

1977 CHRISTMAS COUNTS REFLECT
NORTHERN VISITORS AND HARSH WINTER OF 1976-77

Led by Bay County, Gulf Shores and Eufaula Wildlife Refuge, the 13 AOS Christmas Counts during the 1977 Christmas Season produced a record-breaking total of 207 species, including those seen within the respective count weeks, and a total of 203 on the counts themselves.

Northern Visitors--Notable in this the harshest winter on record in the AOS area were northern visitors, especially waterfowl. The counts made a "grand slam" in scoters--4 White-winged (all females), 3 on Lake Shelby at Gulf Shores for its second consecutive count record, and 1 within the count week at Choctawhatchee Bay ("Choc. Bay"); 2 Blacks, a female at Wheeler Wildlife Refuge for the first inland AOS record and another at Pensacola; and 2 Surfs, a female at Ft. Morgan and a male at Gulf Shores, each being second consecutive count records. The boat party at Choc. Bay reported a flock of 26 Oldsquaws for a NW Fla. Christmas Count record with another bird being found at Bay County. Inland, Com. (or Am.) Mergansers--3 at Wheeler Wildlife Refuge and 1 at Guntersville (all females)--were a prelude to a reasonably large invasion of the Tenn. Valley by this species after the record one of the previous winter.

Doubtless the most significant northern visitors, however, were the Snow Buntings. A pair appeared in Bay County around Thanksgiving, and the male was seen on the count and remained until March 10. Another bird, apparently also a male, was seen within the count week at Choc. Bay, which, in addition, featured an adult Great Black-backed Gull (thought probably to be the same bird that has been spending winters at the Destin East Pass for the last four years) and a Purple Sandpiper within its count week. A Short-eared Owl was recorded at Bay County and, as last Christmas, 1 at Eufaula Refuge and another within the Wheeler count week at Pryor Field north of Decatur.

Western Visitors--The most exciting visitor from the West was a Burrowing Owl at Gulf Shores bobbing up and down on the sand dunes near Mary Lou Slough for one of the few Ala. records. Inland, a Franklin's Gull, the "Prairie Dove" of the Great Plains, still in summer plumage with the rosy bloom on its breast quite visible, lingered in Decatur for the Wheeler Refuge count week. All but two of the Ala. records of this gull have been from the Tenn. Valley where this was the fifth. Bay County had 2 White-winged Doves within its count week; and the Lincoln's Sparrow, which might be considered a western visitor since it is much more common in the West than in the East, was recorded on the counts at Guntersville and Gulf Shores with another banded within the count week at Choc. Bay.

Effect of Harsh Winters--While the recent winter of 1977-78 was the coldest on record overall, there were more severe drops in temperature during the winter of 1976-77, and their effects probably were harder on the more fragile species of wildlife. Especially was the effect noted on small birds that are primarily insectivorous and have low body weights requiring high rates of metabolism. The group hardest hit appeared to be the kinglets, only 1 Golden-crowned being found on the eight Gulf Coast counts. A comparison

between the numbers recorded on the same 13 AOS Christmas Counts held in 1976 and 1977 (with the percentage using 1976 as a base) shows the following:

<u>Species</u>	<u>1976</u>	<u>1977</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Carolina Wren	760	539	71%
House Wren	138	97	70
Myrtle Warbler	10,872	6043	56
Eastern Phoebe	297	152	51
Pine Warbler	540	260	48
Solitary (or Blue-headed) Vireo	96	46	48
Hermit Thrush	293	121	41
Com. Yellowthroat	187	61	33
Golden-crowned Kinglet	364	116	32
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	2494	757	30
Orange-crowned Warbler	93	17	18

Many of these species, especially our resident Carolina Wren and Pine Warbler, had built up their populations during the three mild winters preceding the harsh weather of 1976-77. Consequently, some of the drop might be cyclical, as may well have been the case with the Orange-crowned Warbler, whose numbers on the 1976 counts had risen to a very high relative figure. Notwithstanding the harshness shown by the above figures, the 600 Myrtle Warblers at Eufaula Refuge was a 2d highest inland winter record. In addition, the Solitary Vireo did do well at Choc. Bay (13) and Marianna (8) as did the Hermit Thrush at Birmingham (40), although those are not count records.

