

1976 CHRISTMAS COUNTS FEATURE
NORTHERN VISITORS AND MIGRANT WARBLERS

With a record-breaking count of 152 species at Bay County, the first AOS count to enter the magic circle of 150 or more since Dauphin Island's 156 in 1965, and with new counts inaugurated at Guntersville and Choctawhatchee Bay ("Choc. Bay"), there were a record 15 AOS Christmas Counts conducted during the 1976 Christmas Season. Reflecting the inconsistent weather, which began with an almost summer day on Dec. 18 and wound up with a cold front and tempest braved by participants in the Mobile count on Jan. 2, the most outstanding finds were northern visitors and migrant warblers. The effects of our harshest winter in recent years, which began during the count period, remain, however, to be seen. Particularly affected may be the more fragile passerines (fragile in the sense that they are much more abundant in the South than in the North), such as the Carolina Wren and Pine Warbler where reductions of over 40% have already been noted between the 1976 and 1977 Birmingham Spring Counts.

Northern Visitors--Waterfowl furnished the most exciting species in this category--2 Com. (or Am.) Mergansers at Wheeler Wildlife Refuge (a prelude to the largest invasion of the Tenn. Valley by this species since 1951), a flight of 25 White-winged Scoters at Gulf Shores (an AOS abundance record), and Surf Scoters at Ft. Morgan (8) and Gulf Shores (2) with an unidentified scoter at Bay County. Oldsquaws appeared in four coastal count areas, led by 4 at Choc. Bay with 1 each at Dauphin Island and Bay County and 1 within the count week at Mobile. Choc. Bay also featured a Great Black-backed Gull spending the winter for the third straight year at Destin. The Gannet from the northern seas did well this year, being reported on five coastal counts with a high of 70 at Gulf Shores (an AOS Christmas Count record by over twice the previous high). A Long-eared Owl appeared during the Birmingham count week for the first Mountain Region record and, as a follow-up to its large numbers the last two years, a Short-eared Owl was found at Eufaula Wildlife Refuge with another within the Wheeler count week at Pryor Field north of Decatur. Finally, a melanistic Rough-legged Hawk was recorded at Guntersville.

Migrant Warblers and Other Summer Species--The 1976 counts were noteworthy in sightings of several wood warblers that normally would be spending the winter in Central America or the West Indies. Probably the rarest of these was the female Wilson's at Marianna (first AOS Christmas Count record). Others were an Ovenbird on the same count (second recent AOS Christmas Count record), 2 Parulas at Bay County (its second Christmas Count record) and 2 Black-throated Green Warblers at Pensacola (its first Christmas Count record). (See also Imhof, Thomas A., "The Season, Winter," in this issue for reports of the 1 or 2 Cape May Warblers in Birmingham in Dec. and Jan. although not within the count week.)

Black-and-White Warblers remained inland with single birds noted at Marion (first Upper Coastal Plain winter record) and Eufaula Refuge (second Lower Coastal Plain winter record) and were also found on four coastal counts led by Marianna with 8 for an AOS winter record; and the Yellow-throated Warbler was also found on four coastal counts led by Marianna (5) and Choc. Bay (4). The White-eyed Vireo, another species that is rare to uncommon in winter on the Gulf Coast, did particularly well in this past winter, being reported on seven of eight coastal counts with an AOS winter record at Marianna (12) and good numbers at Gulf Shores (8) and Dauphin Island and Bay County (4 each). Members of the swallow tribe also stayed north into the winter with a Barn Swallow being found at Choc. Bay (third AOS Christmas Count record, all in NW Fla.) and a lingering Rough-winged Swallow at Eufaula Refuge (where 6 were found even later on Dec. 30). One of the latter

also appeared within the count week at Gulf Shores. In addition, although the Tree Swallow winters often abundantly on the Gulf Coast, one remained inland at Marion (second inland AOS Christmas Count record).

The male Summer Tanager at Marianna seems to have taken up winter residence at the feeder it frequents there, being found for the fourth consecutive year on or within the count week of that count. Marianna also reported a Baltimore Oriole (now considered a race of the new No. Oriole) within its count week; and, lastly, an Indigo Bunting was recorded at Pensacola for its second straight Christmas Count record, there having been one to six sightings there for at least the last five winters.

