



Counting at Aquatic Park in Berkeley. Photo by Nancy Johnston.

OAKLAND'S CHRISTMAS COUNT TURNS 75

BY DAVE QUADY AND BOB LEWIS

Oakland's 75th Christmas Bird Count began a little after 2 a.m. on Sunday, December 20, 2015 when four owlers standing on Domingo Avenue in Berkeley heard a Great Horned Owl as they waited for their ride to chilly Redwood Regional Park to start the count's "official" owling. By 5:30 p.m., when the last of our record-high 277 field observers ended their day, they – together with 37 feeder watchers – had recorded 179 bird species and 96,287 individual birds, both figures near our ten-year averages. The temperature had climbed from a pre-dawn 31 degrees to 57 degrees, and the night's starry skies had given way to complete cloud cover and intermittent showers that dropped a couple tenths of an inch of rain.

It was quite a contrast to Oakland's first CBC – held on Christmas Eve in 1938, when three pioneering birders found 78 species and 5,022 birds during 9.5 daylight hours of birding on a day with no precipitation and temperatures that ranged from 49 to 62 degrees.

The findings provide quite a contrast, too. Our count recorded every species found in 1938 except one – Red-necked Grebe (two found then) – meaning that our total of 277 included 101 species the pioneers did not have. They recorded no Gadwalls, no teals, no Buffleheads, no mergansers, and no loons. These and most other misses are rich fodder for speculation about what roles were played by the pioneers' choice of birding locations, quality of their optics, ability to detect and identify species, and other factors.

Possible explanations spring to mind to explain certain 1938 misses: Rock Pigeon, American Crow, Common Raven, Chest-

nut-backed Chickadee, Pygmy Nuthatch, and European Starling. The chickadee and nuthatch apparently did not reach the East Bay until 1948 or later, and that may also be the case for the crow, raven, and starling. We know it is true for Wild Turkey and Eurasian Collared-Dove. On the other hand, Oakland's first report of Rock Pigeon in 1973 was of 543 birds, and we've recorded more than that every year since then, suggesting that zeros prior to 1973 simply indicate antipathy toward recognizing them.

Unrecognized at the time, 1938's modest count of 20 Brown Towhees set Oakland on a path to becoming the Brown Towhee

The local press covered Oakland's 75th CBC well:

San Francisco Chronicle: <http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/East-Bay-bird-lovers-flock-for-annual-avian-count-6711596.php>

San Jose Mercury News: <http://photos.mercurynews.com/2015/12/20/christmas-bird-count-at-lafayette-reservoir-brings-out-birdwatchers/>

For a write-up and photos of the count and dinner on the GGAS blog: <http://goldengateaudubon.org/blog-posts/our-75th-oakland-cbc-damp-but-successful>



Compiling results at the count dinner. Photo by Ilana DeBare.



Hutton's Vireo in Albany. Photo by Alan Krakauer.



Counting at Martin Luther King Jr. Regional Shoreline. Photo by Rick Lewis.

Capital of the World, a title it held until 1989, when the species was split. In most years since then – including last year – Oakland proudly claimed the title of California Towhee Capital of the World. This year we recorded 797 of these big brown jobs.... Will that be enough to retain our title?

Other comparisons with 1938 are more poignant. That year's party recorded 200 California Quail. Where, we wonder, did they bird, and what habitat did they traverse? They almost certainly birded Lake Merritt, near our count circle's center, but we can only guess where else. Our 315 participants recorded only 93 quail over an area much larger than covered in 1938, and the most recorded in any of our count areas was 29 birds. Perhaps this comparison is unsurprising, because the habitat in our count circle is much changed from that of 1938, and we know the populations of most bird species have declined, some drastically, over the years. But it is depressing nonetheless. Finally, as a measure of how birding in general and Christmas Count participation in particular has grown, our 277 field observers exceeded the number of people who participated in all Oakland CBCs combined from 1938 through 1955.

While no Red-necked Grebes were found on Count Day, our birders did uncover a nice selection of other moderately rare birds. A Long-tailed Duck along the airport's shoreline was our first since 2008 and a Cattle Egret there was our first since 2003, when the Lake Merritt area's long-lived bird was last seen. Snowy Plovers (in two areas), Surfbirds, a Glaucous Gull, and

Blue-gray Gnatcatchers (in two areas) were all nice to see, and a Long-eared Owl and a House Wren were both nice to hear. We welcomed a male Black-headed Grosbeak's return for a second winter at a Claremont Canyon feeder, and celebrated the presence of Red Crossbills in two areas with our Best Bird prize.

Oakland's diamond anniversary Christmas Bird Count owes its success to the 29 area leaders – many of them veterans of at least 25 CBCs– who ensured good birding coverage during the day, and produced timely documentation afterward. Skippers Noel Diefendorf and Jim Labbe again donated their time and their boats so we could bird our count circle's San Francisco Bay waters. We are also indebted to the Golden Gate Audubon Society staff and the many volunteers led by Jan Sutchter who ensured that the 150

folks at the count dinner enjoyed a tasty, hearty meal in a festive atmosphere.

Please join us on Sunday, December 18, 2016 to participate in Oakland's 76th Christmas Bird Count.

Dave Quady and Bob Lewis have led the Claremont area of the Oakland CBC since the '70s. They agreed to co-compile the count a decade or so ago, but only if the other did at least half the work. Happily, they've both done so, including at their favorite part of the day: the CBC Count Dinner.

This report is dedicated to the memory of GGAS board member **Allen Hirsch**, whose wonderful bird photography inspired so many people to learn about and protect Bay Area wildlife.



Spotted Sandpiper at MLK Jr. Regional Shoreline. Photo by Rick Lewis.