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Don Paseka

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2016 Christmas Bird Counts

by Don Paseka

Fourteen Nebraska counts were held during the 2016 CBC season, which is one less than last year. The Harrison and Crawford counts were cancelled this year, but in the opposite corner of the state, a new count was started that includes Indian Cave State Park. An unusually mild November and a seasonable start to December were followed by a modest cold snap during the second week of the month. The Harlan County count was run early in the period on the 15th with ample open water, and it produced a record number of species (90) for that circle. But in the first weekend of the official count period, a storm swept across the state bringing snow, high winds, and bitter cold temperatures. Several counts were postponed, and the results for those that were run (Indian Cave, Branched Oak and Lincoln on the 17th, 18th, and 22nd respectively) reflected the tough conditions with little or no open water.

As the count period progressed, the weather quickly moderated allowing for good tallies on several of the remaining and postponed counts. Across all counts, 259,403 individuals were counted, representing 134 species. Eleven species set new, or tied previous high counts. Twenty-three species were found in only one circle, and 15 of those were a single individual. Only 11 species were found in all circles.

Single Black and White-winged Scoters were found at Lake McConaughy and were the only two species of Anseriformes counted this year that are not found annually on a Nebraska CBC. The total of 56,969 Snow Geese, most of which (56,700) were found at Harlan County, was the best count for that species since 129,415 were counted in 2002.

It would be an extreme understatement to say that Ross's Geese did well this year. They had the 7th highest total number of individuals for any species this year. Harlan County produced an amazing number (6,300) of them, and with four more found at DeSoto resulted in a new total high count of 6,304 Ross's Geese. This dwarfed the previous high count of 701 from 2013, and drops the 37 Ross's Geese counted last year into third best count for this species.

You weren't imagining things if you thought that there were a lot of Trumpeter Swans being reported this winter. A total of 316 birds were found in seven circles, more than doubling the previous high count of 155 from 2013. Trumpeters have been counted annually in this millennium.

Some diving duck species have been doing very well recently. For the third year in a row, Ring-necked Duck set a new high count; this year's tally of 419 edged out last year's number (404). The number of Buffleheads (425) bettered last year's tally of 424 and is second only to the 843 counted in 2001. While not a new high

count, the 54 Hooded Mergansers found in seven circles stands in second place behind the 90 counted in 2012.

Galliformes were a mixed bag this year. Northern Bobwhite numbers appear to be recovering. The 258 found this year is the best total since 1994 when 292 were counted. Even though they were tallied in nine circles, Ring-necked Pheasants were hard to find in respectable numbers. This year's tally of 46 birds is the lowest since 43 were counted in 1998.

Last year, the counts produced a grebe "Grand Slam". All six grebe species were found, and a total of 358 individuals were counted in five different circles. But this year there was a total of only six individuals found. The 5 Pied-billed Grebes and a lone Western Grebe were all found at Lake McConaughy.

A couple of diurnal raptors had a good year. The total of 404 Bald Eagles found in 13 circles is second only to the 576 from 2014, and the 40 Cooper's Hawks are second only to the 42 counted last year. Unexpected was a single Golden Eagle found on the Ames count for the first time.

Gull numbers were unimpressive with only seven species found. But the 4 Lesser Black-backed Gulls found at Lake McConaughy plus one at Harlan County topped the old high count of 3 for that species from 2014.

Most of the Columbiformes had a great year. For the fourth year in a row, Eurasian-collared Doves set a new high count. The 2,585 birds counted this year topped the 2396 found last year. A single White-winged Dove found at Scottsbluff marked the third year in a row this species has appeared on a Nebraska count, but just the fourth time ever that this bird has been found during the count period. A new high of 612 Mourning Doves was counted in 12 circles, topping the old high of 578 from 1996.

A pair of unrelated woodland species tied previous high counts. The 25 Barred Owls found in 9 circles was the same number counted in both 2005 and 2011. This year's count of 9 Pileated Woodpeckers matched the number found in 2013. Although the characteristic rectangular excavations had been observed in the past in the Ames circle, this year a bird was heard giving the "flicker on steroids" call. Up until now, this species had been found only on the Omaha and DeSoto counts.

A pleasant surprise was the lone Rock Wren found at Lake McConaughy. The only previous record was also from that circle, in 2003. This year's number of 54 Carolina Wrens found in 6 circles is second only to the 65 counted in 2012.

A single Grey Catbird was found on the Omaha count. This is only the third year that this species has been found on a Nebraska CBC. One had been found in Grand Island in 1987 and two singles were found in 2002, one each in the Branched Oak-Seward and Lake McConaughy circles.

A record high number of Meadowlarks were counted this season. The 1,992 found in 13 circles topped the previous high count of 1,832 set just last year. And the final good news is that the Lake McConaughy count rounded up 6 Cassin's Finches this year. This number is second only to the 14 found in 2002 in the same circle.

