

What's Happening with the Birds?

Here are the 2022 and 2023 West Hants Christmas Bird Counts. Similar numbers of species each year, lots more black ducks, herring gulls and starlings in 2023.

BY PATRICK KELLY



Something different for this count: I am reporting on two years at once to show the variations that often occur from one year to the next. The last two West Hants counts are very interesting.

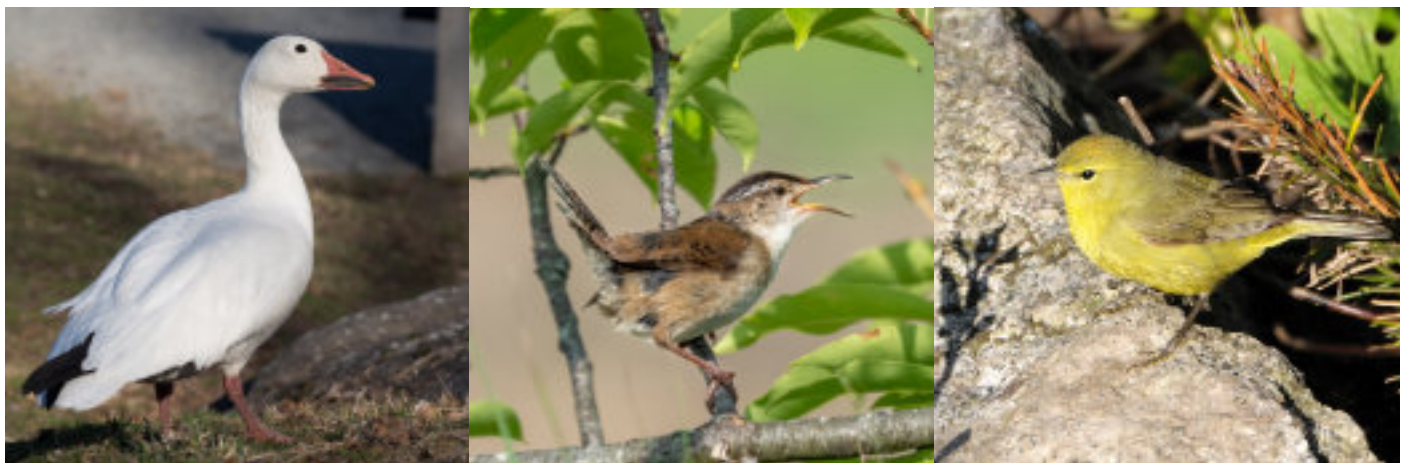
The 2022 count was held on Tuesday, January 3, 2023, while the 2023 count was held on Saturday, December 30. In 2022, temperatures ranged between -1 C and 5 C, with a mix of sun and cloud; in 2023, the temperature was 1 C and overcast. Given how variable the weather can be here at that time of the year, these two days were remark similar!

The data from the last two counts are in the table. The total number of species we saw is not that different, but many species showed up in just one of the two years, often in very small numbers. This is part of what makes bird counts so much fun: You never know what you are going to find. Even more exciting is that in the last two years, five species (snow goose, Cooper's hawk, marsh wren, orange-crowned warbler, and yellow-breasted chat) have been seen on this count for the first time—and the count started back in

1987! The one oddball is the Bohemian waxwing. These birds form large flocks and move around a lot in the winter. You tend to have lots, or very few.

The next obvious difference is the total number of individual birds we saw in 2023 almost doubled to just under 21,000. A new record! This is mainly due to three species: American black duck, herring gull, and European starling. Thousands of herring gulls and starlings literally carpeted large areas of ground at the working face of the West Hants landfill on the Walton Woods Road, along with many bald eagles, crows, and ravens. I do wonder if there are that many there on a Sunday when no new "food" is delivered.

We set all-time, record highs for number of birds counted for 15 species in 2022 or 2023! The species name and record number are italicised in the count table on the next page. As well, we tied the old record highs for several species. Interestingly, the starling numbers, though highest of any species, were still over 1,000 short of the record!



New birds seen in the recent West Hants Bird Counts... the snow goose, marsh wren, orange-crowned warbler, and cooper's hawk (above). PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA.ORG²