By comparison, birds that do not rely so heavily on a diet of insects or are of larger size fared better, as indicated by the following (with the percentages being for the same 13 counts):

<u>Species</u>	<u>1976</u>	<u>1977</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Red-bellied Woodpecker	517	535	103%
Downy Woodpecker	261	262	100
Blue Jay	2319	2408	104
Carolina Chickadee	1161	1195	103
Tufted Titmouse	542	629	116
Brown-headed Nuthatch	450	424	94
Com. Mockingbird	1437	1355	94
Cardinal	2397	2551	106
Rufous-sided Towhee	1344	1117	83
White-throated Sparrow	6774	6111	90

Many of the last listed species were recorded in high numbers at Birmingham with AOS Christmas Count records being set by the Blue Jay (834--almost 100 over any previous Christmas Count), Com. Mockingbird (403) and Red-bellied Woodpecker (141) and with 2d AOS Christmas Count highs for the Cardinal (721), Tufted Titmouse (272) and Downy Woodpecker (102). Its Carolina Chickadees (459) were only four below the AOS Christmas Count record, and the chickadee further set a Coastal Plain record at Tuscaloosa (273). The Brown-headed Nuthatch did well with high numbers at Birmingham (154), Guntersville (59) and Eufaula Refuge (55), the last two being regional records. Also on the abundance side, Birmingham set AOS records for Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers (63) and Brown Creepers (22) and a 2d highest AOS record for White-breasted

Nuthatches (78). A Tenn. Valley record for Yellow-shafted Flickers was set by the 120 at Wheeler Refuge; but not all woodpeckers did well since the Hairy was recorded in lowest numbers in recent years, down almost 50% from 36 on the same 13 counts in 1976 to only 19 in 1977 (a decrease not attributed to the weather, however, but to a general decline in count areas).

Summer Residents and Migrants--Notwithstanding the harsh winter weather, there were a number of reports of summer residents and migrants remaining in the AOS area. Most noteworthy were the Northern Waterthrush, well-observed at close range at Eufaula Refuge for the first AOS Christmas Count record, and 3 Ovenbirds in Caverns State Park at Marianna following 1 on that count last year. Baltimore Orioles (currently considered a race of the Northern Oriole) were found inland at Eufaula Refuge (2) and at Marianna (1) where a female Blue Grosbeak was found at a feeder during the count week. Also in the category of summer finches was a small group of 6 Indigo Buntings at St. Andrew State Park on the Bay County count. Marianna missed its male Summer Tanager in this year's count week, but the bird is still maintaining winter residence in the area since it came to the same feeder on Dec. 23 and stayed until the middle of Jan.

Among summer residents that are rare to uncommon in winter on the Gulf Coast, the Black-and-White Warbler was seen on six counts, led by 6 birds at Marianna and including 1 inland at Eufaula Refuge for its third straight count record. The Yellow-throated Warbler was found on six coastal counts, with highs of 4 each at Marianna and Choc. Bay, as compared with four counts in 1976; but the White-eyed Vireo, also led by Marianna with 6, decreased from 31 on seven coastal counts in 1976 to 10 on four this year. The Green Heron was seen on or within the count week of four coastal counts with a high of 3 at Dauphin Island, its third straight count on which 3 birds have been recorded.

Endangered Species--Hopefully with the bans on DDT and other persistent pesticides, species high on food chains may be recovering from their previous low numbers. As some evidence in that direction, there were more Bald Eagles in the Tenn. Valley this winter than at any time since 1960. On the Gunter'sville count, 5 were recorded (1 adult and 4 immatures), and at Wheeler Refuge there were 2 immatures for its 9th straight year one or more have been seen there either on the counts or within the count periods. Farther south, 2 adults were at Eufaula Refuge, making a total of 9 birds on the AOS Christmas Counts as compared with a previous high of 3. Wheeler and Eufaula each also had a Peregrine Falcon; and there were three Ospreys--2 at Eufaula, and 1 at Gulf Shores. Brown Pelicans were found in a record AOS Christmas Count number at Bay County (99) and were also noted within the count weeks at Gulf Shores and Choc. Bay.

