

A DECADE OF CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNTS IN THE ASPEN PARKLAND

KERRY and KIM FINLEY, Box 8, Luseland, Saskatchewan. S0L 2A0

As we prepare to undertake our eleventh annual Christmas bird count, we look back on a decade of records and contemplate the significance of this annual tradition that is conducted in many other locations in Saskatchewan and throughout North America. From the beginning we have attempted to keep our survey coverage as consistent as possible so that our results would be representative of the winter bird life of this area. Typically, our census involves a morning stroll in the town of Luseland, a drive on open roads within a 7 mile radius of town and a walk or ski through some typical aspen groves. We believe that our counts provide a reasonable index of winter bird life from which we can now begin to look for trends in populations.

We expect to see around 13-15 species; 12 of these have been seen consistently on almost all counts in the past decade (Table 1). Blue Jays have only recently become regular winter residents, dependent on hand outs at feeders. Some species such as Pine Grosbeaks, Evening Grosbeaks and Northern Shrikes are irregular visitors from the north. We recall well the invasion of Pine Grosbeaks in 1972 and again in 1977 when 52 were counted. Six species are rare or accidental in their occurrence and have only been seen on one occasion. Golden Eagles have been observed on 3 occasions during the count period but never actually on count day. While Great Horned Owls are certainly permanent residents in our area, they are secretive and have only been observed twice on count days.

Of the 12 commonly observed bird species, half are dependent on the

human cultural environment. Prairie towns provide a diversity of feeding opportunities and shelter for several species. Waxwings are a conspicuous component of the urban environment, very dependent on the crabapple crop. In our backyard they festoon certain preferred crabapple trees and we wonder why they seem to ignore adjacent trees that (to our eyes) appear to offer equal feeding opportunities. The tree breeders obviously neglected waxwing tastes. A prairie town in winter would be a much duller place without waxwing ornamentation or the raucous blue flash of a jay at the feeder. And who could begrudge even the smallest admiration for the pugnacious but cheerful sparrow.

The town environment is like an oasis compared to the desert landscape of fields of monoculture. Occasionally, a large flock of Snow Buntings swirls across the field or a flock of redpolls erupts from the roadside weeds, breaking the monotony. Both are dependent on slough bottoms or ditches for weed seeds that sustain them. A solitary Snowy Owl on a fencepost usually chooses to situate itself near some native grassland, such as the P.F.R.A. pasture, where rodent densities are higher than on tilled desert. Magpies, partridges, pigeons and sparrows associate strongly with farmsteads, deriving sustenance from spilled grain or cattle feedlots. Without feedlots many birds could not survive, in fact we have observed a marked decline in magpie populations in recent years as small farm feedlots have been forced out of existence by the prevailing economic climate. The magpie, too, is a defenceless victim of changing economies of scale.

Table 1. FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE AND AVERAGE NUMBERS OF BIRDS SEEN ON CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNTS, 1971-1980

<i>Species Observed¹</i>	<i>Frequency (No. of years)</i>	<i>Average no. per count</i>
Sharp-tailed Grouse	9	6
Gray Partridge	10	25
Rock Dove	10	24
Snowy Owl	10	1.4
Downy Woodpecker	8	0.8
Horned Lark	8	11
Black-billed Magpie	10	32
Black-capped Chickadee	9	3.3
Bohemian Waxwing	9	53
House Sparrow	10	118
Redpoll	10	61
Snow Bunting	10	379
Blue Jay	5	max. 3
Starling	4	max. 8
Pine Grosbeak	4	max. 52
Evening Grosbeak	2	max. 8
Northern Shrike	3	max. 2
Horned Owl	2	max. 3

¹Additional species recorded only on single counts include Goshawk, Merlin, Cedar Waxwing, Tree Sparrow, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Western Meadowlark and Golden Eagle.

We have also observed the decline of Gray (Hungarian) Partridges in our area — another victim of a strange chain of events that began with the introduction of the snowmobile in about 1964-65. Coyotes were mercilessly pursued by snowmogoons and were quickly eliminated from large areas. Red Foxes quickly filled the vacuum; in 1964 we saw the first specimen ever recorded in our country and by 1968 they had become common except in P.F.R.A. pastures where some Coyotes survived. Being a much more efficient and diversified predator than the Coyote, foxes multiplied, to the chagrin of the chicken farmer and also to the detriment of ground nesting birds. The fox, being more secretive and evasive than the Coyote, was not greatly affected by snowmobiles. The numbers of Gray partridge declined drastically around

the late 60's and have remained low since. Our evidence is circumstantial but we link this decline to the Red Fox and ultimately to the snowmogoons.

Aspen groves provide relief and shelter from the wind blown fields. The shelter is critical thermal habitat for small creatures like the chickadee. Stepping into an aspen grove when the wind chill factor is 2200 (-24°C with a breeze) in the open is an instructive lesson in heat conservation that could be well applied to prairie living. Only those groves of sufficient size and maturity will harbour chickadees — usually a resident pair eager to check out a human intruder. There are few environments as quiet as a winter aspen grove and the downy woodpecker is quick to reveal itself by its busy tapping. The chickadees and woodpeckers are

also subject to changing economies of scale as the bulldozer paves the way for the megatechnology of monotonous monoculture.

On our eleventh Christmas bird count, we record 15 species. Redpolls are abundant this year as is expected every alternate year when the birch seed production fails in the northern forest. Magpies continue to show a downward

trend concomitant with cattle prices. Chickadees are notably absent this year and another large aspen grove has been bulldozed from our census route. Partridges remain low — no wonder since Bill Fischer, a local trapper, reports taking 44 foxes in the last two months within a mile radius of town. A Hairy Woodpecker is new to our list of winter species that now totals 26.



Red Fox

Ron Jensen

RUFFED GROUSE

Photographs by *Ken Lumbis, Box 516, Grande Prairie, Alberta. T8V 3A7*



