

The 122nd Christmas Bird Count in Kentucky

James A. Wheat

Thirty-eight Christmas Bird Counts (CBCs) were conducted this year in the Commonwealth of Kentucky, including a new CBC in Paintsville. A total of 136 species was recorded; nine less than last year (includes only birds identified to species). Three first records for Kentucky CBCs were observed: Least Flycatcher at Allen County East; Yellow-breasted Chat at Barren River Lake; and Common Raven at Paintsville. There were seven additional species seen during Count Week: Blue-winged Teal at Barren River Lake and Hardin County; Surf Scoter at Barren River Lake; Black Scoter at Ashland, Boyd County; Black-crowned Night-Heron at Louisville; and Least Sandpiper, Western Sandpiper, and Fish Crow at Calloway County. The total number of individuals counted was 301,133. The top species count for this CBC season was Ballard County with 97 species; Calloway County was next, with 90 species. Nine count circles reported between 80 and 88 species; six observed between 70 and 75 species; and the remaining 21 counted between 36 and 67 species.

Weather was increasingly mild in Kentucky, as it has been in recent years. The lows ranged from 18°F to 55°F, with ten CBCs reporting low temperatures at or below freezing. The high temperatures ranged from 31°F to 73°F. Both the high and low ranges are a few degrees above last year's temperatures. All-day or most-day cloudy weather predominated the counts (total of 32). Much more precipitation was reported this year (22 counts), compared with last year (13). Of these 22 counts, 12 reported light rain, six of which were all-day rainfall. Nine CBCs reported heavy rain, but only one had it for the whole day. Light snow was reported on only three counts. Rivers and creeks were flowing without ice. Lakes and ponds were open, with only Paradise reporting some ice, much of which was standing water after recent flooding along the Green River. The distribution of count days across the count period was more uniform than it has been in recent years, occurring across 17 of the 23 days of the count period. The traditional holidays fell on the weekends this year. Fully half of the counts occurred on five of the six weekend days; the biggest count day being Saturday, December 18, with ten CBCs held.

There were numerous highlights this CBC season. Most are on eBird checklists, documented by photographs, and all have considerable identification notes on the rarities. Birders tallied 25 species of waterfowl this year; the most notable include Ross's Goose (6 on four counts) and Tundra Swan (17 at Burlington), which is the second-highest count total since the 1983-84 count season (25). This was only the 12th report of Tundras on any Kentucky CBC. Paintsville, on its inaugural CBC, reported 128 Common Mergansers, the highest tally since 1993 (202 birds at Calloway County). Other waterbird species of note include Eared Grebe (2 at Russell-Adair County); Great Egret (4 on 4 counts); Virginia Rail (1 at Elkton); and Lesser Black-backed Gull (2 on two counts). Notable raptor reports include Golden Eagle (1 at Land Between the Lakes and a count week bird at Bernheim Forest); Snowy Owl (1 at Sorgho for a second year); Merlin (15 on three counts) — for detail on the recent increase in Merlin occurrence on Kentucky CBCs, see Figure 1 for the 15-year trend; and Peregrine Falcon (3 on three counts).

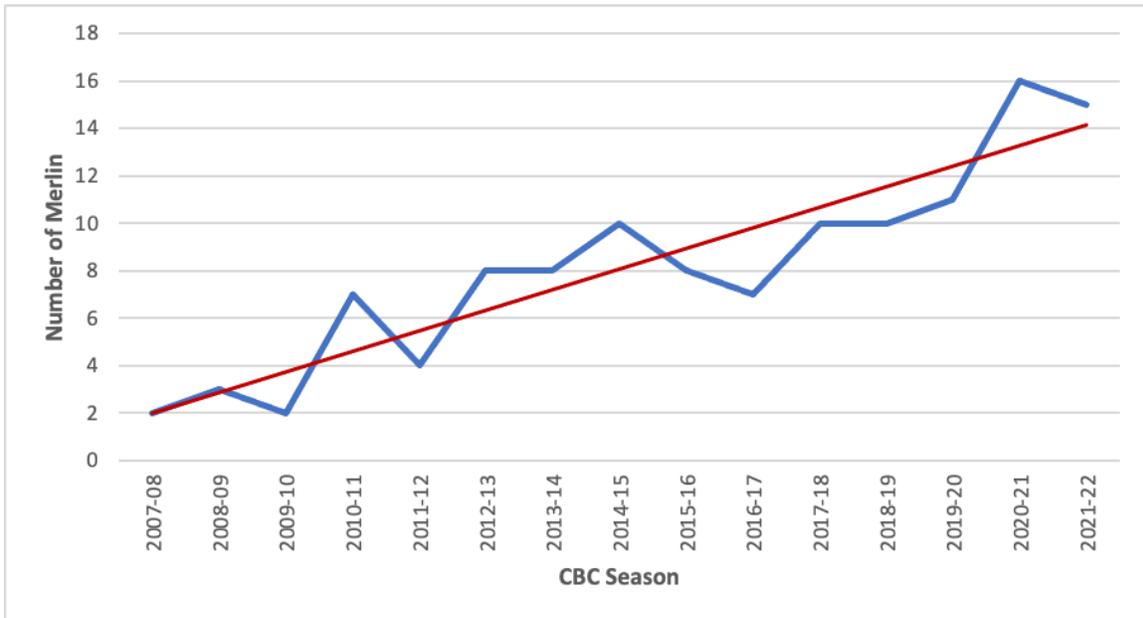


Figure 1. Merlin Occurrence on Kentucky CBCs since 2007-08.

