



The Connecticut Warbler

The Journal of The Connecticut Ornithological Association



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An in-depth look at 2021-22 Christmas Bird Counts
Autumn hawk migration produces some rarities
Deconstructing a puzzling hybrid sandpiper

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ON THE COVER

Surf Scoter

Surf Scoter was by far the most numerous of the three scoter species on the 2021-2022 Christmas Bird Counts. Bruce Finnan captured the beauty of an adult male in his cover photo.

The 2021-2022 Connecticut Christmas Bird Count

By Stephen P. Broker



Peregrine Falcons, which have rebounded from the brink of extirpation, were found in significant numbers on 2021-2022 Christmas Bird Counts. (Steve Broker)

Introduction

The National Audubon Society website indicates that 2,610 Christmas Bird Counts were completed and 42,796,529 birds were counted for the 122nd edition of this longest-running wildlife census in the world. The majority of CBC count circles are found throughout the United States, Canada, and Mexico, with the eastern U.S. and the Gulf Coast states having the greatest concentration of counts. Many counts do occur throughout the western and mid-western U.S.. Increasingly over the years Christmas counts have been added in Central and South America and on islands in the Pacific Ocean. This year, the northernmost Christmas Bird Count was held at Arctic Bay in the Nunavut territory of Canada, where two field observers recorded two bird species, Common Raven and Hoary Redpoll. The southernmost counts were held at Lagos de Yahnaraca and Isla Ronda, Amazonas, Colombia (3 observers, 48 species) and at Manaus (East), Amazonas, Brazil (6 observers, 147 species). The

easternmost count was held at St. John's, Newfoundland/Labrador (29 observers, 77 species), while the westernmost count was held at the Southern Guam circle, Guam (13 observers, 24 species). Species reported from St. John's would be familiar to all Connecticut CBCers, those from Guam not so much.

For a number of years, this review article for the Connecticut Christmas Bird Count has compared the current year's statewide results with those of the previous 29 years for a thirty-year comparison of data. Such an approach is helpful in distinguishing between the vagaries of yearly high and low occurrences of individual early wintering species in Connecticut and perceived longer term trends in bird populations. Reviewing several decades of CBC results leads to the identification of those bird species that have been steadily increasing their early winter populations in Connecticut, as well as those species that have been experiencing significant declines in numbers. Thus, the comments below and the table of results linked to this article at the Connecticut Ornithological Association website (**See Page 116**) consider those species "new" to the counts as making their first appearance this year in the last 30 years, "rare" species as having occurred six or fewer times in 30 years on any given count, and high and low species counts similarly determined over the past three decades.

During the 2021-2022 season, Connecticut birders participated in 21 Christmas Bird Counts, including seven in northern portions of the state, six mid-state counts, and eight counts along the coast from the Greenwich-Stamford CBC that reaches into New York State to the Napatree, RI/NY/CT count that includes southeastern-most New London county. The 21 CBCs involved 720 field observers and 82 feeder watchers, adding up to 802 total observers. The level of participation in the 2021-2022 Connecticut Christmas Bird Count is remarkably consistent with our 30-year average both of field observers and total observers. Birding in forest and field, inland waterbodies and coastlines, and yard feeders involved nearly 2,100 total party hours and 8,000 total party miles - again extensive coverage consistent with that of the last three decades. In the process, we totaled 308,525 individual birds, including 166 count day species and 5 count week species. The 30-year average for our statewide CBC is 167 count day species and 170 count day plus count week species.

Why Do We Find the Bird Species That We Find?

While each yearly statewide count includes a diversity of species reported, including resident birds, late-lingering migrants, periodically irruptive species, vagrants, and any hoped for species new to the all-time Connecticut CBC list, the question that begs to be asked is, "Why these species?" Why do we field observers and feeder watchers report such annually occurring species as Canada Goose, Red-tailed Hawk, American Robin, and Song Sparrow, but we also from time to time report Cinnamon Teal (as in 1994-95), Western Grebe (2006-07), White Ibis (2012-13), Spotted Towhee (2005-06), and Black-throated Blue Warbler (2020-21 and again in 2021-22)?



Eastern Bluebirds are beloved for their acceptance of nest boxes, but they are also widespread as wintering birds found on all state CBCs. (Bruce Finnan)

Before we get to a deeper analysis of the results of the 2021-2022 CTCBC, let's take a 30-year look at the bird species that do get reported from our count circles and address the question, Why these species? To answer this question, I have referred to a number of sources, including publications on Connecticut's resident species, our breeding and wintering birds, North American nearctic-neotropical migrant species, and vagrant species that make it to the eastern United States from elsewhere. The two primary sources for vagrants are Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Birds of the World (BOW) and the richly informative recent publication, *Vagrancy in Birds*, by Alexander Lees and James Gilroy (2021. Princeton University Press).

According to my Connecticut statewide spreadsheet showing the combined results of all 21 Christmas Bird Counts for the 30-year period 1992-93 through 2021-22, a total of 23,871 observers (21,037 in the field and 2,834 at feeders) have recorded 262 different species on count days plus 4 species during count periods. These 266 bird species can be assigned to categories based on their occurrence in Connecticut at various times through the year. My list of resident birds, and those species that can be found in all months of the year, is based on Greg Hanisek's "Connecticut Birds by the Season" published in 2005 with species bar graphs revised in 2008, and on Frank Gallo's updated bar graphs in his book *Birding in Connecticut*, published in 2018.



Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers have expanded their breeding range southward in Connecticut, and they are also one of at least 20 species whose early winter populations are increasing, based on CBC data. (Bruce Finnan)

According to my reading, a total of 127 bird species that are resident or year-round in Connecticut have been reported on our Christmas Bird Count, accounting for 48 per cent of all birds seen on counts in the last 30 years.

The Atlas of Breeding Birds of Connecticut, edited by Louis Bevier and published in 1994, and the current Connecticut Bird Atlas (2017-2022) directed by the team headed up by Chris Elphick and Min Huang, for which temporary results are available at the CBA website, inform my identification of 144 breeding bird species in Connecticut that have been reported in early winter on the CTCBC, for 54 per cent of the 266 total species. I have used multiple sources found in the reference section that list nearctic-neotropical migrant species, and I count at least 75 species found on CTCBCs over the past 30 years that fit into this category, for 28 per cent of all species seen. Finally, Lees & Gilroy (2021) and BOW identify at least 32 vagrant species that have occurred on Connecticut CBCs, for 12 per cent of all birds reported. Obviously, these four categories of birds occurring in early winter are overlapping. As one example, Yellow Warbler is a wood-warbler that breeds commonly in temperate regions including Connecticut and winters in Middle America and South America (a nearctic-neotropical migrant), yet one was reported count day on the 2011-12 Connecticut CBC and another Yellow Warbler during count week this year.

