



WASHTENAW AUDUBON SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER

January/February 2017

Results from the 70th Ann Arbor Christmas Bird Count by Jacco Gelderloos

During the potluck-tally gathering at the closing of this year's Ann Arbor Christmas Bird Count, we discussed if the 2016 edition was the tenth anniversary of my role as count compiler. Neither the previous compiler, Nancy French, nor I was sure when the baton was passed from her to me, but after reviewing my CBC records, I found that 2007 was my inaugural year as compiler, which means that this year, 2016, was, indeed, my tenth year in charge of the Ann Arbor CBC—how time flies!

In any given year's CBC report, I tend to remark that the Ann Arbor count is an amazingly smooth and easy count to run—plenty of trusty observers and a very reliable cadre of area leaders (and other volunteers) leave relatively little work for me to sort out in the lead-up to the count. This year, however, was a tough one, I'd have to say. A couple of area leaders informed me that they would not be able to make it to this year's count, courtesy of, among other things, their schools not having finished classes and exams by the 17th! Luckily, Andrew Pawuk, Tim McKay, and Roger Wykes, area leader emeritus, filled these gaps in a timely manner—coverage was not going to be an issue after all.

Unfortunately, a potentially far more problematic issue replaced this worry almost immediately. Less than a week after Winter Storm Caly dumped some foot of snow in the area, forecasters called for Winter Storm Decima to dump another 5-8 inches on Friday and into Saturday the 17th, count day. If this wasn't a big enough concern, the snow was forecast to switch over to a wintry mix and/or freezing rain, with significant ice accumulations in the offing. As a result, many of the participants that signed up did so with the caveat that inclement weather would preclude them from counting. Understandably so, of course. *(continued on page 4)*

President's Letter

Dear Washtenaw Audubon,

With uncertain times ahead, here are some of my New Year's resolutions for 2017:

Stay alert to threats to birds and our environment.

Speak out and join with others who want to protect birds and the environment, wherever and whenever possible.

Work with other environmental groups to fund and support conservation.

Enjoy birds every chance you get.

Get out and walk as often as possible. See some birds. Exercise is good for the soul.

Stay connected with friends and family through time spent together and through talking, not just social media and email.

Take a friend walking outside. Show them a bird or two.

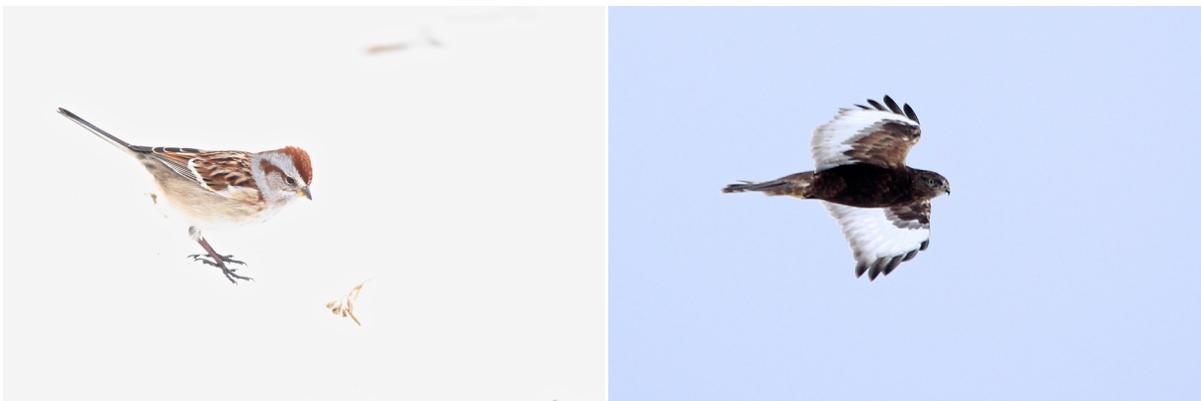
Thank people for their contributions, sincerely and often.

Thanks for being there, Washtenaw Audubon Society members. You all make our important work relevant and possible. Join us at some of our many field trips and programs in the coming months. You'll be glad you did!

