The 126th Christmas Bird Count in Montana

By Rosemary H. Leach, CBC Regional Editor – Montana

Number of Counts Run, Effort, Number of Species Found

During Montana's Christmas Bird Count (CBC) #126, we ran **31 count circles**, which was the same as last year, and similar to the average from the period CBC #115-125 (32). This year we added a new count at Moore Bench, which is SW of Lewistown and comprised of birders from a closely-knit Amish community. They found 37 species, and spent part of the day birding by bicycle. They had 11 field participants as well as 2 feeder-watchers, which is a good showing for their first count. Welcome, Moore Bench! Several of our older count circles have been abandoned, so it is nice to gain a new enthusiastic group in central Montana.

This year, our Montana counts found a yearly cumulative total of **147 species** (**Appendix 1**), which is a bit higher than the average from the period CBC #115-125 (142). The high yearly total during that period was 153 species (from last year), and the low was 133 (during CBC #123). No new species were found this year, so our cumulative total through all years and counts remains at **224 species**.

Effort (the total of daytime field party-hours) was the 3rd lowest from the period #115-125, but the number of individual birds seen was about average for the period (**Figure 1**). The number of field participants was **720**, which was a bit higher than average (691). Snow cover was generally absent-to-low this year, which allowed for easy walking, leading to thorough coverage of count circles. Finding similar numbers and species of birds with less effort and above-average numbers of field participants likely resulted from good overall circle coverage including the ability to visit important circle microsites.

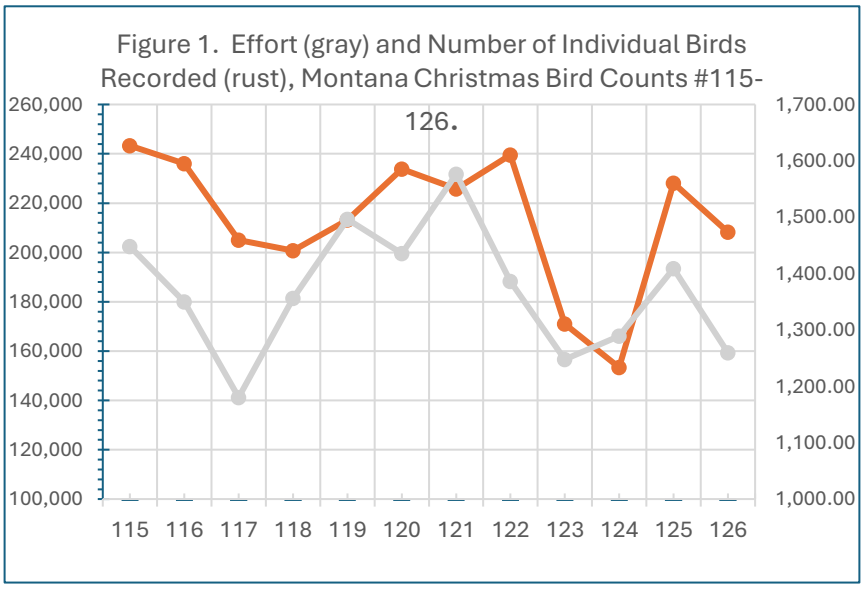


Figure 1. Effort (gray) and Number of Individual Birds Recorded (rust), Montana Christmas Bird Counts #115-126.

Recall that effort is the metric we use to divide bird numbers to compute birds per party-hour, which is used throughout this report to standardize values in order to compare data between years and counts.

Missoula again had the high number of **participants** (**98 field** and **8 feeder-watchers**). McNeil Slough had the fewest (1). Our preference is for at least 10 field participants per circle.

The total number of feeder-watchers (122) was the lowest from the period CBC #115-125, and well below the average (153) from that period.

This year, Ninepipe tallied the **most species (88)**, but 3 other counts also topped 80—Bigfork (86), Missoula (85), and Kalispell (83). The **record** belongs to **Bigfork, with 98 species** found during CBC # **118**. The average number of species found this year was 51. McNeil Slough again had the fewest species (10), followed by Upper Swan Valley and West Yellowstone (with 20 species each).

Four species were found only during a count week (CW—defined as 3 days before and 3 days after a count day). CW birds are recorded, but do not add to the total of species seen on a count day. CW birds this year included Greater White-fronted Goose (from Fort Peck), Ross's Goose (Great Falls), Great Gray Owl (from 3 counts—Hamilton, Kalispell, and Stevensville), and Gyrfalcon (Ninepipe).

Unusual Species

Many circles reported high amounts of open water, which contributed to finding many species of waterfowl this year, as well as the most rare bird for the year—a **Greater Yellowlegs** at Three Forks (with photos in eBird (https://ebird.org/checklist/S290874875). This species has been found on 2 previous counts (CBC #107 also from Three Forks, and CBC #124 from Missoula [also with photos in eBird]). Two **Whooper Swans** were recorded at Bigfork, but the birds were not considered wild, and therefore did not count toward their total species seen. Similarly, **California Quail** was found during CW at **Troy**, but because the species is not considered established in that county (Lincoln), it would not have counted toward their total seen, even if it had occurred during count day. The bird is established in adjacent Idaho and to the north in Canada, however, so we will watch to see if their numbers build in the Troy area in the future.