Connecticut's resident birds and many of those that breed in the state account for most of the species seen during our Christmas Bird Counts. In addition, many of

the breeding species that migrate south in fall are referred to as late lingerers or semi-hardy birds if they stay into mid- to late-December and early January. In most circumstances, it is vagrancy that leads to the rarities that generate so much interest and enthusiasm among birders.

The Vagrants

Lees and Conroy (2021) state, "Vagrants", 'accidentals', 'rarities', 'extralimitals' and 'casuals' are all synonyms for unusual records of nominally 'out of range' individuals of a given bird species." They continue, "Vagrancy is far more frequent in highly migratory species and migration span is a good predictor of both vagrancy likelihood . . . and the distance that birds may travel in the 'wrong direction' - to reach places vast distances outside of their regular ranges." Also, "we share the contention of others . . . that vagrancy is a powerful biological phenomenon whose study is fundamental to understanding the diversity of life on earth." Lees and Conroy categorize the circumstances that lead to vagrancy as either exogenous (external causes, such as weather - "an important driver of vagrancy, but far from the only one") or endogenous (internal causes, including genetic programming and inherited errors in the migratory program). Lees and Conroy "explore in detail the various internal and external drivers of avian vagrancy, first looking at the mechanisms by which migratory species navigate, and how errors in these mechanisms can help explain patterns of vagrant occurrence."



Connecticut added Eurasian Tree Sparrow to the state list after one appeared at a feeder in Old Saybrook in October 2021. It remained to be recorded on the Old Lyme-Saybrook CBC. (Steve Broker)



The total of three Dickcissels on the 2021-2022 counts topped the all-time high by one. (Mark Szantyr)

Migration in birds and other wildlife requires the use of a biological clock and a compass, with four known avian compasses working separately or in concert: the Sun; the stars; patterns of polarized light (strongest at sunrise and sunset); Earth's magnetic field. The primary function of each of these compasses is the ability of a bird to tell where North is, "the cornerstone of migration in naive juvenile birds." True navigation takes place when a bird's biological clock and some combination of compasses and an inherent or learned map are put to use. "In the majority of bird species, the ability to navigate with precision to exact localities is not innate but is learned through gradual experience. Juvenile migratory birds typically inherit a migratory 'program' from their parents, which encodes both the direction and timing of movements necessary to make a return trip to a suitable wintering area." With just a genetically inherited clock and a compass, and no prior learned experiences, it is not surprising that juvenile birds inheriting any errors in their migratory program might head in the wrong direction as they undertake their first long-distance migrations. There is evidence, however, that some juvenile birds do possess a genetically encoded innate map that allows for true navigation in their first migratory year.

Lees and Conroy describe in detail the four known avian compasses, giving examples of how birds make use of the Sun, the stars, polarizing light, and the magnetic field,

and how each of these may be of little use under certain conditions, such as extensive cloud cover during daytime or nighttime, or how a bird's position with respect to the Equator or the poles limits the use of the magnetic field. Most passerines and many non-passerines are known to migrate at night. Potential errors in the migratory program of birds include: not knowing when to start or stop migration; a faulty internal circannual clock; mistakes in the direction of migratory orientation; displacement by severe weather (wind drift); incomplete development of a "mental map of waypoints" in experienced adult migrants; interference with sense of smell (the 'disruption of the olfactory sense'); disruption of sensing infrasounds (such as the breaking of waves on rocky coastlines or wind-generated sounds in mountainous regions).

The authors describe a series of causes of vagrancy, including vagrancy through compass errors, vagrancy in social migrants, wind drift and vagrancy, overshooting, extreme weather and irruptions, vagrancy and natural dispersal, and human-driven vagrancy. These sections provide greater detail on the relation between accurate migration and error-driven and stochastically-driven vagrancy.

Vagrant birds that have occurred on Connecticut Christmas Bird Counts:

Each of the following bird species known for their vagrancy and having occurred on a Connecticut Christmas Bird Count is discussed in the context of the conditions under which they exhibit vagrancy.

Ross's Goose, which has appeared on Connecticut CBCs in 2006-07, 2016-17, and 2017-18, nests in the central Canadian Arctic. Increased sightings of this goose species along the East Coast are attributed to population expansion.

Pink-footed Goose (2016-17, 2017-18, 2021-22) has occurred in fall and winter in the northeastern United States for the past several decades, likely due to increased vagrancy with recovery of protected populations following years of over-hunting.

Barnacle Goose (eight years of occurrence, most recently 2019-20) is another breeding goose of the Arctic tundra, showing increased vagrancy with recovery of populations following over-hunting.

Cinnamon Teal (1994-95) breeds in the arid lands of the Great Basin. One was present at Milford Point saltmarsh from around November 15, 1994 until it was collected on January 9, 1995 and subsequently mounted.

Tufted Duck (1992-93, 2018-29, 2019-20, 2020-21) is a diving duck of European origin. Scattered Connecticut records have occurred from early November to February, March, and April, most recently on a CBC at Captain's Cove, Fairfield.



While blackbirds in general vary in numbers from year to year, most of them can be quite abundant. Rusty Blackbird is the exception, registering a concerning long-term decline. (Frank Mantlik)

Eared Grebe (2000-01, 2001-02, 2016-17, 2018-19) is a breeding species of the western United States and western Canada.

Western Grebe (2016-07) is another western breeding grebe with some breeding taking place as far to the east as Wisconsin. It is a regular vagrant to the eastern United States.

Rufous Hummingbird (observed nine times, most recently in 2020-21) occurs in very small numbers in Connecticut where hummingbird feeders have remained up in the weeks after all Ruby-throated Hummingbirds have migrated south.

Purple Gallinule (1998-99) is a frequent vagrant from tropical and semi-tropical southeastern United States. Its occurrence in Connecticut is due to reverse migration

in fall/winter.

Pacific Loon (seen seven times, most recently in 2017-18) is rare to eastern North America, but with periodic winter records in Connecticut.

American White Pelican (2005-06, 2014-15) shows a fair amount of vagrancy in North America, as does Brown Pelican. American White Pelican has occurred twice in recent years on a Connecticut CBC.

White Ibis (2012-13) occurs year-round throughout Florida and along the Gulf Coast and is described as “a highly nomadic species undertaking post-breeding dispersals, and migrations” (BOW).

Gyrfalcon (1995-96) “inhabits circumpolar arctic and subarctic regions, with some individuals moving south into northern temperate zones during fall and winter. Its patterns are complicated by cyclical food availability, which may cause irruptive movements” (BOW)

Ash-throated Flycatcher (1992-03, 2006-07, 2015-16) is a bird of the western United States but is a regular vagrant in the eastern United States.

Western Kingbird (2006-07, 2021-22) is another tyrant flycatcher that shows regular vagrancy in the eastern United States.

