



# The Passenger Pigeon

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## How Christmas Bird Count Helps Protect Species and Their Habitat

*(Courtesy National Audubon Society.  
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The data collected by observers over the past century allow researchers, conservation biologists, and other interested individuals to study the long-term health and status of bird populations across North America. When combined with other surveys such as the Breeding Bird Survey, it provides a picture of how the continent's bird populations have changed in time and space over the past hundred years.

The long term perspective made possible by the Christmas Bird Count is vital for conservationists. It informs strategies to protect birds and their habitat - and helps identify environmental issues with implications for people as well. For example, local trends in bird populations can indicate habitat fragmentation or signal an immediate environmental threat, such as groundwater contamination or poisoning from improper use of pesticides.

In the 1980's CBC data documented the decline of wintering populations of the American Black Duck, after which conservation measures were put into effect to reduce hunting pressure on this species. More recently, in 2009, the data were instrumental in [Audubon's Birds & Climate Change](#) analysis, which documented range shifts of bird species over time. Also in 2009

CBC data were instrumental in the collaborative report by the North American Bird Conservation Initiative, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service - [State of the Birds 2009](#). The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has included Audubon's climate change work from CBC data as one of 26 indicators of climate change in their [2012 report](#).

In 2007, the data were instrumental in the development of two Audubon State of the Birds Reports - [Common Birds in Decline](#), which revealed that some of America's most beloved and familiar birds have taken a nosedive over the past forty years, and [WatchList 2007](#), which identified 178 rarer species in the continental U.S. and 39 in Hawaii that are imperiled. These three reports helped scientists and policy-makers to both identify threats to birds and habitat, and promote broad awareness of the need to address them.

## Ten Things We Learned from Audubon's Christmas Bird Count

1. Birds are not Climate Skeptics, having [spoken](#) with their wings.
2. The Bald Eagle is [back](#); the Endangered Species Act Works
3. Many of America's most familiar and beloved birds are in serious [decline](#).
4. Eurasian Collared-Doves [invaded](#) America
5. [Peregrine Falcons](#) are no longer in trouble
6. Sage-grouse are in deep trouble [WatchList](#)

7. More and more [hummingbirds](#) are staying in the USA and Canada for winter
8. "Eastern" House Finches having been [moving west](#) for 60 years
9. How fast and how far [West Nile virus](#) spread
10. Birds are [early indicators](#) of environmental problems that can affect people

## Summaries of Some Bird Trends We See from CBC Data - Prior to the 100th Count

### Loons

Continentially, several trends stand out within the 98th CBC. There was a significant number of Pacific or Arctic/Pacific loons reported in eastern North America during this season. Several factors could be responsible for this, with the most obvious perhaps being the weather effects already discussed. However, winter-plumaged loons can be quite difficult to identify. As the considerable pool of observers on Christmas Bird Counts becomes better tuned to the nuances of basic-plumaged loons, it could be that the smattering of Pacific Loons wintering along the Atlantic coast of North America are finally being picked out from runt Common Loons, or distantly-viewed Red-throateds. A new identification challenge is already on the horizon for this taxon; separation of winter Pacific Loons from their Asiatic cousins, the Arctic Loon. Life is never simple in the world of birdwatching.

### Broad-winged Hawk

Another species being reported *and accepted* with increasing frequency on Christmas Bird Counts is Broad-winged Hawk. This species should not be in North America during the winter season at all, with the notable exception of the southern tip of Florida and the Keys. ID questions quickly arise when

immature-plumaged Broad-wingeds are reported in winter; the very similar appearing Red-shouldered Hawk is far more likely, and immature birds in molt can be an especially difficult identification challenge. However, some of the birds being reported are adult Broad-wingeds, and particularly in odd seasons like the one leading to the 98th Count reports of this species on counts must be carefully evaluated.

### Trumpeter Swan

Trumpeter Swans present an increasing challenge to participants on CBCs. Trumpeters until recently were restricted to their well-known western haunts, but this species is now being reintroduced to its former range in the midwest and east. Introduced Trumpeters are showing up along the Mississippi, as well as in eastern Canada and along the mid-Atlantic seaboard. Several of these introductions appear to be taking hold quite well, and CBC data are being used to evaluate the status of this species in central and eastern North America. As of yet Trumpeter Swan is only a "countable" species in the west, but very soon it may be established again in other regions, giving counters three species of swans to haggle over. In fact, a fourth species, Whooper Swan, may become established in North America as well -- check out the Newburyport, Massachusetts count!