Western Visitors--Pensacola and Gulf Shores had the western visitors this past winter. A male and female Rufous Hummingbird frequented a feeder at Pensacola from Dec. 1 through Feb.; and another hummingbird, unidentified as to species, was found during the count week at Gulf Shores. Baldwin County furnished winter home for a pair of Vermilion Flycatchers at Marlow Pond with a male seen within the Gulf Shores count week for its first Christmas Count record since 1964. Pensacola also featured an adult male Bullock's Oriole (the other race of the new No. Oriole) for its third Christmas Count record in the last four years.

Endangered Species--It is hoped that with the bans on DDT and other persistent pesticides, species high on the food chain may be recovering from those pesticide residues. Two Bald Eagles (an adult and an immature) were found at Guntersville and another immature at Wheeler for the eighth straight year one has been seen there either on the counts or within the count periods. Wheeler Refuge also reported two Peregrine Falcons; but there was only one Osprey this year, it being found at Bay County. Although reasonably large numbers of Brown Pelicans have been reported on the Gulf Coast in late summer, there were only 11 found on the 1976 Christmas Counts (9 at Bay County and 2 at Dauphin Island). This compares with 8 birds on three counts in 1975 and is still much under the numbers on the 1972 and 1973 counts.

Hawks--As in past years, most hawks are included on the "Blue List" of species not yet considered endangered but whose numbers are reported on the decline (American Birds (1976), 30(6):1031). However, Sharp-shins were found on 13 counts with a total of 31 birds as compared with 6 counts and 10 birds in 1975. Bay County was high with 6 (an AOS Christmas Count record). On the other hand, the Cooper's Hawk was reported in its lowest numbers since 1970 with single birds on only three counts. The Red-shouldered Hawk is included on the "Blue List" primarily because of reports from other areas, and here it was reported on all 15 counts with an increase in total birds from last year of 52 to an even 100 for the 13 counts conducted in both years. An AOS Christmas Count record was set at Marianna (28) followed by Tuscaloosa (18--an inland coastal plain count record) and Birmingham (16--tying the Mountain Region record). The Red-tailed Hawk (not on the "Blue List") did exceptionally well on the 1976 counts, being reported in highest or next highest numbers on 10 of the 15 counts. Wheeler Refuge and Tuscaloosa each had 53 (the former a Tenn. Valley record and the latter second highest for the inland coastal plain) followed by Eufaula Refuge (47--third highest for the inland coastal plain) and Birmingham (39--a Mountain Region record). The Am. Kestrel (while also on the "Blue List") increased almost 100 for a total of 333 birds on the 13 counts conducted in both 1975 and 1976. Marion was high with 51 (an inland winter record) followed by Dauphin Island and Gulf Shores with 46 each and Wheeler Refuge with 30 for another Tenn. Valley record. Single adult Broad-winged Hawks were reported from Mobile and Bay County; and Merlins (or Pigeon Hawks) were found

at Eufaula Refuge (2), Bay County (1) and Gulf Shores (1), the last being its fourth Christmas Count record in the last five years.

Birds of the Shore and Marsh--Because of rapidly diminishing beach habitat, the Piping and Snowy Plovers are included on the "Blue List," the latter being also considered an endangered species in Alabama. Pippings were found on three counts as in 1975, but the total number was up with 44 being recorded at Bay County for a NW Fla. Christmas Count record. Snowys were found on four counts with 14 at Choc. Bay for another NW Fla. Christmas Count record followed by 12 at Bay County. The Am. Oystercatcher (also on the "Blue List") was reported at Dauphin Island (7) for the highest AOS Christmas Count since 1971. Although the Clapper Rail is not threatened in the AOS area as it is on the Pacific Coast, this year its 27 on seven coastal counts is down from 88 on six in 1975. Consequently, because of the rapid destruction of marsh habitat, this species probably bears close watching.

The most outstanding shorebird observations were those of the Marbled Godwit--two on Shell Island at Bay County for its first Christmas Count record and one together with a Whimbrel near Battleship Park within the Mobile count week, the Whimbrel being the third winter record for the Ala. Gulf Coast. The Red Knot was reported on two counts--Gulf Shores (12) and Bay County (9). Sandhill Cranes continued their return to Gulf Shores, setting a Christmas Count record there of 30, and Limpkins were recorded at both Bay County (2) and Marianna (1) for the fourth straight Christmas Count at the latter. A Least Bittern was found within the count week at Gulf Shores, third of the last four years that species has been found on or within the count week of that count; and notable were the Reddish Egrets at Bay County (3) and Dauphin Island (2), the former being sighted at the same place on Shell Island where 2 were found last year. The 3 Common Gallinules at Eufaula Refuge constituted one of the few inland winter records for that species.