For the 5th year since it was first recorded on a CBC (#83), 1 **Anna's Hummingbird** was found at Bigfork (**Table 1**). (Note—the species also wintered in Stevensville, but just outside of that circle boundary). Anna's Hummingbirds can overwinter in Montana,

when the homeowner provides a heated hummingbird feeder, and where suitable wind and thermal cover (such as mature spruce trees with thick foliage) is available nearby.

Table 1. Anna's Hummingbird records, Montana Christmas Bird Count, #1-126.

CBC Year	Number	Location
83	1	Billings
102	2	Both Missoula
121	1	Missoula
122	3	All in Missoula
125	1	Bozeman
126	1	Bigfork

Fifteen species were found as single birds on only 1 count (**Table 2**). Four species were found on only 1 count, but >1 individual was recorded.

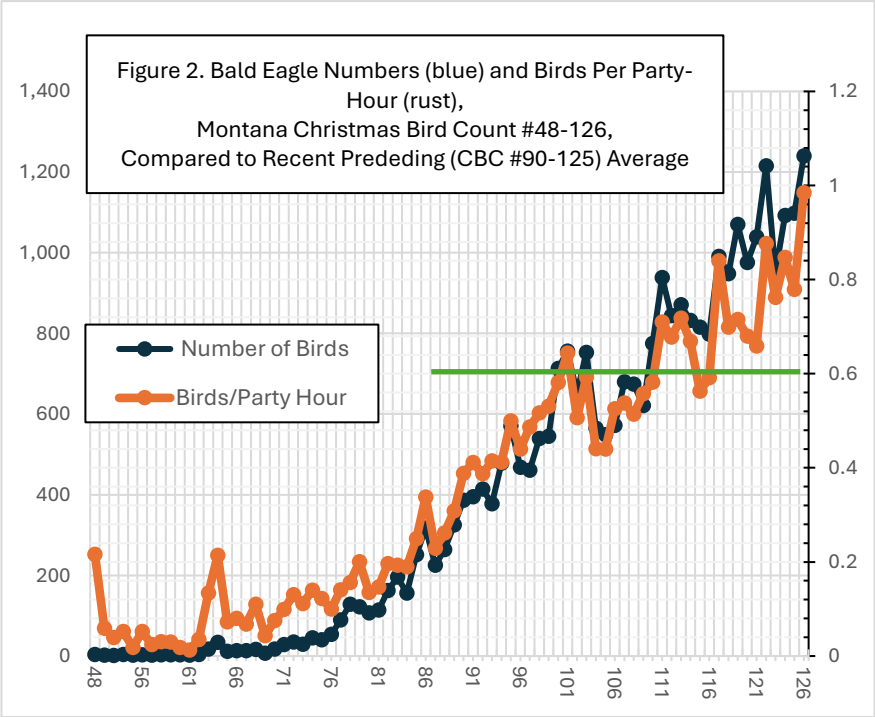
Table 2. Single birds found on single counts, Montana Christmas Bird Count #126.

Harlequin Duck	Glacier National Park
Red-breasted Merganser	Great Falls
American White Pelican	Billings
Greater Yellowlegs	Three Forks
Glaucous Gull	Kalispell
Barn Owl	Missoula
Eastern Screech-Owl	Musselshell Valley
Barred Owl	Troy
Anna's Hummingbird	Bigfork
Lewis's Woodpecker	Stevensville
American Three-toed Woodpecker	Bigfork (and CW at Bozeman)
Peregrine Falcon	Helena
Boreal Chickadee	Glacier National Park
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	Bigfork
Gray Catbird	Missoula

Species found on 1 count but >1 bird recorded	
6 Greater Sage-Grouse	Musselshell Valley
5 Dusky Grouse	Helena
2 Black-backed Woodpecker	Glacier National Park
2 Yellow-rumped Warbler	Troy (and CW at Yellowstone National Park)

