

2009 GBBC Summary

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March 27, 2009

In 2009, Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) participants sent in record numbers of checklists for the fifth year in a row. As of March 15, counters across North America had submitted 93,629 checklists reporting 11,550,200 individual birds of 619 species. This represents a 9% increase in checklist submissions over last year, as well as a new high for numbers of individual birds counted.

Each year the GBBC provides the most detailed real-time snapshot of bird distribution across North America, and we can see how birds are responding to changing weather patterns, available food sources, and other factors. With all of the results publicly available online, anyone can explore the data to see how birds are faring in their area. Although in-depth studies are necessary to further confirm any trends in bird distribution found during the GBBC, and to document their causes, these preliminary results are often clear indicators of how birds are responding to changes in our shared environment.

New Species for the GBBC

Many birds are not reported each year during the GBBC, and each year we add a few new species to the count. In 2009 we added two oceanic species for the first time—Pink-footed Shearwater and Xantus's Murrelet in California. We also obtained first-time reports of lingering migratory species including Baird's Sandpiper, Black-billed Cuckoo, and Blackpoll Warbler. This year participants were also able to add two rare Mexican species to the count—including the first Sinaloa Wren ever found north of the border. This secretive brown bird has alternately delighted and frustrated searchers looking for it since birders first spotted it on August 25 last year in Patagonia, Arizona. The other new GBBC addition from Mexico is a Blue Mockingbird first found in early February in Douglas, Arizona.

Common Species in Decline

Last year Audubon produced a report on common birds that are declining across their range (<http://stateofthebirds.audubon.org/cbid>). This report documented declines in bird numbers seen on the Christmas Bird Count and Breeding Bird Surveys. Last year we noted that we could see similar declines in the same species on the Great Backyard Bird Count (<http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc/science-stories/08Highlights>). This year we continue to see declines in some of these species.

Grassland and shrubland birds are of particular concern due to extensive habitat conversion. Loggerhead Shrikes are down from 1.91 birds per report in 2004 to 1.78 birds per report this year. Northern Bobwhites and Eastern Meadowlarks are both up slightly from last year, but still below their 2004 numbers. As always, trends from the GBBC are only preliminary views of what may be going on with these populations, and we have to continue watching from year to year to get the true long-term view of how these birds are faring.

Range Shifts and Global Warming

A week before the GBBC, Audubon released a new report showing how bird species are shifting their distribution due to global climate change (www.birdsandclimate.org). As documented through Christmas Bird Count data, many species are shifting their range northward as average winter temperatures continue to rise across the continent. The Christmas Bird Count data showed the center of abundance for the distribution of Purple Finches moving 433 miles north over the past 40 years, as well as similar northward shifts in Wild Turkey (403 miles), Ring-billed Gull (356 miles), and Red-breasted Merganser (316 miles).

Although we have yet to undertake a similar extensive study based on GBBC reports, the GBBC results do show intriguing northern range shifts in many species. For instance the Christmas Bird Count data show Fox Sparrows shifting their range an average of 287 miles north, and the Great Backyard Bird Count shows them becoming more common in Pennsylvania (up from 1.5 birds/report in 2004 to 2.2 birds/report this year) and declining in Georgia (down to 2.1 birds/report from 3.4 birds/report in 2004).

Alien Exotic Species

Most bird watchers spend little time looking for or reporting exotic nonnative birds, but these are often found and reported on the Great Backyard Bird Count. This year Californians reported 7 Mandarin Ducks and 7 Orange Bishops from two locations each. Counters also reported 15 species of parrots from 12 U.S. states, including 838 Red-crowned Parrots, highly endangered in their native Mexico, flying free in California, Florida, Hawaii, and Texas cities.

Amazing Northern Finch Invasion

From news and birding reports this winter, we already knew that we were experiencing a huge southern invasion of Pine Siskins and White-winged Crossbills across much of the eastern United States. The GBBC gave real numbers to help document the size and scale of this invasion. In 2009 we counted 279,469 Pine Siskins on 18,528 checklists, up from a previous high of 38,977 birds on 4,069 checklists in 2005. White-winged Crossbills were not as common, but their invasion was still impressive with 4,824 birds on 589 checklists representing a new record over the previous high of 2,854 birds on 135 checklists in 2007.

Do Some Exploring on Your Own

The Great Backyard Bird Count is not just a way for the public to provide data for scientists to analyze. All the data are publicly available on the GBBC website, so anyone can do their own study of bird populations in their area or anywhere in the U.S. or Canada. You can explore maps of bird distribution from year to year, or find the exact counts for each species in your state, province, or hometown. Feel free to explore this great resource at your leisure online at www.birdsource.org.

If the GBBC has given you the bird-counting bug, you can do it anytime and anywhere with the eBird project! Visit www.ebird.org to find out more about this free online checklist program launched in 2002 by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and National Audubon Society.