

2010 GBBC Summary

April 6, 2010

By Robert Petty, Audubon; Marshall Iliff, Cornell Lab, Brian Sullivan, Cornell Lab; Dick Cannings, Bird Studies Canada

Overview

The 2010 Great Backyard Bird Count broke another participation record--bird watchers across the continent and Hawaii set a new record by submitting more than 97,200 checklists--a nearly 4% increase over last year. Checklists came in from all 50 states in the U.S. and from all 10 provinces and 3 territories of Canada. Participants reported 602 species in 11.2 million individual bird observations. Patterns detected in GBBC data are used to alert scientists to particular species or questions that may require more detailed followup studies.

Fewer visiting Winter Finches

One of the exciting things about winter birding is that a suite of northern birds, often called “irruptives,” show wild swings in their abundance from year to year.

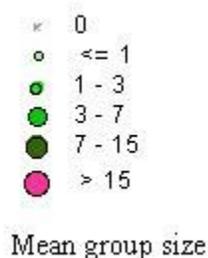
This is particularly notable in the northern United States and southern Canada. Species like Red and White-winged crossbills, Common and Hoary redpolls, Pine Siskin, Evening and Pine grosbeak and a few others may be common one year and entirely absent the next. These irruptions may be closely tied to both reproductive success and food supply. Observations for the Great Backyard Bird Count can raise questions about what is happening to bird populations hundreds or thousands of miles to the north!

Patterns from the 2010 GBBC along with eBird data (www.ebird.org) suggest none of the common irruptives occurred in elevated numbers this year, and many were entirely absent. Their absence was especially conspicuous because the past two years have been excellent ones for irruptive birds moving south. To see how striking these differences can be, compare the GBBC map of White-winged Crossbill for 2009 (left-an irruption year) with 2010 (right-a non-irruption year).

2009



2010



Maps created by Birdsource

Winter finches are always one of the most exciting stories of the Great Backyard Bird Count. It will be interesting to see what the story will be in February 2011!

Gulls Gone Missing

The Glaucous-winged Gull is another example of a bird whose numbers fluctuate from year to year, but unlike the winter finches, these fluctuations are less understood. In most winters, the species is found in modest numbers along the Pacific Coast through southern California. During winter 2009 an exceptional number were found farther south than usual. But this year was a different story. Numbers of Glaucous-winged Gulls were down markedly along the United States Pacific Coast, as were numbers of “northern gulls” in general, a group that includes a suite of gulls that breed in the far north including Glaucous, Thayer’s and Mew gulls.

During the 2010 GBBC, participants in Washington reported 41% fewer Glaucous-winged Gulls compared with last year (2009: 8,795; 2010: 5,174), 64% fewer were reported in Oregon (2009: 938; 2010: 339), and in California a whopping 83% fewer gulls were reported during the GBBC (2009: 1,099; 2010: 185_--that despite the fact that the number of checklists from California increased 23% this year. Though the number of checklists dropped slightly this year in Washington, and Oregon compared to 2009, the change was not enough to account for the huge drop in gull numbers.

The GBBC is helping track these cycles from year to year, and provides an important late winter snapshot of the distribution and abundance of these birds.

Rare and Wonderful Sightings

A few lucky GBBC participants are always treated to rare and wonderful sightings. In Lake Havasu City, Arizona, numerous birders reported a Black-legged Kittiwake. Participants in McAllen, Texas, reported a Crimson-collared Grosbeak—the first time the species has been since during the count since 2005.

Birders off the coast of San Diego added a new species to the GBBC list this year when they saw a Red-billed Tropicbird during a pelagic trip. This is the first verified sighting of this species for the Great Backyard Bird Count. It also inspires a wonderfully expanded perspective on what our “backyard” embraces!

Highlights from Canada this year included a Rustic Bunting seen in Creighton, Saskatchewan. This bird had been delighting birders for much of the winter, so it was great that it hung around to be counted for the GBBC. In Marathon, Ontario, a Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch was a spectacular sighting because it was far outside its normal range in the Rocky Mountains. Such outliers always provide a charge of excitement when they are discovered.

By the Numbers

The GBBC Top-10 lists are a fun way to highlight the count's extremes. In terms of overall numbers of birds counted, the American Robin led the way by a huge margin with 1,850,082 individuals reported. Canada Goose was a distant second with reports of 748,356 birds. Snow Goose, American Crow, and European Starling all came in with about 500,000 individuals each.

Texas, with its size, habitat diversity, and dedicated birders, was the species diversity hotspot again this year with 347 species. Since 2004, Texas has consistently led the count with more than 300 species recorded each year. This year Tivoli, Texas, takes the honor of having the most species recorded at any locality with 175 species. In terms of sheer numbers of individual birds of any species, Saint Petersburg, Florida, led the way for the second year in a row with 1,476,478 birds reported--1,450,058 of those birds were robins! Issaquah, Washington recorded the second highest abundance with 226,266 birds.

But in terms of human participation—birders out there on the ground, observing and submitting reports—Mentor, Ohio, led the way with 709 checklists.

In Canada, Clearwater, British Columbia was the standout performer. With a population of only 4,960, its contribution to Great Backyard Bird Count checklists is exceptional. Spearheaded by enthusiast Dennis Leonard, Clearwater sent in 329 checklists this year—heartbreakingly close to making it to the top 10, just one checklist behind Marietta, Georgia.

Early Migrating Species

Mid-February is an interesting time for a bird count. The count is timed on the cusp of migration for many early migrants. And it is that window of transition that affords an opportunity to pick up changes in those early treks northward.

Some species showed dramatic increases in numbers from past years. For example, although the number of states reporting Tree Swallows was down from 25 in 2009 to 20 this year, the number of individuals reported increased nearly four-fold, from 22,431 to 84,585. Whether this is a result of warmer temperatures and earlier migrations is not yet clear.

Range Shifts

One of the great benefits of the GBBC is that it creates an instant snapshot of the status of all birds across an entire continent and in Hawaii. Over the course of many years, these valuable data can reveal patterns and trends.

For example, the introduction and expansion of the Eurasian Collared-Dove from the Caribbean, to Florida, to a wide swath of North America is clearly illustrated in the GBBC data—in 1999, just over 1,000 doves were reported in nine states; this year more than 14,000 doves were found in 39 states. Some of that change is due to an increase in the number of birders participating in GBBC, but still the pattern is strong.

Explore on your own and count throughout the year

So after the fun of counting birds, spend some exploring the results to which you contributed—look for interesting patterns in species distribution or shifts in abundance by looking at maps and lists in the Explore Data section. It can be a fascinating and enlightening journey. And don't wait for next year's Great Backyard Bird Count to continue the process. On eBird you can count and submit your observations throughout the year. In the United States visit <http://www.ebird.org> and in Canada <http://ebird.org/content/canada>.