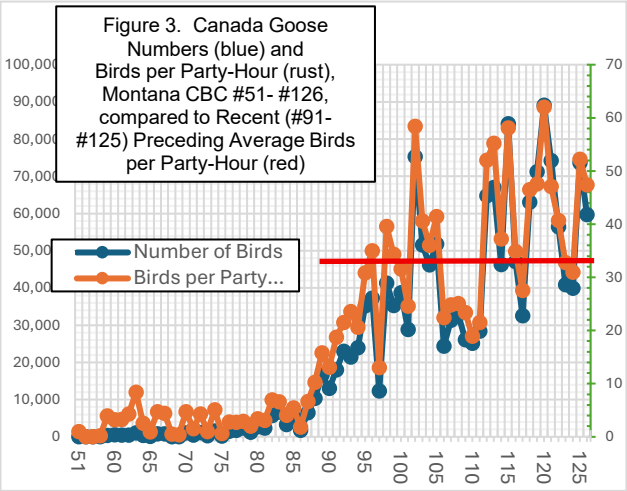
Widespread Species

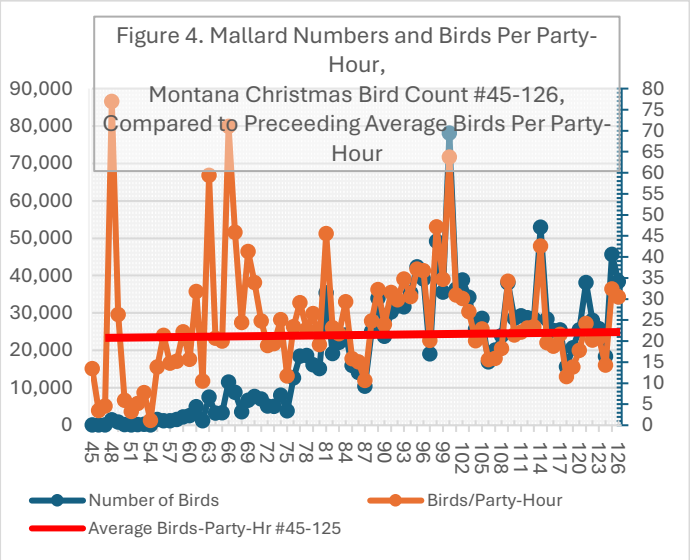
Three species occurred on 30 of 31 count circles—**Bald Eagle** (absent from McNeil Slough), Northern Flicker (absent from West Yellowstone), and **Mallard** (absent from Upper Swan Valley).



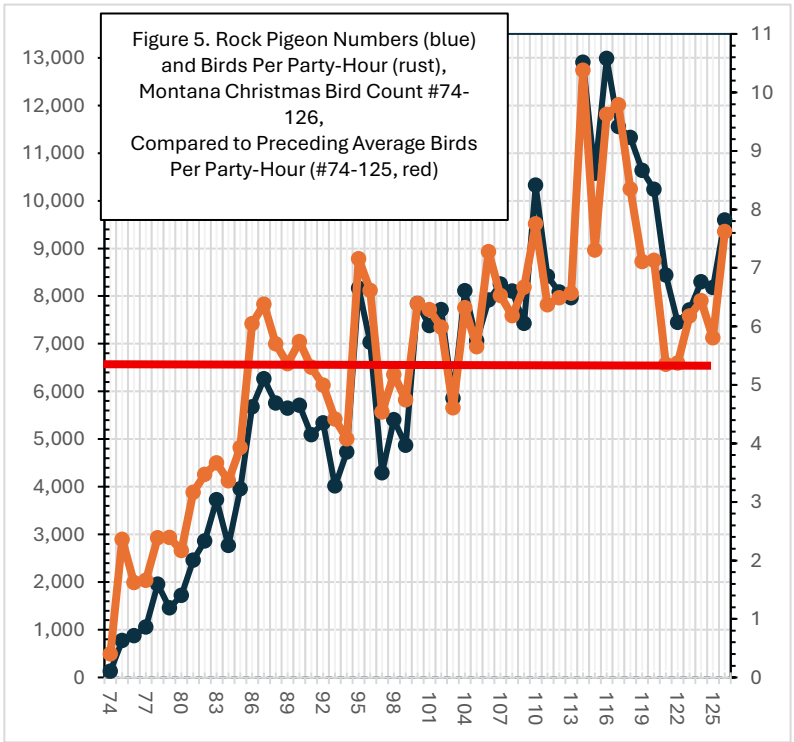
Bald Eagle numbers have continued to climb since the mid-70s, with the banning of DDT and with nest-site protection measures implemented in the 90s (**Figure 2**). This year, Bald Eagle birds per party-hour was well above their recent preceding average birds per party-hour.

Waterfowl were again the most numerous species this year, with **Canada Goose** at 59,716 (**Figure 3**) and **Mallard** at 38,432 (**Figure 4**).

