

WESTERN AND NORTHERN CELEBRITIES
ALONG WITH NUMEROUS LINGERING MIGRANTS
HIGHLIGHT 1974 AOS CHRISTMAS COUNTS

Numerous outstanding finds were recorded on the 13 Christmas Counts reported to Alabama Birdlife for the 1974 Christmas Season (the same number as last year and again including two counts at Eufaula National Wildlife Refuge--one on December 21 and the other on January 4). Western and northern visitors would have to compete with each other for greater significance and, if one had to choose, perhaps the scales should be tipped in favor of the westerns. They included a Black-throated Gray Warbler at Bay County, a Western Kingbird and Scissor-tailed Flycatcher at Fort Morgan, 3 White-winged Doves and a brilliant male Yellow-headed Blackbird at Pensacola, and another Yellow-headed Blackbird at Dauphin Island (each of the blackbirds following up recent winter records at the same places). There are increasing records of Black-throated Grays wintering in the Florida Peninsula, and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers have been noted in good numbers on Western and Southern Florida Christmas Counts for over a decade, so AOS observers may look forward to possibilities of additional observations of those species in future years. The warbler was only the first on an AOS Christmas Count, the Western Kingbird a second, and the flycatcher a fourth. White-winged Doves are rare in the AOS area. There have been three previous count records in Alabama, but this was the first for Northwest Florida on a Christmas Count or during a Christmas Count week since 1967 although a few are seen in most winters.

A mystery lady at Pensacola attracted much attention and was later determined to have probably been a female King Eider, joined on Christmas Day (11 days after the count but still within the full count period) by another; the birds were observed and photographed by many. Their identification as King Eiders is based on one found on the beach later in the winter. It has always been considered difficult to distinguish the female eiders, and field observers report the most determinative characteristic is comparison of the bill length between the nostril and the base at the forehead and the length between the nostril and the tip; the first should be shorter in the King while both lengths should be very nearly equal in the Common. Further exciting northern visitors at Pensacola were 3 female or immature Black Scoters during the count week, which were joined by 2 more afterwards, one of which was an adult male. In addition, even though outside the count period, a female or immature Surf Scoter appeared on January 4 and 5 and later an immature male on February 19. It may be noted that the Blacks are a sequel to single birds observed last Christmas Season at Gulf Shores and Bay County. Other notable northern visitors were the Short-eared Owl at Marion, a prelude to the owl excitement to occur later in the winter (see "Owl Winter" in this issue), and the 2 Rough-legged Hawks at Wheeler Refuge.

The mild winter (second in a row) doubtless contributed to many migrants or summer residents found remaining on the Christmas Counts, all of which were on the coast except the Yellow-breasted Chat, which responded to a Screech Owl call at Marion. Among the others were a Yellow-throated Vireo, Black-throated Green Warbler, Purple Martin and Purple Gallinule at Bay County, a male Summer Tanager and Yellow-billed Cuckoo at Marianna (the former being a sequel to--and probably the same bird as--the male frequenting the same suet feeder within the count week there last year), and Ruby-throated Hummingbirds at Pensacola and within the count week at Bay County (the latter a male and the former a female observed well at close range so that the green back and lack of rufous were noted). Baltimore Orioles (now classified by the AOU as the Baltimore race of a new Northern Oriole) have in recent years been appearing on many Christmas Counts in the Southeast. A lady at Pensacola is doing a good job of feeding them, for a male was found during the count week there at the same feeder as one seen on the count date last year. Other summer residents that are rare to uncommon on the coast in winter included the Gull-billed Tern

at Mobile, 2 Black-and-White Warblers at Bay County, Yellow-throated Warblers on or within the count week of five counts with a high of 6 at Bay County, and White-eyed Vireos on eight counts, six on the coast and, in addition, both counts at Eufaula Refuge.