Hawks--Most hawks continue to be included on the "Blue List" of species not yet considered endangered but whose numbers are reported on the decline (American Birds (1977), 31(6):1087). However, in the AOS area the Sharp-shinned Hawk was again found in good numbers--32 birds on ten counts with an Ala. Christmas Count record of 6 at Wheeler Refuge followed by 5 at Eufaula Refuge and Marianna. The Cooper's Hawk did much better in 1977 than in recent years, being found on or within the count weeks of eight counts, a total of 11 birds with the high being 3 at Eufaula. This compares with a total of 5 birds in 1975 and only 3 on the 1976 counts. The Red-shouldered Hawk is included on the "Blue List" because of reports from other areas. Its total of 68 was less than the 102 on the same 13 counts in 1976, but that was still

the second highest AOS Christmas Count total on record. High numbers this year were at Birmingham (14) and Eufaula (13). The Red-tailed Hawk (not on the "Blue List") continued to do well with the 56 at Eufaula being the second highest AOS count record, and a dark Harlan's Hawk from the Plains States (now considered a race of the Red-tailed) was found at Dauphin Island.

Single immature Broad-winged and Swainson's Hawks were reported at Ft. Morgan, the latter being a rare find for an eastern count and only the second known AOS Christmas Count record. The "Blue Listed" Merlin (or Pigeon Hawk) had a total of 7 birds on four counts--Gulf Shores (3, for the 5th time on its last six counts), Eufaula Refuge (2), and Wheeler Refuge and Dauphin Island (1 each), the previous high total for all counts being 4 in 1976. Although the Am. Kestrel (also on the "Blue List") is difficult to find during the breeding season in the AOS area, the 1977 Christmas Counts produced another high total led by Gulf Shores (50), Dauphin Island (38), and Wheeler (31--a Tenn. Valley record by one), and Eufaula (29).

Birds of the Shore and Marsh--Because of rapidly diminishing beach habitat, many shorebirds bear watching and, for example, both the Piping and Snowy Plovers are included on the "Blue List." However, the Piping, although found on only three counts, was recorded in its highest total of 55 birds (including 32 at Dauphin Island and 22 at Bay County). On the other hand, the Snowy (also considered an endangered species in Alabama) was counted on four counts in its lowest number (14) since 1973. There were no Wilson's, the last Christmas Count record having been one bird in 1969. The Am. Oystercatcher (also on the "Blue List") was again found at Dauphin Island (7 as last year), which is its highest Christmas Count record since 1971. Although not on the "Blue List" but a bird that could suffer from destruction of marsh habitat, the Virginia Rail was found on the 1977 counts in much lower numbers (a total of only 7) than in previous years.

On the abundance side, the most outstanding shorebird records were the Am. Avocets at the Alcoa ponds on Blakeley Island, Mobile (254--an AOS Christmas Count record) and the Spotted Sandpipers at Pensacola (29--an AOS winter record). Spotteds were also found on six other counts, including Gulf Shores (4), Bay County (3), and two inland records--Eufaula Refuge (2) and Birmingham (1, for its 5th count record since 1970). Mobile also had a Christmas Count record for Western Sandpipers (370) plus 2 Semipalmateds that were flushed and identified by calls. Bay County had a NW Fla. Christmas Count record for Westerns (130), an AOS count record for Willets (155), and the 2d highest AOS Christmas Count for Greater Yellowlegs (67). Black-bellied Plovers did well on most of the coastal counts, being led by Bay County (112--the highest AOS Christmas Count record since 1964) and Mobile (64), the total being almost 100 over the 1976 counts. Dauphin Island set an AOS abundance record for Red Knots (105) and a single bird was found at Bay County. Inland, the 41 Dunlins at Eufaula was a winter record by one.

In the wading bird category, notable inland was the Am. Egret at Wheeler Refuge (its 2d Christmas Count record). Reddish Egrets (2 on each count) were found at Dauphin Island (4th of its last five counts) and at Bay County (its 3d straight Christmas Count), and the Least Bittern at Gulf Shores was the 4th out of the last five years that species has been found on or within the count week there. Eufaula Refuge had the 2d highest AOS Christmas Count for Great Blue Herons (140), a tie for the AOS count record for Am. Bitterns (7), and

inland winter records for the Cattle Egret (13) and Little Blue Heron (7). Farther inland, another Little Blue was at Tuscaloosa; and Am. Bitterns were also found on the Gulf Shores count (2, for its 6th straight count record) while the Cattle Egrets there (41) were the 2d highest AOS Christmas Count.