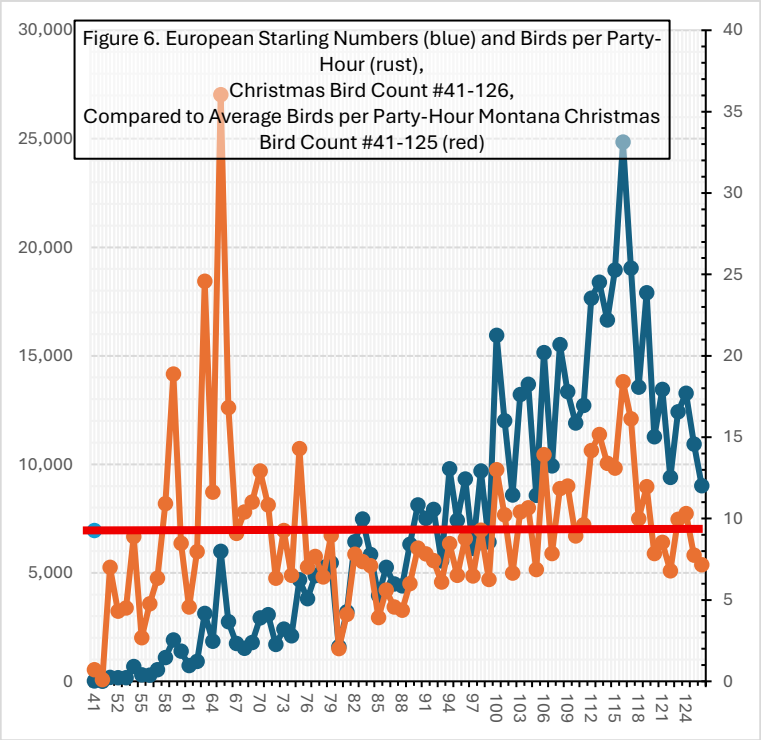




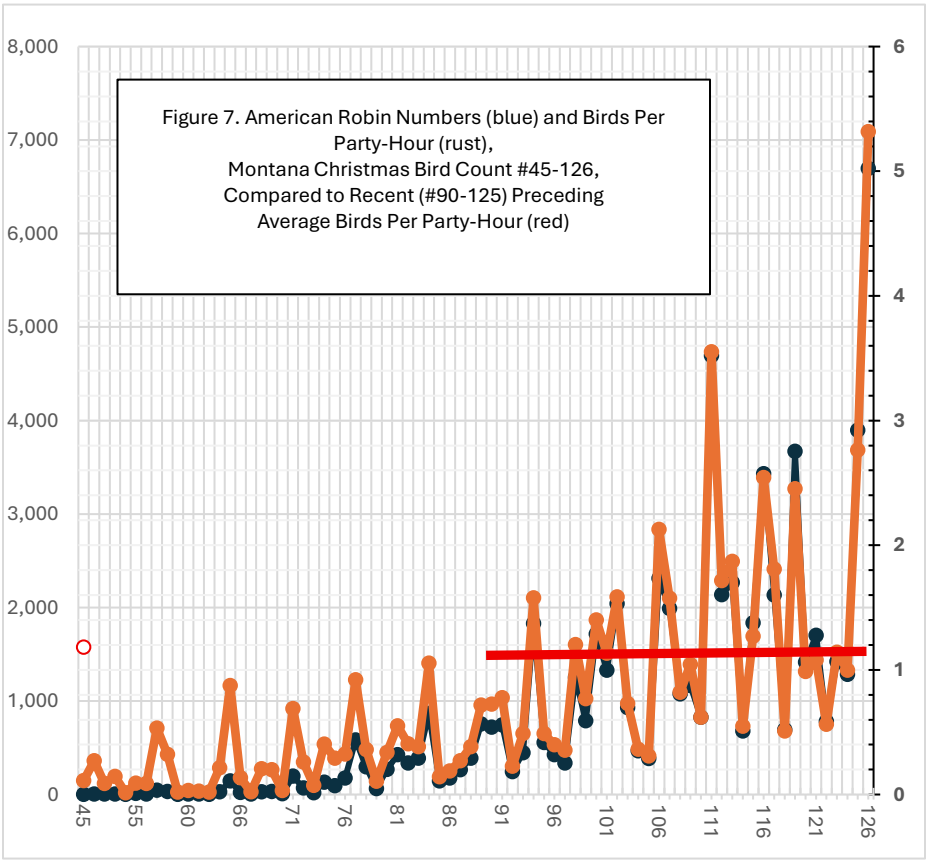
Both vary widely around their preceding average birds per party-hour, with Canada Goose numbers also rising steadily since the early 90s. Canada Goose appeared on 27 circles (absent from Quigley, Upper Swan Valley, West Yellowstone, and Yellowstone National Park) and Mallard on 30 (see above).



The next most numerous species were **Rock Pigeon** (9,595 birds found on 28 circles, **Figure 5**) and **European Starling** (9,012 birds found on 23 circles, **Figure 6**). Rock Pigeon birds per party-hour shows some decline in the last decade, after having increased steadily since the mid-70s. However, their birds per party-hour value this year is still nearly 40% higher than their average birds per party-hour from the period CBC #74-125 (**Figure 5**).

