

Christmas Bird Count Results

by David Griffin, LC-CBC compiler

This years' Las Cruces Christmas Bird Count, held on December 20, was yet another successful event for Mesilla Valley Audubon Society members. The count was successful in a number of ways.

First off we had the most "Observers in the field" ever this year, 58; the previous high was 56 people. In addition to these "Observers in the field" we had 11 Feeder Watchers scattered around town, counting their backyard birds. All of these observers totaled 100.25 hours counting birds on Count Day, which is an all-time high total effort.

Because of this effort we observed 119 species on Count Day and another 7 during Count Week. This number is about average for the previous 10 counts, which ranged from 102 to 127 species. We counted a total of 41,809 birds on Count Day, 44% (18,502) of which were White-winged Doves!

We added three new species to the count: American Bittern, Black-necked Stilt, and Broad-tailed Hummingbird. High counts were made of 7 species: Cooper's Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, Eurasian Collared-dove, Rufous Hummingbird, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Yellow-rumped [Audubon's] Warbler, and Lesser Goldfinch.

For a look at all of the Las Cruces CBC results (going back to Dec 20, 1975) visit National Audubon Society's Christmas Bird Count web page at www.audubon.org/bird/cbc/hr/ and navigate your way through the "Historical Results" features. This web page also allows visitors to graph historical CBC results for individual species—for a truly eye-opening experience I suggest you try this for select Las Cruces CBC species such as White-winged Dove, Eurasian Collared-dove, American Coot, Brewer's and Black-throated Sparrows, Phainopepla, Horned Lark, and Eastern Meadowlark.

Some additional highlights of this years' count include five 'rare' species that have only been observed on one other count: Horned Grebe (pending acceptance by the CBC regional editor); Clay-colored, Baird's, and Grasshopper Sparrows; and Scott's Oriole. In addition, this year we had 'good numbers' of both Scaled and Gambel's Quail, and 'near' high counts for Northern Harrier, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Merlin, Peregrine Falcon, Greater Yellow-legs, Great Horned Owl, Ladder-backed

Woodpecker, Say's Phoebe, Hutton's Vireo, Sage Sparrow, and House Finch.

CBC results aren't only used to see which species have high counts; they are also very useful to draw our attention to those species with declining wintering numbers or those species for which low counts were made.

This year we had a handful of 'normally' common or regularly-occurring species with record low or very low counts. These include Hermit Thrush, Spotted Towhee, Canyon Towhee, Black-chinned Sparrow, and Dark-eyed Junco. Most of these species are easily found and observed in the Las Cruces CBC circle, so the low numbers are probably a good representation of actual abundance in the area this winter. Without further study though, there's no way to know why numbers might be low for a particular species, especially if that species is a migrant wintering bird from more northerly breeding areas, but for some the answers seem fairly obvious.

For instance, even though we didn't have a "low year" for Black-throated Sparrows, we can see a major decline in numbers over time in the Las Cruces CBC circle by using the "Make a Graph" feature on the CBC web page www.audubon.org/bird/cbc/hr/. The numbers of Black-throated Sparrows have steadily declined in the area over the last 33 years.

This is not to say that Black-throated Sparrows have declined throughout their distribution or range in southern New Mexico, but what it specifically shows is that within the Las Cruces CBC circle Black-throated Sparrow winter numbers have declined. This is most likely due to

the widespread development that has taken place in Las Cruces since the 1980s. Remember, not too long ago (ca. early 1990s) Roadrunner Blvd was a dirt road on the eastern outskirts of town, and the area surrounding it was all desert scrub and arroyo vegetation: perfect habitat for Black-throated Sparrows. Now this area is one of the most densely built-up areas in Las Cruces, with numerous residential and commercial developments. Black-throated Sparrows can still be found in pockets of desert vegetation here, but not in the numbers or locations where they once were found. (Note: This long-term decline in Black-throated Sparrows is being seen throughout the species' range. Since 1967 Black-throated Sparrow numbers have declined an amazing 63% in North America, which earned them spot number 12 on National Audubon's List of Top 20 Common Birds in Decline.)

Lastly, I'd like to thank all of you who participated in this years' count. Let me tell you, it was a major effort to coordinate all 68 of you and make sure we all knew where to go and what to do! I'm actively working on a new map and we'll likely change some of the boundaries of the coverage areas to incorporate the new "lay of the land" in Las Cruces. And I'd appreciate any comments or suggestions on how to improve the count for next year, so feel free to call or e-mail me.

Big "Thank Yous!" also go out to Kristi and Wes at Wild Birds Unlimited for posting and recruiting Feeder Watchers and to Andrea who provided a nice after-count meeting place and a wonderful buffet meal at The Banquet Room by Andele!

Black-throated Sparrow, Las Cruces, From Count 76 to 108

