

Yakima Valley and Toppenish Christmas Bird Counts

Results are in from the Yakima Valley Audubon Society's 2005 Christmas Bird Counts. The National Audubon CBCs are held annually and are a snapshot of birdlife throughout the Western Hemisphere during the early winter period, with each count being done in a specified 15-mile diameter circle. Yakima's first count was in 1970, Toppenish in 1983.

This, Yakima's 36th year, was one in which one day made a huge difference. The Yakima Valley count on December 17 set an all-time record with a whopping 91 species and about 19,500 birds. This came as a surprise to participants as, prior to the count, South Central Washington had experienced several weeks of below normal temperatures. This type of weather usually reduces both the total numbers and kinds of birds in the area. Though the harsh conditions led to freeze-up of most open waters, save for the Yakima River and Buchanan Lake, eight teams of birdwatchers scoured Yakima area neighborhoods, fields, riverside woodlands and marshes to set this record.

Yakima recorded an impressive 17 species of waterfowl (swans, geese and ducks). A single Greater White-fronted Goose was the most unusual species. Several Cackling Geese were also seen, a pint-sized bird similar in appearance to a Canada Goose. Observers carefully counted Buchanan Lake in fading light at dusk to count many Common Goldeneyes and Hooded Mergansers. Though often appearing almost birdless by day, it seems lots of ducks and geese fly in from other feeding areas to spend the night on this large lake which has not, as yet, ever frozen over.

Eleven species of raptors were spotted, including an impressive number of Bald Eagles. Several types were seen that are not recorded every year, including Rough-legged Hawk, a visitor from the arctic, and Northern Goshawk, a bird-hunting hawk fleeing snow in the mountains or north country.

Several unusual shorebirds put in an appearance. A "count-first" Least Sandpiper and not one but three Spotted Sandpipers were tallied. Except for Killdeer and Wilson's Snipe, most members of this group bail out of frigid interior Washington and head south for the winter.

The Yakima count had a banner "owl" year. Six species were recorded: Barn, Western Screech, Great Horned, Barred, Short-eared, and Northern Saw-whet. It was also a good day for woodpeckers. Several species of this clan appeared from west of the Cascade Mountains: Red-breasted Sapsucker in Sportsman State Park and Hairy Woodpecker in cottonwoods by Blue Slough were noteworthy, along with the usual Downy Woodpeckers and Northern Flickers. Another species of western Washington's lowlands, Anna's Hummingbird, found a feeder, a critical food source, in Cowiche Canyon. Steller's Jays descended from their usual mountain forest haunts in record numbers (13).

Sparrows really put on a show. It was Yakima count's first "four-Zono day" What's a Zono? They are species of sparrows belonging to the genus *Zonotrichia*, (Greek for "stripe-headed"). A spot on the Popoff Trail where bird seed is being scattered is home this winter to all four Washington species: White-throated (breeds east of the Canadian Rockies), Harris's (breeds around Hudson's Bay), White-crowned (arctic breeder), and Golden-crowned (Canada and Alaska breeder).

Other sparrows swelling the sparrow list included Spotted Towhee, Fox, Song, Lincoln's, and Dark-eyed Junco, a total of nine species! This list doesn't count the introduced House Sparrow, actually a weaver finch.

The Toppenish National Wildlife Refuge Christmas Bird Count was held December 18. This was the 23rd count for this circle. The morning temperatures, simply put, were frigid, just below zero! Twenty-two stalwart birders (plus one feeder watcher sensibly staying cozy inside) in eight teams set out to canvas their mostly frozen slice of the 15-mile diameter circle in an attempt to match or beat Yakima's record. Alas, this was not to be. For the six car-based teams, a strategy of full-bore floor heat helped keep toes warm. Their time out of vehicles tended to be short either because of the cold or "there wasn't anything to see." For the two hiking teams, a brisk pace kept them comfortable. The extreme cold is blamed for keeping birds out of sight; finding food was evidently more important than showing themselves to observers.

Toppenish recorded only 78 species and about 13,450 birds, both below their long-term averages. Despite the very harsh weather, there were some "good birds." A pine grove on West Wapato Road had a Western Scrub-Jay, new for the count. This striking jay, a characteristic denizen of California's chaparral and Oregon's oak habitats, is slowly but surely spreading north on both sides of the Cascades from its southwestern Washington stronghold in the Klickitat oak country. Global warming you say? Perhaps, but feeders help a lot, too.

Another species new to the count was American Pipit. Four of these drab, sparrow-sized birds wed to arctic and alpine habitats, were closely seen on refuge fields, along side Horned Larks. This species normally migrates south to snow-free areas by October.

Because most ponds were iced-over, waterfowl were scarce. Mallards, usually seen in the many thousands, came in at only 848. Most other waterfowl were also seen in below-normal numbers, too. Diving ducks such as goldeneye, scaup, and mergansers were especially scarce.

As usual, Toppenish had plenty of birds of prey, though again fewer than in normal years. For instance, 92 Red-tailed Hawks were seen (108 is the average), and 80 American Kestrels (84 is the average).

Last year Toppenish had swarms of crows, recording an astonishing 3,071 birds. These black clouds were nowhere to be found this year; only a total of 30 were counted.