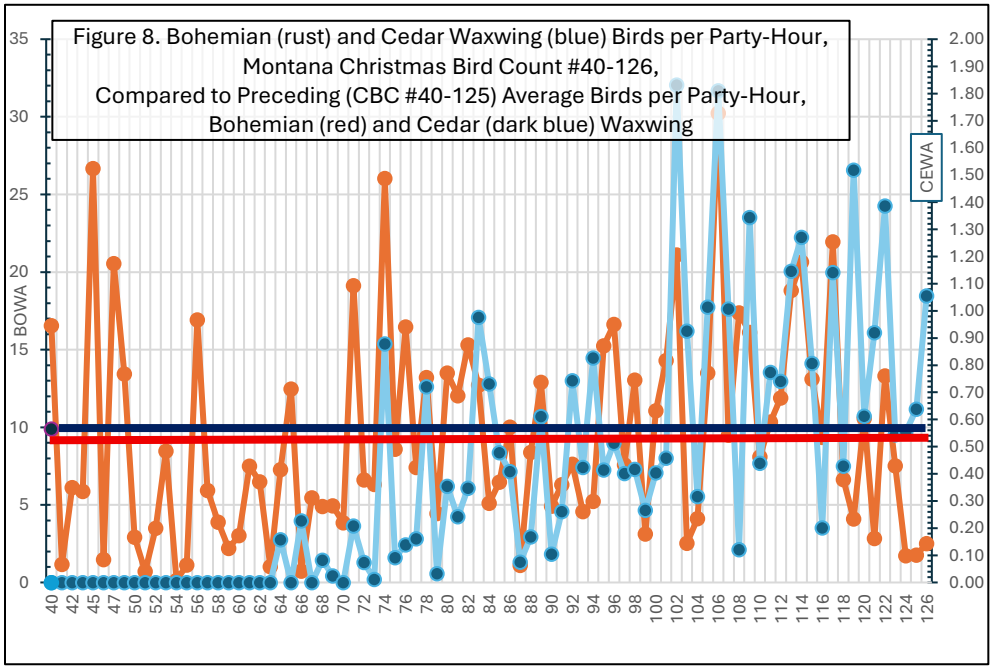


European Starling birds per party-hour have generally fluctuated near their preceding average (**Figure 6**)



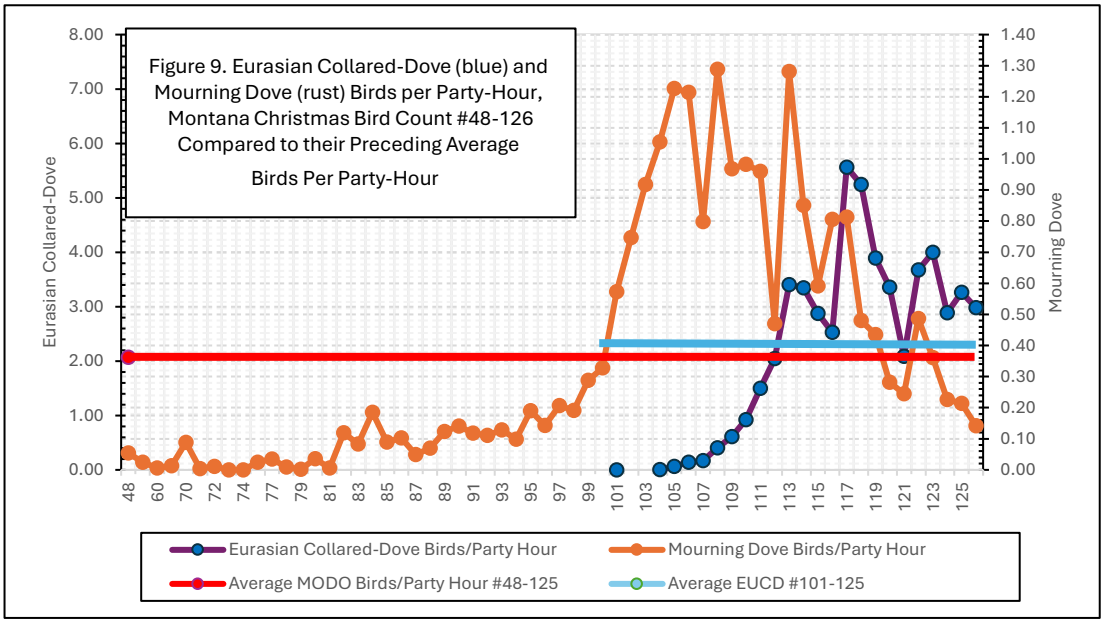
I was curious about the status of **American Robin** this year, because they had seemed very widespread and abundant this winter. In fact, they were the next most numerous species, with 6,695 birds from 24 circles (**Figure 7**). While robins have occurred regularly throughout CBCs in the past, their birds per party-hour spiked this year, well above their recent average birds per party-hour (Figure 7).

The only other species over 6,000 individuals was **Black-billed Magpie** (6,167, from 27 circles). Magpie birds per party-hour have been fairly close to their average since the late 90s.

