

2019

Backyard Winter Bird Survey



2019 Survey Results

by Dr. Pamela Hunt, Senior Conservation Biologist



Carole and Stephen Osmer photographed their Evening Grosbeaks on the 2019 Backyard Winter Bird Survey. Pam Hunt's predictions for this species were right on!

After a spate of warmer-than-average winters, the winter of 2018-19 was pretty normal for New Hampshire and across the Northeast as a whole. February started off cold, but temperatures at the Manchester airport reached the sixties on February 4 and 5 before returning to normal levels (20s and low 30s) for the Backyard Winter Bird Survey (BWBS) count weekend. The big weather challenge this year was the wind, which reached gusts of 40 mph on Saturday. Things had calmed down on Sunday, but many observers wondered if the wind was responsible for lowered bird activity. It certainly could have been, or resulted in quick feeder visits when we weren't looking, but as always there are a lot of other things influencing the numbers of birds in New Hampshire in mid-February.

Some species were up, some were down, but perhaps the most interesting statistic for someone taking the long view was the number of species. We collectively recorded only 64 confirmed species this year, which is actually the lowest since 1996 (when there were a lot fewer observers). In contrast, our average for the last 10 years has been 74. One partial explanation for this decline was the almost complete absence of "half-hardies" like thrushes, warblers, and towhees, which often increase our total without changing numbers very much. It's likely that such species vacated the state during an unusually cold November (20th lowest in over 120 years!). Once they're gone, they're not coming back until spring,

despite average or above average temperatures in December and January. For perhaps the same reason, no new species were added to the master list this year.

Readers of last year's summary will recall the record low numbers of Black-capped Chickadees – and widespread concern over why they were absent. I explained that they probably weren't absent in a larger sense (although there was some evidence for poor breeding success); they were simply feeding on plentiful natural foods away from feeders. The good news is that chickadee numbers were back up this season, although they still weren't as abundant as in some years. As regular readers know, even a couple of years do not make a trend, and bird populations increase and decrease all the time. It's only when the declines are consistent over a number of years that we need to start being concerned.

And this brings us to Blue Jays. As Figure 1 shows, these boisterous yard birds hit not just a record low, but one significantly below the previous low count. Jays average about 5,000 birds on the BWBS, so less than 1,500 was extremely noteworthy. NH Audubon received countless calls about the absence of jays – although some observers did welcome the corresponding decrease in their seed budget.

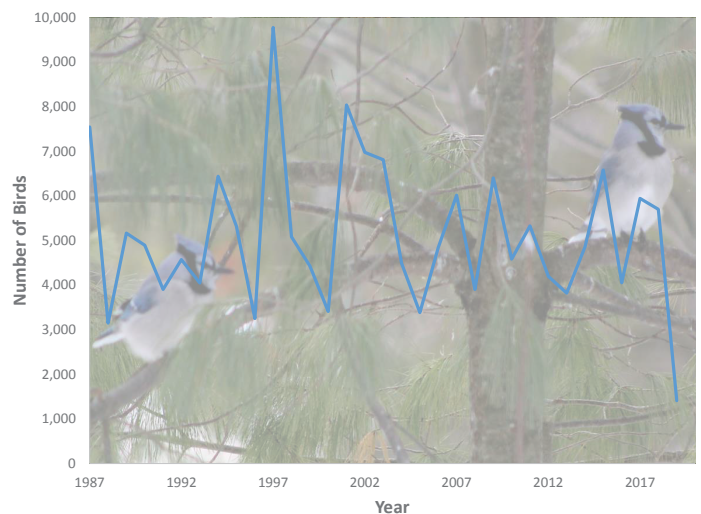


Figure 1. Blue Jay numbers on the Backyard Winter Bird Survey, 1987-2019. Photo by Thom Riley.