The mild winter may also have accounted for the large number of counts on which certain wading birds appeared. The White Ibis was reported on four counts as opposed to five last year--12 for a Christmas Count record at Fort Morgan, 2 immatures inland on the Dec. 21 Eufaula Refuge Count, and 2 each at Mobile and Pensacola. Green Herons were reported on three counts, including one on the Jan. 4 Eufaula Refuge Count. Am. (now called Great) Egrets and Little Blue Herons were found inland on both Eufaula Counts, the 85 of the former on Jan. 4 being an inland winter record as were the 5 of the latter on Dec. 21. Eufaula also has a good colony of Black-crowned Night Herons, and 54 were noted on the Jan. 4 count. The Yellow-crowned Night Heron might be expected to be less likely in winter since it is the more southern of the two night herons, but it was recorded on three coastal counts--Mobile (4), Dauphin Island (1) and Pensacola (2), the latter its fifth straight Christmas Count record. Notable also were 3 Reddish Egrets (one a white-phased bird) at Dauphin Island and a Least Bittern at Gulf Shores for the second straight year that one was observed at Mary Lou Slough. The American Bittern, its more northern cousin, appeared on three counts--2 at Gulf Shores and 1 on the Jan. 4 Eufaula Refuge Count, each for their third straight year, and 1 at Fort Morgan. Strangely due to its continuing population explosion, however, the Cattle Egret was found this year on only two Christmas Counts with a high of 6 at Mobile as compared with five counts last year and a high of 26 at Dauphin Island.

In the category of species endangered from one cause or another, the Brown Pelican, apparently still suffering from persistent pesticide residues, was found in low numbers on only two counts--3 at Bay County and 1 at Fort Morgan--down from 42 and 20 on those same counts, respectively, in 1973. The Bald Eagle and Osprey are also still suffering from persistent pesticide residues. It is, therefore, encouraging to note an immature Bald Eagle at Wheeler Refuge for the sixth straight year one has been seen there either on the count or within the count periods and the 2 (one adult and one immature) within the count week of the Dec. 21 Eufaula Refuge Count; the same is true of the 2 Ospreys on the Jan. 4 count at that refuge and the 1 at Fort Morgan. The other North American eagle--an immature Golden--was found at Eufaula Refuge on its Dec. 21 count.

Another threatening factor is, of course, destruction of habitat, and changes in the marsh area at the intracoastal waterway near Gulf Shores resulted in absence of the usual Sandhill Crane flock. Because of rapidly diminishing beach habitat, the Piping and Snowy Plovers are included on the "Blue List" of species not yet considered endangered but whose numbers are reported on the decline (American Birds (1974), 28(6): 972-74). On the 1974 AOS Counts, Pippings were found on four counts with a high, however, of 30 at Dauphin Island, and Snowys on three with highs of 10 at Pensacola for a Northwest Florida Christmas Count record and 9 at Dauphin Island. The Am. Oystercatcher (also on the "Blue List") was found at Dauphin Island (3) and Fort Morgan (2 within the count week). The Christmas Counts reflect that the Eastern Bluebird, which has suffered from harsh winter weather in past years, as well as a decline in available nesting locations, is still low in highly urbanized areas such as Birmingham and Mobile, although it is increasing in some rural and coastal areas.

Most hawks are also on the "Blue List." In the AOS area, Sharp-shins were found on six counts with highs of 5 at Bay County and 4 at Marion, while the Cooper's appeared on or within the count week of only four. Single Merlins (or Pigeon Hawks) were found on three counts--the Jan. 4 Eufaula Refuge Count, Fort Morgan and Gulf Shores.

Although the Am. Kestrel is on the decline in or around urban areas, the 35 at Marion set an inland winter record with good numbers also at Gulf Shores (46) and on the Dec. 21 Eufaula Refuge Count (21). The Marsh Hawks (39) on the same Eufaula count are a high number for that raptor.

Notable observations of hawks not on the "Blue List" included an AOS record for Red-tailed Hawks at Marion (85) with a high for Northwest Florida at Marianna (26). In addition, it is interesting to note that one of the light-phased Krider's race, more numerous on the plains, was found at Wheeler Refuge, Birmingham and on the Jan. 4 Eufaula Refuge Count, which also reported a melanistic Red-tail. Rounding out hawk observations were the large number of Black Vultures from a roost near Marion (134) and the Turkey Vultures at Mobile (52) for the second highest Alabama record.