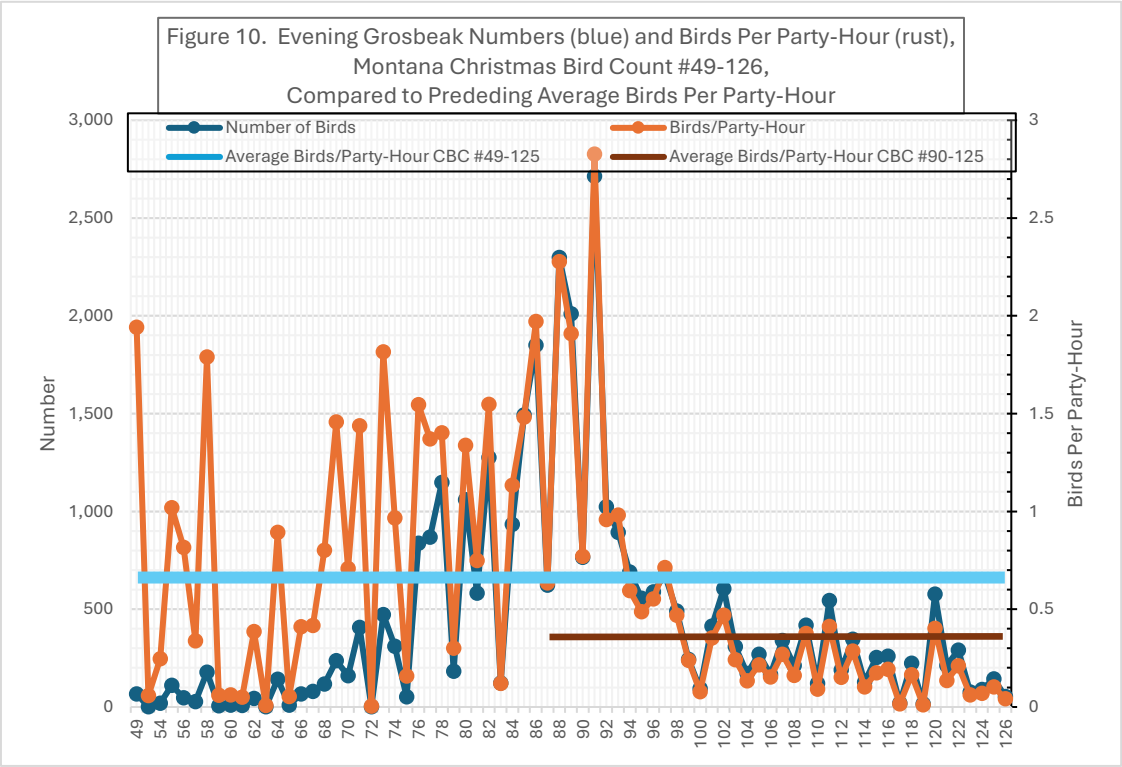


Bohemian Waxwing is another species that can vary by orders of magnitude each year (from approximately 1,100 to 33,000 birds). This year their birds per party-hour was well below their preceding average, while Cedar Waxwing was well above their preceding average (**Figure 8**). Cedar Waxwing was absent from our counts until the early 60s.

Doves



Mourning Dove birds per party-hour continues to decrease (rust line, **Figure 9**), but it is still near to or slightly above their values from the 40s to the late 90s. Some of the high values from the early 2000s might actually represent mis-identified collared-doves, because field birders were not as familiar with collared-doves at that time. This year, Eurasian Collared-Dove birds per party-hour was well below their highs from CBC #117 and #118, and their values might be leveling out now.



Evening Grosbeak continued to show a marked decline that began in the late 90s (**Figure 10**), with 54 birds recorded this year. Its birds per party-hour was nearly 90% lower than the average birds per party-hour during the time period CBC #90-125.

Owls

We found 8 Owl species (plus a CW-only species [**Great Gray**]) this year, out of a possible 13 winter owl species. The most unusual species was an **American Barn Owl** from Missoula, which has been found during only 4 other counts starting on 2 January 2000 (**Table 3**). Montana winters are likely too harsh for this species to regularly occur on our CBCs.

