THE 112TH CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

Western Kingbird, Blue-headed Vireo, and American Redstart. Not to prolong the agony, this remarkable assortment of species represents only a fraction of the mind-blowing 237 species collectively recorded on the 112th New England CBC. In the nearly 30 years that this editor has been editing New England CBCs, this total far and away exceeds the previous all-time high of 225 species recorded in 1999–2000. In addition to the stunning total of 237 species belong a count week Osprey and three recognizable subspecies (i.e., “Audubon’s” Yellow-rumped Warbler, “Ipswich” Savannah Sparrow, and “O regon” Dark-eyed Junco). Accounting for these remarkable statistics were 3270 observers who participated in 122 New England counts, invested 9704.26 party hours of effort, and traveled 41,911.9 party miles in their quest to locate and tally species for their individual count circles. More than anything, however, the survival of so many vagrants and late-lingering species was undoubtedly due to the fortuitous combination of extraordinarily mild late fall and early winter weather, lots open ground and unfrozen water, and generally favorable conditions on many count days.

As suggested above, count conditions were nearly ideal on many counts this season, with a number of compilers specifically commenting on how lots of open water and snow-free ground seemed to affect their count totals. Accordingly, some passerine species were more dispersed than usual due to the relatively snow-free conditions, and waterfowl were specifically mentioned as being less concentrated because of all the open water.

In keeping with an Olympic Year, special accolades go to the state counts achieving the highest CBC totals. In southern New England the Gold Medal went to Mid-Cape Cod (137) in Massachusetts, with Silver and Bronze belonging, respectively, to New Haven (128) in Connecticut and Newport County-Westport (127) in Rhode Island. In northern New England top honors belonged to Coastal New Hampshire (117) in New Hampshire, followed by Greater Portland (97) in Maine and Ferrisburg (81) in Vermont. Not surprisingly some of the count and species totals were the highest in many years.

With such an embarrassment of riches to choose from this year, selecting the most outstanding CBC records of the season posed a significant challenge. On the short list have to be Pink-footed Goose at Worcester, Cape Ann and Cape Cod; Great Shearwater at Mid-Cape Cod; Cassin’s Kingbird at Newburyport, Northern Rough-winged Swallow at Hartford, and Wood Thrush at Woodbury-Roxbury. Considering the rarity of these species I am pleased to report that all were extremely well documented.

Species that in most years would receive top honors as most “Off the Wall” candidates include Barnacle Goose at Newburyport; Great Shearwater at Cape Ann and Cape Cod; Yellow-crowned Night-Heron at Stratford-Milford; Willet (2) and Lesser Yellowlegs at Cape Cod; Great Skua (2) at Nantucket; Parasitic Jaeger at Old Lyme; Ash-throated Flycatcher at Greater Boston, Cape Cod, and New Bedford; Cape May Warbler at Barkhamsted; Townsend’s Warbler at Newburyport; American Redstart at Brattleboro; Indigo Bunting at Northampton; and Painted Bunting at Cape Cod. What is especially fascinating about this mix of species is their diverse point of origin. The Palearctic is represented by Pink-footed Goose and

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In northern New England top honors
Barnacle Goose; the pelagic realm hosts Great Shearwater, Great Skua, and Parasitic Jaeger; the western United States is the likely source of Ash-throated Flycatcher, Cassin’s Kingbird, and Townsend’s Warbler; and the neotropical/Caribbean region is likely to be the seasonal headquarters for Brown Booby, Cape May Warbler, American Redstart, and Indigo and Painted bunting. This is not to suggest that all of these species traveled directly to New England in late December, but simply underscores the widespread representation of the remarkable array of species involved.

Illustrative of why irruptive species are called irruptive, compare this year’s total of 54 Bohemian Waxwings against 5276 last year, or 139 Common Redpolls compared to 4613 in 2010–2011. In the raptor department numbers of Rough-legged Hawks (67), Northern Shrikes (51), and Short-eared Owls (26) were very comparable to last winter, but a total of 20 Northern Goshawks was well below that of the past two winters. On the other hand 35 Snowy Owls region-wide metaphorically represented the tip of a giant Snowy Owl iceberg that apparently extended from coast to coast last winter.