Any guesses as to what was going on? If you guessed "food," you are right on the money, and this time the story was all about acorns. Oaks tend to produce bumper crops every two years, and the fall of 2018 was one of the poorest years in recent time. Acorns are a staple in Blue Jay diets, so much so that these birds are actually migratory, although

the extent of their movements varies considerably. In the absence of acorns, Blue Jays migrated south in fall 2018 in large numbers, leaving relatively few to grace our feeders over the winter. It's even quite possible that there were more at the start of the winter, and they moved out as natural food supplies continued to dwindle. In contrast, the roads in Concord are littered with acorns as I write this (October 2019), so Blue Jays will likely be back in force when all of you get ready to count in February! Speaking of acorns, squirrel numbers dropped back to "normal" levels after their record highs on the 2018 Survey, probably a result of both food scarcity and the high mortality seen in the fall of 2018.

While we're on the subject of low numbers, I'm a little shocked to report that Red-bellied Woodpeckers, my perennial example of a species showing no sign of slowing their expansion, dropped to their lowest total since 2014. I honestly have no explanation for this, which just goes to show that there are still things we don't know about our bird populations. It also highlights the need to keep collecting data! Given that Red-bellied Woodpeckers were down, it comes as no surprise that the same held true for Carolina Wrens (another species, like the Red-bellied, that has extended its range northward into New Hampshire), although their drop was nowhere near as dramatic.

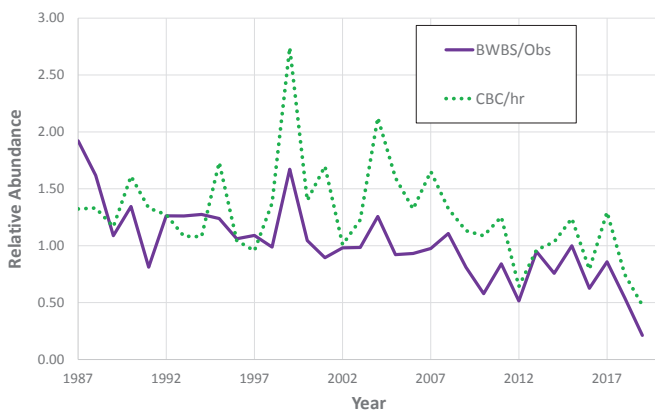


Figure 2. Comparison of American Tree Sparrow abundance on the Backyard Winter Bird Survey and Christmas Bird Count, 1987-2019.

Sparrows were also on the low side after a strong showing in 2017-18. In the absence of a bumper seed crop, Dark-eyed Junco numbers dropped back to more typical levels, probably because they continued farther south. Similarly, Song and White-throated Sparrows were also back around average winter numbers for the BWBS. Of this group, American Tree Sparrow bears watching. This species hit a record low in 2019, and Figure 2 shows a steadily decreasing trend over the last 30 years. This trend has also been seen on the Christmas Bird Count, and some researchers wonder if climate change could be affecting its arctic breeding grounds. Another alternative is that the species is slowly shifting its range north, but more data are needed from Canada to test this hypothesis.

Irruptive species such as waxwings and winter finches had a mixed season. Common Redpolls were up as per my prediction, but not by much, marking the fourth year in a

row with very low numbers (Figure 3). Most of the redpolls in New Hampshire were in the north, and a look at eBird data showed that even more were concentrated to the west and north of the Granite State. One presumes that they encountered plenty of food in those areas and simply did not make it this far east. Redpolls were actually outnumbered by Evening Grosbeaks, which reached their highest total since 2008. Numbers still paled compared to the peaks of the late 1980s and early 1990s, but many observers still got to enjoy these once-reliable visitors for the first time in over a decade.

