

The 2011/2012 Christmas Bird Count

By Paul W. Sweet

*"Arctic" Great Horned Owl.
Meredosia Island Christmas Bird
Count, Spunky Bottoms Preserve,
Brown County. 19 December 2011.
Photo by Michael Ward.*



After the cold counts Illinois birders had to contend with the last two years, an early cold snap in late November and early December must have seemed ominous. However, things warmed up nicely, and only 6 counts failed to reach the freezing mark. Surprisingly, the coldest count for the state turned out to be Lake Shelbyville, which only reached 28 degrees F on count day. On the other hand, 8 counts exceeded 50, and 15 recorded low temperatures above freezing. Needless to say, running water was open on all counts, with only 4 reporting any freezing, and only 3 counts reporting still water as completely frozen. Only 10 counts reported any snow fall, with a maximum of 3 inches at Carlyle. To counter this, 28 counts reported winds of at least 15 mph, with 16 counts dealing with winds of at least 20, and 4 reporting winds of at least 40 mph. Illini State Park reported peak winds of 48 mph. The count also followed an epic fall for western vagrants in the Midwest, so the total count of 176 species seen on count day (with 4 more count week birds) should be no surprise.

Overall, 65 counts reported this year, with 1,122 observers contributing 3467.75 party hours. Despite more observers, this was fewer party hours than last year, possibly because of the high winds so many counts had. An additional 190 feeder observers contributed 416 hours. As always, Fermilab had the most observers with 138, while Quincy reported the most feeder-watchers with 22. Three counts reached 100 species, with Union County at the top with 107. Illinois' first CBC Mountain Bluebird was at Collinsville. Other notable finds included Pacific Loon, Prairie Falcon, and Spotted Sandpiper at Clinton Lake; Lesser Yellowlegs and Dunlin at Meredosia; a California Gull at Chicago Lakefront, a Rufous Hummingbird at Chicago Urban; a Cape May Warbler at Chautauqua; and a Henslow's Sparrow photographed at Evanston.

Ducks through Herons

Greater White-fronted Goose numbers were an impressive 208 percent above the 10-year average, Snow Goose were 77 percent above, and Ross's Goose numbers were up 22 percent. Only Cackling Goose had a below-average year. Cypress Creek's 15,216 Greater White-fronted Geese alone were more than the 10-year average. Even with the impressive goose showing, this year might well be termed the year of the swan – 419 swans were reported, including 181 Mute Swans on 18 counts, 781 Tundra Swans on 11 counts (including 722 at Clinton, IA), and a record 251 Trumpeter Swans, led by Union County with 63. Most dabbling duck numbers were higher than last year, with Cypress Creek reporting impressive totals of Gadwall (1639), Northern Shoveler (1471), and Northern Pintail (2149). Clinton, IA had 6,540 Canvasback. Pere Marquette's 2,500 Ring-necked Ducks led an impressive 8450 state total, while all three scoters were reported, including lone Surf Scoters at Bloomington, Calumet, and Davenport, 8 White-winged at Waukegan, and a lone Black at Barrington. Only 1 Long-tailed Duck was reported (at Evanston). Peoria reported 880 Ruddy Ducks, leading a state total of 4,028.

Ring-necked Pheasant numbers were down drastically from last year, with only 163 reported on 25 counts, and Newton only reported 11 Greater Prairie-Chickens this year. Wild Turkeys were only slightly below last year, but only 107 Northern Bobwhite were reported on 14 counts. This is the lowest total for the species since 1941.