Birds Counts by Species for 2022 & 2023

	2022	2023		2022	2023
Waterfowl			Waxwings		
Snow Goose	-	1	Bohemian Waxwing	1,307	1
Canada Goose	1,114	2,449	Cedar Waxwing	32	-
Gadwall	-	1			
Eurasian Wigeon	2	1	Warblers		
American Wigeon	37	9	Orange-crowned Warbler	1	-
American Black Duck	1,414	2,796	Common Yellowthroat	-	1
Mallard	307	404	Yellow-breasted Chat	1	-
Northern Shoveler	-	9			
Northern Pintail	16	45	Sparrows (incl. Old World)		
Green-winged Teal	10	1	American Tree Sparrow	41	31
Ring-necked Duck	-	2	Chipping Sparrow	-	1
Greater Scaup	2	-	Savannah Sparrow	1	-
Lesser Scaup	-	3	Song Sparrow	84	119
Bufflehead	1	-	Swamp Sparrow	7	8
Common Goldeneye	-	2	White-throated Sparrow	23	106
Hooded Merganser	1	4	Dark-eyed Junco	119	201
Common Merganser	1	-	House Sparrow	33	47
Game Birds			Blackbirds		
Ring-necked Pheasant	81	53	Red-winged Blackbird	2	46
Ruffed Grouse	7	-			
			Finches		
Raptors and Owls			Pine Grosbeak	22	-
Bald Eagle	63	54	Purple Finch	82	9
Northern Harrier	3	4	White-winged Crossbill	-	1
Sharp-shinned Hawk	3	1	Common Redpoll	1	
Cooper's Hawk	-	3	American Goldfinch	588	435
Red-tailed Hawk	28	34	Evening Grosbeak	127	106
Merlin	2	-			
Barred Owl	2	-	Nuthatches		
			Red-breasted Nuthatch	8	12
Gulls			White-breasted Nuthatch	32	38
Ring-billed Gull	22	8			
Herring Gull	270	3,486	Kinglets		
Iceland Gull	1	6	Golden-crowned Kinglet	27	82
Great Black-backed Gull	74	105	Ruby-crowned Kinglet	-	1
Doves			Miscellaneous		
Rock Pigeon	285	172	Belted Kingfisher	1	-
Mourning Dove	383	719	Eastern Phoebe	-	1
			Horned Lark	6	-
Woodpeckers			Black-capped Chickadee	399	432
Red-bellied Woodpecker	1	-	Brown Creeper	2	6
Downy Woodpecker	24	26	Marsh Wren	-	1
Hairy Woodpecker	18	32	American Robin	182	70
Northern Flicker	19	12	Grey Catbird	-	1
Pileated Woodpecker	7	12	Northern Mockingbird	-	1
			European Starling	2,981	7,119
Corvids			American Pipit	-	1
Canada Jay	-	1	Lapland Longspur	-	1
Blue Jay	436	686	Snow Bunting	111	52
American Crow	372	557	Northern Cardinal	46	99
Common Raven	106	76			

Of course, there needs to be a way to compare the amount of effort that goes into looking for birds. That is why party-hours and distance travelled are recorded by each group. A party-hour is when one group spends one hour birding together. Similarly, the distance that people cover, and their methods are tracked. While one does need to drive to cover the assigned area, a lot of the scarcer (and smaller) birds are usually found on foot while “whacking in the weeds.” This seems part of the reason the species numbers for the last three years have been high compared to the recent past. The number of hours spent walking are actually higher than the number of hours spent in cars.

Birds are also counted at feeders. In this case, one counts the maximum number of each species seen at the same time. The reason for this is to treat all species the same. If you see a male cardinal, and later

Bird Count Totals

	2022	2023
Species Seen	61	63
Total Birds*	11,380	20,844
Party-hours (car)	27:39	25:15
Party-hours (foot)	34:49	32:20
Party-hours (total)	63:28	57:35
Party-km (car)	400.7	320.4
Party-km (foot)	68.2	59.2
Party-km (total)	468.9	379.6
Feeder Watching	4:00	3:25

see a female cardinal, you know they are two different birds, but you would only count that as one! Now imagine you see one blue jay. If you later see another blue jay, you can't tell if it is a different sex than the first one you saw. Thus, you treat the cardinals the same way as the blue jays. You also keep track of how much time you spend watching your feeding area.

Lastly, there are “count week” birds. While not counted in the totals for the count, any species seen three days on either side of the count date can be reported. This is a lot easier to track if you subscribe to the eBird rare bird alerts for your area. In 2022, there were no count week birds. In 2023, there were four: great horned owl, Barrow's goldeneye, fox sparrow, and Lincoln's sparrow. With a bit of luck, the



Guess who were most common? PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA.ORG.²

species count for 2023 could have been even higher.

Thank you to everyone who participated in these counts.¹ The count would not be possible without your efforts. On a sad note, since the 2021 count, two couples have retired (George and Margaret Alliston; Susan and Andrew Harvie), and three long-time participants have died: Jim Wolford, John Robertson and Tony Duke. They are all greatly missed. Jim would be well known to many BNS members as a long-standing field trip leader. He always covered the town of Windsor, a lot of it on foot, and visited the Windsor sewage lagoons several times, as rare gulls, ducks, and shorebirds often turn up there. What Jim was to Windsor, John Robertson was to Hantsport, again, doing most of it on foot.

Who knows what the 2024 count will bring?

Patrick Kelly is the compiler for the West Hants Bird Count.

Notes

¹ Thank you to all helped in the field or as feeder watchers: George Alliston, Margaret Alliston, John Belbin, Charlene Bishop, Sherman Boates, Sarah Boudreau, Lyall Bouchard, Robert Burns, Timothy Burns, Louis Coutinho, Joanne Cook, Sandy Cook, Tony Duke, Jocelyn Durstan, Alison Fortune, Larry Hughes, Arianne Janes, Patrick Kelly, Peggy Kochanoff, Logan Lalonde, Virginia Mackenzie, Kevin Moore, Richard McKay, Barry Sabean, Janet Sabean, Elizabeth Stern, Richard Stern, Guy Stevens, Phil Taylor, and Jake Walker.

² The individual photos can be found on wikimedia.org with a search for the bird. The photographers are: snow goose & marsh wren—Rhododendrites; orange-crowned warbler—Greg7 on Flickr; Coopers hawk—Cephas; European starling—Frank Shulenburg.