As always,

I am for the birds,

Juliet Berger



Tree Sparrow and Rough-legged Hawk, Vreeland Road, Superior Township, Benjamin Hack

The KIWA Diary, Part 2

Karen Markey's adventures with the 2016 Kirtland's Warbler Census

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Day 2 (Tuesday, June 7), ELDORADO

No long morning ride to Pine River means I get to sleep an extra 15 minutes this morning! We had hit-and-miss thunderstorms last night, and dawn arrives with lingering light showers and much lower temperatures. I put on my rain suit because the jack pine forests will be wet, plus there's a chance I'll be assigned to a natural burn area where brushing up against vegetation means black soot and grime.

I'm stuck doing everything this morning—navigating, listening, and triangulating Kirtland Warblers (KWs) on the map—because team member Cathy is a first-time volunteer and Nancy is rather new, plus she's forgotten her GPS and doesn't know how to work her borrowed GPS.

Taking my initial steps into the jack pine, I realize that it is older, unyielding stuff. Most of the lower branches are dead, and they overlap wiry pin oaks making forward navigation slow, uncomfortable, and sometimes impossible. So many times I lean forward into the jack pine only to pop back out, seeking an alternate route forward. Additionally, the jack pines are so high here that I can't find a distant landmark on our transect. Thus, navigation is a combination of constantly monitoring both my GPS to determine how many meters we've walked and my compass to ensure we stay on our transect. The good news is that we are traveling an east-to-west transect; as long as we walk at 270 degrees, we should stay on track.

Along this one-mile transect we hear 11 KWs. Reaching the transect's end, a KW sings nearby—I pish, and he flies into the center of a jack pine, hardly two feet off the ground, his brilliant yellow breast beaming in stark contrast to the dull vegetation on this overcast morning. Despite navigating entirely by GPS and compass, I am thrilled that we arrive at the end of this first transect, only a short 70 meters north of our final point.

We get a break for our second transect—walking a road and listening to the south where we hear three KWs. Comparing my results with those of the adjacent census team, I am surprised that they triangulated a dozen KWs on their transect, a quarter mile south of the road we walked. I suspect the strong north wind carried KW songs farther south, opposite of our direction.

At the Paddle Inn, one team is abuzz with excitement over seeing and photographing a Massasauga Rattlesnake, his head buried in wild blueberry and his rattle upright and shaking vigorously. Others show photos of egg-filled nighthawk nests and tell of flushing Ruffed Grouse and Upland Sandpipers.

I'm eager to hit the road, spending the rest of the afternoon birding, first at the Luzerne Boardwalk, and second on an unmarked jack pine plantation. "Closed for Repair" signs meet me at the former. The boardwalk is in total disrepair due to age and heavy use by both hikers on foot and riders on horseback. I walk there anyway, hearing a singing Canada Warbler and Winter Wren in the wetlands adjacent Big Creek. The sun finally emerges from the thick cloud cover, and I press on, stopping to admire the view of gently rolling pine- and hardwood-covered landscape from the lookout. Exiting the boardwalk, I catch sight of the miniature Winter Wren whose swift and seemingly random activity is more insect- than bird-like.

I motor to the unmarked state land and walk its generous two-track that passes diagonally through a young jack pine plantation. Hearing a KW, I gently pish, and I focus my binoculars inside the pine tree where he is perched. Suddenly a second KW belts out "choo-choo-chee-chee-wee-wee" right behind me. Wow! Here are two KWs in plain sight, separated by the 12-foot wide two-track, singing their unique and distinctive song. They also pump their tail making it easy to identify them over other birds of the jack pine forest—Nashville Warblers, Eastern Bluebirds, Brown Thrashers, and Lincoln's Sparrows—even in silhouette.

In the evening, several of us hitch a ride in Dave's luxurious truck to Lewiston to meet forest biologist Phil and his family for dinner. At the Lewiston Lodge, we have a scrumptious lakeside view. I opt for the walleye, enjoying every bite because it's back to the Sky Ranch tomorrow.

In forthcoming issues of the newsletter we will explore more of Karen's KIWA Diary.