Some observations about both counts: as is often the case, the introduced (from Europe) European Starling was the most numerous species on both counts-5962 in Yakima and 1775 in Toppenish. Yellow-headed Blackbird, a migratory marsh dweller that usually leaves the Yakima region in winter, was found on both counts. Bewick's Wren, closely associated with dense brush (as along the Yakima River), is normally noted on both counts in pretty good numbers. Yakima found 48, but inexplicably, Toppenish could manage but one. On the flip side, the ash trees at the Mt. Adams Golf Course had a small flock of Purple Finches, a rare species east of the Cascades, but these same trees at Sportsman State Park had none.

The Data — Christmas Bird Counts species by species

	<u>Topp</u>	<u>Yakima</u>		<u>Topp</u>	<u>Yakima</u>
PIED-BILLED GREBE	4	12	WESTERN SCRUB-JAY	1	
DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANT		1	BLACK-BILLED MAGPIE	455	505
GREAT BLUE HERON	47	57	AMERICAN CROW	30	136
BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT HERON	3		COMMON RAVEN	83	86
GREATER WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE		1	BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE	66	213
CANADA GOOSE	588	1677	RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH		3
CAKCLING GOOSE	11	2	BROWN CREEPER		3
WOOD DUCK	2	154	ROCK WREN	2	
GREEN-WINGED TEAL	9	88	CANYON WREN	5	
MALLARD	848	1263	BEWICK'S WREN	1	48
NORTHERN PINTAIL	13	3	WINTER WREN	3	3
NORTHERN SHOVELER	30	26	MARSH WREN	5	1
GADWALL	5	3	AMERICAN DIPPER		5
AMERICAN WIGEON	397	257	GOLDEN-CROWNED KINGLET	16	20
RING-NECKED DUCK	5	85	RUBY-CROWNED KINGLET	6	32
LESSER SCAUP	2	12	HERMIT THRUSH	3	3
COMMON GOLDENEYE	6	110	AMERICAN ROBIN	368	577
BARROW'S GOLDENEYE		18	VARIED THRUSH	3	24
BUFFLEHEAD	4	34	AMERICAN PIPIT	4	
HOODED MERGANSER		76	CEDAR WAXWING	5	
COMMON MERGANSER		169	NORTHERN SHRIKE	6	2
DUCK SP.	800		EUROPEAN STARLING	1775	5962
BALD EAGLE	7	35	YEL.-RU. ("MYRTLE") WARBLER	3	5
NORTHERN HARRIER	41	17	YEL.-RU. ("AUDUBON'S") WARBLER	43	117
SHARP-SHINNED HAWK	10	10	SPOTTED TOWHEE	12	36
COOPER'S HAWK	11	7	SAVANNAH SPARROW	7	
NORTHERN GOSHAWK		1	FOX SPARROW	1	11
ACCIPTER SP.	4	3	SONG SPARROW	144	210
RED-TAILED HAWK	92	92	LINCOLN'S SPARROW	7	2
ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK		4	WHITE-THROATED SPARROW		1
GOLDEN EAGLE	1	1	GOLDEN-CROWNED SPARROW	83	101
AMERICAN KESTREL	80	81	WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW	1361	1016
MERLIN	5	1	HARRIS'S SPARROW		1
PRAIRIE FALCON	7	3	DARK-EYED (SLATE-COLORED) JUNCO	1	2
CHUKAR	4	6	DARK-EYED (OREGON) JUNCO	679	634
RING-NECKED PHEASANT	31	15	RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD	927	239
CALIFORNIA QUAIL	441	1057	WESTERN MEADOWLARK	62	
VIRGINIA RAIL		5	YELLOW-HEADED BLACKBIRD	1	2
AMERICAN COOT		25	BREWER'S BLACKBIRD	855	345
KILLDEER	4	12	BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD	6	27
SPOTTED SANDPIPER		3	PURPLE FINCH	6	
LEAST SANDPIPER		1N	HOUSE FINCH	985	1215
WILSON'S SNIPE	7	7	AMERICAN GOLDFINCH	374	324
RING-BILLED GULL		1	HOUSE SPARROW	403	1163
ROCK PIGEON	372	553			
MOURNING DOVE	374	134	TOTAL INDIVIDUALS	13445	19456
BARN OWL	1	3	TOTAL SPECIES	78	91
WESTERN SCREECH-OWL	1	2			
GREAT HORNED OWL	6	9			
BARRED OWL		1			
SHORT-EARED OWL		4			
NORTHERN SAW-WHET OWL		3			
BELTED KINGFISHER	14	29			
RED-BREASTED SAPSUCKER		1			
DOWNY WOODPECKER	21	29			
HAIRY WOODPECKER	3	1			
NO. (RED-SHAFTED) FLICKER	104	109			
ANNA'S HUMMINGBIRD		1			
HORNED LARK	233	55			
STELLER'S JAY		13			

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N — New species for the count

H — All-time high for individuals of that species

L — Very low number of individuals of that species as compared to other years

CW — Seen count week (three days before the count or three days after) but not count day

Note on Bald Eagles: It is doubtful that 35 different individuals were seen on the Yakima CBC. Many of the eagles were probably seen more than one time during the day.