Pacific-slope Flycatcher (2015-16): DNA testing of fecal samples from some Empidonax flycatcher vagrants in the eastern U.S. has established their identity to the species level, including the Pacific-slope Flycatcher discovered in 2015 within Area K of the New Haven count circle. The only other occurrence of a “Western” flycatcher in Connecticut (December 1, 2007, Osbornedale State Park, Derby) lacked conclusive evidence for identifying that bird as either a Pacific-slope or a Cordilleran flycatcher.

Boreal Chickadee (1993-94) is a northern, irruptive species that was more commonly found in Connecticut prior to the 1990s.

Cave Swallow (2008-09, 2012-13, 2015-16) - “The status of Cave Swallow as a vagrant in eastern North America has changed dramatically in recent decades and it is now a predictable late autumn vagrant, a change associated with its range expansion in the south” (Lees & Conroy, 2021)

Bohemian Waxwing (1980-81) is species of the open boreal forest. “Named for the nomadic ranging patterns of its winter flocks, the Bohemian Waxwing moves widely, seeking crops of winter fruits, and irregularly sweeps into regions to the south and



Northern Cardinals, while widespread and familiar to every count participant, were recorded at their 30-year low. (Bruce Finnan)

east of its typical winter range” (BOW)

Mountain Bluebird (1994-95, 1998-99), found in western North America, is a highly migratory bird and a widespread vagrant in eastern North America.

Townsend’s Solitaire (1993-94, 1994-95, 1999-2000, 2015-16) is another highly migratory thrush species of western North America which “has occurred widely as a vagrant in the eastern half of the continent” (Lees & Conroy. 2021)

Varied Thrush (1983-84) is an irruptive species of the northern boreal forest, occurring infrequently in winter in Connecticut.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow (2021-22) is a new addition to the all-time Connecticut list of birds, approved recently by the Avian Records Committee of Connecticut (ARCC). One appeared at a private residence feeder in coastal Old Saybrook and remained viewable from its October discovery through at least early January 2022. This bird was seen by many observers and was described and photographed well. ARCC members researched its spread in recent years from the midwestern United States. “Eurasian Tree Sparrows were brought to St. Louis, Missouri, in the 19th century as part of a shipment of European songbirds imported from Germany. The birds were destined for release as part of a project to enhance the native North American avifauna. Around two dozen Eurasian Tree Sparrows were released in late April 1870,

they bred successfully and gradually established a presence in the Midwestern United States” (BOW). The paucity of eBird posts on the Old Saybrook individual after about November 20 suggests that most state twitchers had already added the bird to their Connecticut list or that the daily occurrence of cars and birders showing up at the owner’s driveway merited a courteous hiding of eBird posts.

Pine Grosbeak (8 times, most recently in 2012-13) is an irruptive species of the boreal forest that occurred with much greater frequency from the early 1950s to the mid-1980s than in the four decades since. Consider these CTCBC numbers from the past: 440 Pine Grosbeaks in (1961-62), 685 in 1968-69, 331 in 1977-78, 316 in 1981-82.

Le Conte’s Sparrow (2012-13) is a grassland bird that breeds in central Canada and north-central United States and migrates south through the Mississippi Flyway to south-central and the southeastern U.S.. There are “isolated vagrant records from California to the East Coast, most during fall migration and most apparently of hatch-year (HY) birds” (BOW).

Spotted Towhee (2005-06), formerly considered conspecific with Eastern Towhee but now recognized as a sister species, breeds in the western United States and has full migratory, partial migratory, and non-migratory populations, with the migrating populations occupying wintering grounds in Oklahoma, Texas, and northern Mexico. The only record of Spotted Towhee in Connecticut is “when one was found on 31 Dec 2005 at Groton Long Point on the New London Christmas Bird Count” and lived on scattered birdseed at a pop-up feeding station through mid-February. “Plumage details ruled out the identification as a hybrid with Eastern Towhee and suggested the bird was a first-year female of the Great Plains race *arcticus*” (ARCC).

Yellow-headed Blackbird (1994-95, 2007-08, 2012-13, 2013-14) has an extensive breeding range in western and central Canada and the U.S. and winters in the southern U.S. and Mexico. “Individuals [are] recorded regularly in winter along east coast from at least Massachusetts south to Florida” (BOW).

MacGillivray’s Warbler (2001-02) is a long-distance neotropical migrant that breeds in western Canada and the United States and migrates in the fall to Central and South America. The first Connecticut record of MacGillivray’s Warbler was made on December 15, 2001 in New Milford on the Woodbury-Roxbury CBC. There are scattered reports (some with photos) from New England, mostly at coastal areas.

Black-throated Gray Warbler (2002-03) is “recorded widely in the east . . . [and is] “considerably rarer as a vagrant [than is Townsend’s Warbler]” (Lees & Conroy. 2021).

Western Tanager (2000-01, 2006-07, 2015-16, 2021-22) - Christmas Bird Count Western Tanagers have occurred four times in the last thirty years: at Woodbury-Roxbury during count week in 2000-01; in the Moodus area at Salmon River in 2006-07; at New Haven and Napatree count day in 2015-16, and; two at Napatree this year, along with one count week at Old Lyme-Saybrook. From Lees & Conroy, 2021., “the majority of temperate zone species [among cardinals and allies] are highly migratory and have correspondingly high incidence of long-range vagrancy.” These species include Western Tanager, a vagrant to the eastern United States.

Black-headed Grosbeak (1959-60, 1980-81) also is widely reported in eastern North America, although not on a Connecticut CBC since 1980.

Painted Bunting (2006-07, 2018-19, 2020-21) requires further study of its life history characteristics. This species of southern distribution has occurred several times on the Connecticut Christmas Bird Count, including as a count week bird in 1989-90 and 1990-91. At that time, I naively described the occurrence of this adult male at an Old Lyme feeder as an escapee, but more recently it has become apparent that Painted Buntings do occur in New England winters in some years as a reverse migrant. The most recent sighting was a count week Painted Bunting in 2020-21 in Westerly, Rhode Island on the Napatree count.

Weather Conditions on the 2021-2022 Connecticut Christmas Bird Count

A review of the last ten years of Christmas Bird Counts for weather conditions shows the following generalities, with some additional mention of some extreme conditions: unseasonable warmth and mild, favorable weather with no snow and no rain for count year 2011-12; heavy rain and blizzard conditions (2012-13); 2-6 inches of snow (2013-14); light snow and mild, cooperative weather (2014-15 through 2017-18); unseasonable warmth and generally mild conditions (2018-19 and 2019-20); snow depth of 2-15 inches (2020-21). Circumstances differed around the state for each of these years, with coastal counts potentially enjoying the ameliorating effects of Long Island Sound (but for the wind gusts) and more northern, higher elevation counts experiencing expected colder conditions.