Again this year, waterfowl were generally down in number, especially on the Gulf Coast. This appears to be due both to a general decline in numbers and to so-called "short-stopping" by feeding programs holding the birds for the winter in more northern areas. There were, however, a few scattered exceptions, including the Am. Wigeon (or Baldpate) at Jacksonville (178 for a Mountain Region record), Canvasback at Wheeler Refuge (108 for a Wheeler Christmas Count record), high numbers of Red-breasted Mergansers at Fort Morgan (565) and Pensacola (500), and reasonably high numbers of Ruddy Ducks at Bay County (119 for a Northwest Florida Christmas Count record) and Gulf Shores (100).

The most outstanding abundance records for the AOS area came, however, from species widely separated on the AOU list--the 206 Am. Avocets at Mobile (13th out of its last 14 Christmas Counts), attracted largely by the ponds on Blakeley Island (previous record of 147 in Dec., 1972) and the Savannah and White-crowned Sparrows at Marion and Wheeler Refuge (see below). As observers during migration periods will attest, the ponds at Blakeley Island also attract large numbers of Dunlins, and that species seems to be doing well since it was found on 9 of the 13 AOS counts this winter, including inland observations of 40 on the Eufaula Refuge Jan. 4 Count (an inland winter record), 13 at Wheeler Refuge (a Tenn. Valley winter record), and 2 at Marion, and also 134 at Bay County for a Northwest Florida Christmas Count record. The Spotted Sandpiper also had a good year, being recorded on six counts, including an inland observation of a single bird at Wheeler Refuge for the second straight year and a high count of 7 at Pensacola. Other high counts of shorebirds were Least Sandpipers at Marion (115 for a second inland winter record in abundance) and Willets at Bay County (79 for a Northwest Florida Christmas Count record).

Other notable coastal observations were Anhingas (rarely noted on AOS Christmas Counts) at Marianna (4), Bay County (2) and Gulf Shores (1), the Limpkins at Marianna (2), probably attracted by the good cypress swamp habitat in the count area, and single Whip-poor-wills there and at Pensacola.

Noteworthy inland observations were led by the White Pelican at Wheeler Refuge, the first recent inland winter record. Others included a Whistling Swan during the count week at Wheeler for its fifth straight count period record, a Blue-winged Teal at Birmingham that was attracted by the ducks at the Birmingham Zoo, a Greater Yellowlegs within the count week there for its first record of the Christmas Season, 7 Short-billed Dowitchers on the Dec. 21 Eufaula Refuge Count (second straight year for that shorebird at Eufaula), and 2 Palm Warblers at Wheeler Refuge for the third straight year (although previously that warbler had not been recorded there during recent winters).

All members of the Wren and the Gnatcatcher-Kinglet families did well this past Christmas Season. The House Wren made almost a "clean sweep" of the counts, being found on 12 of the 13, with highs at Gulf Shores (31 for a second highest AOS winter record), Fort Morgan (25), and Bay County (24 for a Northwest Florida winter record),

and 1 at Wheeler Refuge (where this wren is not usually found that far north in winter). Single Bewick's Wrens were found at all five inland count localities. The Carolina Wren is said to inhabit almost every brush pile in the Southeast and lived up to its reputation at Birmingham (277 for a near AOS record), Marion (128 for a Coastal Plain record), Gulf Shores (94, just one shy of a Gulf Coast record), and Pensacola (50 for a Northwest Florida record). The Blue-gray Gnatcatcher did well, being found on all counts from Eufaula Refuge south with 8 for an inland winter record on the Dec. 21 count there and high but not record numbers at Pensacola (28), Bay County (24), Gulf Shores (21) and Fort Morgan (18). Its northern relative, the Ruby-crowned Kinglet, had high numbers almost throughout the area, led by a high but not record 199 at Birmingham and regional records or near records at Marion (160), Pensacola (132), Fort Morgan and Bay County (130 each), Wheeler Refuge (126), the Dec. 21 Eufaula Refuge Count (123), and Marianna (101). The Golden-crowned Kinglet also set a Tennessee Valley record (78) at Wheeler Refuge.