### House Finch

Many studies have been conducted using Christmas Bird Count data tracking the spread of the House Finch across eastern North America since its introduction into the greater New York City area in the mid-1940s. A similar study crying to be undertaken is the documentation of the spread of Eurasian Collared-Dove from the southeast across the continent. This introduced species is being encountered in larger numbers in the southeast every year, and is extending its range rapidly both northward and westward. In the 98th Count

they were noted as up in numbers in Georgia/Florida, Alabama/Mississippi, first record in Arkansas, way up in numbers in Louisiana, and increasing in Texas. Much of North America may soon have another dove competing with Mourning Doves at feeders.

### **American Kestrel and Northern Bobwhite**

Two species reported upon for the past several years in this summary and throughout the Regional Summaries as universally in decline are American Kestrel and Northern Bobwhite. These two species again were reported throughout North America as in low or record low numbers. The long-term analysis of Christmas Bird Count data, well beyond that in the scope of this annual summary, should be undertaken to document the extent of these apparent declines. The status of Northern Bobwhite is especially open to question, as local releases of birds as a game species may tend to cloud the issue of the status of resident populations. Along this line, please note Dave Sonneborn's comments from Alaska! The Christmas Bird Count may also be tracking the disappearance of one species from the United States; Smooth-billed Ani. This species' stronghold has been south Florida, but Paul Sykes warns it may be on the way out, for reasons not understood. As illustrated in Paul's summary, CBC data dramatically document the decline of this species, and may be used to highlight species that should be of management concern.

### **Grasshopper Sparrow**

For the past eleven years we have tracked species of interest in the Christmas Bird Count in this summary. The [table](#) once again lists these species, starting with our diminutive skulker, the Grasshopper Sparrow. The number of birds reported this season was mid-way between sightings in the 96th and 97th Counts; fewer individuals were identified than last season, but in more count circles and in more regions. This makes sense given the weather pattern; more birds were

probably dispersed farther north, and the species may have been less concentrated on its North American wintering grounds. A species like Grasshopper Sparrow poses a continual enigma to researchers utilizing data such as Christmas Bird Counts; although presenting occasional identification questions, and not the easiest bird to locate outside the breeding season, it is a species of interest to many field observers, and it is common enough to be encountered with some frequency. The historical CBC data now becoming available through BirdSource will shed even better light on the long-term status of Grasshopper Sparrow than can be achieved in the year-to-year comparisons included here.

### **Bohemian Waxwing**

In this forum we do better with a species such as Bohemian Waxwing, our next suspect in [table](#) . There was a significant movement of this species during the 98th Count, though it did not follow the same pattern as the winter finch flight. Bohemian Waxwings were noted in unusually low numbers in their core range in Alaska and the interior of western Canada, but were in high numbers in eastern Canada, with large flocks appearing all the way to the Atlantic Coast in the Canadian Maritimes. There was a fair flight into northern New England, but with a sharp southern cut-off that restricted the flight to a much smaller region than that seen in the epic flight of the winter of the 94th Count. Areas in the northern Rockies also well-clad with large flocks of Bohemian Waxwings, but very few made it south of Wyoming. Overall there was a major, but well-defined movement away from the expected breeding areas of northwestern North America, producing large numbers of these wandering frugivores in some regions, but not to the extent of four years ago. Winter irruptive species are very well tracked by the Christmas Bird Count; observers are out in force over the entire continent,

and breadth and scope of these annual movements can be compared and contrasted over time utilizing the data collected.

### **Evening Grosbeak**

The remaining three species in [table](#), Evening Grosbeak, Red Crossbill, and Common Redpoll, illustrate the varying ways that species respond during superflight years. Evening Grosbeaks moved early in the flight, and in fact during the Christmas Bird Count period were tallied in only average numbers. Several areas, mostly in the midwest or central Rockies, experienced a paucity of these voracious feeder birds. The only region with even fair numbers of Evening Grosbeaks reported was northeastern North America, but even these totals were far below those of large flight year like the 94th and 96th Counts. Where did they go? Perhaps Evening Grosbeaks move southward in concentrated fashion during the fall, then dispersed into smaller flocks for the winter, resulting in fewer total birds tallied per count.

### **Red Crossbills**

Red Crossbills, when encountered, are seldom found in flocks approaching the size of Evening Grosbeak herds ([table](#)). Over much of North America it is a treat to encounter this species at all on a Christmas Bird Count. Therefore the total of 242 counts in 50 regions encountering a total of over 5500 Red Crossbills is notable, especially when we realize that this was just the tip of the iceberg. Crossbill numbers (both Reds and White-wingeds) built throughout the winter, with some birds dispersing well into the southern lowland regions of North America, only retreating northward after the end of February. Interestingly, there were very few Red Crossbills reported this season in the region where they did undertake a major irruption during the 97th Count, in the southern Rockies and the desert southwest. Perhaps they knew to emigrate to greener pastures. However, clouding the Red Crossbill picture is a taxonomic enigma: what

we currently identify as "Red Crossbill" may well be several closely-related species, separable in the field only by bill size and call notes. The "Type 2" Red Crossbills, the breeders in the southern Rockies and desert southwest sky islands, probably were not involved in this year's superflight.