TABLE 3. BARN OWL RECORDS, MONTANA CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT #1-126

COUNT YEAR	Number	Location
100	2	2 at Stevensville
112	1	Ennis
116	1	Stevensville
117	2	2 at Missoula

126	1	Missoula

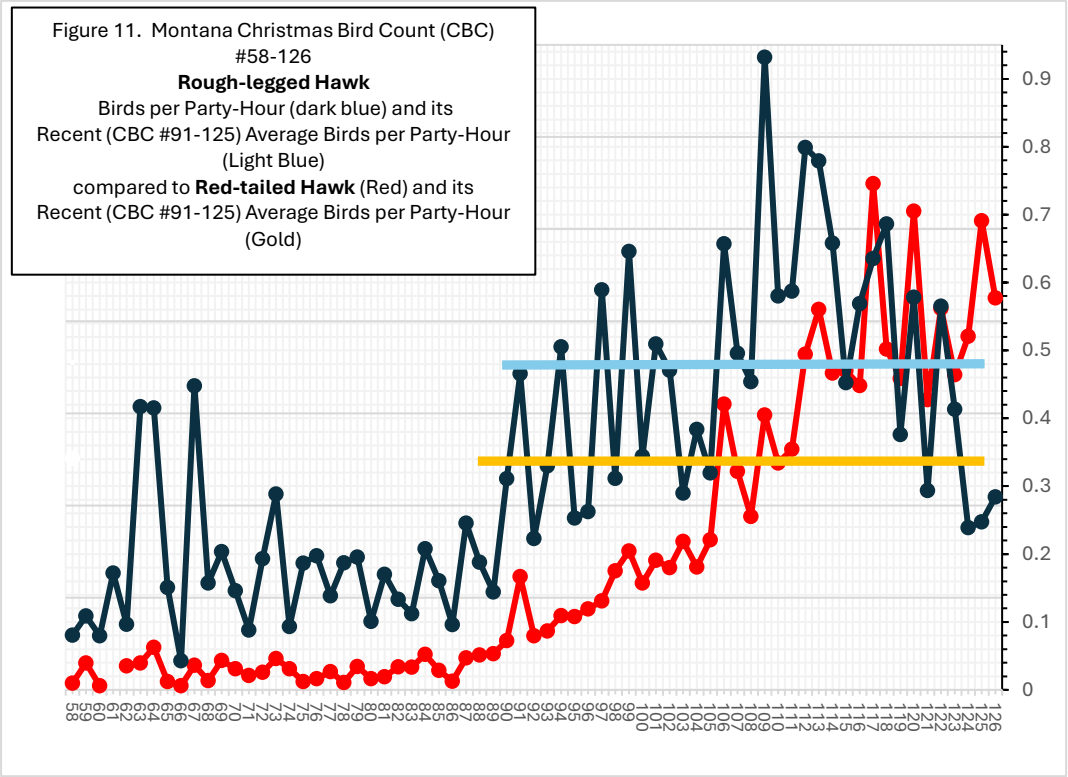
Great Horned Owl was the most numerous and widespread—60 birds from 17 count day circles and 2 CW sites. **Short-eared Owl** was the next most numerous, with 20 birds from 4 count day circles and 1 CW site. Ninepipe had 17(!), followed by Missoula, Bigfork, and Bowdoin with 1 each. We had 8 **Long-eared Owls** from 3 circles—Bigfork (4), Kalispell (1), and Missoula (3). This year we had 1 **Eastern Screech-Owl** (at Musselshell Valley), but no Western Screech-Owls. We had 2 **Northern Pygmy-Owls** (1 each from Ruby Valley and Troy), and 3 CW birds (Ennis, Kalispell, and Missoula). Troy had the single **Barred Owl**. Missoula, Ninepipe, and Quigley each had single **Northern Saw-whet Owls**, which was also found CW at Moore Bench and Kalispell. Species we missed besides Western Screech-Owl included Snowy Owl, Boreal Owl, and Northern Hawk Owl. In the past, **Burrowing Owl** has generally migrated from Montana during winter, although recently the bird has been found during winter at some sites. It may show up in future CBCs if those sites are located in count circles and if viewing conditions are favorable on count day.

Gulls

This year we tallied 5 gull species: 1,351 Ring-billed Gulls from 6 circles; 45 Herring Gulls from 5 circles; 6 California Gulls from 3 circles, 2 Thayer's type Iceland Gulls, 1 each from Bigfork and Kalispell, and 1 Glaucous Gull from Kalispell. Kalispell had the most diversity with all 5 of this year's gull species found.

Red-tailed and **Rough-legged Hawks**

I was curious which species was more numerous this year. Since CBC #117 (**Figure 11**), Red-tailed Hawks have been more numerous in birds per party-hour, which was the case again this year.



This year, Red-tailed Hawks numbered 727 vs 358 for Rough-legged Hawks.

Thanks to all of our participants again this year. There would be no data or report without your cumulative efforts.

Appendix 1 Cumulative List and Numbers Species (147) Found, Montana Christmas Bird Count (CBC) #126.

