

December

December is the month for Christmas Bird Counts. Birders who take them most seriously, cover their CBC territories in advance, hoping to stake out a late Brown Thrasher or Towhee that just might stay a few more weeks in a favorite tangle, seeing if Long or Short Eared Owls have come to their favorite roosting place again, checking out where the best fields of Foxtail grass are to walk for sparrows on count day, etc.. December is also the month that Missouri Department of Conservation holds its "Eagle Days" at selected refuges. Many birders take advantage of an Eagle Day, hoping to pick up an American Black Duck or a Tundra Swan at the refuge in the process,

From the birds' point of view, December is just winding down of November. Most of the regular migrants have left, or gone through, or arrived, as the case may be. Most of the dabbling ducks, except Mallards, have gone through, as have the larger rafts of diving ducks. Few, if any, loons and grebes remain on the large lakes. A few Winter Wrens and White-throated Sparrows remain in the wooded areas, along with the odd Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. But many of them have already gone further south. The Vesper Sparrows and most of the Savannahs are gone, as are most of the late warblers. Usually only a few Yellow-rumped Warblers remain in sheltered areas where there are plenty of Poison Ivy or dogwood berries for them to feed upon. Upland dicker birding yields the usual wintering species, juncos, American Tree Sparrows, White Crowned Sparrows, plus a few "half hardy" stragglers. Depending upon the weather, large flocks of blackbirds may be around, or most of them may already be gone. Some American Robins, Cedar Waxwings and Red-headed Woodpeckers may linger all winter if food supplies, hawthorn and juniper berries for the robins and waxwings, acorns for the woodpeckers, are abundant. But most individuals of these species leave in early December also.

There are various stimuli for bird migration. Changes in the amount of daylight prompt most regular migrants to get going. The process is also affected by the need to fatten up for the journey. Many birds remain behind to fatten up, moving only when the onset of colder weather and/or depletion of food supplies forces them to leave. The same principle works for stopover locations, which provide food for further fattening up along the way. Migrants stay until food supplies are gone, or until ice or snow covers them up. By December, the food supplies of many of stopover locations have been pretty well picked over, and ice and snow may already have arrived to make the remainder hard to find. Shallow lakes and marshes often freeze up in late November or early December.

Even while Missouri birders are noting the numbers of some of their resident and stopover species diminish dramatically in late November and early December, they are benefitting from a similar process occurring to their north. Freeze-ups now force large numbers of Mallards out of their more northern resting places, and they arrive here in larger and larger numbers. Goldeneye and mergansers, especially Common Mergansers, become the most common waterfowl on larger lakes. Bald Eagle and Rough-legged Hawk populations continue to build up.

From the standpoint of the birder who wants to see unusual birds and/or birds still needed for the year list, the most important migration that occurs in December is usually of invasion species that have been driven south by famines in the more northerly areas where they usually spend the

winter. Examples of such species are Northern Shrikes, Snowy Owls, Northern Goshawks, Red-breasted Nuthatches, and the various “winter finches” – i.e., crossbills, siskins, redpolls, Purple Finches and Evening Grosbeaks. These species do not appear in good numbers every year. Some of their invasions are cyclical. Snowy Owls are driven south by crashes in lemming populations that occur roughly every three to five years. Northern Goshawks follow a 10 or 11-year cycle, which is related to the rise and fall of Ruffed Grouse populations. Winter finches are affected by cone crop failures in the coniferous trees that are their favored habitat.

December is a good month to watch the listserv regularly, because many of the winter finches show up at feeders and are apt to be reported at locations where they can be chased and found. It is also an excellent month to walk pine groves, which not only harbor Red-breasted Nuthatches, Golden-crown Kinglets and crossbills, when they are down, but also often are roosting places for owls. Lakes and sewage lagoons should also be checked regularly, if more quickly. Although they are apt to be far less productive than in November, the odd scoter or Long-tailed Duck may still show up, and the flock of gulls roosting on a sand spit may contain a good one.

One of the great things about birding is that it is so dynamic. Birds move around throughout the year. December is no exception. Many potential rewards still await the birder who ventures forth in December.

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