A roll call of the various species groups recorded throughout the New
England region inevitably produces interesting results, too. Beginning with waterfowl, a remarkable eight Greater White-fronted Geese were tallied Ferrisburg (2), Greater Portland, Concord (MA), Worcester, Newport County-Westport, Hartford, and Quinnipiac Valley. This far exceeds any previous New England regional CBC total and is exemplary of an increasing trend throughout much of the eastern U.S. Almost as mind-blowing for New England were 21,966 lingering Snow Geese at Ferrisburg and 3478 at Champlain Islands-St. Albans, both clearly products of the mild season. In the same vein as Greater White-fronted Goose belong 11 Cackling Geese distributed between Ferrisburg (3), Randolph, York County, Greater Boston, Newport County-Westport (3), South Kingstown, and Hartford.

Fourteen Blue-winged Teal distributed between Nantucket (6), Martha’s Vineyard (3), Mid-Cape Cod (3), and Cape Cod (2) was a notable tally for a species that often goes unrecorded on New England CBCs. Slightly north of traditional wintering areas were Redheads at Coastal New Hampshire (5) and Greater Portland. Nantucket’s total of 57,113 Long-tailed Ducks must have been a welcome sight after last year’s disappointing tally of 10,458 at this species’ lower U.S. winter stronghold.

Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont CBCs registered 298 Ruffed Grouse while the southern New England states could only muster 49, thus continuing the trend of depressed numbers of this once common gamebird in southern parts of the Region. Of even greater concern is the meager total of four Northern Bobwhites in New England, all of them in Massachusetts.

Nantucket’s total of 1946 Red-throated Loons was indicative of the mildness of the season, and two Pacific Loons there maintained a now annual regional trend. Grebes made a statement in northern New England with 483 Red-necked Grebes at Mt. Desert Island and three well-described Eared Grebes and a Western/Clark’s Grebe at Champlain Islands-St. Albans. An unprecedented regional CBC tally of 46 Northern Fulmars at Stellwagen Bank was further highlighted by the high percentage of dark individuals—a morph most frequent in the High Arctic in Atlantic waters. Single lingering Great Shearwaters were recorded at Cape Ann and Cape Cod. Without question the most unusual seabird of the season was a juvenile Brown Booby observed flying past Sandy Neck Beach on the Mid-Cape Cod CBC. The booby was undoubtedly the same individual that had been frequenting the waters off Provincetown and in Cape Cod Bay since August.

A regional total of 53 Great Egrets spear-headed by counts of 22 at Newport County-Westport and 12 at Napatree eclipsed all previous New England CBC records. These were shadowed by unusual appearances of Snowy Egrets at Nantucket and Newport County-Westport, and a Little Blue Heron and the previously mentioned Yellow-crowned Night-Heron at Stratford-Milford.

A total of 563 Bald Eagles surpassed the species’ regional high of 534 set in 2009–2010, while at the same time the total of 241 Cooper’s Hawks was barely half of last year’s tally. Correspondingly a total of 100 Peregrine Falcons region-wide seemingly set a new high New England CBC total at the same time that the 38 American Kestrels reported represents close to an all-time low. Single Golden Eagles were registered at Plainfield, Central Berkshires, and South Kingstown.

A King Rail at Old Lyme was decidedly notable in December, as were Soras at Sturbridge (very unusual inland), Napatree, Newport County-Westport, and Truro, and two Common Gallinules at Nantucket.

A robust total of 16 shorebird species was documented, included among them an American Oystercatcher at New Haven; two Willets, a Lesser Yellowlegs, a Marbled Godwit, and a Western Sandpiper at Cape Cod; and two Long-billed Dowitchers at Newburyport. A regional total of 27 American Woodcocks was a clear reflection of the open ground and mild pre-count conditions.

Gulls often stand out as CBC luminaries, but with so many other highlights this year only Little Gull at Nantucket, Laughing Gull at New Haven, and well-documented Thayer’s Gulls at Nantucket and New London warrant mention. Two Great Skuas admirably described as they harried gulls at Nantucket were no doubt the envy of many a landlubber, while two Pomarine Jaegers at Stellwagen Bank and a Parasitic Jaeger at Old Lyme were also decidedly unusual. Among the notable alcids reports were Stellwagen Bank’s 138 Dovetails, 56 Common Murres, and two Atlantic Puffins. Also noteworthy were a Common Murre and a Thick-billed Murre at New London that were recorded from the New London-Orient Point ferry.

A total of 16 Barn Owls was evenly split between Martha’s Vineyard and Nantucket, and a Northern Hawk Owl at Hartland was the first on a New...
Pileated Woodpecker (Dryocopus pileatus), Concord, Massachusetts.

