

Christmas Bird Count 2004-05

BRITISH COLUMBIA – YUKON

By Dick Cannings

Eighty-seven counts came in from British Columbia and Yukon this year, another all-time high. New counts were from Blaeberry, Charlie Lake, Powell River, Rossland-Warfield, Teslin, and Trail-Beaver Valley. Weather didn't play a factor on most counts, though the Mayo, YT count reported a bone-chilling low of -49°F and wind and cold temperatures combined to make life uncomfortable for birders at Whitehorse and Haines Junction, YT. Some coastal counts had rather windy days as well, including (as usual) Haida Gwaii counts such as Skidegate Inlet and Rose Spit. Tlell, however, had calm conditions and viewing conditions for waterfowl were unusually ideal. Those conditions, combined with a concentration of herring and perhaps other food inshore produced remarkable numbers of loons, grebes, and waterfowl at Tlell.

The species count in British Columbia soared to 236 this year (225 last year) and Yukon's species count climbed to 36 (34 last year). Victoria birders had a superb day, setting a new Canadian record of 154 species, and Oliver-Osoyoos led the way again in the Interior with 105. In the Yukon, Whitehorse was alone in the lead with a record-breaking 28 species.

Last year's good Brant totals plummeted this year, with only 365 seen, 261 of them at Ladner. The Trumpeter Swan total dropped slightly to 6638, mainly because numbers at Comox were down to 1474, less than half what was reported last year. Mute Swan numbers were up, with 102 seen on 8 counts, mostly on Vancouver Island. Tlell reported good numbers of mergansers and Long-tailed Ducks, but their truly remarkable total was a new Canadian record for Common Goldeneyes: 11,161. Tlell also posted record-breaking numbers of Red-throated Loon (1151) and Red-necked Grebe (708). Campbell River, with its well-known concentrations of waterbirds in Discovery Passage, reported 4437 Pacific Loons. Yellow-billed Loons were back to normal levels, with 5 seen on 3 counts, including 3 on Hecate Strait. The Hecate Strait ferry also had the only tubenoses reported this year — 5 Short-tailed Shearwaters.

Spruce Grouse are difficult to find in winter, remaining quietly in their food trees all day, so totals of 10 at Marsh Lake, 7 at Whitehorse and 5 at Pemberton-Mt. Currie are certainly noteworthy. Ptarmigan are also cryptic in winter; this year Whistler had a White-tailed Ptarmigan (reportedly being killed by Northern Pygmy-Owl!); while good numbers of Willow Ptarmigan were seen at Haines Junction (27) and Mackenzie (10). This year's record total of 697 Wild Turkeys was certainly helped by a report of 223 from the new Trail-Beaver Valley count. This species continues to burgeon in the Kootenays. Numbers of another introduced species, the California Quail, declined in the north Okanagan this year but a record high of 4566 was reported farther south in Penticton.

A White Pelican at White Rock was extremely unusual. Sooke reported good numbers of cormorants with 1349 Brandt's, 1329 Double-crested and 502 Pelagic; only Skidegate

Inlet had more Pelagics (585). White Rock and Ladner both had single Cattle Egrets, the remnants of a large movement that had small flocks moving through British Columbia; in the interior, Creston and Logan Lake managed to report single count period birds. Golden Eagles wintered in good numbers, with a total of 51 seen, including 12 at Vaseux Lake and 11 at Oliver-Osoyoos. Gyrfalcons were unusually widespread, with singles on 8 counts. Black-bellied Plovers wintered in high numbers for the second year in a row, with 6855 on the Ladner count and a notable 293 at Comox.

White Rock had a good array of unusual shorebirds, including an American Avocet, a Lesser Yellowlegs, and a Long-billed Curlew. Other interesting shorebird sightings included a Willet at Ladner, 3 Whimbrel at Victoria and a Ruddy Turnstone at Nanaimo. A Sabine's Gull at Penticton was totally unexpected, though a few had passed through the interior in fall. Other rare gulls included a count week Slaty-backed at Nanaimo and a count-week Heermann's at Victoria.

Hecate Strait reported 13 Cassin's Auklet, but more surprising was a count-week bird in Victoria. The most unusual alcid was a single Tufted Puffin in Bamfield. A surprising total of 155 Eurasian Collared-Doves were counted in British Columbia's single wild population at Cawston. Seven Western Screech-Owls were reported from 7 counts, 4 on the coast and 3 in the Okanagan-Similkameen. Victoria reported good numbers of other owls, including 26 Great Horned and 8 Barred, indicating that it isn't lack of effort that is producing the low counts of screech-owls. Great Horned Owls remain at low numbers in the Yukon, with only a count-week report from Haines Junction. Single Northern Hawk-Owls were reported from 5 counts, but there was certainly no sign of the significant movement that occurred east of the Rockies. Great Gray Owls were widespread, with 7 on 5 counts, including 3 at Smithers; no fewer than 8 were reported in count week elsewhere.

Victoria hummingbird watchers again outdid themselves with a record 390 Anna's Hummingbirds reported; Sooke had a single Rufous. Penticton missed Lewis's Woodpecker for the first time in history as the Trout Creek wintering population dwindled to zero, but Oliver-Osoyoos reported two. A Western Scrub-Jay at a Squamish feeder was the fourth record for a Canadian Christmas count. Chestnut-backed Chickadees, normally restricted to the wet coniferous forests of the coast and Kootenays, wandered widely across the drier interior, showing up on perhaps 10 counts they don't normally appear on, including 5 each in Salmon Arm and Penticton. Conversely, single Mountain Chickadees showed up on three Lower Mainland counts — Chilliwack, Ladner and White Rock — well away from their normal interior coniferous forest haunts.

Barn Swallows continued their mysterious winter wanderings into British Columbia; two were found in Kamloops and a single at Port Alberni. Vaseux Lake had two lingering Rock Wrens and a near-record 24 Canyon Wrens. Penticton's Western Bluebird total slipped to 150, while Victoria reported the only Mountain Bluebird this year. Wilson's Warblers were seen on three coastal counts (Abbotsford-Mission, Vancouver and Victoria), while Victoria also had a Western Tanager. Kelowna's Chipping Sparrow and Whitehorse's White-throated Sparrow were both highly unusual, but paled in comparison

to the pair of McKay's Buntings seen on the Vancouver count. These birds had been present for some time and remained on the Iona Island jetty for several weeks after the count as well.

A count-week Rose-breasted Grosbeak was very unusual at Pitt Meadows, as were single count day Black-headed Grosbeaks at Nanaimo and Pemberton-Mt. Currie. Except for an isolated concentration at Cranbrook, Red Crossbills were scarce everywhere off Vancouver Island. White-winged Crossbills were also scarce, consistently found only in the northwest. Evening Grosbeak numbers remained low, with the only significant numbers being 309 tallied at Rossland-Warfield.