The outstanding sparrow abundance records referred to above were the almost 1300 Savannahs at Marion and 111 White-crowns at Wheeler Refuge, each an AOS area record (previous highs being 548 for the Savannah at Eufaula Refuge last year and 50 for the White-crowns in 1953 also at Wheeler). The Savannah, in addition, had good numbers this year on the Jan. 4 Eufaula Count (470), its Dec. 21 Count (400) and the Gulf Shores Count (409). Other abundance records for the sparrow tribe included the Vespers at Gulf Shores (224 for an AOS area record), Chippings at Marianna (485 for a second highest Gulf Coast record), and White-throats at Birmingham (1501 for a second highest inland AOS record). A large number of Fox Sparrows (53) were seen at Marion, which is high for the AOS area outside of Birmingham; and, although the Fox does not normally winter as far south as the coast, it appeared on four counts there with a high of 3 at Marianna. Among the sizable count of Slate-colored (now Dark-eyed) Juncos at Birmingham (almost 1200) were 3 of the Pink-sided Oregon race, birds of that race having been found on three of its last four Christmas Counts. Those sparrows that, when found, are in low numbers included LeConte's (1 at Pensacola and another within the count week at Marianna) and Grasshopper Sparrows on or within the count week of four counts, including 2 each on the Jan. 4 Eufaula Refuge Count and at Marianna. In addition, single Lincoln's Sparrows (primarily a western species) were observed on three counts--Marion, Gulf Shores and Marianna.

Other abundance figures included: Great Blue Heron--the high number of 80 on the Jan. 4 Eufaula Refuge Count; Bob-white--125 at Gulf Shores for an AOS Christmas Count record; Killdeer--634 at Gulf Shores; Mourning Dove--566 for a Northwest Florida record at Pensacola (which also reported a good number of 612 Rock Doves); Com. Ground Dove--the high number of 39 on the Dec. 21 Eufaula Refuge Count with a good number of 28 at Marianna; Eastern Phoebe--five counts at or near Christmas Count records, led by 25 both on the Dec. 21 Eufaula Refuge Count and at Marianna; Belted Kingfisher--high numbers at Bay County (50) and Pensacola (43); Com. Crow--590 at Jacksonville for a Mountain Region record (in the absence of a roost); Carolina Chickadee--322 at Birmingham for an AOS area record and 48 at Marianna for a record at the Gulf Coast where it is found in much smaller numbers than inland; Brown Creeper--16 at Wheeler Refuge for a Tennessee Valley record; Water Pipit--267 also at Wheeler for a North Alabama record; Cedar Waxwing--the high number of almost 1600 at Birmingham; Loggerhead Shrike--77 at Marianna for an AOS Christmas Count record and 46 at Marion for an inland winter record; Solitary (or Blue-headed) Vireo--7 at Pensacola for an AOS Christmas Count record; Myrtle Warbler--almost 2700 at Gulf Shores for a second highest AOS record; Pine Warbler--143 at Bay County for an AOS Christmas Count record (a remarkable increase from the 10 and 13 reported there the previous two years) and 90 at Birmingham for a North Alabama Christmas Count record; Com. Yellowthroat--33 at Gulf Shores for an AOS Christmas Count record with also high numbers at Fort Morgan (24) and Bay County (23); Eastern Meadowlark--almost 600 at Marion for an inland record; Brewer's Blackbird--over 2500 at Marion for an AOS area record and 60 at Wheeler Refuge where they have been considered uncommon and local in winter; Com. Grackle--a relatively high number for the Gulf Coast of almost 6300 at Marianna; and Cardinal--727 at Birmingham for an AOS Christmas Count record and almost 400 at Marion for a Coastal Plain record. In addition,

very energetic nighttime observing resulted in record Christmas Count numbers of Screech Owls at Gulf Shores (55) and Birmingham (34), Great Horned Owls at Marion (6), and Barred Owls at Birmingham (8) and Marion (7).

