

Christmastime Bird Count Below Last Year

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You are among the most accurate birdwatchers of Santa Cruz County if during the Christmas season you had difficulty spotting here such species as the Red-necked Grebe, the Gadwall, the Harlequin Duck, the Dunlin or the Parastic Jaeger.

Some of the most experienced birdwatching eyes belonging to members of the Santa Cruz County Bird Club found here only one representative of each of these species during the National Audubon Society Christmas Bird Count here from Dec. 16 to Jan. 2, according to results compiled by Randy Morgan.

But there were abundant representatives of other species. Most numerous was the Starling, with 2,154 counted. Also seen in plenitude were the American Coot (1,800), Brewer's Blackbird (1,590) and Sand-erling (1,031).

"However, we missed several species that are nearly impossible to miss," Morgan said ruefully. "We had no sightings of the Barn Owl, Red-shouldered Hawk, Yellow-billed Sapsucker or Loggerhead Shrike."

The National Audubon Society Christmas Bird Count was the 79th annual count made by birdwatchers from Alaska to Bermuda, from the northernmost reaches of the Continent to Venezuela and Panama, according to a press release by the society.

"This is the big birding bash of each year, and for

some groups days and weeks of effort are put into strategy, tactics and logistics of trying to amass in a single day at Christmastime the biggest list of birds ever seen in the chosen count area," the release states, in part.

There were two areas chosen for the count locally, according to Morgan. The area covered by his group was the land-and-water area that included most of the county stretching from below Capitola to Boulder Creek and Davenport, along with stretches of the ocean and bay, rivers, creeks, lagoons.

The second area, with results not yet reported, took in the rest of the county, part of Monterey and other water bodies and waterways.

In all, Morgan's group logged 160 species of birds, well below last year's count "but not a bad total considering the miserable rainy weather we had," Morgan said.

He elaborated:

"In general, we did unusually well on water birds and unusually badly on land birds. Everyone participating was impressed by the scarcity of land birds."

The group of 34 bird counters and three feeder-watchers counted 22,454 individual birds. This is a low tally, Morgan said. "We should have had almost that many Starlings and Blackbirds alone. On the other hand, we had 10 times as many Foster's Terns and Arctic Loons as usual, and we also had unusually high numbers of Fulmars, Wigeons, Wood Ducks, White-winged Scoters and Snowy Plovers."

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Morgan's watchers reported sightings of unusual to rare species, including several new ones, to the annual count made here. These included:

The Manx Shearwater - "unusually rare to this part of the coast, but this fall they showed up in large numbers."

The Harlequin Duck - "a male off Younger Lagoon. Rare here."

The Violet-green Swallow - "rare in winter."

The Common Raven - "rare here, occasional along the north coast and in the mountains."

The Blue-gray Gnatcatcher - "one at Neary Lagoon, rare here in winter."

Other more or less rare or difficult to find in the bird-count area used, were these species:

Cattle Egret, Black Brant, Great Egret, Ring-necked Duck, Whimbrel, Surfbird, Common Gallinule, Merlin (Pigeon Hawk), Black Scoter, Greater Scaup, Ancient Murrelet, Black-legged Kittiwake, Thayer's Gull, Pomarine Jaeger, Long-billed Dowitcher, Nuttall's Woodpecker, Dipper, House Wren (one sighted), Orange-crowned Warbler, Palm Warbler (a few every winter at Neary Lagoon), Wilson's Warbler (one sighted, very rare here in winter) and one Evening Grosbeak.

In 1977 the total birds counted by all groups participating in the international bird count came to almost 121 million.

The 1978 total results will be published in the July issue of "American Birds."