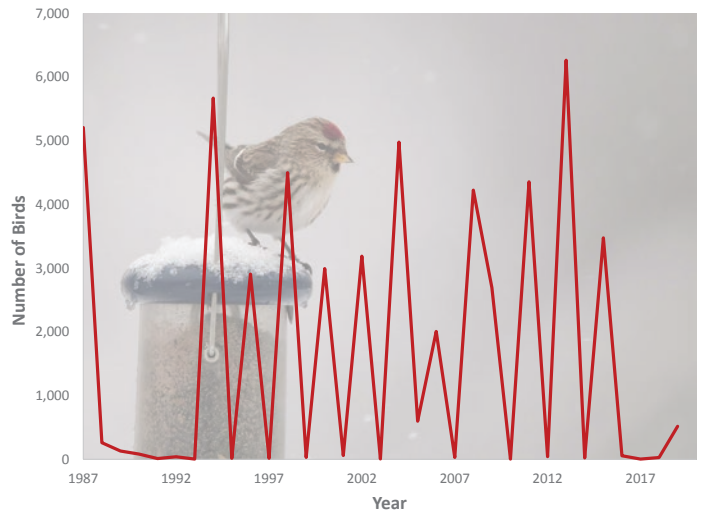


Figure 3. Numbers of Common Redpolls on the Backyard Winter Bird Survey, 1987-2019. Photo by Scott Heron.

Among frugivores (fruit eaters), Pine Grosbeaks were up a little as well, although it's been several years since there was a good statewide irruption of this species. Bohemian Waxwings reached their third highest total ever, while Cedar Waxwings were quite scarce. Numbers of Cedars were the second lowest since 1996, and it was only the second time that they were outnumbered by Bohemians. So what are Cedar Waxwings looking for that they couldn't find, while Bohemians did just fine? We have no idea! Numbers of thrushes followed trends

seen in recent years, with American Robins stalled out in the low 1,000s and Eastern Bluebirds hitting a new record high. If these trends continue, it won't be long before the BWBS tallies more bluebirds than robins! There was a lot of fruit on trees and shrubs in the fall of 2019, so there's a good chance we'll continue to see good numbers of all these birds, although an even bigger fruit crop in Canada is expected to keep Bohemian Waxwings north of the border.

Bucking the declines in



Barred Owls had their second highest total ever on the Survey. Read more about it in the accompanying article. Photo by Don Burns during the 2019 Backyard Winter Bird Survey

jays and squirrels, at least one acorn-eater fared quite well in 2019. Wild Turkeys hit yet another record high for the second year in a row, but fall reports – or relative lack thereof – suggest numbers may be down for the 2020 BWBS.

As I mentioned earlier, there were very few noteworthy “half-hardies,” so I’ll end this summary with a brief look at a species that doesn’t usually get a lot of press on the BWBS – and which also happened to hit a record high: the Bald Eagle. Not many people see eagles in their yards, and the majority of records on the BWBS are overhead or along nearby rivers, but your chances of seeing one are certainly increasing. In fact, the 24 reported this winter is only four less than the number of Northern Mockingbirds – one of the species this survey was created for back in 1967! After a slow start when eagles were just getting re-established in the state (the first modern breeding pair was in 1989), our breeding and wintering populations have been steadily increasing, and in 2017 Bald Eagles were officially removed from the New Hampshire threatened species list. This trend is nicely shown in even the BWBS which is a general survey, but it mirrors the targeted winter Bald Eagle surveys (Figure 4).

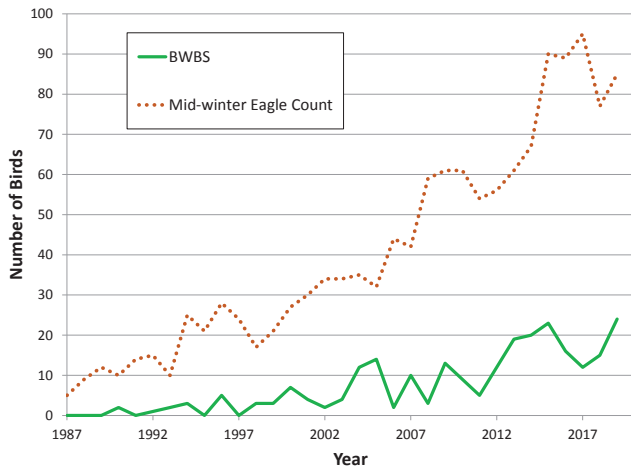


Figure 4. Numbers of Bald Eagles reported on the Backyard Winter Bird Survey and on NH Audubon’s annual “Mid-winter Bald Eagle Count” held in January, 1987-2019.