Not surprisingly, a few species' tallies were disappointing this year. Virginia Rails, which are usually found in small numbers at Lake McConaughy, were missed for the first time since 1996.

But two other species which were still found this year are showing alarming trends. Black-billed Magpies continue to be scarce. Although the record low count for them of 16 was back in 1967, the high count of 303 for magpies happened relatively recently in 2001. With the onset of West Nile Virus, however, their numbers dropped, beginning in 2006 with a total of only 39. This year's total of 35 ranks as the fourth lowest ever, just ahead of the 32 in 2013 and 34 in 2010. Also, for the first time ever, Black-capped Chickadee was missed entirely on the Scottsbluff count. This year's total of 614 chickadees for all circles is the lowest since 1975 when only 527 were counted, and at that time, there were only 6 active circles. Peak numbers of Black-capped Chickadee occurred from 1986 to 1989, ranging from 2,160 to 2,364 during that four year period. With the onset of West Nile Virus, chickadee numbers fell to a low of 681 in 2007, but then gradually recovered to a peak of 1,307 in 2011. However, their numbers have declined every year since then.

Fortunately, three other underperforming species this year don't appear to be part of an ongoing population decline. Cedar Waxwings had the lowest count (519) since 1997 when only 498 were found and the 38 Pine Siskins counted was the lowest total since 17 were counted in 1991. These species are both known for winter irruptions based on food availability which has resulted in a great deal of variability on CBCs. While the 3 Rusty Blackbirds is the lowest total since a single bird was tallied in 1996, last year's total of 147 was the highest in the past twenty years.

2016-2017 CBC Site Data

	Date	Species	Individuals	Observers	Total Party Hours ^d	Low Temp.	High Temp.	Sky	Precipitation
Ames	21 Dec	66	6,511	14	49	2.5	50	pt. cloudy	none
Branched Oak-Seward	18 Dec	61	5,300	33	43	-13	13	clear	none
Calamus-Loup	27 Dec	58	11,843	7	23	17	43	clear/pt. cloudy	none
DeSoto-Boyer	30 Dec	73	25,359	28	73	22	46	clear/pt. cloudy	none
Grand Island	20 Dec	55	8,513	19	20	5	36	pt. cloudy	none
Harlan Co.	15 Dec	90	91,448	18	60	8	30	pt. cloudy	none
Indian Cave	17 Dec	24	1,020	5	4	24	34	cloudy	lt. rain
Lake McConaughy	31 Dec	89	17,892	17	61	23	44	clear/pt. cloudy	none
Lincoln	22 Dec	67	19,736	33	114	14	47	clear	none
Norfolk	30 Dec	51	16,533	17	32	21	50	clear	none
North Platte	30 Dec	76	15,620	27	49	18	58	clear	none
Omaha	28 Dec	73	14,123	37	67	30	48	cloudy/pt. clear	none
Ponca S.P.	23 Dec	47	2,722	14	32	15	33	cloudy	lt. snow
Scottsbluff	20 Dec	60	22,783	11	26	21	51	cloudy	none
a-total (sum of column values)		134	259,403 ^a	280 ^b	653 ^d	16 ^b	42 ^b		
b-average				191 ^c					
c-number of people who participated in CBCs. Note: many observers participated in more than one CBC.									
d-the sum of hours spent driving and walking during daylight, excluding feeder watching and owling									

2016-2017 Christmas Bird Count

	Ames	Branched Oak Lake	Calamus-Loup	DeSoto-Boyer	Grand Island	Harlan Co.	Indian Cave	Lake McConaughy
Gr White-fronted Goose			1	8		1		
Snow Goose	3			43	5	56,700	100	2
Ross's Goose				4		6,300		
Cackling Goose	33	4	43	117	18	12		24
Canada Goose	2,003	501	5,018	10,336	4,679	1,107		5,021
Trumpeter Swan	7	4	114	135				5
Tundra Swan								
Wood Duck					6	cw		
Gadwall	4			10	1	2		62
American Wigeon				2		10		51
Mallard	189	294	158	6,347	757	10,300		1,597
Northern Shoveler					25	24		
Northern Pintail						7		4
Green-winged Teal				2		cw		
Canvasback						1		220
Redhead	1					3		50
Ring-necked Duck				76		1		246
Greater Scaup								40
Lesser Scaup	2	1			2	1		218
White-winged Scoter								1
Black Scoter								1
Bufflehead				2		1		407
Common Goldeneye	11	4	27	202	12	82		168
Hooded Merganser			1		2	21		2
Common Merganser	39		18	19	8	10,400		777
Red-breasted Merganser						2		13
Ruddy Duck						1		16
Duck sp.	150			5				
Northern Bobwhite		31	39		2	117		
Ring-necked Pheasant	cw	4	2	4		5		
Sharp-tailed Grouse			5					
Greater Prairie-Chicken			9		45			5
Wild Turkey	4	148	140	238	71	57		

