

VISITORS FROM NORTH, SOUTH, AND WEST FEATURED  
ON 1978 CHRISTMAS COUNTS

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Visitors from other areas produced the most exciting observations on the 13 Alabama Ornithological Society (AOS) Christmas Counts ("CBC's") conducted during the 1978 Christmas Season, the same number and same counts as in 1977. However, from a quantitative standpoint, many low species totals were reported. A number were doubtless due to the effect of the two preceding harsh winters; and others reflected the inconsistent weather, counts conducted in the last portion of the count period generally having many more low totals.

Notable Visitors--The rarest visitor on the AOS CBC's was the Sooty Shearwater (Puffinus griseus) at Ft. Morgan, Alabama where a single bird, showing silvery underwing linings and a stiff-winged flight, was noted off the end of the peninsula. This shearwater breeds in the Antarctic around New Zealand and Cape Horne and, thus, should be "at home" in December during the Antarctic summer. There have, however, been 2 January records (one a partial specimen) from the Pensacola, Florida area. This was the second record for Alabama, the other being inland in the spring of 1898 after a heavy storm.

From the West, an Ash-throated Flycatcher (Myiarchus cinerascens) was found at the Cottondale Sewage Treatment Ponds on the Marianna, Florida CBC and a Grooved-billed Ani (Coccyzus erythrophthalmus) within the count week at Dauphin Island. There have been a few observations of Ash-throated Flycatchers in the AOS area outside of the breeding season, but this is the first CBC record. The ani could well have been the same bird found at the Dauphin Island Shell Mounds earlier on October 7-8, 1978, which constituted the third Alabama record. For some discussion of field

marks of the anis, see the article on the 1975 Christmas Counts in Alabama Birdlife (1976), 24(1-2):3. Notable also was the Yellow-throated Vireo (Vireo flavifrons) at Pensacola, Florida which was the second NW Fla. CBC record and the third for the AOS area. Magnificent Frigatebirds (Fregata magnificens), which are indeed rare here in winter, appeared this year on two CBC's--a male at Dauphin Island and an immature at Gulf Shores, Alabama.

From the North, the 2 Lapland Longspurs (Calcar-  
ius lapponicus) on the outer beach at the Destin East Pass on the Choctawhatchee Bay, Florida ("Choc. Bay") CBC were the second record for NW Fla. and the first on its CBC's. There were at least 3 of these birds seen during mid-winter, first discovered on December 17 and remaining until at least January 6, 1979. Farther north, 61 such longspurs (an AOS CBC record) were found on the mudflats of Beulah Bay on the Wheeler Wildlife Refuge CBC. Also at Wheeler during the winter of 1978-79 there were 47 Whistling Swans (Olor columbianus) the most ever seen in Alabama. Other particularly northern waterfowl were the AOS record number of 11 Common Scoters (Oidemia nigra) at Dauphin Island with a female being seen at Gulf Shores and 4 unidentified scoters at Ft. Morgan.

A female Ruby-throated Hummingbird (Archilochus colubris) was reported at a feeder in Mobile, Alabama for one of the few CBC records of the species. The Ringed Turtle Dove (Streptopelia risoria) is a visitor of sorts; and 2 were reported from the suburban Mobile colony that has been breeding for several years, this, however, being its first CBC record.

Other Visitors--Choc. Bay again reported an adult Great Black-backed Gull (Larus marinus), thought presumably to be the same bird that has been spending winters at the Destin East Pass for the last 5 years. Gannets (Morus bassanus), also from northern waters, were found on 4 counts with a high of 63 at Gulf

Shores (second highest AOS CBC). Terns that are rare in winter on the Gulf Coast included 1 Gull-billed Tern (Gelochelidon nilotica) at Mobile (its third CBC record) and 25 Sandwich Terns at Bay County (an AOS CBC record by 10) with another at Dauphin Island.

Perhaps the most significant shorebird report was of the 2 Marbled Godwits (Limosa fedoa) at Bay County, the first NW Fla. CBC record; and a Northern Oriole (Icterus galbula) was found within the count week at Marianna, the third straight year one has been seen on its count or within the count week there.