Results of the 70th Annual Christmas Bird Count

Continued from page 1

So, as count day approached, I faced having to postpone the count to a later date. Unfortunately, a look at the calendar showed that there were few, if any, back-up dates available – Christmas on the weekend after the count, New Year's on the weekend after that, leaving only a single possible weekend within the count period after that, with no guarantee of good weather for that weekend either. After much agonizing, I told the area leaders the count would be on as announced. Our CBC participants would be allowed to make the call as to when and how long to count, and we would just have to live with the fall-out of that approach. After I set up a phone tree of sorts with the area leaders, I turned in, anxious for what the night would bring.

Boy, did things work out well for us! A quick peek at the radar at 2:00 a.m. revealed that Decima's snow had essentially cleared out of our area, having dropped only about three inches. What was more, the daytime precipitation forecast was now much less worrisome too, with most precipitation not scheduled to fall until later in the day. Phew....

Although temperatures had been well below freezing during the week following Winter Storm Caly, temperatures on count day were quite pleasant, hovering in the low- to mid-20s. For much of the early part of the day winds were light, but they shifted to the northwest and picked up some as the day progressed. In spite of the dire outlook, snow fell only in a few squalls during the pre-dawn hours, and apart from some very light drizzle, freezing rain held off until much later in the evening (a little fell during the potluck).

Although the impact of the weather turned out to be much less severe than initially thought, many observers opted for safety and called off the day before the count. As a result, the number of participants was some 25% lower than last year (38 v. 52); luckily, much of that shortfall was made up for by reducing the size, not the number, of parties in the field.

Even with a smaller group of birders in the field, counters in each area turned up unique species—but they also missed some surprising ones! As a whole, we found 73 species on count day (slightly above the recent 10-year average of 72 species), along with a hybrid and a very tantalizing *sparrow* sp., and three more species during count week, for a very respectable end total of 76 species. Like last year, the number of individuals counted, 23,180, is about two-thirds of the 10-year average. In large part, this total is heavily dependent on the number of crows we count at the roost located in Ann Arbor; of course, the location of that roost therefore determines how many crows we end up reporting. For an added twist, the multitudes of crows that had been gathering in the Observatory area vanished from that location mere days ahead of the count, only to be re-found near Pioneer Woods on Thursday.

Although November had been unseasonably mild, with close to 75 degrees on the 18th, December certainly reminded us that winter was, in fact, upon us. Not only did Caly drop around a foot of snow, the northerly airflow in its wake was sufficiently frigid to freeze all non-flowing bodies of water, in stark contrast to last year's abundance of open water. Not surprisingly, waterfowl was concentrated in the patches of open water along the Huron River and a few of the larger creeks, such as Malletts Creek in Mary Beth Doyle Park. In the end, only one less species than last year was reported. In my opinion, the most notable news in this category is the fact that Trumpeter Swans outnumbered Mute Swans by a significant margin, in large part caused by the historically low tally for Mute Swan. Could it be that the Mute Swans had all moved to North Bay Park, whereas the Trumpeters all stayed in the Huron River within our circle? (See *Jacco's Mute v. Trumpeter comparison chart on the WAS web site.*)

Species of note in this category were a count week flock of 14 Tundra Swans, 5 American Wigeon, and 4 Green-winged Teal were certainly good finds. A species of concern, American Black Duck was found in numbers more in line with (even slightly above) the recent 10-year average. Becoming somewhat of a hit-or-miss species, a couple of Wood Ducks were present in two locations along the Huron River. Although it was still by far the most numerous species in this category, 1,738 Canada Geese was the lowest since 1994, and more than 50% below the 10-year average.

Staying with more or less water-dependent species, seven Great Blue Herons were right on the average mark, as were the seven Belted Kingfishers we found. After last year's mind-blowing 300+ tally, turning up 11 Sandhill

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president@washtenawaudubon.org

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vp-programs@washtenawaudubon.org

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Jessica Adamczyk
membership@washtenawaudubon.org

Field Trips

Bryn Martin
fieldtrips@washtenawaudubon.org

Education

Cathy Theisen
cathythetvet@comcast.net

Webmaster/Technology and Social Media

Rob French
rwfrenchjr@comcast.net

Past President

Sue Johnson
Suejohn62@gmail.com

Board Member/Bird Rescue

Sherril Smith
grackle@umich.edu

Newsletter

Nancy Davis
newsletter@washtenawaudubon.org

The Washtenaw Audubon Society is an active chapter of Michigan Audubon formed in the early 1950s. Monthly programs feature guest speakers on a wide variety of natural history and birding topics. We conduct field trips to places in Ann Arbor, Washtenaw County, and beyond.