Waterfowl--Reports of ducks were again diverse, and surface-feeders were still found in very low numbers on the coast. One exception was the Green-winged Teal, which again set a modern Christmas Count record at the Alcoa ponds at Mobile (606) and was found in record numbers for No. Ala. at Wheeler Refuge (382). Overall, the Lesser Scaup seems to have done the best by setting Christmas Count or near count records on four inland and four coastal counts--Dauphin Island (1525), Bay County (1321), Gulf Shores (1271), Pensacola (733), Eufaula Refuge (300), Wheeler Refuge (194), Guntersville (189) and Tuscaloosa (148). Also high on the coast were the Redhead and Bufflehead at Choc. Bay (2155 and 448, respectively, the latter an AOS count record) and at Bay County (1540 and 320, respectively). The Red-breasted Merganser was not only found in high numbers on the coast--Gulf Shores (691), Pensacola (534) and Dauphin Island (514)--but set an inland Christmas Count record at Wheeler (33). Other highs were the Black Duck at Wheeler (3159--a modern count record), the Ring-necked Duck there (633--2d highest AOS record in this decade), and the Gadwall at Guntersville (1017--an inland record excluding Wheeler). At Marianna, the 42 Wood Ducks were the highest AOS Christmas Count away from wildlife refuges.

Wintering Finches and Nuthatches--Southern invasions of boreal finches are cyclical, generally depending on food supply in the northern forests. The last and largest invasion of Evening Grosbeaks was in 1975; and now, two years later, those flashy birds are returning, having been seen on six Christmas Counts in 1977--1st count records at Eufaula Refuge (13) and Marianna (3), and 2d count records at Guntersville (13) and Wheeler (9). Both the Pine Siskin and Purple Finch did well, the former with Christmas Count or other high records on seven of ten counts led by Birmingham (203), Mobile (72) and Choc. Bay (65). The Purple Finch set an AOS Christmas Count record at Birmingham (466) and the 2d highest NW Fla. Christmas Count record at Bay County (60). The Am. Goldfinch did well also on most counts with the 3d highest AOS Christmas Count at Guntersville (599) and count records at Ft. Morgan (469) and Gulf Shores (391). The Red-breasted Nuthatch, which often accompanies an influx of boreal finches, set a record total for AOS counts (158) with the high figures being the AOS record at Birmingham (72) and a Christmas Count record at Gulf Shores (26). The cycle of invasions has been varying recently; but it should be more than two years, which offers prospects for a flight year again this coming winter.

Sparrows--Sparrows were generally low on the coast with the outstanding exception being the Savannah at Gulf Shores (752 for a Gulf Coast record by over 200). On the other hand, many abundance records were set inland. Especially was this true at Tuscaloosa for the White-crowned (273--an AOS Christmas count record, doubling the previous high last year at Marion), the Fox (83--2d highest AOS count), the Swamp (226) and Song (274), both count records. The Song Sparrow also did well at Eufaula Refuge (418) and Gulf Shores (181), while the White-crowned, which is never as numerous on the coast, set a Gulf Coast count record at Marianna (12). The Slate-colored Junco, now considered a race of the Northern or Dark-eyed Junco, did well as usual in Birmingham (over 1400 for the 2d highest AOS record, and 2 birds of the Pink-sided race were found at Guntersville. In addition, Birmingham set an AOS record for

Field Sparrows (736). In the category of the never-abundant grassland sparrows, a single Henslow's was found at the Gulf Coast Community College in Bay County--only the 3d AOS record for a Christmas Count or count period within the last decade--while Eufaula Refuge reported 3 LeConte's, and Gulf Shores 1 of that species plus 4 Grasshopper Sparrows.

Other Non-passerines--The most notable observations in this category were the Arctic Loon reported at Gulf Shores (the 2d AOS Christmas Count record following 1 in 1975 at Birmingham), a Red-throated Loon within the count week at Bay County, and a Chuck-will's-widow at Dauphin Island, there being few AOS Christmas Count records for any of these species. Sandwich Terns were found on four counts led by Bay County (5 at Shell Island) with others at Dauphin Island and Gulf Shores (3 each, the latter its 5th out of the last six count periods) and Mobile (1 at the Alcoa ponds). Single Eared Grebes were recorded at both Ft. Morgan and Gulf Shores.