2016-2017 Christmas Bird Count

	Ames	Branched Oak Lake	Calamus-Loup	DeSoto-Boyer	Grand Island	Harlan Co.	Indian Cave	Lake McConaughy
Pied-billed Grebe								5
Western Grebe								1
Rock Pigeon	80	3	59	107	522	33		121
Eurasian Collared-Dove	39	9	44	2	187	74		347
White-winged Dove								
Mourning Dove	16	29	8	12		9	4	4
American Coot	7				1	167		225
Killdeer	cw				2	cw		11
Calidris sp.						1		
Wilson's Snipe	1							1
Bonaparte's Gull						12		3
Ring-billed Gull			6			511		300
California Gull						1		6
Herring Gull			1			135		183
Thayer's Gull						1		2
Lesser Black-backed Gull						1		4
Glaucous Gull								1
Gull sp.			5					
Common Loon						1		
Double-crested Cormorant						22		
Great Blue Heron	4		2	1	3			10
Bald Eagle	29	4	50	73	12	83		41
Northern Harrier	4	7	2	9	8	23		5
Sharp-shinned Hawk		7		8	1	3		7
Cooper's Hawk	1	4	3	4	1	7		1
Accipiter sp.			1					
Red-tailed Hawk	44	30	16	90	15	56	7	29
Rough-legged Hawk	5	17	1	3	6	8		2
Ferruginous Hawk								
Buteo sp.		2	1	1				
Golden Eagle	1					cw		1
Eastern Screech-Owl	3	4	4	2	4	5		
Great Horned Owl	4	4	17	3	1	3		6

2016-2017 Christmas Bird Count

	Ames	Branched Oak Lake	Calamus-Loup	DeSoto-Boyer	Grand Island	Harlan Co.	Indian Cave	Lake McConaughy
Winter Wren	2			2				
Marsh Wren								8
Carolina Wren	1	3		1		4		
Golden-crowned Kinglet	10	12	1	4		7		14
Ruby-crowned Kinglet						2		
Eastern Bluebird	34	108		98		69		19
Mountain Bluebird								29
Townsend's Solitaire		1						77
Hermit Thrush	2							
American Robin	79	974	3,782	33	20	293		3,433
Gray Catbird								
Northern Mockingbird								
European Starling	1,616	491	1,382	1,754	686	1,903	12	2,185
Cedar Waxwing		11	33	159	3	90		21
House Sparrow	150	215	153	216	383	58	373	231
House Finch	32	64	92	9	43	78	56	106
Purple Finch	3		2	4		1		
Cassin's Finch								6
Red Crossbill								
Pine Siskin		4				1	3	17
American Goldfinch	74	506	144	212	70	184	146	154
Lapland Longspur	65					144		30
Snow Bunting								6
Yellow-rumped Warbler	3	18	4			23		28
Spotted Towhee	1			1	2	3		
Eastern Towhee		1						
American Tree Sparrow	89	328	132	722	145	379	4	135
Field Sparrow				1				
Fox Sparrow	1	4				3		
Song Sparrow	11	2	3	30	6	28		10
Lincoln's Sparrow								1
Swamp Sparrow	1					1		
White-throated Sparrow		1	1	13				

2016-2017 Christmas Bird Count

	Lincoln	Norfolk	North Platte	Omaha	Ponca SP	Scottsbluff	TOTAL
Gr White-fronted Goose	1		3	1			15
Snow Goose	104			7		5	56,969
Ross's Goose							6,304
Cackling Goose	249	8	55	97		99	759
Canada Goose	9,163	7,471	3,722	5,499	4	10,776	65,300
Trumpeter Swan			14	37			316
Tundra Swan				1			1
Wood Duck						5	11
Gadwall	9		63			8	159
American Wigeon			60	1		35	159
Mallard	2,284	250	4,172	1,128	160	6,642	34,278
Northern Shoveler			17			55	121
Northern Pintail			85			13	109
Green-winged Teal			95			3	100
Canvasback							221
Redhead						20	74
Ring-necked Duck		9	40	6		41	419
Greater Scaup						1	41
Lesser Scaup	2	3	5			85	319
White-winged Scoter							1
Black Scoter							1
Bufflehead						15	425
Common Goldeneye	2	1	106	33	48	127	823
Hooded Merganser	12			6		10	54
Common Merganser	3		4	91	51		11,410
Red-breasted Merganser							15
Ruddy Duck							17
Duck sp.							155
Northern Bobwhite	57	12					258
Ring-necked Pheasant	1	3	13		7	7	46
Sharp-tailed Grouse							5
Greater Prairie-Chicken			47				106
Wild Turkey	5	75	407	73	43		1,261

