



Patricia Bacchetti

Shorebirds on a breakwater, viewed from a count boat.

2019 OAKLAND CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT: 186 SPECIES AND EVEN MORE PARTICIPANTS

BY DAVE QUADY AND BOB LEWIS

Three nights after the Full Cold Moon, cloud-free skies were bright, winds were calm, and the air was crisp as birders took to the field before dawn on Sunday, December 15, 2019 to discover which owl species would become the first bird of Oakland's 79th annual Christmas Bird Count. By the time the count's 254 field observers and 34 yard watchers put their binoculars down in the evening they had detected a record-high 186 species, and more than 120 folks had gathered to share stories and celebrate at the compilation dinner.

They had much to celebrate. The day had continued pleasant and dry, the temperature reached 55 degrees, and there were lots of birds to look at. Altogether we recorded 105,594 individual birds, some ten percent more than our recent average, and sprinkled among them were a number of notable species.

Among those 186 species found on count day, three were new to the count. A Tufted Puffin seen in flight over the bay between Treasure Island and Alameda zipped away before it could be photographed. But it

was well described, and at the compilation dinner was selected as the count's Best Bird. Tropical Kingbird, a species previously represented only as a count-week bird (recorded within three days on either side of count day) in 2012, was the subject of a little mid-day drama. While it perched for study and admiration atop a television antenna in Alameda's Bay Farm Island district, an oriole flew in as if to challenge its possession of this prominent perch. Although the oriole was tentatively identified on the spot, it wasn't correctly identified as a Hooded Oriole—the third species new to the count—until four days later, when good photographs were obtained.

Other unusual count-day species include a single Brant on the bay, southwest of Pt. Isabel, five Black Scoters (a high count since 1974) in two small groups offshore Alameda, a Long-tailed Duck south of Ballena Bay, 22 Snowy Plovers sheltering on Shoreline Beach in Alameda, 34 Surf-birds (a high count) at a traditional roost in Emeryville, and a Common Gallinule at Lafayette Reservoir.

Unusual land birds not already mentioned include seven Blue-gray Gnatcatchers spread among four different count areas, a Ferruginous Hawk over Upper San Leandro Reservoir, 28 Tree Swallows over Lafayette Reservoir and a single Tree Swallow in Claremont Canyon, a Barn Swallow at Bay Farm Island, a Western Tanager in the Dunsmuir area, two Black-throated Gray Warblers in Berkeley, and a Black-headed Grosbeak attending a feeder for the sixth winter in Claremont Canyon. A Yellow-bellied Sapsucker photographed in Montclair was only the fourth count-day bird of that

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(left, right) Ilana DeBare; (middle) Denise Wright

Claremont Canyon count team; Blue-gray Gnatcatcher; Counting at MLK Jr. Regional Shoreline.

species, while a Red-naped Sapsucker photographed at Saint Mary's College joined two 2007 birds as the only Red-napes ever found on the count.

American Crow numbers reached an all-time high of 2,543 birds, topping last year's all-time high and continuing the species' upward population trend. Prior to 2001 the crow had only once topped 150 birds. Other species that set high counts (since 1974) were Blue-winged Teal (16), Bufflehead (8,588), Clark's Grebe (462), Anna's Hummingbird (1,016), Bald Eagle (6), Red-shouldered Hawk (77), Hairy Woodpecker (65), Black Phoebe (407), Say's Phoebe (61), Marsh Wren (30), and Hermit Warbler (3).

Loggerhead Shrike and Tricolored Blackbird—two species known to be in serious and widespread decline—were again missed on count day, for the third and fifth years, respectively. After an absence of three years, two Ruddy Turnstones were found this year; cold comfort from a declining species that has exceeded ten birds only twice in the last 25 years. Brown-headed Cowbird was a decidedly unexpected miss on count day, although its numbers have not exceeded 15 birds during the preceding four years. Several cowbirds were found near the shoreline in Albany immediately following count day.

Besides Brown-headed Cowbird, four other species spurned the opportunity to appear on count day but showed up during count week. A pair of Black Skimmers, a species never before recorded on the count, skimmed the coastline near the Bay Farm Island Bridge the day before the count. The other species were a trio of Cassin's Finches

that visited a feeder in the Oakland hills two days before the count, a single Red Knot on the Emeryville shoreline two days before the count, and a Yellow Warbler at Godfrey Park in Alameda two days after the count.

In most years since the Brown Towhee was split in 1989, the Oakland count has detected more of its iconic daughter species, the California Towhee, than any other count. But in 2018 we found only 526 towhees, our lowest number since 2002, and feared that our streak would be broken. Happily, it was not; we again surpassed every other count. And having found 669 towhees in 2019 it seems likely that Oakland will remain the *California Towhee Capital of the World*, as we have in every year since 2008.

The birds are an essential part of a Christmas Bird Count, but so are the people who participate in the count by detecting, identifying, and documenting them. Unlike some

Christmas counts, Oakland has long encouraged all birders to take part, no matter their level of experience and skill. As compilers, we try hard to distribute the pool of volunteer birders equitably over the count circle, and we depend on our 29 area leaders to ensure that all their folks contribute during the day and have a good time doing so.

In 2014 we were surprised to learn that Oakland had more field observers—257—than any other Christmas count in the world. And we were proud to lead again in 2015, 2016 and 2017. In 2018 we attracted 261 field observers. No other count in the U.S. had more, but the Victoria, British Columbia count did, with 285 people in the field. We'll have to wait until later this year to learn where in the rankings Oakland's 254 field observers placed us among the more than 2,000 Christmas Bird Counts conducted during the 2019-2020 season.

We thank everyone who participated in this year's count—especially our boat captains and area leaders, and those who made the compilation dinner so enjoyable. We hope they will all return on December 20, 2020 for Oakland's 80th count.



Red-naped Sapsucker; Hooded Oriole.

(above) Becky Flanagan; (below) Mark Raouf

Bob and Dave have co-compiled the Oakland Christmas Bird Count since 2003. They agreed to partner up on one condition: that the other did at least half the work, including at their favorite part of the day, the compilation inner. After seventeen years their workload has finally evened out overall, and it's a good time to retire. Bob and Dave hand their bins to Dawn Lemoine and Viviana Wolinsky, and wish them great success as they compile the next Oakland CBC.