On the abundance side of the marsh and shorebird ledger, the Am. Coot set a modern inland record in abundance with over 11,000 at Guntersville. The Spotted Sandpiper was found on a record nine counts led by Dauphin Island (5) with one as far inland as Birmingham for the third record in its last four Christmas Counts; and a Lesser Yellowlegs at Wheeler was the second winter record for North Alabama. The Dunlin did very well, again as in 1975 being reported on nine counts led by Bay County (727 for a NW Fla. Christmas Count record--double its previous high) and with birds found on three inland counts--Wheeler Refuge (6), Birmingham (2) and Marion (1). The Killdeer also did well, led as always by Gulf Shores (989 for the second highest AOS record in abundance, being exceeded only by the 1975 count there of 1087). Wheeler Refuge reported 548, which is 100 over the previous inland record, and Bay County had 356 (a high for NW Fla.). The Great Blue Heron set a Gulf Coast winter record at Gulf Shores (88); the White Ibis did rather well on three coastal counts led by Mobile (47) and Choc. Bay (28); and the roost of Black-crowned Night Herons at Eufaula Refuge was counted at near record numbers (56). Other abundance records were the Sanderling--261 at Bay County (a NW Fla. Christmas Count record) and 212 at Choc. Bay, and the Willet--88 at Bay County, only two less than the AOS Christmas Count record.

Waterfowl--Waterfowl reports were diverse with both high and low numbers for various species on various counts, the only consistent thread being that surface-feeding ducks were found in very low numbers on the coast. There was even one exception to that, the Green-winged Teal, which set a modern Christmas Count record of 360 at Mobile. It also set a similar record for the Tenn. Valley with 314 at Wheeler Refuge where Tenn. Valley Christmas Count records were also recorded

for the Am. Wigeon (8000), Black Duck (3000) and No. Shoveler (341). Blue-winged Teal were found on four inland counts led by Tuscaloosa (8) with others at Wheeler (2), Guntersville (1) and Marion (1); and the almost 500 Ring-necked Ducks at Tuscaloosa were a record for the Upper Coastal Plain. The Lesser Scaup did very well on the coast, particularly at Dauphin Island (3161 for an AOS winter record) and with count records at Bay County (652) and Gulf Shores (568). AOS Christmas Count records were also set for the Bufflehead at Choc. Bay (339) and Red-breasted Merganser at Gulf Shores (967).

Wintering Finches and Nuthatches--Southern invasions of boreal finches have generally followed a 4-year cycle--see report of the 1975 Christmas Counts in Alabama Birdlife (1976), 24(1-2):3,6, and Wright, Harriett H. (now Findlay), Alabama Birdlife (1967), 15(1):7. This cycle, dependent primarily on food supply in the northern forests, was reduced to a 2-year interval between 1966 and 1968 and to a 3-year interval between 1972 and 1975, the last being our largest invasion of Evening Grosbeaks. This year, the "echo" year, none reached the AOS area; and Pine Siskins were extremely scarce. On the Christmas Counts, siskins were found on only three--Eufaula Refuge (5), Birmingham (3) and Jacksonville (1)--and those were practically the only ones found all winter. The Red-breasted Nuthatch was also down from 13 to 9 counts with the highest being 16 birds at Ft. Morgan. The more common Purple Finch was, however, up from the previous "echo" year of 1973 by 200 or over 40%. It set highest or second highest Christmas Count records on 10 of the 15 counts, led by Birmingham's 344 (a second highest AOS Christmas Count record) and Bay County's 52 on the Gulf Coast where it is not so numerous. Numbers of the Am. Goldfinch varied with no consistent pattern, but the highest was 456 at Marion, an exact tie with last year's count for a Coastal Plain Christmas Count record.

Sparrows--Most sparrows did very well with the leader being the Song Sparrow. It was counted in record or near record numbers on nine counts, the highest being at Marion (433--an Upper Coastal Plain record) followed by second highest Christmas Count records at Birmingham (411) and Wheeler (318) and, on the coast where not as numerous, by Gulf Coast records at Marianna (178) and Choc. Bay (155). Its close cousin, the Swamp Sparrow, did particularly well at Wheeler (624--the second highest AOS record) followed by Birmingham (236--a Mountain Region record). Among the rarer grassland sparrows, the LeConte's had a very fine year. An AOS Christmas Count record of 7 was set at Eufaula Refuge where 14 (an Alabama record) were counted later on Dec. 30, Pensacola recorded four, and single birds were reported at both Wheeler Refuge and Bay County. The Grasshopper Sparrow was found on three counts--Marianna (3), Eufaula Refuge (2) and Bay County (1). Energetic observers at Bay County "tromped through lots of marsh" on Shell Island to turn up a modern AOS count record of 130 Sharp-tailed Sparrows (up from 45 last year).