For the 2021-22 Connecticut CBC, most compilers of the first weekend's counts expressed relief that the forecast for heavy rains did not materialize. Throughout the December 14 to January 5 count window, temperatures remained on the warmer side to positively balmy, while snow fall and snow cover were nonexistent, but for an inch or less on two northern counts. Half the count circles experienced temporary light rain, and with few exceptions still and moving water remained open throughout the state. Birders did contend with partly cloudy or cloudy skies, and fog interfered on two coastal and two inland counts.



Eastern Meadowlark, a species in steep decline as a breeder due to loss of habitat, provided a bright spot for the counts. The statewide total of 66 was the highest in 22 years. (Frank Mantlik)

The first weekend of the National Audubon Society-designated count period included counts on Saturday, December 18 at New Haven, Woodbury-Roxbury, and Storrs, and on heavily stacked Sunday, December 19 at Greenwich-Stamford, Hartford, Litchfield Hills, Lakeville-Sharon, Napatree, Norwich, Oxford, Quinnipiac Valley, Salmon River, and Westport. Temperatures on Saturday ranged from the mid-30s to the mid-40s. Writing a summary for the New Haven CBC, compiler Chris Loscalzo noted, “The day was cloudy and relatively warm with the temperature in the upper 30s for most of the day. There was occasional mist and light rain, but we were fortunate that the weather was better than had been forecast.”

Ken Elkins, compiler of the Woodbury-Roxbury CBC, wrote, “The forecasted conditions of persistent light rain reduced our number of volunteers and reduced the amount of time some key observers stayed in the field. The overall warm temperatures preceding the count had not caused any concentrations of birds for the winter yet.”

Sunday's counts were held under equally benign conditions, again in spite of predictions of stifling rain. Mornings were characterized by extensive cloud cover, some light rain here and there, temperatures for most counts ranging from the high 20s to the low to mid 40s, wind gusts up to 30 mph, and mostly open waters. Cynthia

Ehlinger, who coordinates and compiles the Greenwich-Stamford CBC, wrote, “The mild but damp pre-dawn hours gave way to clearer but windier conditions with dropping temperatures that seemed to keep many land birds hidden and water birds bouncing in choppy surf. Jay Kaplan, veteran compiler of the Hartford CBC, shared his summary of this long-running count. Jay’s always insightful observations concerning weather conditions and their impact on numbers of bird species recorded merit the following lengthy quote.

“Last year’s Hartford Christmas Bird Count featured a foot of snow on the ground. This year, there was none! What’s more, warm temperatures throughout the fall kept even small ponds open. So, on a day without snow and ice, and temperatures reaching well into the thirties, why were there so many complaints throughout the State about how few birds were seen on the first weekend of the Christmas Count season? Let us consider some plausible explanations. First, the lack of freezing temperatures may have kept waterfowl, raptors, and other birds from moving southward out of northern New England. Would these same conditions, however, allow some species to linger in our area rather than move to warmer climes for winter? Second, the mild, open conditions also allowed birds to find food over a wide area and kept them from clustering in sheltered areas near restricted food supplies. Third, a big issue on Count Day was a cold 10-15 mph northwest wind that made it feel much colder than it actually was. When birding, wind is not your friend, as many birds remain hidden away.”

The Hartford CBC was far from being a disappointment, however, with very reasonable species totals and several excellent avian finds in key parts of the Hartford count circle.

Shai Mitra and Glenn Williams, co-compilers of the Napatree CBC, wrote, “Though the predawn owling and early morning was hampered by drizzle and most sections reported lower than normal bird activity, we ended up with a respectable 118 species, one subspecies, and some quality birds. There was no significant freezing before count day and all water was open. Coverage was a little thinner than normal due to holidays falling on the weekend so fewer dates available for counts.”

Sharon Dellinger, co-compiler with Doreen Jezek of the Salmon River CBC, wrote, “It was a blustery day with a low temperature of 29 degrees F. and a high of 40. Winds were from the north or northwest with gusts up to 30 mph. All bodies of water were open, so ducks and water birds weren’t concentrated in any one area.”

Stratford-Milford and Barkhamsted held their counts on December 26, with cloudy or partly cloudy skies, reduced wind gusts, no precipitation, and mostly open waters. New Year’s Day, on Saturday this year, saw counts at Pawling, New York/Hidden Valley, Connecticut and at New London. The balmy weather throughout the region brought



Historically Cooper's Hawk (shown here) has been less common than Sharp-shinned Hawk, but momentum has swung with a decline in “Sharpies” and a surge in “Coops,” a change reflected in numbers on the state's CBCs. (Bruce Finnan)

in locally distributed fog and a touch of light rain, with cloudy skies continuing through the day. All water bodies were open. The CBC period concluded with counts on Sunday, January 2 at Bristol, Edwin Way Teale, Trail Wood, Guilford-Long Island Sound, and Old Lyme-Saybrook. Each of these counts experienced temperatures rising to the mid-50s, hence a continuation of foggy conditions accompanied by morning and afternoon light rain. Again, inland ponds, lakes, and rivers were open, and with negligible winds.

Highlights of the 2021-2022 Connecticut Christmas Bird Count

Each year, a number of species are recorded in 30-year record high numbers, while inevitably another group of species is counted at 30-year low numbers. While one year of results does not establish a trend, the 30-year look at individual species counts can be quite suggestive of longer term gains and losses of our southern New England or Eastern avifauna. Connecticut Christmas Bird Count articles from the past three decades have identified growing early winter populations of at least 20 species: Brant; Bufflehead; Hooded Merganser; Wild Turkey; Red-throated Loon; Common Loon; Northern Gannet; Black Vulture; Turkey Vulture; Cooper’s Hawk; Bald Eagle; Red-shouldered Hawk; Red-bellied Woodpecker; Yellow-bellied Sapsucker; Pileated Woodpecker; Merlin; Peregrine Falcon; Fish Crow; Common Raven; Winter Wren; Carolina Wren; Chipping Sparrow. Among these species are those that have extended their breeding and winter ranges from more southern distributions, while several continue to expand breeding and wintering ranges from the north.

In contrast, at least two-dozen bird species continue to be in population declines as evidenced by our Christmas Bird Count data. These include: American Black Duck; Canvasback; Greater Scaup; Northern Bobwhite (native populations extirpated);

Ruffed Grouse; Ring-necked Pheasant (now also considered extirpated as a breeder in Connecticut); Killdeer; Ruddy Turnstone; Red Knot; Herring Gull; Great Black-backed Gull; Sharp-shinned Hawk; Northern Goshawk; Eastern Screech-Owl; American Kestrel; Loggerhead Shrike; American Crow; Northern Mockingbird; European Starling; Evening Grosbeak; Purple Finch; Field Sparrow; American Tree Sparrow; Eastern Meadowlark; Rusty Blackbird. The irruptive species of northern boreal forests and bird species that flock in widely varying numbers further complicate the long-term picture of our dynamic avifauna.