Among summer residents that are rare to uncommon in winter on the Gulf Coast, the Yellow-throated Warbler (Dendroica dominica) was seen on 6 counts with a CBC record for Alabama of 5 at Gulf Shores. The Black-and-White Warbler (Mniotilta varia) was seen on only 2 coastal counts as compared with a high of 12 on 6 counts 2 years ago in 1976, but the 6 birds at Marianna were one of its highest CBC's. The White-eyed Vireo (Vireo griseus) was found on 5 coastal counts, but the total of 9 birds was much under the 31 on 7 such counts in 1976. Among wading birds that are more common in summer, the Cattle Egret (Bubulcus ibis) was reported on 6 counts, including Eufaula Wildlife Refuge (42--an inland CBC record), Marianna (21--a NW Fla. CBC record), and CBC or near CBC record numbers at Gulf Shores (36), Dauphin Island (19), and Bay County (15). There were 39 Yellow-crowned Night Herons (Nyctanassa violacea) at Bay County (an OAS CBC record) and 1 to 2 birds on 4 other coastal counts, while the Green Heron (Butorides virescens) was also reported on four coastal counts or within their count weeks with a high this year of 2 at Dauphin Island.

Effect of Harsh Winters--Harsh winters appear to be particularly hard on small birds that are primarily insectivorous and have low body weights requiring high rates of metabolism. While the previous winter of 1977-78 was the coldest on record overall, there were more severe drops in temperature during the

winter of 1976-77, which was, therefore, probably harder on such fragile species. The changes in selected species recorded on the same 13 AOS CBC's in 1976 through 1978 (with the percentages showing changes during those years) are presented in Table I.

It will be noted that CBC counts of 4 of the species in Table I are still decreasing with the Golden-crowned Kinglet being the hardest hit of all; and, were it not for the high number of 33 Yellowthroats at Bay County, its numbers would still be going down. Recovery of the Pine Warbler from 1977-78 consists primarily of an increase on the coastal counts led by Choc. Bay (97) and Gulf Shores (88) although a record for the Tennessee Valley, where the bird is not nearly as common as elsewhere, was set at Guntersville, Alabama (22). Recovery of the Yellow-rumped Warbler was led by Pensacola (1885--a NW Fla. CBC record). Guntersville also had a Tennessee Valley winter record for Eastern Bluebirds (57). Three Gray Catbirds (Dumetella carolinensis) were found as far inland as Birmingham where they are rare in winter. In somewhat similar status was the House Wren with, however, high counts at Gulf Shores (31) and Pensacola (21); and 1 bird of that species was found at Guntersville where it is rare that far north.

The possible effect of harsh winters on hardier species, i.e., those that do not rely so heavily on an insect diet or are of larger size, is noted in the article on the 1977 Christmas Counts in Alabama Birdlife (1978), 26(1-2):3. For those species this last Christmas season, Pensacola set Gulf Coast abundance records of 99 Chickadees (Parus sp.) and 88 Tufted Titmice (Parus bicolor). Guntersville reported Tennessee Valley records of 20 White-breasted Nuthatches (Sitta carolinensis), 65 Brown-headed Nuthatches (Sitta pusilla), and 17 Brown Creepers (Certhia familiaris), the last being the second highest AOS CBC. In addition, 2 White-breasted Nuthatches were found at Mobile where they are rare that far south.

TABLE I. CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT DATA FOR THE YEARS 1976-78.

<u>Species</u>	<u>1976</u>	<u>1977</u>	<u>Percent change</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>Percent change over 1977</u>
Pine Warbler ( <u>Dendroica pinus</u> )	540	260	-52	467	+79.6
House Wren ( <u>Troglodytes aedon</u> )	138	97	-30	111	+14.4
Yellow-rumped (or Myrtle) Warbler ( <u>Dendroica coronata</u> )	10872	6043	-44.4	7786	+28.8
Carolina Wren ( <u>Thryothorus ludovicianus</u> )	760	539	-29.1	496	-8.0
Eastern Bluebird ( <u>Sialia sialis</u> )	407	247	-39.3	248	0
Solitary (or Blue- headed) Vireo ( <u>Vireo solitarius</u> )	96	46	-52.1	58	+26.1
Ruby-crowned Kinglet ( <u>Regulus calendula</u> )	2494	757	-69.6	1208	+59.6
Eastern Phoebe ( <u>Sayornis phoebe</u> )	297	152	-48.8	137	-9.9
Common Yellowthroat ( <u>Geothlypis trichas</u> )	187	61	-67.4	72	+18.0
Hermit Thrush ( <u>Cathara guttata</u> )	293	121	-58.7	105	-13.2
Orange-crowned Warbler ( <u>Vermivora celata</u> )	93	17	-81.7	28	+64.7
Golden-crowned Kinglet ( <u>Regulus satrapa</u> )	364	116	-68.1	78	-32.8