A bird of the pink-sided race of the Oregon Junco (now considered a race of the all-inclusive Dark-eyed) was found at Marion, the most southern count record for that bird in the AOS area; and the Slate-colored race again did well at Birmingham (1352) and set records on the coast, where it is not as common, at Marianna (157--the Gulf Coast abundance record), Choc. Bay (120) and Mobile (111). Other high sparrow counts were: Savannah--1075 at Marion (a second highest AOS record), followed by 521 at Gulf Shores (a Gulf Coast record) and 173 at Wheeler (a Tenn. Valley record); Vesper--156 at Marianna (a NW Fla. record); Field--460 at Birmingham (highest since 1968) and 212 at Choc. Bay (a Gulf Coast record); White-crowned--124 at Marion (an AOS abundance record), followed by 92 at Tuscaloosa (third highest AOS record); and White-throats--1732 at Birmingham (another AOS abundance record) and 1500 at Wheeler (highest for the Tenn. Valley).

Chickadees through Kinglets and Others--Most of the small woodland passerines again had excellent years, their detection assisted by their good response to Screech Owl calls. Most noteworthy was the Solitary (or Blue-headed) Vireo, which had a banner year, being recorded on 13 counts with record or near record numbers on 10 and the first winter record for the Tenn. Valley of one at Wheeler Refuge. Highest was at Marianna (29--an AOS winter record) followed by Pensacola (15) and numbers of 7 to 9 at Choc. Bay, Ft. Morgan, Gulf Shores, Marion and Eufaula Refuge. The Ruby-crowned Kinglet tallied a record of almost 2900 birds, topping 1975's record total by over 200 more than those reported on the 13 counts conducted in both years. Highest or second highest numbers were reported on seven counts led by Marianna (390--a Gulf Coast record) followed by Marion (380) and totals ranging from 232 to 369 at Birmingham, Choc. Bay, Pensacola, Eufaula Refuge and Gulf Shores. Its relative, the Golden-crowned, did well at Tuscaloosa with an Upper Coastal Plain record of 106 but was low on many other counts.

As in 1975, both the Hermit Thrush and Orange-crowned Warbler also did well. The thrush set records or near records on 10 counts led by Birmingham's 53, an AOS abundance record by 40% over its previous high. Other high numbers were 47 at Marianna (only one less than the Coastal Plain record), 42 at Marion (an Upper Coastal Plain record), 37 at Gulf Shores and 29 at Wheeler, tying its Tenn. Valley record of last year. High for the Orange-crowned was 20 at Mobile, followed by Marianna (14), Gulf Shores (13) and Eufaula Refuge (6--an inland winter record). Led by its 462 at Birmingham (only one less than the AOS abundance record), the Carolina Chickadee continued to do well; also high were Tuscaloosa (146--a Coastal Plain record) and, on the coast where it is less abundant, Marianna (80) and Choc. Bay (55).

Short-billed Marsh Wrens were reported as common this year at Eufaula Refuge and, as a result of many more party-hours spent in wet grass areas, an inland record of 56 was reported there. Bewick's Wren (a representative from the wren family on the "Blue List") was reported on three counts--Wheeler Refuge and Marion (2 each) and Eufaula Refuge (1); and a House Wren was found at Guntersville where it is rare that far north. It is also difficult to find Brown-headed Nuthatches in the Tenn. Valley, but Guntersville recorded an abundance record for that region of 40.

Other Non-passerines--Bay County again had a record number of Ring-billed Gulls, but this year's 12,100 was an AOS abundance record by a fantastic 10,000; and its 1240 Herring Gulls set an AOS Christmas Count record. At Guntersville, inland Christmas Count records were set for the same species by 596 Herrings and 555 Ring-billeds. The Laughing Gull did extremely well at Dauphin Island with its 4635 being 3000 over the previous AOS winter record, and 6 birds were also found inland at Eufaula Refuge. Also doing well was the Bonaparte's at Bay County (770, exceeded only by its 1975 AOS Christmas Count record of over 1200). Two Sandwich Terns, which are rare on the coast in winter, were found within the count week at Gulf Shores for the fourth out of the last five years that tern has been reported on or within the count periods of that count. Locally significant was a Com. Loon inland at Lakeland Farm on the Marion count, notable because of the absence of large bodies of water in that count area.