This was the second year after the sizable invasion of Evening Grosbeaks in the winter of 1972-73, and the species was reported on only two counts--1 at Birmingham (with a flock of 30 seen within the count week) and 5 at Jacksonville. The Purple Finch was generally down in numbers but was recorded on 11 of the 13 counts. The Pine Siskin was substantially absent with, however, a few scattered verified reports ranging from 2 at Jacksonville and 1 to 3 at Eufaula Refuge, both on the eastern boundary of the state (near adjoining areas of the Appalachians where it is understood additional birds were found, although in small numbers) to another pair as far south as Mobile. Although another visitor from the northern forests, the Red-breasted Nuthatch, was virtually absent last winter, it was recorded, although not in large numbers, on 7 of the 13 counts this year with the highs being 14 and 11 at Bay County and Fort Morgan, respectively, and an apparent Tennessee Valley record of 6 at Wheeler Refuge.

On the 1974 counts, a record of an even 200 species was observed on the counts and during the count weeks with 198 on the counts themselves (the full count period being Dec. 14 through 31). Complete tabulations of all species on counts conducted during that period will appear in Vol. 29, No. 2 of American Birds, which will be received by all participants in those counts. Therefore, in order to avoid duplication, a complete tabulation of only counts not held during that period is set forth following this article. As a parting note from the editor, we urge all interested observers to communicate with the count compilers and other leaders and to participate in the 1975 Christmas Counts. It can be seen that many noteworthy birds may be found; in addition, one may also have an enjoyable winter's day in the out-of-doors.

A summary of the above 13 Christmas Counts is as follows:

Count, Date and Compiler	Species(a)		Total Individuals	Partici- pants	Parties	Party- Hours
	On Count	Within Count Week				
Wheeler Wildlife Refuge-- Dec. 14 (J. Milton Harris)	91	92	52,619	31	6	63
Birmingham--Dec.29 (Thomas A. Imhof)	90	92	17,760	40	12	121
Jacksonville--Dec. 14 (C. William Summerour)	74	74	22,024	24	5	41
Marion--Dec.22 (James V. Peavy, Jr.)	94	94	21,451	13	5	53
Eufaula Wildlife Refuge-- Dec. 21 (Michael Fuller)	114	117	11,225	11	7	62
Eufaula Wildlife Refuge-- Jan. 4 (Julian L. Dusi)	103	105	5,048	11	--	18.25
Mobile--Dec. 14 (Richard E. Hayward, Jr.)	139	139	14,897	17(b)	10	51
Dauphin Island--Dec. 28 (M. Wilson Gaillard)	110	110	9,215	16	5	38.5
Ft. Morgan--Dec. 28 (Mary Lou Mattis & Sherlie Gade)	110	112	6,837	14	6	58
Gulf Shores--Dec. 31 (P. Fairly Chandler)	119	122	21,468	28	8	76.5
Pensacola--Dec. 14 (Curtis L. Kingsbery)	119	123	13,835	40(b)	10	92.5
Marianna--Dec. 14 (Marion W. Gray)	92	95	13,933	19(b)	8	53
Bay County (Panama City)-- Dec. 28 (Donald P. Scott)	133	134	15,205	26	10	80

(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.

(b) Additional observers at feeders.

Robert R. Reid, Jr.
Counts Editor

Eufaula National Wildlife Refuge (incl Chattahoochee R., sloughs managed for waterfowl, and Cowikee and Wylaunee Creeks--count limited to refuge area): Jan. 4; 6:00 AM to 4:45 PM. Participants: Neva Brunton, Julian L. Dusi (compiler); Rosemary T. Dusi, Thomas French, Michael Fuller, Susan Lancaster, Marjory D. Lyons, Jackie and Ron McKitrick, and Harriett and Tom Meadows.