This eagle story is another example of how volunteers continue to contribute valuable data toward New Hampshire Audubon’s bird monitoring efforts. I look forward to seeing what all of you find in 2020!



Immature Bald Eagles coming to a carcass on the ice in Dover, NH. Photo by Deb Powers, February, 2018.

Remember to fill in the date on your survey form. We had to **invalidate 74 surveys** in 2019 because no date was checked off.

Dr. Hunt’s Predictions for 2019

Looking back to my predictions in the fall of 2018, my success was decidedly mixed. I predicted that redpolls would be up and they were, but not by much. My expectations for siskins and Purple Finches were not realized – they failed to remain in numbers after a good fall flight. At least I got the reappearance of Evening Grosbeaks right! I correctly predicted the big drops in Blue Jays and Dark-eyed Juncos, but was way off with projected increases in Red-bellied Woodpeckers and Carolina Wrens.

As for what 2020 has in store, the easy

prediction is the return of Blue Jays, and all available evidence indicates that it will be a low year for

most if not all irruptives such as redpolls, grosbeaks, and Bohemian Waxwings.

The only exception might be crossbills, which have been present in northern New Hampshire since the summer. However, these species rarely visit feeders, and are likely to remain in the woods feeding on a fairly good cone crop. I really do expect Red-bellied Woodpeckers to increase, but they proved me wrong last year!



Red-bellied Woodpecker by Roger Frieden.

Which Hawk is it?

Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks are very difficult to tell apart. Both have long tails and rounded wings. They feed on small birds and are the most common hawks at feeders.

The adults of both species have a gray back and a rusty breast. The immatures have a brown back and white breast with brown streaks (as do many immature hawks). "Sharpies" tend to be smaller than Cooper's but there is an overlap.

The photo by Sally Inzer shows a hawk with a reddish breast, gray head, and long tail. That tells us it is an adult Sharp-shinned or Cooper's Hawk. Notice that the tail is very square at the end and the head is gray, small and rounded. Compare

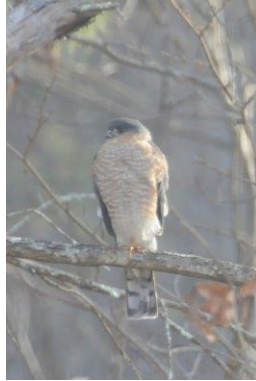


Photo by Sally Inzer from the 2019 BWBS.

that with the photo by Scott Heron of a hawk with similar coloration but a rounded tail and larger, darker head that has a peaked or "squared-off" look. Sally's photo is a Sharp-shinned Hawk and Scott's is a Cooper's Hawk. These two photos illustrate the classic identification features used to differentiate perched adults. The immatures are more difficult, but often show the same differences in tail and head shape.



Photo by Scott Heron.

Even if your hawk doesn't pose for such ideal photos, send along any photos you get – even if you think they're terrible (see the story on the next page). If you're not sure, it is fine to report Sharp-shinned/Cooper's Hawk or "Hawk species" on your survey.

Barred Owl Phenomenon

by Kathryn Frieden

The winter of 2018-19 was remarkable for the high number of Barred Owl sightings in New Hampshire, with the second highest record of 36 on the 2019 Backyard Winter Bird Survey. Wildlife clinics noted many more injured Barred Owls being brought in, and more road-killed owls were found than usual. This was all caused by a food chain starting in 2017 that involved seeds, rodents, and subsequently owls. Do you remember getting hit on the head by acorns and the many road-killed squirrels in the fall of 2018? What does that have to do with Barred Owls?