Due to the dry weather in 1978 (a stark contrast with 1979), much of the Chipola River bottomlands could be explored on the Marianna CBC, and the results were Gulf Coast records of 10 Brown Creepers and 21 Winter Wrens (Troglodytes troglodytes).

Endangered Species--The Bald Eagle (Haliaeetus leucocephalus) seems to be making a come-back. This year and last, there were more Bald Eagles in the Tenn. Valley than at any time since 1960; and, by coincidence, there were the same numbers on the AOS CBC's--1 adult and 4 immatures at Guntersville and 2 immatures at Wheeler Refuge, the latter being the 10th straight year one or more have been reported on either Wheeler counts or within its count periods. Ospreys (Pandion haliaetus) were found at Marianna (1) and Bay County (3)--the highest AOS CBC record; and single Peregrine Falcons (Falco peregrinus) were at Wheeler (its third straight CBC), Dauphin Island, Ft. Morgan and Bay County. The totals of 4 for each of these endangered species are the highest for AOS CBC's in many years.

Hawks--Most hawks are included on the "Blue-List" of species not yet considered endangered but whose numbers are reported on the decline (see American Birds (1978), 32(6):1106). However, the Sharp-shinned Hawk (Accipiter striatus), whose numbers may well be increasing, was again found in good numbers in the AOS area--25 birds on 11 counts, the highs being 4 at Wheeler, Marianna and Bay County. The Cooper's Hawk (Accipiter cooperi), which is rarer, tallied 13 birds on 9 counts, almost the same as last year. The Northern Harrier (or Marsh Hawk, Circus cyaneus) was up this year with 106 birds on 12 counts as compared with 65 birds on 11 in 1977; high was Gulf Shores with a Gulf Coast winter record of 23. The Red-tailed Hawk (Buteo jamacensis), always found in good numbers in the Coastal Plain in winter, set an AOS abundance record at Tuscaloosa (90). Although the "Blue-Listed" American Kestrel (Falco sparverius) is extremely difficult to find in the AOS area during the breeding

season, the 1978 CBC's produced another high total led by Gulf Shores with the second highest AOS CBC record (55) followed by Dauphin Island (48) and Pensacola (36), a NW Fla. CBC record. Its relative, the Merlin (Falco columbarius), had 5 birds on 4 counts, the high being 2 at Gulf Shores for its 6th CBC report in the last 7 years.

Birds of the Shore and Marsh--Real estate developments are rapidly decreasing beach habitat; consequently, many birds that nest on our beaches are on the "Blue-List." On the 1978 AOS CBC's, the Piping Plover (Charadrius melodus) was recorded in the lowest number since 1968--only 2 on 1 count, and the Snowy Plover (Charadrius alexandrinus) the lowest since 1973 with 13 on 4 counts. Again, there were no Wilson's Plovers (Charadrius wilsonia); although that plover may be reasonably abundant on the Atlantic Coast, the last AOS CBC record for it was 1 bird in 1969. The American Oystercatcher (Haematopus palliatus), also on the "Blue-List," is always reasonably rare in the AOS area, but this year the 15 at Dauphin Island was a modern AOS abundance record.