This CBC season, there were ten species recorded at 30-year high totals and 8 species reported at 30-year low totals. Those species at new 30-year highs were (with previous high count followed by new high count in parentheses): Pink-footed Goose (1=>4), Ring-necked Duck (2,095=>2,142), Barrow's Goldeneye (3=>3), Clapper Rail (12=>13), Great Blue Heron (442=>457), Snowy Egret (2=>3), Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (340=>363), Ruby-crowned Kinglet (72=>82), Western Tanager (2=>2), Dickcissel (2=>3).

A total of eight species were reported at 30-year low totals (the previous low count followed by new low count in parentheses): Mute Swan (727=>685), Mallard (9,462=>8,265), Bonaparte's Gull (2=>0, missed first time in 30 years), Sharp-shinned Hawk (62=>58), Long-eared Owl (2=>2), Black-capped Chickadee (5,733=>5,506), American Tree Sparrow (602=>561), Northern Cardinal (3,008=>2,935). The potential factors contributing to these trends of increasing or decreasing early winter populations in Connecticut are addressed below.

This review article annually considers the early winter/CBC seasonal occurrence of both common and rare bird species. Let's start with some of the more eye-popping discoveries made during our Christmas Bird Count, which National Audubon Society designates as occurring from December 14 through January 5. Three new species were added to our 30-year total: Western Kingbird at Old Lyme-Saybrook (new to count day, was count week at New London in 2006-2007); European Tree Sparrow at Old Lyme-Saybrook, and; Black-throated Blue Warbler at Edwin Way Teale, Trail Wood (new to count day, was count week at New London last year).

Western Kingbird is "a conspicuous bird of open habitats that breeds in the western United States and winters in southern Mexico and Central America" (BOW). One or two individuals occur in Connecticut in most years during fall migration, from late August through September, October, and November, with the occasional record into December. Western Kingbird first was sighted on a Connecticut CBC as a count week bird at Greenwich-Stamford in 1960-61. Its second occurrence took place more than four decades later, at Napatree during count week in 2006-07.

A first-year female Black-throated Blue Warbler was reported feeding on suet balls

and meals worms at a private residence in Moosup Village, Plainfield, Connecticut (the Edwin Way Teale, Trail Wood CBC) from December 30, 2021 through at least January 16, 2022. The home owner was diligent in issuing regular updates on this late lingering wood-warbler. There are scattered reports of Black-throated Blue Warbler throughout coastal and inland New England in December and January.

Those species considered here as rare for a Connecticut Christmas Bird Count have been recorded six or fewer times in the last three decades. Four Pink-footed Geese traveling together at Hartford mark the fourth time that this species has been recorded on our statewide CBC. This increasingly common species in Connecticut was added to the all-time CBC list when seen count week at Greenwich-Stamford in 2016-17 and at Napatree in 2017-18. In 2019-20, it was added to the count day list when one was sighted at Norwich. Birds of the World notes that "Greenland and Icelandic populations of Pink-footed Goose winter mostly in Scotland and Northwestern & Eastern England," and that this handsome goose "has also wandered to Northeastern North America, between autumn and spring, with almost all records since [the] 1990s, mainly from Quebec south to New York, rarely to Delaware and Pennsylvania, with one record from Nebraska." I was one of three New Haven area birders who experienced the staging of tens of thousands of Pink-footed Geese in Scotland in late April this year during the spring migration.

Green Heron was reported on a Connecticut CBC with some regularity from the late 1960s through the mid-1980s, but was last counted at Old Lyme-Saybrook in 2009-10 and before that at New Haven in 2006-07. In our most recent CTCBC, New Haven reported a count week Green Heron. A lingering Yellow Warbler made its first appearance on the Connecticut CBC in 2011-12 when one was sighted at Old Lyme-Saybrook. This year, the second statewide CTCBC record of Yellow Warbler was made count week at Napatree. eBird shows scattered reports of very late lingering Yellow Warblers into December, mostly along the New England coastline.

Birds of the World states that "little research has focused on the Western Tanager, and much of what is known of the species' breeding biology, behavior, and migration is anecdotal." Also, "small numbers are recorded annually outside of regular range, particularly in eastern North America and primarily during fall-early winter." Western Tanagers winter in Mexico and Central America. There are numerous eBird reports of Western Tanager in New England in December, the majority along the coast from Connecticut (Long Island Sound) to southern Maine.

Other noteworthy species reported this year were Sora at Old Lyme-Saybrook, Long-billed Dowitcher and Yellow-crowned Night-Heron at Stratford-Milford, and Blue-headed Vireo at Old Lyme-Saybrook.

Fifteen count day and five count week species were unique to just one of our 21

Christmas Bird Counts. They were: Pink-footed Goose (4 at Hartford); Canvasback (3 at Stratford-Milford), Redhead (3 at Greenwich-Stamford); Sora (Old Lyme-Saybrook); Long-billed Dowitcher (Stratford-Milford); Black-headed Gull (count week at Napatree); Glaucous Gull (2 at Storrs); American Bittern (2 at New London); Snowy Egret (3 at Stratford-Milford); Green Heron (count week at New Haven); Yellow-crowned Night-Heron (Stratford-Milford); Golden Eagle (count week at Westport); Western Kingbird (Old Lyme-Saybrook); Blue-headed Vireo (Old Lyme-Saybrook); European Tree Sparrow (Old Lyme-Saybrook); Lapland Longspur (count week at Stratford-Milford); Nashville Warbler (3 in New Haven); Common Yellowthroat (Napatree); Yellow Warbler (count week at Napatree); Black-throated Blue Warbler (Edwin Way Teale, Trail Wood).

An additional fourteen species and one sub-species were reported in just two count circles: Eurasian Wigeon; Harlequin Duck; Red-necked Grebe; Razorbill; Laughing Gull; Lesser Black-backed Gull; Snowy Owl; Long-eared Owl; Northern Shrike; House Wren; Common Redpoll; Savannah 'Ipswich' Sparrow; Lincoln's Sparrow; Western Tanager; Dickcissel. Taken together, these 35 hard to find species account for 20 per cent of the total species count for 2021-2022. In contrast, 35 species were found on each of the twenty-one CT CBCs, again accounting for 20 per cent of the total species recorded. The remaining 60 per cent of species reported constitute the majority, most of them occurring fairly predictably on each of our annual counts.

Notable misses this year were Ruffed Grouse, Bonaparte's Gull, Northern Goshawk, and Rough-legged Hawk. Ruffed Grouse has retreated northward from much of its breeding and wintering range over the past 35 years. Consider the 271 grouse reported in 1980-81 and 267 reported in 1981-82. Bonaparte's Gull has been in serious decline during early winter for at least 20 years.