Cranes may seem like a let-down, but that flock (found at Mary Beth Doyle Park) still almost triples the pre-2015 high count! Generally, gulls are not among the species that I single out in this report, but the fact that only three individual birds were found is certainly noteworthy—looking over the recent gull counts, a rather interesting pattern seems apparent, with major crashes roughly every five years. (See *Jacco's Gull Numbers Chart on the WAS web site.*)

Daytime raptors put in a good showing, with ten species in all, among them all three *buteos* (an unusual occurrence to find all three on count day), as well as all three falcons—with the Peregrines now firmly settled in, this is almost to be expected now! Unfortunately, Kestrels continue to struggle in our count, with just one reported. By contrast, Cooper's Hawks posted a record high tally, even if just barely so.

Despite less than ideal conditions, several observers were out and about, looking for owls in the pre-dawn snow showers (and on dodgy roads, I might add). In addition to a count week Barred Owl, which failed to sound off on count day (in spite of several efforts), three additional species were found. Northern Saw-whet Owl is always a great find (only five times since 2000), Great Horned Owl hit the 10-year average of eleven on the nose, and Eastern Screech-Owl appears to have suffered from reduced observer effort courtesy of the weather. A few observers noted that the rather vocal Great Horneds probably also prompted nearby Screech-Owls to stay quiet (certainly a sensible thing to do if you're a small owl!).

Our area's chicken-like birds appear to have settled into what can be termed their "new normal": single-digit tallies for Ring-necked Pheasant and triple-digit counts for Wild Turkey. Clearly, the major factor in the decline of the former and the increase of the latter is habitat succession, although the conversion of pheasant habitat into subdivisions has no doubt played a significant role, as well.

As if to prove my statement about a slight drop in numbers in last year's report wrong, woodpeckers put in a stellar showing, both as a group and as individual species. Pileated Woodpecker once again tied its high of three, two Red-headed Woodpeckers is its best showing since the early 1980s, and both Red-bellied and Hairy Woodpeckers posted all-time highs! Pretty impressive, given the group's steady increases over the past two decades.

Hard though I may try, I cannot capture passerines with a single sweeping characterization, other than to state that not one species posted a record high count. Several of the "usual" species were present in above-average numbers, but others' counts were significantly below average, with some nearly missed. As an indication of how these trends cut through species groupings, Black-capped Chickadees were 10% below their recent 10-year average, whereas Tufted Titmice were some 20% above! Staying with this theme: White-breasted Nuthatches were present in near-record numbers, some 30% above the average, but Red-breasted managed only about half of the recent average. Admittedly, that average includes the 82 birds found during the amazing 2012 irruption; when that odd-ball record is taken out of consideration, eight birds is much closer to the recent norm.

Fruit-eating species must have largely left the circle, because they tended to be present in below-average numbers. Starlings, Robins, and Bluebirds all seem to have been hard to come by (relatively speaking, of course), but, interestingly, Cedar Waxwings did quite well, as did Hermit Thrush. The cherry on the pie for this group was the Northern Mockingbird found in area B. For the second year in a row, we failed to turn up any Yellow-rumped Warblers. (continued on page 6)

Results of the 70th Annual Christmas Bird Count

Continued from page 5

Emberizids were present in good variety and good numbers, with only White-throated Sparrows posting significantly below-average numbers. By contrast, both American Tree Sparrow and Dark-eyed Junco seem to have come south in much higher numbers than in the past couple of years of milder early winter weather. As always, several unusual sparrows were located, almost all at feeders—apart from count week birds in 1997 and 2012, this was the first CBC record for Chipping Sparrow since 1995. Though not as unusual, Fox and White-crowned Sparrows are still excellent finds on our CBC, showing up roughly once every 2-3 years. Potentially topping all of these, though, was the very tantalizing observation by Benjamin Hack of a sparrow-like bird that he identified as a Grasshopper Sparrow. Unfortunately, Ben saw the bird only briefly and was unable to get the rest of his group onto the bird, or to get a photo. Given the magnitude of a wintertime Grasshopper Sparrow observation in the Great Lakes, getting this record accepted will involve some doing, however. For now, I have entered this record as a *sparrow* sp.