The center of the Wheeler Refuge count circle was moved slightly to the west to include portions of the Swan Creek Wildlife Management Area on the north bank of the Tennessee River. There the mudflats of Beulah Bay produced not only the record CBC of Lapland Longspurs referred to above but also 1416 Horned Larks (Eremophila alpestris) (an AOS CBC high count by almost 800) and record numbers of several shorebirds--inland winter records of Dunlins (Erolia alpina) 422 and 24 Western Sandpipers (Ereunetes mauri), second highest count of 54 Greater Yellowlegs (Totanus melanoleucus), and North Alabama winter records of 289 Common Snipe (Capella gallinago), 128 Least Sandpipers (Erolia minutilla) and 7 Lesser Yellowlegs (Totanus blavipes). Tuscaloosa also had high inland counts for the Snipe (209) and 20 Western Sandpipers (Ereunetes mauri) while Birmingham reported a single Dunlin (Erolia

alpina) for its third CBC record and 8 Dowitchers (Limnodromus) (unidentified as to species), the first winter for North Alabama. On the coast, Bay County tallied high numbers of 359 Dunlins and 79 Greater Yellowlegs (Totanus melanoleucus), while the 42 Lesser Yellowlegs at Mobile are an AOS winter record.

The spotted Sandpiper (Actitis macularia) did well on the 1978 CBC's, being found on a record 10 counts or in the count weeks. Pensacola led with 13, and others were found inland at Eufaula Refuge (3--an inland CBC record), Birmingham (1 bird for its fourth straight year) and Guntersville (also 1). The Killdeer (Chadrius vociferus) did well too, with 894 at Gulf Shores, but also including 846 at Wheeler (an AOS inland record by 300). Mobile added high counts of 95 Black-bellied Plovers (Squatarola squatarola) and 90 American Avocets (Recurvirostra americana). This makes 16 of the last 18 CBC's for the Avocet, which formerly was considered rare in winter in the East.

Bay County reported a Purple Gallinule (Porphyryla martinica) for the third time since 1974, 2 Limpkins (Aramus guarana), and a Semipalmated Sandpiper (Ereunetes pusillus). The marsh habitat around Gulf Shores that has attracted Sandhill Cranes (Grus canadensis) has been subject to intermittent encroachments; but after a miss in 1977, 14 birds were found in 1978. Unfortunately, however, it is believed that the most favored marsh area along the intracoastal waterway is no longer satisfactory. Quantitatively, the American Coot (Fulica americana) was counted in record numbers at Guntersville (almost 13,700 for a modern inland record) and 10,000 at Mobile. Strangely enough, however, it was in low numbers on most other counts.

In the wading bird category, Reddish Egrets (Dichromanassa rufescens) were found on 3 counts--6 at Bay County (an AOS CBC record), 2 at Dauphin Island (the fifth of its last 6 CBC's), and 1 at Choc. Bay.



Great Blue Herons (Andrea herodias) were in high numbers at Wheeler Refuge (146--a North Ala. CBC record by 50) and at Bay County (126--a Gulf Coast CBC record). A total of 10 American Bitterns (Botaurus lentiginosus) was found on 5 counts, led by 3 each at Eufaula and Bay County.

Waterfowl--Reports of ducks were inconsistent with more low numbers than highs and often some complete misses, especially for surface-feeding ducks on the coast. Highest numbers inland were the approximately 6600 American Widgeons (Mareca americana) at Wheeler Refuge (second highest AOS CBC record) and almost 2400 Gadwalls (Anas strepera) at Guntersville (highest AOS record since 1964). Wheeler also set a North Ala. CBC record of 416 Green-winged Teal (Anas carolinensis), with 2 Blue-winged Teal found as far inland as Tuscaloosa. On the coast, the highest abundance records were for the Redhead (Aythya americana) at Bay County (4300--an AOS abundance record by almost 2000) and at Choc. Bay (1413).

Overall, the Lesser Scaup (Aythya affinis) again probably did best by setting CBC or second highest CBC records on both inland and coastal counts--Bay County (2100), Dauphin Island (1570), Guntersville (640), Pensacola (514), Gulf Shores (500), Wheeler Refuge (344) and Tuscaloosa (203), the number at Guntersville being a CBC record for the Tennessee Valley. Inland, the first and second North Ala. abundance records were set for Common Goldeneyes (Bucephala clangula) at Guntersville (288) and Wheeler (122); and, on the coast, the first and second AOS abundance records were set for Buffleheads (Bucephala albeola) at Choc. Bay (584) and Bay County (539). The Hooded Merganser (Lophodytes cucullatus) did well at each end of the area with a modern North Ala. record at Wheeler (244) and first and second Gulf Coast winter records at Choc. Bay (101) and Bay County (79). Since the advent of our harsh winters, the Common Merganser (Mergus merganser) is being found in greater

numbers than previously on the Tennessee River, this time with 7 at Wheeler and 1 at Gunter'sville.