Northern Goshawk occurred in early winter Connecticut in high numbers during the 1980s to mid-1990s (17 individuals in 1981-82, 14 in 1983-84, 18 in 1985-86, 14 in 1995-96). The Autumn 2022 issue of Living Bird carries an article by Scott Weidensaul entitled "When Goshawks Ruled the Autumn Skies." The introduction to this highly informative article, which offers some hope for the return of the Goshawk, asks, "Are the massive migration flights of Northern Goshawks a thing of the past? Some scientists think climate change and habitat loss have made these big accipiters permanently scarce. But others see a complex pattern of cycles within cycles, and the possibility that the mega flights will return."

Finally among the notable misses this year, Rough-legged Hawk is an irruptive northern boreal species that breeds in the arctic tundra and taiga and winters in southern Canada and northern United States. Birds of the World states, "Annual variation in numbers attributed to species' reliance on cyclic lemming and vole populations for prey."

Checklist Summary of Bird Species Observed

Waterfowl

Six species of geese were recorded this year, including the four Pink-footed Geese at Hartford. Snow Goose numbers tend to be highly variable from year to year. Greater White-fronted Goose was reported at Hartford, Litchfield Hills, and Greenwich-Stamford, where compiler Cynthia Ehrlinger wrote, "A Greater White-fronted Goose that has been an annual visitor for many years in a pond in New York, showed up just in time for the Greenwich-Stamford count." Cackling Goose was present at Hartford (CW), Lakeville-Sharon, and Greenwich-Stamford. Jay Kaplan noted that "Canada Goose reached a ten year high count, perhaps not surprising without snow covering the fields, lawns and golf courses." Mute Swan numbers continue at far lower levels along the coast while early wintering birds on inland ponds, lakes and rivers appear to be stable. The dabbling duck species American Wigeon, Mallard, and American Black Duck were in shorter supply, but Northern Pintails and Green-winged Teals were found in comparative abundance. Diving ducks varied in their occurrence, the three Canvasback in stark contrast with a total of 429 reported in 1992-93. Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead, and Hooded Merganser all maintaining robust early winter populations. Jay Kaplan wrote, "A female Greater Scaup in Hartford's "sewage lagoon" pond near Riverside Park mark this species' first appearance since 2012."

Gallinaceous Birds to Rails

Northern Bobwhite has not been reported since 2010-11. Rock Pigeon (feral) has been counted (undercounted?) in significantly lower numbers for the past 15 years, mirrored to an extent by a decline in Mourning Dove. Clapper and Virginia rails, those "rare and elusive marsh birds", were located in highest or second highest numbers along the coast. Two Virginia Rails were nice additions to the Norwich CBC. American Coots show some variability in numbers from year to year, but the last five years have seen only double digit numbers of these small rallids.

Shorebirds to Alcids

Shorebirds offered the usual mixed picture, with Black-bellied Plover in reduced numbers for 19 years, Ruddy Turnstones at their highest total in 13 years, Red Knot absent from our coastal count for 14 years, Greater Yellowlegs on the high side, and no rare occurrences by Lesser Yellowlegs or Willet. Cynthia Ehrlinger noted, "Among other misses [at Greenwich-Stamford] were some of the shorebirds, seabirds, and gulls we sometimes see such as Black-bellied Plover, Dunlin, Sanderling, Razorbill, Bonaparte's Gull, as well as other less common gulls."

Among the alcids, Razorbill has been reported for each of the past 20 years, with varying numbers depending largely on Napatree results, and only six individuals reported this year, one at Napatree and five at New London, all these sighted from the New London to Orient Point ferry. No other alcids made the news this year.

Gulls to Cormorants

Speaking of gulls, to get an idea of how Bonaparte's Gull has fallen off the radar, this year was the first since at least 1950 (!) that no Bonaparte's Gulls were found on the Connecticut statewide count. Described as "a familiar and often abundant migrant and winter visitor over much of the continent" (BOW), its numbers have varied from year to year but often have been counted in the many hundreds along the coast, with a high of 2,231 in 1992-93. What's going on here? Napatree had one count week Black-headed Gull. As noted previously, the three most common gulls were all in reduced numbers. From Jay Kaplan, compiler at Hartford: "The big shocker was the absence of Great Black-backed Gull, which has been declining since the closure of the landfills about ten years ago. The last time this gull failed to appear on our Count was in 1963, 58 years ago! Only Ring-billed Gulls with their penchant for sitting on parking lots seem to be holding steady with the highest total since 2016."

Red-throated and Common loons and Northern Gannets figured prominently this year. Four Common Loons at Litchfield Hills were notable. Double-crested Cormorants continue to stay into winter in higher numbers than several decades past, again outnumbering Great Cormorants along the Long Island coast.

Hérons

Open water and mild weather conditions were beneficial to members of Family Ardeidae, with two American Bitterns at New London, a record high number of Great Blue Herons and strong numbers of lingering Great Egrets, three Snowy Egrets at Stratford-Milford, the count week Green Heron at New Haven (Branford), 10 Black-crowned Night-Herons, and 1 Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, predictably at Stratford-Milford.

New World Vultures to Owls

Both vulture species enjoyed high early winter numbers. The diurnal raptors included a count week Golden Eagle at Westport, good numbers of Cooper's Hawks, 265 Bald Eagles statewide (second highest total), increasing numbers of Red-shouldered Hawks, but record low numbers of Sharp-shinned Hawks (57, compared with consistently high counts in the hundreds during the period 1992-2007. Of vultures and eagles, Sharon Dellinger wrote, "Black Vulture numbers reached an all-time high of 27, as did Bald Eagle, with 25 individuals seen. It is worth noting that it wasn't until 2011 that we reached double digit numbers of Bald Eagle."

Eastern Screech-Owl has become harder to find over recent years, and we counted half so many Great Horned Owls this year as last. Jay Kaplan wrote, "In the case of the owls, wind did not make early morning owling easy. In fact, only a single Great Horned Owl was tallied." A similar halving in numbers applies for Barred Owl, and only two Long-eared Owls were sleuthed out. Counts of Northern Saw-whet Owl were good. Three Snowy Owls were reported at Stratford-Milford in the Long Beach

area, and one count week at Fort Trumbull State Park on the New London CBC.

Kingfishers and Woodpeckers to Falcons and Corvids

Open waters, and their usual chattiness, facilitated the spotting of Belted Kingfishers. All six regularly reported woodpeckers were well represented this year. As noted above, American Kestrel has been dropping from the statewide count for at least 22 years, with increasing numbers of Merlins over half that time period. Peregrine Falcon has shown dramatic recovery from its extirpation east of the Mississippi River 60 or more years ago, with 32 peregrines counted this year, including four at Hartford. Such is not the case with Monk Parakeets, with 42 individuals from three coastal counts (Greenwich-Stamford, Stratford-Milford, and New Haven) representing the second lowest total in 30 years. Recall the high count of 1,204 in 2004-05? Must be some interesting management plan for this native South American parrot, popular in the pet trade and "introduced" to North America more than 50 years ago.