Photo/Tom Murray

England CBC in over a decade. Red-headed Woodpeckers made appearances at York County, Concord (MA), and Hartford. In marked contrast to last year's 15,113 Blue Jays in Massachusetts, this winter witnessed a dearth with only 6698 tallied. This was almost certainly attributable to a crash in the local acorn crop. An astounding flock of nine Northern Rough-winged Swallows at Hartford represented only the second such CBC record for the region, the first occurring at New Haven during the 108th CBC. A Blue-gray Gnatcatcher at Greenwich-Stamford surely brightened that CBC tally. It's hard to imagine that Townsend's Solitaire at Uxbridge was actually upstaged by a meticulously described Wood Thrush at Woodbury-Roxbury for one of very few New England CBC occurrences of this strictly neotropical migrant.

The lineup of 16 warbler species recorded practically reads like a shabby Big Day list! Among the more notable species on this stunning roster were Nashville at Greater Boston, Cape May at Barkhamsted, Northern Parula at Coastal New Hampshire and South Kingstown, Black-throated Blue at Greater Portland, Black-throated Green at Coastal New Hampshire, Townsend's at Newburyport, American Redstart at Brattleboro, Ovenbird at Manchester and Cape Cod, Northern Waterthrush at Mid-Cape Cod, and Wilson's at Greater Boston (2) and Cape Cod. In addition to this litany, "Audubon's" Yellow-rumped Warblers were tallied at Marshfield, Buzzards Bay, and Cape Cod. Final additions to this year's epic hit parade were Clay-colored Sparrows at Buzzards Bay, Mid-Cape Cod, and Nantucket; two Lark Sparrows at Greater Portland; and a regional total of 10 Lincoln's Sparrows—a species now no longer needing to be boldfaced. Bringing up the rear is Western Tanager at Buzzards Bay, Rose-breasted Grosbeak at Woodstock, Indigo Bunting at Northampton, and Painted Bunting at Cape Cod.

NEW YORK

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A total of 69 counts were run in New York this season. Early December was one of the warmest on record, and winter weather did not arrive until the first day of the count period. As a result there was little snow cover and more open water than usual. Southern Nassau County led the state with 133 species, upstate Rochester, Buffalo, and Covesus-Hemlock-Honeoye Lakes tallied 92 species, and Ithaca 91.

Before Cackling Goose was elevated to species level, its status in New York was not well understood. It appears to be a regular visitor to New York, with 32 seen on 12 counts this period. Single Ross's Geese were reported on three counts. Trumpeter Swan was seen on five counts, with the Montezuma count again high, this year with 49. Ring-necked Ducks reached record highs on numerous counts around the state.

Wild Turkey numbers were down, although the species was seen on a normal 60 counts. For the first time, no Northern Bobwhites were reported on a single New York Christmas count.

Red-necked Grebe was reported on 13 counts, and an Eared Grebe was found in Brooklyn. High counts of Pied-billed Grebes were reported, with 230 seen on 31 counts; about twice normal numbers.

Despite the warmer weather, Great Blue Herons were seen in normal numbers on the usual number of counts. Slightly unusual for the region, three Snowy Egrets, two Green Herons, and one Yellow-crowned Night-Heron were reported from Long Island.

Black Vultures were seen on 13 counts with a maximum of 122 on the Rockland count. Turkey Vultures continued to increase, reported on 24 counts. More counts reported them away from their normal Hudson Valley stronghold, with Syracuse reporting 8 and Ithaca a surprising 44.

A total of 353 Bald Eagles were reported from 52 counts, more than double the number reported on only 30 counts a decade before. Broad-winged Hawks were reported on three counts, only one with details. This is a species that is being more widely reported, but is still best confirmed with a photograph. Golden Eagle was reported from four counts.

A Black Rail seen on the Captree count unfortunately was on private property and not accessible to other observers. A single Sandhill Crane on the Fort Plain count was unusual, as was the total of 25 seen on the Montezuma count. Cranes breed in the Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge area in very small numbers, and it appears the surrounding wetland complex is becoming a minor staging ground as well.

A Marbled Godwit count week in Brooklyn was unusual, but even more so was the Red Phalarope photographed there on count day. Bonaparte's Gull numbers were higher than normal, with the Buffalo count reporting 15,420. Buffalo also reported its first California
Gull; the species is annual along the Niagara River but never before seen on this count. Parasitic Jaeger is seen annually from the Lake Ontario shore, but the individual seen on the Rochester count was its first.