Woodpeckers--One might suspect the Wheeler Refuge observers baited the area with suet since the Wheeler count set Tennessee Valley records of 95 Downy Woodpeckers (Dendrocopos pubescens), 90 Red-bellied Woodpeckers (Centurus carolinus), 19 Hairy Woodpeckers (Dendrocopos villosus), and 44 Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers (Sphyrapicus varius). The Hairy Woodpecker, however, was found in low numbers on almost every other count on which it was reported. Pileated Woodpeckers (Dryocopus pileatus) are, as is most of the family, not found in as high numbers on the coast as inland; but this year it did well with a tie for the Gulf Coast record being set at Mobile and Marianna (20 each).

Winter Finches and Nuthatches--Invasions of boreal finches into the South are cyclical; and, while the cycle used to be every four years, it was three between 1972 and 1975 and only two between 1975 and 1977, the year of the last large invasion. A strong factor in the cycle is the food supply in northern forests but another could well be an increase in population, which is known to have occurred in the case of the Evening Grosbeak (Hesperiphona vespertina). In the "echo" year of 1978-79, there were, however, no Evening Grosbeaks on the AOS CBC's and practically none found during the entire winter. Similarly, there were none on CBC's in the previous "echo" year of 1976. Also, comparing the 1978 counts with those in 1976, there were only 9 Pine Siskins (Spinus pinus) on four counts compared with 9 on 3, 1975 Purple Finches (Carpodacus purpureus) on 7 counts compared with 669 on 15, and 30 Red-breasted Nuthatches (Sitta canadensis) on 10 counts compared with 50 on 9. A total of 1461 American Goldfinches (Spinus tristis) was only around 50-60% of the total in 1976 (2480) or 1977 (2828).

Sparrows--Wheeler Refuge led the region in sparrow abundance with Tennessee Valley CBC or second highest CBC records of 1306 White-throated Sparrows (Zonotrichia albicollis), 363 Song Sparrows (Melospiza melodia), 358 Swamp Sparrows (Melospiza georgiana), 349 Field Sparrows (Spizella pusilla), and 228 Savannah Sparrows (Passerculus sandwichensis), while Guntersville reported a Tennessee Valley record 111 Chipping Sparrows (Spizella passerina). Also identified at Guntersville was a Lincoln's Sparrow (Melospiza lincolni), which might be considered a western visitor since it is much more common in the West. Tuscaloosa had an Upper Coastal Plain record of 239 Swamp Sparrows, and Marianna the second highest Gulf Coast CBC of 179 Vesper Sparrows (Pooecetes gramineus). However, sparrows of both grasslands and other habitats were found in low numbers on virtually every other count with zeros on many.

Other non-passerines--The most notable observations in this category were of the White Pelican (Pelecanus erythrorhynchos), which was reported on 5 counts with the phenomenal number for an AOS CBC record of 770 at Choc. Bay; others were at Mobile (130), Pensacola (7), Gulf Shores (6) and Marianna (1), the last 3 counts being the first CBC records for those areas. The 2 Double-crested Cormorants (Phalacrocorax auritus) at Wheeler Refuge were significant since, until recently, cormorants have been virtually extirpated from inland waters. Guntersville had second inland count records of 295 Pied-billed Grebes (Podilymbus podiceps) and 107 Horned Grebes (Podiceps auritus) and a North Ala. record of 42 Common Loons (Gavia immer). Bay County reported a Gulf Coast abundance record for the Pied-billed Grebe (102), and other highs for the loon were a near Gulf Coast CBC record on Bay County (339) and inland CBC records at Wheeler (27) and Tuscaloosa (20).

As often has been the case, Bay County did well in the gull category--its 1713 Herring Gulls (Larus argentatus) set an AOS CBC record, and its 1863

Laughing Gulls (Larus atricilla) were highest for NW Fla. Pensacola also had a high number of Laughing Gulls (1356), while first and second highest inland CBC records for Ring-billed Gulls (Larus delawarensis) were at Wheeler (1136) and Guntersville (659). High for the Bonaparte's Gull (Larus philadelphia) this year was the 1040 at Choc. Bay, second highest NW Fla. CBC record.