Further highlights include Rufous Hummingbird (1 at Burlington); Least Flycatcher (1 at Allen County East, a Kentucky-first CBC record); Common Raven (1 at Paintsville, a Kentucky-first CBC record); Brown-headed Nuthatch (1 at Cumberland Falls); House Wren (18 on ten counts) — for detail on the recent increase in House Wren occurrence on Kentucky CBCs, see Figure 2 for the 15-year trend; Sedge Wren (1 at Ballard County); Gray Catbird (4 on four counts); Orange-crowned Warbler (2 at Louisville); Common Yellowthroat (3 on two counts); Yellow-breasted Chat (1 at Barren River Lake, a Kentucky-first CBC record); LeConte’s Sparrow (2 at Ballard County); Indigo Bunting (1 at Ballard County); and Brewer’s Blackbird (3 at Otter Creek).

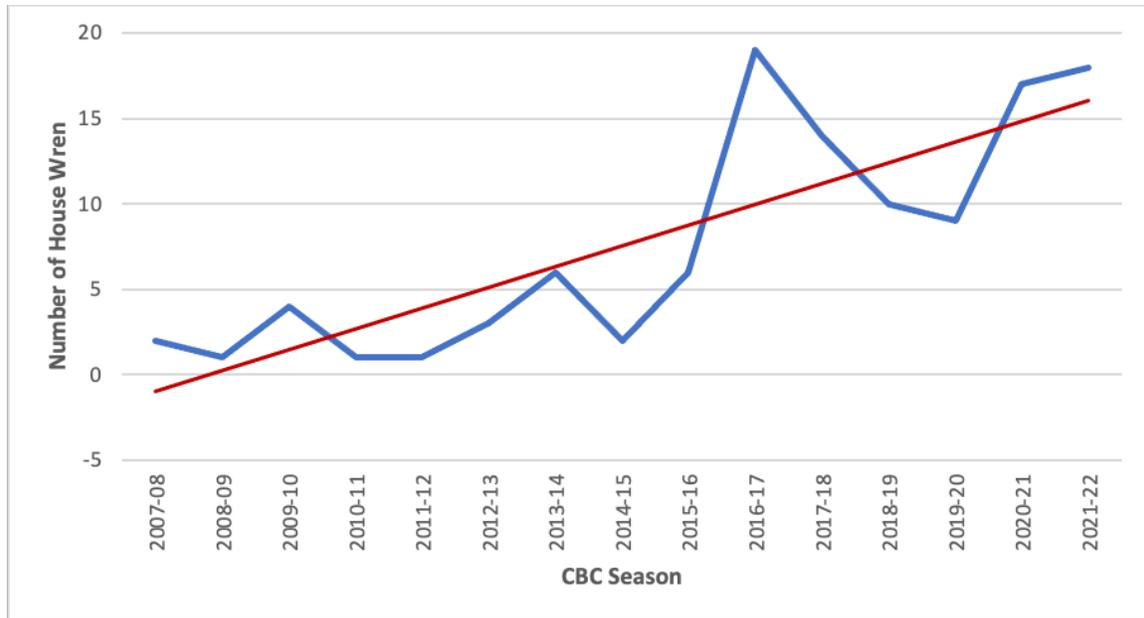


Figure 2. House Wren Occurrence on Kentucky CBCs since 2007-08.

Cedar Waxwings and Yellow-rumped Warblers were quite numerous this CBC season, with some compilers noting the healthy crop of soft mast available for them (as well as for many other birds). Both species reached their highest count in 15 years. There were 5760 Cedar Waxwings observed on 35 CBCs, which is significantly higher than the 15-year average for this species (1858). The same can be said for the Yellow-rumped Warbler, with 3028 birds tallied this year on 37 CBCs, well above the 15-year average (1022).

The ten most numerous species were Red-winged Blackbird (61,385); European Starling (53,584); Common Grackle (32,647); American Robin (19,758); Mourning Dove (8796); American Crow (7284); Canada Goose (6747); Sandhill Crane (6158); Cedar Waxwing (5760); and Northern Cardinal (6178). There were 21 common species that were reported on all 38 counts, and 16 species were observed on only one CBC each. Four CBCs tallied over 17,000 birds: Elkton (73,019), Louisville (17,888), Paradise (17,329), and Somerset (17,074).

The 399 participants in 210 parties, including some multi-CBC observers, logged a total of 1238.75 party-hours and 7054.5 party-miles. With 21 fewer participants than last year, we maintained about the same party hours and party miles as last year. Birders spent 25.5 hours owling while traveling 52.25 miles, both of which were down this year. Twenty-eight feeder watchers logged 59 hours observing birds. This was a solid effort!

I offer sincere thanks to the 399 observers who participated in this year's counts. Once again, most of these observations have also been reported in eBird. My special gratitude goes to the 32 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: Roseanna Denton (4), Blaine Ferrell (2), Steve Kistler (2), and Brainard Palmer-Ball (3). To those who

completed Rare Bird Reports or otherwise documented the unusual birds, thank you very much for your contributions to the CBCs and citizen science.