A total exceeding 18,000 American Crows this year suggests some significant crow roosts, yet it was the second lowest total for this cawing corvid in 30 years. Fish Crows continue to go up in numbers over the past decade in all three broad geographic regions of the state. Common Raven exceeded 300 individuals statewide for the second time. Twenty-nine years ago, we counted 13 ravens, with 10 on northern counts and three mid-state.

Chickadees and Titmice to Wrens

Compiler Ken Elkins expressed concern about the new low number of Black-capped Chickadees on the Woodbury-Roxbury CBC. "Our effort might have been low, but not as bad as some other stormy days (on previous Counts). Perhaps they were still dispersed in the larger tracts of habitat that people did not walk - and we did have a few less feeder watchers - but I'd be interested in hearing if others in the Northeast also saw low Black-capped Chickadee numbers."

Two other compilers weighed in on this shortage of chickadees. Sharon Dellinger noted for the mid-state Salmon River count that "numbers of Black-capped Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, and American Crow have been trending down." On the Hartford count to the north, Jay Kaplan wrote, "A number of songbirds came in at ten year lows, and one must wonder how great a role the wind played when it came to Black-capped Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, Northern Mockingbird, Cedar Waxwing (only a single bird from Glastonbury), and Northern Cardinal. Hopefully, this is a one year blip, and does not continue into the future?"

No lingering swallows were sighted this year. Ruby-crowned Kinglets achieved a 30-year high total. The irruptive Red-breasted Nuthatch of more northern distribution (*S. canadensis*, as opposed to *S. carolinensis*) was at 21 per cent of last year's total. House Wrens, Winter Wrens, and Carolina wrens all enjoyed the mild early winter conditions in high numbers.

Catbirds to Winter Finches

Nearly three times as many Gray Catbirds were located this year as last, and double the number of Brown Thrashers as were seen a year ago. On the other hand, Northern Mockingbird continues a 15-year slide downward in numbers. European Starlings have declined significantly from pre-1998 but have maintained fairly steady numbers for the past 17 years or so. More than 300 Hermit Thrushes statewide accounted for the second highest total in three decades of data. American Robins had an apparent ready supply of fruits and other foods and exceeded last year's count of 4,500 by surpassing 20,000 individuals this year. Biggest robin counts were at Barkhamsted, Litchfield Hills, Lakeville-Sharon, and Pawling/Hidden Valley.

European Tree Sparrow is the new kid on the block, a population of one. House Finches continue what is best described as a slow recovery from the die-off of 27 years ago due to mycoplasmosis, a highly transmissible bacterial infection that wiped out millions of House Finches across the country. The count was characterized by the absence of winter finches, with a mere 21 Pine Siskins counted, mostly in the Quinnipiac Valley count circle. American Goldfinches exceeded last year's total by more than 1,000 individuals, the biggest boost coming from Barkhamsted, Bristol, and Pawling/Hidden Valley counts.

Longspurs and Buntings to Sparrows

Stratford-Milford recorded the only Lapland Longspur of the count, a count week observation, and a majority of the Snow Buntings along the coast.

Jay Kaplan writes, "There is no doubt that the Glastonbury Meadows (restricted access) is the place to be if you are a sparrow. The Meadows produced ten sparrow species including Fox Sparrows, seen for the first time since 2017, a record high five Vesper Sparrows, and a Lincoln's Sparrow for the second time in three years! In addition, of 149 American Tree Sparrows seen on the Count, 128 came from the Meadows, although this number is far below record years when the farm fields were left unplowed. The Meadows also produced the Count's only White-crowned and Swamp sparrows." The continued decline of Field Sparrows and American Tree Sparrows has been noted above. The 561 American Tree Sparrows counted is the lowest total in 30 years. High count during this period was 6,193 individuals in 1998-99. Fox Sparrows were in good supply for the second year in a row, and seven Vesper Sparrows (five at Hartford) were emberizid highlights of the sparrow count. The only Savannah 'Ipswich' Sparrows were at Napatree and count week at Stratford-Milford. Hartford and Old Lyme-Saybrook boasted single Lincoln's Sparrows. Eastern Towhee was yet another semi-hardy species that fared well this early winter.

Chats to Icterids

Six Yellow-breasted Chats at New London were highly noteworthy. Sixty-six Eastern Meadowlarks, including 26 each at Norwich and New London, accounted for the highest total of this grassland and open country species in 22 years. Baltimore Orioles



Brown Creepers are always a welcome find on a Christmas Bird Count. While not rare, they tend to be solitary, widely dispersed and easy to overlook. (Bruce Finnan)

were found at Napatree, New Haven, and count week at New London. Flocking birds continue to fit a highly variable pattern of occurrence in early winter, with fewer Red-winged Blackbirds and Brown-headed Cowbirds than a year ago, nearly twice as many Common Grackles this year, and a big drop in numbers of Rusty Blackbirds (26) from the 166 recorded in 2020-21. This high degree of variability will work for the abundant flocking species but not for Rusty Blackbirds, which have experienced up to a 95% decline in numbers since 1970.

Wood-warblers to Cardinals

The wood-warblers were well represented again this year, with seven Orange-crowned Warblers, including two mid-state at Norwich and Oxford, three Nashville Warblers at New Haven, a single Common Yellowthroat at Napatree, the count week Yellow Warbler at Napatree, Black-throated Blue Warbler that joined the all-time count day list with the discovery of one at Edwin Way Teale, Trail Wood, good numbers of Palm and Pine warblers, and just over 1,000 Yellow-rumped Warblers statewide, the best total for this warbler species in 23 years. Shai Mitra and Glenn Williams wrote, "With a Palm Warbler at a private vineyard in Stonington, a Common Yellowthroat on West Avenue in Quonochontaug (Quonny), plenty of Yellow-rumped Warblers, and an amazing count week Yellow Warbler photographed at Misquamicut State Beach on the 21st, we recorded five warbler species. The honorary warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat, was missed on count day for only the third time, but one was found for count week at the productive Avondale Farms Preserve."

Finally, the two Western Tanagers at Napatree were great finds. Co-compilers Shai Mitra and Glenn Williams described their discovery as follows, “A Western Tanager was found at the Avondale Farm Preserve. While others were trying to refine it, a second one appeared - as well as a Pine Warbler.” Serendipitous! In contrast, Northern Cardinals were at their lowest total in thirty years, but three Dickcissels made for good finds, one at Greenwich-Stamford, and two at New Haven.

Acknowledgements:

We close this narrative with the comments expressed by Hartford compiler Jay Kaplan to his Christmas Bird Count participants.

“I would like to thank the area captains, without whose participation this Count would not be successful. Thank you, also, to all those field observers, owners, and feeder watchers for giving up some time during their Holiday Season to go out and tally birds. The Christmas Bird Count, begun in 1900, is the longest running of all ‘citizen science’ field studies. Over time, the Count offers valuable information about trends in bird populations during the early winter. I hope to hear from you all again next year (and on the Summer Bird Count, the second weekend in June).” Thanks, Jay!