2016-2017 Christmas Bird Count

	Lincoln	Norfolk	North Platte	Omaha	Ponca SP	Scottsbluff	TOTAL
Pied-billed Grebe							5
Western Grebe							1
Rock Pigeon	1,321	394	184	413	124	255	3,616
Eurasian Collared-Dove	62	36	292	18	25	1,450	2,585
White-winged Dove						1	1
Mourning Dove	149		1	341	2	37	612
American Coot	5		13			75	493
Killdeer			1				14
Calidris sp.							1
Wilson's Snipe		1	1			1	5
Bonaparte's Gull							15
Ring-billed Gull			16	9			842
California Gull							7
Herring Gull			1				320
Thayer's Gull							3
Lesser Black-backed Gull							5
Glaucous Gull			1				2
Gull sp.							5
Common Loon							1
Double-crested Cormorant							22
Great Blue Heron	5	1	6	2			34
Bald Eagle	4	8	34	44	15	7	404
Northern Harrier	6	2	6	9	6	2	89
Sharp-shinned Hawk	2	2	4	3		1	38
Cooper's Hawk	9		2	5	1	2	40
Accipiter sp.							1
Red-tailed Hawk	72	28	51	115	26	3	582
Rough-legged Hawk	2		9		20	14	87
Ferruginous Hawk						1	1
Buteo sp.	3					2	9
Golden Eagle					1	1	4
Eastern Screech-Owl		1			3		26
Great Horned Owl	6	14	4	3	1	3	69

2016-2017 Christmas Bird Count

	Lincoln	Norfolk	North Platte	Omaha	Ponca SP	Scottsbluff	TOTAL
Barred Owl	1	2		7	1		25
Long-eared Owl		3	2				8
Short-eared Owl							2
N. Saw-whet Owl							1
owl sp							4
Belted Kingfisher	5	1	12	6		2	52
Red-headed Woodpecker				2			6
Red-bellied Woodpecker	90	15	9	111	33		433
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	1		1				8
Downy Woodpecker	112	15	17	87	23	7	483
Hairy Woodpecker	11	4	3	25	6	1	119
Northern Flicker	56	15	24	33	9	23	404
Red-shafted			10			1	28
Red x Yellow-shafted						5	9
Yellow-shafted	35		10	33	9	3	182
unspecified	21	15	4			14	185
Pileated Woodpecker				6			9
American Kestrel	26	6	22	21	3	28	172
Merlin	1	1	1	3	1		13
Prairie Falcon	1		1			1	9
falcon sp				1			1
Northern Shrike	1	1		1	4	2	31
Blue Jay	237	64	11	87	33	99	869
Black-billed Magpie			2			15	35
American Crow	79	46	1,440	98	107	1	2,371
Horned Lark	8	2	64	1		35	1,173
Black-capped Chickadee	76	20	1	169	37		614
Tufted Titmouse				19			47
Red-breasted Nuthatch	8	5	12	1			57
White-breasted Nuthatch	130	30	13	161	25		594
Pygmy Nuthatch						10	10
Brown Creeper	15	8	4	7	2		70
Rock Wren							1

2016-2017 Christmas Bird Count

	Lincoln	Norfolk	North Platte	Omaha	Ponca SP	Scottsbluff	TOTAL
Winter Wren				5			9
Marsh Wren							8
Carolina Wren	15			30			54
Golden-crowned Kinglet	24	8	9	7			96
Ruby-crowned Kinglet			1				3
Eastern Bluebird	53		1	61	49		492
Mountain Bluebird							29
Townsend's Solitaire			3			17	98
Hermit Thrush				1			3
American Robin	308	21	1,670	77	17	142	10,849
Gray Catbird				1			1
Northern Mockingbird	1						1
European Starling	2,426	7,250	973	1,891	340	1,146	24,055
Cedar Waxwing	74	2	73	16	31	6	519
House Sparrow	553	167	341	208	81	437	3,566
House Finch	102	62	125	22	5	134	930
Purple Finch	12			14	1		37
Cassin's Finch							6
Red Crossbill						1	1
Pine Siskin	7		2			4	38
American Goldfinch	297	41	93	245	147	268	2,581
Lapland Longspur			3		1		243
Snow Bunting			1				7
Yellow-rumped Warbler	14			1			91
Spotted Towhee	1		1	1			10
Eastern Towhee							1
American Tree Sparrow	456	58	151	390	530	74	3,593
Field Sparrow							1
Fox Sparrow	7			4	1		20
Song Sparrow	15		2	55		4	166
Lincoln's Sparrow			1	4			6
Swamp Sparrow				2			4
White-throated Sparrow	12		2	22			51