Pied-billed Grebe-3; Great Blue Heron-80; Green Heron-1; Little Blue Heron-1; Great (or Am.) Egret-85; Black-crowned Night Heron-54; Am. Bittern-1; Canada Goose-25; Snow Goose (white phase)-4; Blue Goose (blue phase of Snow Goose)-15; Mallard-600; Black Duck-35; No. Pintail-87; Green-winged Teal-6; Am. Wigeon (or Baldpate)-10; No. Shoveler-61; Wood Duck-12; Redhead-15; Ring-necked Duck-3; Canvasback-7; Bufflehead-20; Ruddy Duck-3; Hooded Merganser-12; Turkey Vulture-1; Black Vulture-2; Cooper's Hawk-1; Red-tailed Hawk (1 Krider's)-15; Red-shouldered Hawk-2; Marsh Hawk-21; Osprey-2; Merlin (or Pigeon Hawk)-1; Am. Kestrel (or Sparrow Hawk)-4; Bob-white-75; Virginia Rail-2; Sora-2; Am. Coot-104; Killdeer-106; Com. Snipe-78; Greater Yellowlegs-3; Lesser Yellowlegs-1; Least Sandpiper-27; Dunlin (or Red-backed Sandpiper)-40; Herring Gull-2; Ring-billed Gull-98; Bonaparte's Gull-3; Rock Dove-6; Mourning Dove-104; Com. Ground Dove-11; Barn Owl-2; Screech Owl-1; Barred Owl-1; Belted Kingfisher-4; Yellow-shafted (Com.) Flicker-11; Pileated Woodpecker-4; Red-bellied Woodpecker-14; Yellow-bellied Sapsucker-3; Downy Woodpecker-5;

Eastern Phoebe-7; Blue Jay-22; Com. Crow-23; Fish Crow-2; Carolina Chickadee-30; Tufted Titmouse-9; Brown-headed Nuthatch-9; House Wren-3; Carolina Wren-47; Short-billed Marsh (or Sedge) Wren-2; Com. Mockingbird-30; Brown Thrasher-5; Am. Robin-259; Hermit Thrush-6; Eastern Bluebird-2; Blue-gray Gnatcatcher-2; Golden-crowned Kinglet-5; Ruby-crowned Kinglet-22; Water Pipit-14; Cedar Waxwing-15; Loggerhead Shrike-16; Com. Starling-5; White-eyed Vireo-1; Solitary (or Blue-headed) Vireo-1; Myrtle (Yellow-rumped) Warbler-121; Pine Warbler-7; Palm Warbler-4; Com. Yellowthroat-8; Eastern Meadowlark-478; Red-winged Blackbird-275; Com. Grackle-173; Cardinal-39; Purple Finch-3; Pine Siskin-1; Am. Goldfinch-56; Rufous-sided Towhee-27; Savannah Sparrow-470; Grasshopper Sparrow-2; Vesper Sparrow-132; Slate-colored (Dark-eyed) Junco-127; Chipping Sparrow-1; Field Sparrow-151; White-crowned Sparrow-2; White-throated Sparrow-159; Swamp Sparrow-150; and Song Sparrow-229. Within count week: Gadwall, and Lesser Scaup.

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE FEEDING HABITS
OF THE RED-HEADED WOODPECKER
(Melanerpes erythrocephalus)

James V. Peavy, Jr.

It is a well-documented fact that Red-headed Woodpeckers will hawk for insects in a flycatcher-like fashion. For several years I have regularly observed them doing this at the Birmingham Zoo, which is where I work. In the late summer when insects hatch out in the zoo ponds, the Red-heads will congregate in several weeping willow trees and begin to forage in the typical manner; I have often seen eight or ten birds so engaged at one time. Another favorite pastime for these birds is to steal peanuts from the elephants. One or two birds will sit on a power pole near the elephants' lot, and, when a peanut is thrown to the elephants, a bird will swoop down, grab the nut and fly back to the top of the pole. The birds usually open the nut and eat it immediately; occasionally they carry it away.

The most unusual observation I have made at the zoo occurred on July 26, 1975, when I saw an adult Red-head fly down, catch a mouse by the tail and carry it to the top of a pole. The mouse was squeaking loudly, and this noise seemed to attract a young Red-head over. The adult bird moved to a tree limb, killed the mouse with a few pecks and flew off with the mouse; the young bird followed giving typical "feed-me" calls. This is the only instance of mammal predation by a Red-headed Woodpecker of which I have knowledge. A. C. Bent, in his Life Histories of North American Woodpeckers, quotes Mr. E. D. Nauman who relates an instance of a Red-head attacking a mouse, but the mouse escaped. It is interesting to note that, when carrying the mouse, the woodpecker used its beak rather than its feet; however, it did hold the mouse with one foot while killing it.

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