Species Name	Species Name
Greater White-fronted Goose CW only	Lewis's Woodpecker 1
Snow Goose 30	Downy Woodpecker 248
Cackling Goose 1,290	Hairy Woodpecker 122
Canada Goose 59,716	American Three-toed Woodpecker 1
Trumpeter Swan 884	Black-backed Woodpecker 2
Tundra Swan 85	Northern Flicker 1,719
Swan Species 56	NOFL Red-shafted --204,Yellow-shafted--8,intergrade--2
Wood Duck 79	Pileated Woodpecker 94
Gadwall 256	Woodpecker spp. 2
American Wigeon 652	American Kestrel 99
Mallard 38,432	Merlin 56
Northern Shoveler 65	Gyrfalcon CW only
Northern Pintail 311	Peregrine Falcon 1
Green-winged Teal 420	Prairie Falcon 19
Canvasback 13	Large Falcon spp. 1; falcon spp. 2
Redhead 720	Northern Shrike 42
Ring-necked Duck 338	Gray Jay 12
Greater Scaup 107	Pinyon Jay 37
Lesser Scaup 100	Steller's Jay 35
Harlequin Duck 1	Blue Jay 260
Long-tailed Duck 2	Black-billed Magpie 6,167
Bufflehead 615	Clark's Nutcracker 352
Common Goldeneye 3,607	American Crow 3,343
Barrow's Goldeneye 193	Common Raven 3,046
Goldeneye spp. 20	Horned Lark 2,047
Hooded Merganser 264	Black-capped Chickadee 4,569
Common Merganser 724	Mountain Chickadee 699
Red-breasted Merganser 1	Black-capped X Mountain (hybrid) 2
Merganser spp. 1	Chestnut-backed Chickadee 91
Ruddy Duck 26	Boreal Chickadee 1
Duck spp. 430	Chickadee spp. 24
California Quail 1,268	Red-breasted Nuthatch 1,071
Ring-necked Pheasant 872	White-breasted Nuthatch 117
Gray Partridge 352	Pygmy Nuthatch 265
Ruffed Grouse 36	Brown Creeper 26
Greater Sage-Grouse 6	Canyon Wren 3 (2—Msla, 1—Stevi)
Dusky Grouse 5	Pacific Wren 19
Sharp-tailed Grouse 280	Marsh Wren 11
Wild Turkey 3,518	American Dipper 107
Common Loon 2	Golden-crowned Kinglet 225
Pied-billed Grebe 8	Ruby-crowned Kinglet 1
Horned Grebe 7	Western Bluebird 16
Red-necked Greb 5	Townsend's Solitaire 805
Western Grebe 3	American Robin 6,695
Double-crested Cormorant 7	Varied Thrush 5
American White Pelican 1	Gray Catbird 1
Great Blue Heron 81	European Starling 9,012
Golden Eagle 73	Bohemian Waxwing 3,148
Northern Harrier 176	Cedar Waxwing 1,329
Sharp-shinned Hawk 46	Bohemian/Cedar Waxwing 108
Cooper's Hawk 17	Lapland Longspur 68

Northern Goshawk 8	Snow Bunting 4
Former Accipiter spp. 3	Yellow-rumped Warbler 2 (both at Troy, CW at Y'stone NP
Bald Eagle 1,240	American Tree Sparrow 389
Red-tailed Hawk 727	Dark-eyed Junco 2,637
Red-tailed Hawk (Harlan's) 26	Slate-colored 45
Rough-legged Hawk 358	Oregon 633
Ferruginous Hawk 8	Pink-sided 16
Buteo spp. 14	White-crowned Sparrow 2
Hawk spp. 3	Harris's Sparrow 2 (1 ea 3-Forks, Grt Falls
Eagle spp. 1	White-throated Sparrow 4
Virginia Rail 6	Song-Sparrow 292
American Coot 1,432	Spotted Towhee 11
Sandhill Crane 47	Sparrow spp. 41
Killdeer 12	Red-winged Blackbird 4,764
Greater Yellowlegs 1 (Ennis, with photos)	Western Meadowlark 9
Wilson's Snipe 8	Yellow-headed Blackbird 1
Ring-billed Gull 1,351	Rusty Blackbird 3
California Gull 6	Brewer's Blackbird 294
Herring Gull 45	Common Grackle 6
Iceland Gull (Thayer's type) 2	Blackbird spp. 5
Glaucous-winged Gull CW	Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch 123 (80—YNP, 43-L'twn)
Glaucous Gull 1	Pine Grosbeak 80
Rock Pigeon 9,595	House Finch 5,425
Eurasian Collared-Dove 3,753	Purple Finch 7
Mourning Dove 179	Cassin's Finch 123
Barn Owl 1	Finch Spp. 1
Eastern Screech-Owl 1	Red Crossbill 1,422
Great Horned Owl 60	White-winged Crossbill 107
Northern Pygmy-Owl 2	Crossbill spp. 122
Barred Owl 1	Redpoll 29
Great Gray Owl CW	Pine Siskin 3,706
Long-eared Owl 8	Lesser Goldfinch 5
Short-eared Owl 20	American Goldfinch 1,009
Northern Saw-whet Owl 3	Evening Grosbeak 54
Anna's Hummingbird 1	House Sparrow 5,267
Belted Kingfisher 115	Passerine spp. 7

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17 March 2026