariously in Oakland's count. Andrea Kissack and Nancy Warren spent the day with Kevin McKereghan's Pt. Isabel team and with yard watcher Phila Rogers, and produced a segment that aired twice on January 2. You can relive their experience at <http://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/kqed-s-quest-science-radio/id214663465>. Thanks to Phila and Kevin, and to others who contributed to this fine program.

Oakland's compilation dinners are always fun. Besides enjoying a fine meal,

diners have the satisfaction of sharing tales of their day in the field, the drama of hearing what others experienced, and the thrill of learning what unusual species were found within the count circle. This year's dinner also formally launched the newly published *Alameda County Breeding Bird Atlas*, and gave 120 diners an opportunity to join Golden Gate Audubon Executive Director Mark Welther in honoring the team that produced it.

Lisa Owens Viani, GGAS Development Director, ensured that the decorations, the food, and the atmosphere did justice to the occasion. She was ably assisted by Elinor Blake, Marjorie Blackwell, Jan Collins, Janet Mandelstam, Fari Pour Ansari, Jacqui Smalley, Helen Vandeman, and Linda Wraxall. Thanks to them all.

Our tasks as compilers benefited from Stephanie Strait's support in many areas, the generosity of the skippers of our two boats, and especially the efforts of our 29 indefatigable area leaders. We thank them, and the rest of the 220 CBC participants (plus anyone we inadvertently overlooked), for another successful count.

Oakland's 72nd CBC will take place on Sunday, December 16, 2012. We hope for fair weather, good birds, and your participation—no matter your age or your birding ability, we hope you'll join the count. See you then!

—Dave Quady and Bob Lewis, compilers



Patricia Barcchetti

A Hammond's Flycatcher at Dunsmuir House was only the second of its species ever found on an Oakland CBC.



Glen Tepke

One of two Wandering Tattlers seen on CBC day was observed from the South Boat on a breakwater in Alameda.