Continuing 2015's excellent blackbird year, our volunteers once again located three species in the icterid family, even if only in small numbers. As was the case last year, these birds were found in scattered locations, not in a single mixed flock as one might expect – each of the four observations was in a different count area. I expressed surprise at this last year, but since it seems not that exceptional, perhaps I should adjust my expectations for CBC blackbirds!

As far as finches were concerned, the 2016 Ann Arbor CBC was slim pickings. We could not find any unusual species, and the three “expected” species were hard to come by. Only area A was able to find Pine Siskins, and House Finches were roughly 20-25% below average. American Goldfinches did even worse: the 383 we found was the lowest since the year 2000 and a whopping 36% below the recent average!

After the mild-weather CBCs in 2014-2015, I think we can safely say that the 2016 edition of the Ann Arbor count was a proper “winter” count. With more than a foot of snow on the ground throughout the circle and much of the circle's water frozen, it sure felt like participating in a Christmas Bird Count! With regard to the birds, much like everybody present at the tally, I was surprised to discover that we had topped the 75-species mark, in spite of the harsh conditions in the week leading up to the count. Each area's volunteers turned up unusual species and contributed to making the 70th edition of our count a resounding success, in spite of the worrisome weather forecast. In the end, having made the difficult decision to go through with the count as planned, this outcome was all I could have hoped for. So, to all you who were out there slipping, sliding, and slogging through the snow: thank you, thank you, thank you!

As always, I have summarized our finds in a spreadsheet, so please have a look at the results of everyone's hard work (see the Washtenaw Audubon Society web site for complete details). If you would like to read about the outcome of the 2015 and prior CBCs on a grand scale, please surf to the CBC pages on the National Audubon website: <http://netapp.audubon.org/cbcobservation/>. This site serves as the interactive version of the “American Birds” magazine of years past, and as such, it provides not only all of the interesting articles and information, but it can just as easily link you to much more detailed custom data. The tools and options of this website are amazing and can (and will) suck you in for hours and hours!

Speaking of online resources, our web guru, Rob French, developed a wonderful new addition to the Ann Arbor CBC portfolio this year. His sign-up document encompasses the bulk of our CBC registration information, which is exceedingly helpful for me when assigning volunteers to the different areas. In the year to come, Rob will work on tweaking the form so that it can also incorporate information with regard to the potluck (what dish to bring, etc.). This is a great new resource for sure, Rob—thank you!

With the retrospect of ten years as a compiler, I have become absolutely convinced that it takes all of us to continue to run as successful a count as we do. All of you, area leaders, observers, feeder watchers, and volunteers of all varieties are and have been indispensable to 70 years' worth of great Christmas Bird Counts in the Ann Arbor circle. Throughout Michigan, our count consistently ranks in the upper echelons in number of participants and number of species tallied. Here's to another successful Ann Arbor CBC in the books! And, of course, see you on December 16, 2017, for the 71st edition! (*And thank you to Jacco for all his hard work!*)

Upcoming WAS Field Trips (February 2017 – April 2017)

Bryn Martin, Field Trip Coordinator (fieldtrips@washtenawaudubon.org)

Washtenaw Audubon field trips are free of charge and open to the public unless otherwise indicated. For trips with constraints on the number of participants, WAS members are sometimes given priority in registering (again, as indicated). *For trips that require carpooling, minors attending without a parent must bring a written permission statement signed by a parent.* To receive a standard form for this, contact me at the email address above. Also, if you have a suggestion for a field trip, please send it to Bryn at the email address above.

February, Date and time TBD

Winter Birding

Leader: Bryn Martin

Check the WAS web site or via social media to learn about the finalized details. Depending upon what is being seen where, the field trip will be structured accordingly.

