THE 126th CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT IN KENTUCKY

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Forty-two Christmas Bird Counts (CBCs) were conducted this year in the Commonwealth of Kentucky. CBC species counts have been increasing in the past 20 years, averaging 139 per year. This year, a total of 147 species was recorded; eight more than last year, and likely the highest ever for Kentucky.[1] One additional species seen during Count Week, Red-necked Grebe, was observed in Louisville. The total number of individuals counted were 309,865 birds, down from last year by just under 30,000 birds (after the prior year's drop of 83,000 birds). The top species count for this CBC season was Louisville with 102 species, its highest ever, under difficult count-day conditions; next was Allen County East with 101 species, its third-highest; followed by Ballard County with 92 species; and Barren River Lake with 90 species. Nine count circles reported between 89 and 82 species; eleven observed between 78 and 70 species; and the remaining 18 counted between 69 and 48 species.

Weather averaged slightly cooler in Kentucky compared with last year. Lows ranged from 5°F to 66°F, with an average of 32°F. There were 26 CBCs with low temperatures at or below freezing, two more than last year. The high temperatures ranged from 14°F to 71°F, with an average of 49.3°F. Like last year, all-day or most-day cloudy weather predominated the count period (34 counts). Very little precipitation fell during CBCs this year. Light rain was reported on only four counts, only one of which was all-day light rain. Heavy rain fell all day on one count, cutting it short with a worse afternoon forecast (Hardin County). There was no snowfall on Kentucky CBCs, and there was only about an inch of accumulation on the ground in Louisville. Rivers and creeks were flowing without ice, except two CBCs reporting some freezing at the edges. Lakes and ponds were mostly open, with 11 count circles indicating some ice; two indicated completely frozen still water. The distribution of count days across the count period narrowed, occurring on 17 of the 23-day span, compared to 20 last year. Once again, the traditional holidays occurred mid-week. More than half of the CBCs, 23, occurred on the seven weekend days of the count period. The biggest count day was Saturday, December 20, with ten CBCs conducted.

There were numerous highlights this CBC season. Most are on eBird checklists, many documented by photographs and/or audio files, and all rarities have identification notes. Birders tallied 29 species of waterfowl this year, which is one more than last year. Important observations include Black-bellied Whistling-Duck (five at Elkton); Ross's Goose (22 on eight counts, doubling last year's numbers, plus one count week); Cackling Goose (nine on four counts); Trumpeter Swan (two at Clark County); Tundra Swan (21 on two counts); and Blue-winged Teal (one at Land Between the Lakes). Additional water bird species of note include Virginia Rail (two at Paradise); Sora (one at Elkton); Dunlin (three at Allen County East); Least Sandpiper (17 on two counts, plus one count week); Western Sandpiper (one at Allen County East); Great Black-backed Gull (one at Barren River Lake); Lesser Black-backed Gull (ten on two counts, plus two count week); Iceland Gull (one Thayer's at Louisville); Forster's Tern (nine on two counts); Red-necked Grebe (count week at Louisville); Red-throated Loon (one at Green River Lake); Black-crowned Night-Heron (one at Louisville); and Great Egret (three on three counts). Notable raptor reports include Golden Eagle (three on two counts); Rough-legged Hawk (one at Burlington); Barn Owl (15 on eight counts); Short-eared Owl (15 on eight counts, plus one count week); Merlin (eight on six counts); and Peregrine Falcon (five on five counts).

Additional highlights include White-eyed Vireo (one at Somerset); Common Raven (six on two counts); Brown-headed Nuthatch (two at Cumberland Falls); Northern House Wren (seven on five counts); Gray Catbird (two on two counts); Snow Bunting (one Indiana bird in the Louisville CBC); Vesper Sparrow (one at Louisville); LeConte's Sparrow (one at Ballard County); Western Meadowlark (one at Ballard County); Brewer's Blackbird (three at Breckinridge County);

Orange-crowned Warbler (four on three counts); Indigo Bunting (one at Bowling Green); and Dickcissel (one at Elkton).

The ten most numerous species were European Starling (62,513); Sandhill Crane (29,346); Common Grackle (20,607); Brown-headed Cowbird (20,000); American Robin (15,125); Red-winged Blackbird (14,757); Mallard (13,153); Canada Goose (10,081); Rusty Blackbird (8,700); and Snow Goose (7,654). There were 21 common species that were reported on all 42 counts (up five from last year), and 21 species were observed on only one CBC each (up five from last year). It is noted that there were eight additional species seen on all but one CBC. Six CBCs tallied over 15,000 birds: Louisville (39,414); Elkton (34,657); Breckinridge County (26,066); Ballard County (20,641); Allen County East (18,998); and Lexington (15,911).

CBC participation has continued to grow over the past ten years. This year's 534 field observers exceeded last year by 6, after the prior year's increase of 32. Birders walked 488 miles over the course of 614.25 hours. Observers drove 6,044.5 miles over 789.5 hours in their sections of the count circle. Bicyclists pedaled 147 miles over 37.25 hours. Participants rode horse-and-buggies 73 miles for 28 hours. Finally, boaters paddled 24 miles for 5 hours.

The following effort data are compared to the ten-year rolling average. These averages appear in parentheses after the current numbers in the following effort categories: The 534 field participants (455.4) in 267 parties (224.5), including some multi-CBC observers, logged a total of 1,474 (1,286.3) party-hours and 6,776.5 (6,946.2) party-miles. Birders spent 26 (28.5) hours owling while traveling 67 (88.1) miles. Up 23 feeder watchers from last year, 56 observers (25.8) logged 39.5 hours (42.2) watching numerous feeding stations. Putting these data in context, this year's 42 CBCs compare to the ten-year average of 38.4. Our species total of 147 compares with the ten-year average of 141.9 species. Kentucky birders always put in a solid effort!

Thank you to the 590 field and feeder observers who participated in this year's counts. My special gratitude goes to the 36 hard-working compilers who organized and executed their counts, submitted count results online, and endured my many requests and questions. I want to commend especially compilers who volunteer to run multiple CBCs: Kathy Caminiti (two), Lisa Combs (two), Roseanna Denton (three), Blaine Ferrell (two), Steve Kistler (two), Brainard Palmer-Ball (three), and David Svetich (two). To those who completed Rare Bird Reports or otherwise documented the unusual birds, thank you very much for your contributions to the CBCs and to community science.

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[1] Detailed statewide numbers have been aggregated only back to the 2007-08 CBC season; this work is continuing. Prior to the 2017-18 CBC season, not all Kentucky CBCs were submitted to Audubon's CBC Portal, thus the data not included in that database had to be compiled manually by the author.