### **Common Redpoll**

Then there were the redpolls ([table](#)). Much of the continent was covered by a chipping swarm of Common Redpolls during the winter season of 1997-1998, and they were well documented in the 98th Count. Common Redpoll was noted as being in high or record numbers in the Canadian Maritimes, Quebec/Ontario, New England, New York, Ohio, Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa, the Dakotas, and Montana/Idaho. Over 40,000 were found in Ontario alone, and they were only missed on one count in that province. A flock even made its way to Bermuda! Overall, about one-third of all North American counts encountered Common Redpolls, in numbers approaching the epic flight of the 94th Count. It is interesting to note that some sort of irruption of Common Redpolls happens roughly every other year; we'll see what happens in the 100th Count.

## **Trip Report**

*(Submitted by Jay Stenger, Trip Leader)*

The Cincinnati Bird Club conducted our annual November field trip to Brookville Lake today, Saturday, November 16th. Twelve enthusiastic participants met at the Miamitown Park & Ride at 8 AM and birded the Brookville Lake Region all day, followed by a short visit to Hueston Woods SP, before heading for home around 4:30 PM. We had an excellent day of birding and had 68 total species, many in large numbers. Our highlights include a female Black Scoter, an immature Golden Eagle, a Merlin,

5 Eurasian Collared-Doves, 25 Sandhill Cranes, 7 Bald Eagles, 25+ Dunlin, 2 Red-breasted Nuthatches, 4 Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers (3 in one tree) and over 1300 ducks (Anatidae) representing 14 species.

Below is our complete list to the best of my knowledge. This list was reviewed by 3 participants immediately after the field trip and some of the numbers of the more common species are best estimates:

Canada Goose 110, Mute Swan 4, Gadwall 230, American Wigeon 20, American Black Duck 6, Mallard 475, Northern Shoveler 60, Northern Pintail 3, Green-winged Teal 5, Redhead 9, Black Scoter (female) 1, Bufflehead 140, Common Goldeneye 1, Hooded Merganser 225, Common Loon 2, Pied-billed Grebe 47, Horned Grebe 4 (1 at Hueston), Double-crested Cormorant 2, Great Blue Heron 16, Black Vulture 90, Turkey Vulture 2, Bald Eagle 7 (at least, 1 at Hueston), Cooper's Hawk 1, Red-tailed Hawk 11, Golden Eagle (immature) 1, Merlin 1 (at Hueston), American Kestrel 5, American Coot 360, Sandhill Crane 25+, Killdeer 80~, Dunlin 25+, Bonaparte's Gull 1100, Ring-billed Gull 300 (150 at Hueston), Herring Gull 1 (imm), Rock Pigeon 60~, Mourning Dove 175~, Eurasian Collared-Dove 5, Belted Kingfisher 6, Red-bellied Woodpecker 10, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker 4, Downy Woodpecker 10~, Hairy Woodpecker 3, Northern Flicker 7, Pileated Woodpecker 3, Blue Jay 20+, American Crow 100+, Horned Lark 10, Carolina Chickadee 35, Tufted Titmouse 8, Red-breasted Nuthatch 2, White-breasted Nuthatch 10, Brown Creeper 4, Carolina Wren 8, Golden-crowned Kinglet 12, Eastern Bluebird 30+, American Robin 75~, Northern Mockingbird 6, European Starling 10,000+, Cedar Waxwing 20, Yellow-rumped Warbler 18, Song Sparrow 15, White-throated Sparrow 30~, Dark-eyed Junco 25, Northern Cardinal 20, Red-winged Blackbird 800+, House Finch 6, American Goldfinch 25, House Sparrow 50+.

## Local Calendar

### Audubon Society of Ohio

**Date:** Monday, Jan 20  
**Program:** *Conservation of Ohio's Endangered Salamander, the Hellbender*

See [www.cincinnati.audubon.org](http://www.cincinnati.audubon.org) for additional details.

### Cincinnati Nature Center

#### Field Trips

December 14	Bill McGill
January 11	Bill Stanley
January 25	Darlena Graham
February 8	Steve Bobonick
February 22	Lester Peyton (LBFT)

See [www.cincynature.org](http://www.cincynature.org) for additional details.

### Oxbow, Inc.

**Date:** Tuesday, Jan 14  
**Program:** *Audubon, Wilson, Ord, Bachman & Darwin*

See [www.oxbowinc.org](http://www.oxbowinc.org) for additional details.

