

Silver City Christmas Bird Count 2016 & 2017

December 2016 had 98 species and 9,504 individual birds, which ties our second highest species count and IS our second highest individual count. A record number of out-of-season birds included, Hooded Merganser, Common Merganser, Pied-billed Grebe, Eared Grebe, Wilson's Snipe, Band-tailed Pigeon, Vermilion Flycatcher, Canyon Wren, and Brown-headed Cowbird. Others we rarely get included; Inca Dove, Scaled Quail, Sandhill Crane, Western Screech-owl, Lewis's Woodpecker, American Crow, Pyrrhuloxia, and Eastern Meadowlark.

December 16, 2017 Count: Members of Southwestern New Mexico Audubon Society participated in the 118th Christmas Bird Count sponsored by the National Audubon Society. Thirty-five participants, including those counting avian visitors at feeders, counted birds within a 7.5-mile radius circle historically centered on the Silver City golf course. Participants reported 96 species of birds.

Before I mention particulars about this count, a word about counts, in general, is warranted. The goal of the Christmas Bird Count is to estimate populations of birds in an approximately 177 square mile circle bounded by a 47-mile circumference. No easy task when one considers that all parts of the circle are not equally accessible, have various habitats and are visited by birders of various skills. On top of this are variations in weather from year to year. The ultimate goal of the count is to compare the estimates of the bird population in one year to those of previous years with potentially different people (regarding numbers and skills), routes, weather, etc. A strategy employed is to try to reduce variation in these multitude of factors from year to year. National Audubon has specified a specific time of year (days around Christmas), counting only on count day, counting only in the defined circle, and reviewing the results by knowledgeable birders. If various counts ignore or bend these rules, then it is much harder to come up with valid conclusions.

With all the above in mind, it is possible to make some general comments and conclusions on this year's count: Observers saw Hooded and Common mergansers, species that do not occur commonly in the count circle. A Rough-legged hawk was seen which is rare in our area. Several observers detected Eurasian Collared-doves (120) which were unknown in our area before 2002. This species was introduced to the Bahamas, spread to Florida, and then to the rest of the U.S. White-winged doves out number Mourning doves, a phenomenon reversed over the past several years. The same pattern is reflected in Lesser and American goldfinches. A first for the count were two Anna's hummingbirds seen at Brian Dolton's hummingbird feeder. Some higher elevation species occurred in larger numbers on the count this year including Steller's jay, Mountain chickadee, Red-breasted nuthatch, Mountain bluebird, and Cassin's finch. Separating ravens into species, Chihuahuan vs. Common still is a difficult field identification problem, as is the separation of meadowlark species into Eastern and Western. Both raven and meadowlark species were reported on this count. A Black and White warbler was a first for the Silver City count. Finally, an observer reported four Black-headed grosbeaks from their area. This species is a common summer bird but very rare in the winter. The NM Ornithological Society searchable database (<http://www.nmbirds.org/>) shows two December Silver City records for this species, one in 2001 and the other in 2006. An unusual winter sighting but one that is supported by other previous sightings.

Some observers mentioned the paucity of birds on their routes. Factors such as milder weather and lack of a good seed crop could be in play. Seed eating birds such as sparrows are often affected locally by food supplies. Mild fall temperature are implicated in the lack of certain hawks.

We are sometimes misled that “rarer” species are more important than the common birds in our area. If the purpose of the Christmas Bird Count is to document changes throughout the years, all species are of equal importance. – Roland Shook