

The 2016 Newton Christmas Bird Count

The 2016 Newton Christmas Bird Count got off to its usual start at 5 AM on Saturday, December 17th. This event always begins in the cold and dark, often with mild freezing precipitation. Serious precipitation will stop us.

The Search for Owls

A small group of people interested in owls gathered on Rayburn Terrace and loaded into one car to go prowling for owls. This year yielded the same species and numbers as last year.



Eastern Screech Owl - Gray Morph

Our method of finding owls involves having a boom-box with a CD of owl calls on it. By late December, our owl species are starting to court, and males are beginning to defend territories. Thus, they will come to check out the “intruding” owl on our tape. We have some powerful flashlights along and try to get the defensive owls in view.

We saw five Eastern Screech-owls, which exist in two color morphs, red and gray as shown in the photos above.



Great Horned Owl

However, this was the second year in a row that we missed the also common Great Horned Owl. We often see both species. The Great Horned Owls do nest in Newton but do not cooperate as easily as the Screech-owls. They have been less cooperative in responding to our tapes recently. However, they do roost regularly in white pines in our parks. A photograph of the missing Great Horned Owl is above.

The Rest of the Count

After about an hour and a half, the owlers returned to Rayburn Terrace, where the host family served bagels, hot coffee, tea and doughnuts. Other more relaxed birders arrived at 7 AM, in the daylight, to get organized into teams. The teams fanned out and covered the part of Newton that lies within a 10-mile radius of the Habitat Audubon preserve in Belmont. The Newton count is a part of the Greater Boston Count involving all of the towns within that circle.

In 2016 we recorded 300 fewer birds than last year and 500 fewer than in 2014. We saw four fewer species than last year and three more than in 2014. These numbers don't mean so much, but these counts have gone on for over 100 years. The accumulated data do show trends.



Eastern Screech Owl - Red Morph

Charles River Birds

One of our groups always searches the area near the Charles River. We agree with the Waltham birders where the dividing line is. Since birds fly, this adds some error to the overall counts.

The river gives us swans, geese and ducks, together with an occasional overwintering Great Blue Heron. We logged one Great Blue Heron this year. The number of Canada Geese was way down, but we all know this is a meaningless fluke.

The three common species of gulls were seen along the river: the Herring, Ring-billed and Great Black-backed Gulls. The latter is the largest gull in the world and is a serious predator along our coasts.

Among the duck species we encountered was the beautiful Hooded Merganser. The Mallards outnumbered all the rest of the ducks combined, with 205 individuals. There were a couple of Buffleheads and two American Black ducks. A picture of the drake Hooded Merganser, or “hoodie,” is on page 10.

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Hooded Merganser - Male

Woodpeckers

We saw only two of our woodpecker species in 2016, the Red-bellied and Downy Woodpeckers. We missed the Hairy Woodpecker and the Northern Flicker. The Flicker mostly leaves us for the winter, but the Hairy Woodpecker is in Cold Spring Park all winter. It can be tough to find, though. The Red-bellied Woodpecker stays here throughout the winter now but is a more southern species that has moved north with the advent of our changing landscape and climate. The male digs several holes in dead trees during the winter and roosts in one. In the spring, his mate arrives and inspects his work. She will decide which of his construction projects is the best for her nest.

Hawks

Among the hawk species, we saw only our omnipresent Red-tailed Hawk. These hawks have adapted to human presence and are successful in coexisting with us. They often

perch along our highways. They also make the rounds of feeders in the winter. They usually prey on rabbits, squirrels and chipmunks, but in a tough winter, they like Mourning Doves just fine.

No Sharp-shinned or Cooper's Hawks were seen on the 2016 count. These two species more often will prey on songbirds and, thus, frequent our feeders during the winter.

The Wrap-Up

At around noon, most of the groups had finished their assigned territories and, after turning in their results to the central hostess, they were free to leave nature to return to their usual activities. The Newton organizer then went to the Audubon Center in Belmont for the Greater Boston count summary, where all of the teams in the 10-mile circle gathered to report and to pool their data into one spreadsheet. This was then combined with other spreadsheets across the state of Massachusetts and then the rest of the U.S.

Over the years, trends can be found in this "citizen science" activity. The disparity between Newton's and Waltham's counts along the river blend into the background noise in the huge data set.

We have a lot of fun. All ages and levels of experience are welcome. Remember us next year. You can contact Pete Gilmore at maurice.gilmore@comcast.net to get on an email list to be notified of the date for the 2017 Christmas Bird Count a week or two before it takes place. You can choose to go for owls or for any part of the morning's birding. ■

✍ Pete Gilmore

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As explained in past newsletters, Amazon Smile is a program through which Amazon donates 0.5% of most purchases (yes, \$5 of every \$1000) to a nonprofit (501c3) organization of your choice (the Newton Conservators, we hope!).

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Even with relatively few members using the program so far, the rewards have grown. For the first quarter we participated in 2014, we received \$22.32. For the most recent quarter in 2016, we received \$38.31.

We do encourage you to support our local bookstores, but as most people know, you can buy almost anything on Amazon, and we hope that you will let your purchases work on behalf of open space in Newton.

If you have any further questions about the program, check the FAQ page: <http://smile.amazon.com/about>.