# The 114<sup>th</sup> National Audubon Society Christmas Bird Counts

*(Contributed by Jay Stenger, Field Trip Coordinator)*

**\*Note: All National Audubon Society Christmas Bird Counts are now FREE.** Beginning this season the Audubon Society will no longer charge the \$5.00 field participation fee. To offset this loss of income “American Birds” will no longer be printed on paper and mailed to participants and Audubon will move to an online delivery of the summary results of the Christmas Bird Counts.

The Christmas Bird Count (CBC) is a long-standing program of the National Audubon Society, with over 100 years of citizen science involvement. It is an early-winter bird census, where thousands of volunteers across the US, Canada and 19 countries in the Western Hemisphere, go out over a 24-hour period to count birds. Last year’s count set an all-time high with 2,369 individual counts conducted. Those counts included a record total of over 71,531 participants.

Count volunteers search for birds within a designated 15-mile (24-km) diameter circle while counting every bird they see or hear throughout the day. It’s not just a species tally; all individual birds are counted, giving an indication of the total number of birds within the circle that day. If observers live within a CBC circle, they may arrange in advance to count the birds at their feeders and submit those data to the count compiler. All individual CBC’s are conducted during the period beginning December 14th through January 5<sup>th</sup> each season, and each count is conducted during one calendar day.

CBC participants are organized into groups or field parties by the compiler of the count. Each field party covers a prearranged and specific area within the 15-mile diameter count circle. And everyone is welcome and encouraged to participate regardless of ones birding skills. Compilers arrange field parties so that inexperienced observers are always out with seasoned CBC veterans. You don’t have to commit to the whole day either. You are welcome to participate for as long as you like, a half-day or even a few hours

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The first CBC was done on Christmas Day of 1900 as an alternative activity to an event called the “side hunt” where people chose sides, then went out and shot as many birds as they could. The group that came in with the largest number of dead birds won the event. Frank Chapman, a famed ornithologist at the American Museum of Natural History and the editor of Bird-Lore (which became the publication of the National Association of Audubon Societies when that organization formed in 1905) recognized that declining bird populations could not withstand wanton over-hunting, and proposed to count birds on Christmas Day rather than shoot them.

There are many Christmas Bird Counts to choose from and we encourage you to take part in as many as possible. But we also hope

you can find the time to participate in at least one of our local Christmas Bird Counts listed below. If you have any questions concerning a particular count feel free to contact that count's compiler.

For more information on Audubon Society Christmas Bird Counts visit the following website:

<http://birds.audubon.org/christmas-bird-count>

## **2013-2014 Greater Cincinnati (Local) National Audubon Society Christmas Bird Counts:**

Hamilton-Fairfield Christmas Bird Count  
Saturday, December 14, 2013  
Compiler Mike Busam, (513) 755-0057,  
[mbusam@gmail.com](mailto:mbusam@gmail.com)

Ohio River Christmas Bird Count  
(27th Annual)  
Sunday, December 15, 2013  
Compiler Paul Wharton, (513) 353-3403,  
[pwharton@fuse.net](mailto:pwharton@fuse.net)

Cincinnati Christmas Bird Count  
(67th Annual)  
Sunday, December 29, 2013  
Compiler Jay Stenger, (513) 522-8147,  
[jaystenger@cinci.rr.com](mailto:jaystenger@cinci.rr.com)

Western Hamilton County Christmas Bird Count (48<sup>th</sup> Annual)  
Sunday, December 22, 2013  
Compiler Ned Keller, (513) 941-6497,  
[keller@one.net](mailto:keller@one.net)

Michaela Farm/Oldenburger CBC  
Saturday, December 28, 2013  
Compiler Wayne Wauligman (513) 922-4430  
or (513) 680-4447  
[wrrwpgw@aol.com](mailto:wrrwpgw@aol.com)

East Fork Christmas Bird Count  
(31<sup>th</sup> Annual)  
Saturday, January 4, 2014  
Compiler Joe Bens, (513) 353-4229,  
[joebens@live.com](mailto:joebens@live.com)



# The Passenger Pigeon

## Newsletter of the Cincinnati Bird Club

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**Park VIP: John Stewart**

2013-2014 Dues:

If you haven't sent in your dues yet for the September  
2013 - May 2014 birding season, please fill out the form  
below and mail it in along with your membership fees.

Visit us on the Web at:

[www.cincinnatibirds.com/birdclub/index.php](http://www.cincinnatibirds.com/birdclub/index.php)

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## Bird Club Membership

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Make your check payable to Cincinnati Bird Club, and mail to our Treasurer:

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