The first step was a biological event called mast seeding. Trees and shrubs produce seeds and nuts (fruit) that are consumed by wildlife species. The botanical term for this fruit is mast. Mast seeding is the cyclical increased production of mast by a whole population of trees in a region in a given year. This can result in thousands more acorns and other seeds than usual, and the bumper crop of the fall of 2017 was such an event. Scientists are still debating what triggers a mast seeding, but it is probably a combination of available resources, weather, and predation.

With abundant food available, more small rodents survived the winter of 2017-18. This led to increased reproduction and survival of rodent species throughout 2018, leading to the multitudes of squirrels, chipmunks, mice, and other rodents that we experienced in the fall of 2018. Over 50% of the diet of the Barred Owl consists of small mammals, including the white-footed mouse, one of the rodents that benefits significantly from mast seeding. More rodents means

greater food supply and consequently, increased survival of the young Barred Owls hatched in 2018. As often happens, the mast seeding event of 2017 was followed by a dramatic decrease in mast production in the fall of 2018. There were few acorns, nuts and other seeds and there wasn't enough food to support the large rodent population. That's what caused all the road-killed squirrels – all those squirrels had to travel in search of food because it was so scarce. The previously abundant rodents became harder to find during the winter of 2018-2019, and the still abundant owls became easier to find as their hunting patterns were forced to change.

Due to increased competition for scarce food, owls were forced to forage more often during the day than usual, and venture to new hunting grounds. The difficulty in finding enough food may also have been complicated by icy conditions in some regions. Owls often hunt near roads where crossing rodents are more visible. Unfortunately, with more owls, there were also more road-killed and injured birds.

Barred Owls are not a migratory species, but the numbers here in New Hampshire could not have all been local birds and may have been first-winter birds dispersing from breeding areas elsewhere. According to Andrew Vitz, Massachusetts State Ornithologist, many may have come south from the boreal forests of Canada. The last large Barred Owl influx was 2007-2008 when the record high number (43) was recorded on the 2008 Backyard Winter Bird Survey. Although it is a cyclical event, the cycle is not a set length. So if you want to predict the next big Barred Owl winter, watch the acorn crop, and then check for mice in your attic the following spring.

There's No Such Thing as a "Bad Photo"

When it comes to documenting an unusual bird, photos can help confirm it and you don't have to have great photos to do it. Even a poor photo can provide enough clues to confirm the identification, especially when you add a few descriptive notes. Here are some examples.



Even though we can't see half of the bird, the buffy breast color, white eye stripe, curved bill, and rusty shoulders make this a Carolina Wren. This species has been increasing on the BWBS in the southern part of the state, but it is still rare in the north. Photo by Thom Riley on the 2013 BWBS.



The breast color, posture, and long white stripe on the edge of the wing tell us this is a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. We've had a few more reports of this species on the Survey in recent years, but they are still rare. They can be easily confused with other species, so they need good details. Photo by Sharon Day on the 2018 BWBS.



This photo shows enough of the breast and rusty sides to confirm the identification of a female Eastern Towhee, which is rare in winter. It was taken by Ann Smith on the 2018 BWBS.

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Thank you for your donations to the Backyard Winter Bird Survey. Contributions are the sole source of funding for this survey and make it possible for us to collect and analyze this valuable data. Some companies match employee donations and we appreciate those who take advantage of that. We are grateful to Johnson & Johnson who matches gifts 2:1, effectively tripling a gift. We're sorry we cannot list all survey participants, but your data is a vital contribution to the Survey. Thank you to everyone who contributed to the 2019 Backyard Winter Bird Survey.

— Rebecca Suomala, Survey Coordinator

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Russell Hughes	Marianne McDaniel	William Preston	Karen Tays	

Background photos: Tufted Titmouse by Sharon Grader (page 6) and White-breasted Nuthatch by Sharon Grader (page 7).