Saturday, March 11 Time TBD

One-Road Challenge

This fun, annual challenge will be held in March this year. Details will be forthcoming, but be sure to check the WAS website or social media to learn more about the finalized details.

Sunday, March 26 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.

Kensington Metropark Birdwatching for Beginners

Leader: Bryn Martin

Meet at the Nature Center parking area at 10:00 a.m. for a trip around the trails. Bring a pocketful of sunflower seeds to hand-feed the chickadees and titmice. View migrating waterfowl and the Great Blue Heron rookery. We hope to see the resident Sandhill Cranes, as well as Red-winged Blackbirds, and other early migrants. This field trip is a fun way to bring young birders and novice adults into the birding community. It is suitable for all ages. Young children should be accompanied by an adult. Older minors can bring a completed release form found on the WAS website. This trip is free of charge, but a Metroparks Pass is required for admission to the park.

Thursdays in April and May (and one at the end of March)

Spring Migration Walks at Nichols Arboretum

Join us on Thursday morning, March 30, and Thursday mornings in April and May (April 6, 13, 20, 27; May 4, 11, 18, 25) at Nichols Arboretum to observe migrants making their way north. These leaderless walks are a great opportunity to join with other birders of all skill levels. In addition to the birds, the Arb's trees and other plants offer delights of their own. Park and meet at the Riverview Court cul-de-sac off Geddes Road at 8:00 a.m.; the walks will end around 11:00 a.m., but participants can leave whenever they prefer.

To become a member of Washtenaw Audubon Society, please complete the form below (or a copy) and mail it with a check or money order payable to **Washtenaw Audubon Society—WAS Membership, P.O. Box 130923, Ann Arbor, MI 48113.**

<input type="checkbox"/> Renewal	<input type="checkbox"/> New Member	Membership Dues	
Additional Donation \$ _____		<input type="checkbox"/> Individual Household	\$25 (online only \$20)
Name: _____		<input type="checkbox"/> Student	\$15 (online only \$10)
Address: _____		<input type="checkbox"/> Senior	\$15 (online only \$10)
Phone: _____	Email: _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Patron	\$50

We encourage you to join at a lower rate if the suggested rates would otherwise preclude your membership, or at a higher rate if you possess the means. **Note:** WAS will only use your email address to communicate with you about WAS programs, field trips, or matters of interest to you, such as membership renewal and emailed WAS newsletters (in color!). We will not give your email address to anyone else.

WAS Monthly Programs

WAS monthly events usually are held on the third Wednesday of the month. Programs begin at 7:30 p.m. at the U-M Matthaei Botanical Gardens, 1800 Dixboro Road, Ann Arbor. Free and open to the public. **Please note:** *The Matthaei Botanical Gardens charges for parking at the rate of \$1.20 an hour, enforced 7 days a week from 8am to 8pm. Members of the Matthaei Botanical Gardens and Nichols Arboretum park for free.*

February 15 Vacation on the Riviera Maya—Birding on Family Time

Join Jacco Gelderloos for an exploration of the bird life of the coastal Yucatan peninsula and the birding opportunities it offers. Jacco is a WAS member, served as WAS Field Trip coordinator, and is the current Ann Arbor CBC compiler.

March 15 Dead Birds (...for Science!)

To save birds, we need to save their habitats. But birds have wings, can't read maps, and don't stay where they're safe. So how can we create a more bird friendly world beyond parks and refuges? We need to know how they die. What kills birds tells us where we can make changes to prevent bird deaths in the future. Join Heidi Trudell in exploring the preventable causes of avian mortality that put so much pressure on the birds we know and love, and learn about how valuable dead birds are to science. Heidi serves as a coordinator as well as monitor with Washtenaw Safe Passage, and she is Chair of the Great Lakes Safe Passage Committee for Detroit Audubon.

April 19 The Year in Review in Ornithology

Join Ben Winger, Ph.D., for a survey of some of the exciting advances in bird research in the past year. Ben Winger is an Assistant Professor and Curator of Birds in the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology and the Museum of Zoology at the University of Michigan.

Washtenaw Audubon Society

P.O. Box 130923
Ann Arbor, MI 48113-0923