On the abundance side, the over 1000 Bonaparte's Gulls at Gulf Shores was an Ala. Christmas Count record, and high numbers were also found at Bay County (695), Eufaula Refuge (130) and Guntersville (121--a No. Ala. abundance record). Ring-billed Gulls were recorded in high numbers at Bay County (over 1800) and at Mobile (over 1000), but this was down from the fantastic total of over 12,000 at Bay County last year. Similarly, Dauphin Island had over 1500 Laughing Gulls, which, however, was 3000 less than its count in 1976. Guntersville set an AOS abundance record for Pied-billed Grebes (311--an amazing 150 over any previous total) and inland count records for Horned Grebes (126) and Com. Loons (33).

Other non-passerine records in abundance included: Double-crested Cormorant--over 2000 at Dauphin Island (2d highest AOS record) and 658 at Bay County (a NW Fla. Christmas Count record); Am. Coot--high numbers of over 10,000 at Mobile and 8383 at Guntersville; Black Skimmer--500 at Dauphin Island (tying its AOS winter record set in 1975); Mourning Dove--1070 at Gulf Shores (a Gulf Coast Christmas Count record) and almost 800 at Pensacola (a NW Fla. Christmas Count record). The Belted Kingfisher continued to do well with highs on the Gulf Coast at Pensacola (47) and inland at Guntersville (21--a Tenn. Valley abundance record) and Birmingham (20).

Other Passerines--Over 9000 Am. Robins were found at Bay County; and, although the Eastern Bluebird was low on most counts, count records were set at Eufaula Refuge (71) and Guntersville (31). The 13 Sedge (or Short-billed Marsh) Wrens at Eufaula was the 2d highest inland record (although less than 25% of its incredible 1976 total). The Bewick's Wren is on the "Blue List;" and in 1977 Eufaula had the only one on the AOS counts, which is the lowest total for that species since 1972. At Dauphin Island, 1000 Brewer's Blackbirds was the 3d highest Gulf Coast Christmas Count; and inland, where not as common, they were closely observed through telescopes at Wheeler Refuge (65) and within the count week at Guntersville (a female and a probable 3 males), the farthest east they have been found in the Tenn. Valley. Other passerine abundance records included: Cedar Waxwing--over 1300 at Birmingham; Eastern Meadowlark--617 at Tuscaloosa; and Brown-headed Cowbird, which unfortunately seems to be appearing more and more in the South including the breeding season --over 2000 at Gulf Shores (highest Ala. Gulf Coast count).

Complete tabulations of all AOS Christmas Counts will appear in Vol. 32, No. 4 of American Birds. A summary of the 13 AOS counts is as follows:

<u>Count, Date and Compiler</u>	<u>Species (a)</u>		<u>Total Individuals</u>	<u>Partici- pants</u>	<u>Parties</u>	<u>Party- Hours</u>
	<u>On Count</u>	<u>Within Count Week</u>				
Wheeler Wildlife Refuge-- Dec. 17 (J. Milton Harris)	99	100	114,823	33	6	70
Guntersville--Dec. 23 (C. Dwight Cooley)	91	92	23,708	11 (b)	3	41
Birmingham--Dec. 26 (Thomas A. Imhof)	87	91	30,538	39 (b)	12	133.5
Tuscaloosa--Dec. 30 (Richard K. Crawford)	80	81	10,218	10 (b)	3	35
Eufaula Wildlife Refuge-- Dec. 26 (Sam Pate, Jr.)	135	135	43,769	33	16	61
Mobile--Dec. 31 (Richard E. Hayward, Jr.)	128	130	23,396	16	6	54
Dauphin Island--Dec. 17 (M. Wilson Gaillard)	119	121	13,052	19	7	61 (c)
Ft. Morgan--Dec. 26 (Mary Lou Mattis & Sherlie E. Gade)	90	90	5,811	16	4	38.5
Gulf Shores--Dec. 31 (P. Fairly Chandler)	139	144	46,933	25	8	88.5
Pensacola--Dec. 17 (Curtis L. Kingsbery)	102	107	10,910	32 (b)	10	97 (c)
Choctawhatchee Bay--Dec. 26 (Sandra Lefstad)	117	132	12,025	29	6	66 (c)
Marianna--Dec. 17 (Marion W. Gray)	98	104	8,430	17 (b)	7	63.5
Bay County (Panama City)-- Dec. 30 (Joe B. Harbison)	141	145	27,092	33 (b)	8	80.5 (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. This treatment affects geese, juncos and the Harlan's Hawk.

(b) Additional observers at feeders.

(c) Includes boat party.

Robert R. Reid, Jr.
Counts Editor

2616 Mountain Brook Parkway
Birmingham, Alabama 35223