2019 Backyard Winter Bird Survey Species Totals

Species seen at participants' bird feeders and backyards Survey Dates: February 9 & 10, 2019

Canada Goose	549	Common Raven	96
American Black Duck	34	Black-capped Chickadee	5978
Mallard	157	Tufted Titmouse	2793
Bufflehead	13	Red-breasted Nuthatch	580
Common Goldeneye	23	White-breasted Nuthatch	1817
Common Merganser	10	Brown Creeper	103
Duck sp.	47	Carolina Wren	125
Ruffed Grouse	12	Eastern Bluebird	1035
Wild Turkey	3350	American Robin	1190
Rock Pigeon	475	Northern Mockingbird	28
Mourning Dove	4955	European Starling	1468
Ring-billed Gull	10	Bohemian Waxwing	243
Herring Gull	10	Cedar Waxwing	173
Gull sp.	6	House Sparrow	1795
Great Blue Heron	1	Evening Grosbeak	772
Turkey Vulture	10	Pine Grosbeak	35
Bald Eagle	24	House Finch	809
Sharp-shinned Hawk	21	Purple Finch	150
Cooper's Hawk	25	Common Redpoll	519
Cooper's/Sharp-shinned Hawk	9	Red Crossbill	2
Northern Goshawk	2	Pine Siskin	218
Red-tailed Hawk	65	American Goldfinch	2923
Hawk sp.	24	Snow Bunting	2
Eastern Screech-Owl	1	American Tree Sparrow	277
Great Horned Owl	1	Fox Sparrow	1
Barred Owl	36	Song Sparrow	36
Owl sp.	3	White-throated Sparrow	316
Red-bellied Woodpecker	445	Sparrow sp.	179
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	1	Dark-eyed Junco	2753
Downy Woodpecker	1822	Red-winged Blackbird	13
Hairy Woodpecker	1132	Brown-headed Cowbird	14
Northern Flicker	16	Common Grackle	62
Pileated Woodpecker	68	Northern Cardinal	1899
Woodpecker sp.	7		
Northern Shrike	5	Total Confirmed Species	64
Canada (was Gray) Jay	8		
Blue Jay	1411	Red Squirrel	1448
American Crow	1053	Gray Squirrel	3801

Unusual reports with insufficient or no descriptive documentation:

Northern Pintail	1
Turkey Vulture	5
Northern Harrier	2
Red-shouldered Hawk	1
American Kestrel	1
Snowy Owl	1
Red-headed Woodpecker	1
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	2
Black-backed/Three-toed Woodpecker	1
Winter Wren	2
Gray Catbird	1
Chipping Sparrow	3
Fox Sparrow	1
Rusty Blackbird	1

Observers (by county)

Belknap	79
Carroll	80
Cheshire	108
Coos	40
Grafton	119
Hillsborough	285
Merrimack	260
Rockingham	264
Strafford	109
Sullivan	50

Total Observers 1394

Please include details or photographs of unusual sightings. Photos may be emailed to bwbs@nhaudubon.org. Examples of good descriptions are on the web site.

Survey participant Bob Quinn, had two helpers counting birds for his 2019 tally in Webster. The counters were Zoey (age 5) and Henry (age 3) Mulkhey. They even discussed woodpecker identification – something that's not easy! Test your skills on the opposite photo. Which woodpecker is it? Answer below photo. Photo by Sharon Grader.



Hairy Woodpecker (long bill, all white feathers on side of tail)

Backyard Winter Bird Survey web site:
New Hampshire Audubon
84 Silk Farm Road Concord, NH 03301

<https://nhbirdrecords.org/backyard-winter-bird-survey/>
Phone (603) 224-9909 • FAX (603) 226-0902
bwbs@nhaudubon.org • www.nhaudubon.org