Although it was a great winter for observing Snowy Owls in the central part of the continent, it was nothing special in New York, with only eight counts reporting them in spots where they often are seen. A Rufous Hummingbird appeared on the Montauk count.

Multiple counts reported low numbers of Downy and Hairy woodpeckers. Overall the numbers of these common residents were down, as were numbers for other resident woodland birds. Numbers for Red-bellied and Pileated woodpeckers remained at recent high levels.

It was a good year for Northern Shrikes, with 61 seen on 29 counts. Several counts commented on low Blue Jay numbers, but American Crow tallies were generally robust. Fish Crow observations totaled 2472 for the state, but mostly along the lower Hudson River.

Although a few counts reported low numbers of Yellow-rumped Warblers, overall it was an outstanding warbler year for New York with 11 species tallied. The reported Orange-crowned, Nashville, Pine, and Palm warblers, along with Common Yellowthroat and Yellow-breasted Chat are all regular in small numbers. Less common was the Wilson's Warbler in Rochester and the count week American Redstart in Brooklyn. Black-and-white Warbler is not common, so the fact that it was seen on three counts (Buffalo, Brooklyn, Orient) was remarkable. But, hands-down the warbler of the 112th count was a young female Grace's Warbler in Southern Nassau County. Rarely recorded east of the Mississippi, this species was a spectacular CBC find. It might have caused a lower than normal count for the circle, as many birders abandoned their assigned areas to get looks at the warbler. Fortunately it stayed around for several days and was well documented and photographed.

Although all but three counts reported at least one individual, American Tree Sparrow numbers were
down. Only 4700 were tallied, well below half of usual counts. Perhaps the unusually warm weather in November and December delayed the normal migration. White-crowned Sparrows were scarce, too.

A green Painted Bunting was found on the Northern Nassau County count, but only a few birders were allowed on the private property to see it. A single Dickcissel was found on the Staten Island count.

The mild weather made it a better than average year for wintering blackbirds. The Chatham count accounted for the bulk of them with 40,251 Red-winged Blackbirds, 33,000 Common Grackles, and 5033 Brown-headed Cowbirds. Baltimore Orioles were seen on four Long Island counts, as well as in Ooneonta.

It was a very modest winter finch year. Pine Grosbeaks were seen on two counts, as were Red Crossbills. White-winged Crossbills were seen on six counts, with Saranac Lake accounting for over half the state total of 222 individuals. A small number of Common Redpolls were found on four counts. Nineteen counts tallied 1848 Pine Siskins, somewhat less than a large November pulse of the species made some viewers expect. Evening Grosbeak continues to be a rare bird in New York, with only a count week report from New Woodstock-Southern Highlands, and five seen in Saranac Lake.

NEW JERSEY/PENNSYLVANIA

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There were no snow storms or nor’easters really to disrupt the 112th New Jersey/Pennsylvania CBC, and most counts were conducted under mild to almost balmy conditions. The unusually warm fall and early winter, with temperatures averaging 4 to 5 degrees above normal in November and December, probably contributed to the variety of late-lingering species. An impressive number of outstanding rarities, especially in Pennsylvania, consisted mostly of holdovers from the fall. Once again there were very few winter finches, and Evening Grosbeak was missed on all counts.

Thirty counts were again run in New Jersey, with the total of 204 species a significant improvement over last year’s dismal showing and three above the 20-year average. Despite an excellent list of rarities, Cape May could manage only 152 species, well below average and one fewer than last year. Barnegat took advantage of the better weather to jump 25 species from last year to a more typical 133, followed by Cumberland County (128) and Long Branch (118). There were no new high counts, but Marmora, which was regularly among the top 10 only 20 years ago, was last and has settled into the bottom third during the past decade.

The 36 species of waterfowl recorded included two Greater White-fronted Geese on both the Long Branch and Somerset County CBCs, as well as a Ross’s Goose on the Warren County-Northampton County count. Five different counts reported a total of 12 Blue-winged Teal, while Cape May (2) and Raritan Estuary (1) accounted for the three Eurasian Wigeon. Barnegat had three King Eiders and 23 Harlequin Ducks, but only 99 Common Eider, down from the 709 of the previous count.

A single Ruffed Grouse was found on the Walnut Valley count, continuing the dismal showing for this species in recent decades, and the Wild Turkey tally of 1222 was barely half of last year’s record.