

Gleanings from the Northumberland Bird Database

'MINI' CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNTS

By Clive E. Goodwin

One of the things most active birders usually get involved in is the annual Christmas Bird Count. In fact, many get involved in more than one – the Willow Beach and Presqu'ile counts, for example. When we arrived in Cobourg we were no exception, and in due course we joined Lori and Bill Wensley and Audrey Wilson covering their route on the Willow Beach CBC. It was Route 9, which covers the area east of Division Street in Cobourg, north to about Baltimore and south to the Lake, east to around Lucas Point.

Who covered the area immediately to the east, we wondered? And it transpired no one did. There was a sort of 'no-man's-land' between the eastern boundary of the Willow Beach count and the western edge of the Presqu'ile count. This is perfectly understandable: CBC areas are all large circles of fixed diameter and there just isn't room for another circle between the two existing counts. But the lack of any coverage seemed a pity.

So we thought it would be interesting to cover a route in the gap. And with that the idea of a 'mini-CBC' was born: we'd take a count along the Lake and as far inland as practical, during the two-week CBC period. In fact we ended up with two routes, covering Grafton and Colborne, and [with the exception of a small section of Telephone Road] south of Highway 401. As we weren't tied to a specific date we could try to pick two days with fair weather, thus eliminating one of the problems inherent in the real CBC, and we tried to cover exactly the same routes each year, thus eliminating another – or, I should say, partly eliminating these difficulties. The real world has a way of intervening: while we didn't take any counts in a blizzard, some years there was lots of snow and ice and some none; and changes were made to the landscape, feeders came and went, and [for example] the power line we used to walk off Brimley Road was closed off a few years back.

We started in 1994 and up to 2008 we have 13 years' data [we missed one year due to illness, and the current winter's counts were not taken at the time of writing], so aside from having fun, is there anything interesting in the results? It turns out that there is. For one, there are many interesting comparisons with the adjacent Route 9 CBC. In approximately the same period, Route 9 had 78 species against our 72, and we have averaged a species or two fewer in most years. Of course, with 5 of us there were more eyes on Route 9, but the mini-CBCs had more time in the field, and – at roughly two long mornings annually – more potentially productive time. Anyone who has tried to add to a CBC total in mid-afternoon probably knows how the birds seem to vanish!

There seem to be two, or possibly three, main reasons for the lower species' numbers. One is that our counts were invariably later, and there is a very rough correlation between the number of species one sees and the date – the further into the CBC period, the fewer the birds. The other two reasons both come down to people: one, there were many more

bird feeders on Route 9. We tend to think of the countryside as yielding more birds, but in winter a sheltered in-town area of mature gardens and trees, together with feeders, like the Lakeshore Road area of east Cobourg, can be very productive and often have rarer birds that should have gone south. Then the Lake in this area is very productive as well. The large Mallard and goose flocks ranging east from Cobourg harbour [where people feed them] attract 'hangers-on' that are bonuses for the counters.

But it was when I looked at the totals of the commoner species that the real surprise came, because there were sharp contrasts between almost all of them, this from two areas that, you'll recall, are adjacent to one another. Let's look at the waterfowl first.

As mentioned above, it's not surprising that the numbers of geese and dabbling ducks would be higher on Route 9. The differences are dramatic: it averaged 203 geese and 308 Mallards annually; to the east we managed only 41 and 8 respectively! But most of the diving ducks showed a similar pattern as well: Long-tailed Ducks totals were 111 in the west and only 26 to the east, while Bufflehead figures were 72 versus 8. Gulls also shared a similar pattern; in fact the only waterbirds that were commoner to the east were goldeneyes, with 47 on route 9 and 96 to the east. I can see no obvious explanation. Goldeneye feed heavily on mollusks in winter, but other waterfowl, particularly Long-tailed Ducks and scoters, will do so as well. It certainly appears that the waters between Cobourg harbour and Lucas Point are more productive in winter than those to the east.

So what of the landbirds? In spite of the species' totals there is an almost complete reversal; winter landbirds really are more numerous in the countryside! This included such 'typically' urban birds as pigeons and starlings: we had an average of 42 and 358 respectively on the 'minis', but only 16 and 240 on the Cobourg count. It included such feeder regulars as jays [47 vs. 21], chickadees [98 vs. 72] and goldfinches [42 vs. 32].

There were only five exceptions, some of which surprised me. White-breasted Nuthatches, with only 5 outside of town but 7 in, seemed inconsistent, until I remembered that often the only bird to be found in the exposed expanses of Victoria Park in mid-winter is a White-breasted Nuthatch! Nuthatch distribution probably has more to do with deciduous trees than urban-rural splits. Robins too were a surprise, at 12 on the 'minis' and 34 on Route 9, but here urban-rural certainly had nothing to do with it, as most of the robins were in the rural parts of the route, and the difference here likely reflects the winter distribution of wild fruits. The other three are all, in one way or another, not native to our climate. Cardinals [6 vs. 10] are southerners and our first records date from 1938; much of their spread seems tied to the availability of feeders in winter, and the other two – House Finch [31 vs. 75] and House Sparrow [30 vs. 31] have always been tied to housing. In fact the difference in the latter would be far more pronounced except for an anomalous count of 101 near Grafton in 2006.

Turning to the results of the 'mini' counts alone, are there any interrelationships or trends to be seen over the 14 years the counts have been taken? Like many of the species on the counts, waterfowl generally show much fluctuation from one year to the next. In 2003 we recorded record numbers of four species, Long-tailed Duck, White-winged Scoter,

goldeneye and Bufflehead – and perhaps predictably, 2003 was an unusually open winter. 1998 was an exceptional landbird year, with record counts of waxwings, robins and cardinals, and very high numbers of starlings, tree sparrows and juncos; and 2005 was also exceptional, with record totals of both nuthatch species, tree sparrows and juncos and good numbers of other landbirds. In fact, a number of species vary in tandem: good waxwing years usually are accompanied by higher robin counts, and the same relationship holds for tree sparrows and juncos.

There are also some clear trends. The increase in Red-breasted Merganser numbers chronicled in an earlier *Gleanings* appears here as well. Up to 2003 we had recorded only the occasional bird. Then starting in '03 we have seen it annually, with its numbers increasing to 95 by last year.

Unfortunately most trends are declines. We looked at crow losses and West Nile virus in an earlier article, and these counts support this, with crow numbers barely half of average over the past six years. There's also some suggestion of a drop in chickadee numbers, another species that has been linked to the disease, although trends there are cloaked by periodic very high counts. Blue Jays, on the other hand, though also vulnerable to West Nile, do not seem to show any decline. Maybe our winter jays originate from areas where the virus is less pronounced.

Another species with occasional high counts is American Tree Sparrow, this time in 1998 and 2005 as mentioned above. With these removed from the average the species has declined over the past seven years. Goldfinch numbers have also dropped, and apart from the large House Sparrow count I mentioned above it too has been well below average over the past seven years. Could these all be artifacts of these particular counts? It's possible, of course, and it would be encouraging if this was the case, but unfortunately most of these species have been reported as in trouble elsewhere.

So our 1994 decision to run a count route between the Cobourg and Presqu'ile circles has indeed been interesting, and has yielded some intriguing insights into the numbers of our local winter birds.