Among the owls, the 9 Barred Owls (Strix varia) at Marianna were the second highest for an AOS CBC, while Tennessee Valley highs were set at Guntersville of 5 Barred Owls and 4 Great Horned Owls (Bubo virginianus). Three Short-eared Owls (Asio flammeus) were reported at Wheeler from two different airport locations.

Other non-passerine records in abundance included: 1048 Mourning Doves (Zenaidura macroura) at Tuscaloosa (an Upper Coast Plain CBC record, and 894 at Pensacola (a NW Fla. CBC record); 48 Ground Doves (Columbigalina passerina) at Marianna (only one under the Gulf Coast abundance record); and 65 Belted Kingfishers (Megaceryle alcyon) at Pensacola (an AOS abundance record), 51 at Bay County, 25 at Guntersville (a Tennessee Valley record), and 21 at Birmingham (its second highest CBC).

Other passerines--Noteworthy in this category was the fantastic number of Common Grackles (Quiscalus quiscula) reported from Wheeler Refuge--5,000,000, flying to and from a roost down the Tennessee River. In addition, Pensacola had a high for the Gulf Coast of over 8000. Wheeler also reported a record 1110 Cedar Waxwings (Bombycilla cedrorum), a Tennessee Valley record by 650.

Other passerine abundance records included: Fish Crow (Corvus ossifragus) CBC records away from roosts of 851 at Pensacola and 604 at Mobile; American Robin (Turdus migratorius)--8700 at Marianna (second highest CBC for NW Fla.); Blue-gray Gnatcatcher

(Polioptila caerulea)--29 at Pensacola (second highest AOS CBC) with one inland at Tuscaloosa; Loggerhead Shrikes (Lanius ludovicianus)--65 at Marianna (second highest AOS CBC); and Palm Warbler (Dendroica palmarum)--47 at Marianna (a NW Fla. winter record, including reports of both races) with 2 at Wheeler (its fourth recent CBC record).

On the 1978 AOS CBC's, there was a total of 194 species (including two within the count weeks). For complete tabulations of all CBC's, see Vol. 33, No. 4 of American Birds. A summary of the 13 AOS counts is in Table 2.

TABLE II. A SUMMARY OF THE 1978 AOS CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNTS

<u>Count--Date (Compiler)</u>	<u>On Count</u>	<u>Within Count Week</u>	<u>Total Individuals</u>	<u>Partici- pants</u>	<u>Parties</u>	<u>Party- Hours</u>
Wheeler Wildlife Refuge-- Dec. 16 (J. Milton Harris)	106	106	5,217,236	34	10	85(c)
Guntersville--Dec. 23 (C. Dwight Cooley)	96	96	51,882	10	4	50
Birmingham--Dec. 30 (Thomas A. Imhof)	83	85	14,383	34(b)	14	113.5
Tuscaloosa--Dec. 21 (James C. Thompson)	85	87	14,356	14	4	34
Eufaula Wildlife Refuge-- Dec. 23 (Sam Pate, Jr.)	121	122	17,063	9	6	46.5
Mobile--Dec. 26 (M. Wilson Gaillard)	123	123	18,910	22	7	53
Dauphin Island--Dec. 30 (Richard E. Hayward, Jr.)	124	128	8,358	21	10	68(c)
Ft. Morgan--Dec. 23 (Mary Lou Mattis & Sherlie E. Gade)	104	105	4,491	17	6	60(c)
Gulf Shores--Jan. 1 (P. Fairly Chandler)	122	125	30,364	27	8	80.75
Pensacola--Dec. 16 (Curtis L. Kingsbery)	108	109	22,641	47	11	104.75(c)
Choctawhatchee Bay--Dec. 17 (Sandra Lefstad)	122	128	14,648	27	6	61(c)
Marianna--Dec. 16 (Marion W. Gray)	100	108	19,323	16(b)	8	73(c)
Bay County (Panama City)-- Dec. 29 (Joe B. Harbison)	142	142	22,859	30	10	84(c)

(a) Species combined in the 1973 revision of the AOU Check-List are treated separately in this article and the above table because reported separately on the Christmas Counts. In 1978, this treatment affects only geese.

(b) Additional observers at feeders.

(c) Includes boat party.