Other non-passerine records in abundance included: Pied-billed Grebe--128 at Guntersville (a Tenn. Valley record); Mourning Dove--701 at Bay County (a Gulf Coast Christmas Count record); Belted Kingfisher--50 at Pensacola (tying the second highest NW Fla. record); Yellow-bellied Sapsucker--51 at Marion (second highest AOS winter record); and Downy Woodpecker--86 at Wheeler Refuge (a Tenn.

Valley record), 35 at Marion (a Coastal Plain record) and 24 at Marianna (a Gulf Coast record where it is not as numerous as inland). Turkeys were found on two counts--Wheeler Refuge (4) and Tuscaloosa (1), and Whip-poor-wills in four count areas--single birds on the counts or within the count weeks at Dauphin Island, Ft. Morgan, Gulf Shores and Pensacola. Lastly, energetic nighttime observing resulted in good numbers of Screech Owls at Gulf Shores (41) and Wheeler Refuge (33) and Barred Owls at Marion (7).

Other Passerines--Leading the other passerines was the Eastern Phoebe, which scored highest or second highest numbers on nine Christmas Counts led by Marianna's remarkable 70 for an AOS Christmas Count record. Other high counts were Pensacola (45), Choc. Bay (41) and Birmingham (33), the latter a Christmas Count record for the Mountain Region. Especially notable in numbers were the Fish Crows at Marianna--14,340, exceeding its AOS abundance record of last year by over 4000, and the Myrtle Warblers at Gulf Shores--almost 5600, exceeding the previous AOS abundance record set there in 1972 by over 2000 birds.

Other passerine records in abundance included: Blue Jay--628 at Birmingham (an AOS Christmas Count record); Com. Crow--750 at Jacksonville (an inland record away from roosts); Loggerhead Shrike--62 at Marianna (the second highest AOS Christmas Count record), but still very low around metropolitan areas such as Birmingham and Mobile; Pine Warbler--120 at Choc. Bay (second highest AOS Christmas Count record); Palm Warbler--18 at Eufaula Refuge (an inland winter record) and a single bird as far north as Guntersville where it is rare in winter; Com. Yellowthroat--72 at Bay County (an AOS winter record by almost 30 birds) followed by 19 at Eufaula (another inland winter record); and Eastern Meadowlark--651 at Marion (an AOS abundance record).

On the 1976 counts, a total of 202 species was observed on the counts and during the count weeks with 195 on the counts themselves. Complete tabulations of all Christmas Counts will appear in Vol. 31, No. 4 of American Birds. The AOS staff extends its thanks for their good efforts and cooperation to all participants and especially to the count compilers. A summary of the record 15 AOS 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. 18 (J. Milton Harris)	104	105	136,649	34	6	65
Guntersville--Dec. 23 (C. Dwight Cooley)	87	87	50,992	3	2	21.5
Birmingham--Dec. 26 (Thomas A. Inhof)	88	90	32,849	45	12	141
Jacksonville--Dec. 18 (C. William Summerour)	67	69	2,705	21	3	20
Tuscaloosa--Dec. 23 (Richard K. Crawford)	77	77	7,806	9	3	30.75
Marion--Dec. 19 (James V. Peavy, Jr.)	95	95	22,866	11	4	42
Eufaula Wildlife Refuge-- Dec. 18 (Sam Pate, Jr.)	125	127	43,302	30	13	81
Mobile--Jan. 2 (Richard E. Hayward, Jr.)	122	125	13,170	21	9	50
Dauphin Island--Dec. 18 (W. Wilson Galliard)	119	119	18,052	22	9	68
Ft. Morgan--Dec. 27 (Mary Lou Mattis & Sherlie E. Gade)	92	93	9,675	12	4	42
Gulf Shores--Jan. 1 (P. Fairly Chandler)	128	135	33,615	28	8	86
Pensacola--Dec. 18 (Curtis L. Kingsbery)	114	115	13,031	31(b)	9	89.5
Choctawhatchee Bay--Dec. 19 (Sandra Lefstad)	122	127	11,704	25	6	67
Marianna--Dec. 18 (Marion W. Gray)	100	106	30,380	25(b)	8	62
Bay County (Panama City)-- Jan. 1 (Stephen J. Stedman & Joe B. Harrison)	152	153	26,274	40	12	94

(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. This treatment affects geese, orioles and juncos.

(b) Additional observers at feeders.

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