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2021 Fall Hawk Watch

By Steve Mayo



Although Lighthouse Point Park is not noted for Broad-winged Hawk migration, one big day bolstered the 2021 seasonal total. This immature passed there on the late date of Nov. 6. (Abby Sesselberg)

More than 13 species of diurnal raptors are regularly counted at Connecticut Hawk Watch sites. Early migrants include American Kestrel, Osprey and Broad-winged Hawk. Sharp-shinned Hawk numbers build in late September, and October is known for flights of Cooper’s Hawk, Peregrine Falcon and Merlin. Northern Harriers and Bald Eagles move throughout the season, and November is associated with flights of Turkey Vulture, Black Vulture, Golden Eagle, Red-shouldered Hawk and Red-tailed Hawk. Seasonal rarities include Mississippi Kite, Northern Goshawk,

Swainson's Hawk, Rough-legged Hawk and Short-eared Owl. Weather is one of the most significant factors in determining the number of hawks and presence of rarities. The 2021 season had few cold fronts during key migration timeframes, and this may have kept overall numbers down for several hawk species.

Inland Hawk Watch Sites

Cold fronts provide ideal conditions for Broad-winged Hawks leaving the eastern US and southeastern Canada. The first front on 9/10 was uneventful, but light northerly winds on 9/13 brought 942 Broad-winged Hawks over Chestnut Hill (Litchfield). Winds shifted back to the south in most of Connecticut the next day. Still, Chestnut Hill added another 113, and Botsford Hill (Bridgewater) tallied 172. On 9/18 Chestnut Hill counted 706 on steady and light northerly winds, and Booth Hill (West Hartland) had 130. Light northerly winds continued the following day with Chestnut Hill and Botsford Hill tallying 416 and 197 Broad-winged Hawks, respectively. These fronts also helped Chestnut Hill attain a record 32 Cooper's Hawks for the season. Coverage was down at Johnnycake Mountain (Burlington), Middle School (Torrington) and Poquonnock (Windsor). Significant Broad-winged Hawk flights were missed or simply didn't occur, and these sites failed to approach 100 hawks on any of their daily totals. Maltby Lakes (Orange) resumed coverage after a 17-year hiatus with 10.5 coverage hours.

Quaker Ridge

The same inland northerly winds brought 234 Broad-winged Hawks on 9/18 and 634 on 9/19. Although an unprecedented migration of Broad-winged Hawks occurred along coastal Connecticut on 9/30, Quaker Ridge had 19 on that day. The seasonal total of 1,562 was the lowest since 2003. Osprey also move in September, and the site had a daily high total of 49 on 9/11. Daily high counts of 119 Sharp-shinned Hawks (9/29) and 48 Cooper's Hawks (10/6) contributed to normal seasonal totals for both Accipiters. Northern Goshawk was missed in 2021 and 2019. These are the only seasons in recent years when this declining Accipiter went unreported. But another Quaker Ridge specialty, Golden Eagle, was in good supply. Golden Eagles found every day from 11/3-11/8 contributed to a season total of 13. Also, a good Turkey Vulture flight and a season-record 78 Black Vultures were reported from the site. Buteo numbers can fluctuate among the years. The 635 Red-shouldered Hawks were within the average and standard deviation of the previous 10 years (574 +/- 267). The total of Red-tailed Hawks, however (124), was well below the previous ten years average (277 +/- 121). Totals for other raptors were comparable to 5- and 10-year averages.

Lighthouse Point Park

An initial push of 78 Osprey on 9/3 was followed by a peak of 216 over 9/18 and 9/19. On 9/19, a first-ever Lighthouse Park Mississippi Kite came up from the beach and over the watch site, staying for several minutes. Shortly after it disappeared



Ospreys are a regular feature of coastal migration, but this accompanying immature Swainson's Hawk on Sept. 19 was a highlight of the Lighthouse Point season. (Abby Sesselberg)

to the northwest, a juvenile Swainson's Hawk appeared and lingered overhead. On 9/29, moderate northwest winds brought 691 hawks including 272 American Kestrels. Another 139 Kestrels followed the next day. But 9/30 will be remembered as the day of an unusual and near-record Broad-winged Hawk flight. Throughout the day, multiple kettles of 40 to 400 formed near Long Island Sound just to the east of the watch site. A total of 4,996 were counted as they peeled off to the northwest. Kettles were also reported along the Connecticut coast from Madison to Greenwich. This last day of the month also brought the daily high count of 177 Sharp-shinned Hawks. Low daily and season totals (1,250) comprised a tenth of some of the season totals in the 1980s. Cooper's Hawks also peaked on 9/30 (127), and the final total

of 1,007 was well within seasonal norms.

Oct. 1 brought a few lingering Broad-winged Hawks (256). Overall, a lack of cold fronts resulted in near-record lows for the month's raptor totals. Few frontal passage events continued through November. The low November total for all raptors (792), did include 6 Golden Eagles as well as a second Swainson's Hawk on 11/5 and a Short-eared Owl. This honorary member of the diurnal raptors passed over the site on 11/15. The site's season total of 11,916 raptors was bolstered by that remarkable 9/30 Broad-winged flight.

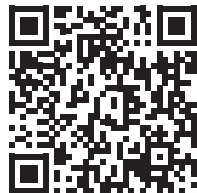
Site hawk watch summaries are available on the COA website at www.ctbirding.org. Additional data including daily, monthly, and seasonal summary reports may be obtained from the Hawk Migration of North America website, hawkcount.org. 2021 migration summaries of Connecticut and other Northeastern United States sites can also be obtained from Northeast Hawkwatch, www.nbatally.com/nehw/.

Watchers

Mark Aronson, John Askildsen, Renee Baade, David Babington, Bill Banks, Dan Barvir, Steve Beal, Raymond Belding, Brian Bennett, Gail Benson, Nick Bonomo, Polly Brody, Christina Buccieri, Sylvio Buccieri, Tom Burke, Sam Buttrick, Dana Campbell, Kyle Carlsen, Richard Chmielecki, Jim Cortina, Rita Dempsey, Ayreslea Denny, Deidre Denny, Paul Desjardins, Amy Dworetzky, David D'Ostilio, Cynthia Ehlinger, Adam Fasciolo, Jo Fasciolo, Chris Finlay, James Fischer, Bobbie Fisher, Ted Gilman, Nancy Glynn, Carole Griffiths, Olivia Giuntini, Frank Guida, Ed Haesche, Greg Hanisek, Dennis Hannon, Carrol Harrington, Richard Harrington, Roy Harvey, Julian Hough, Brenda Inskeep, Lynn James, Keith Johnson, Lynn Jones, Steve Kovari, Meriam Levin, Maryanne Loomis, Joan Luperchino, Ryan MacLean, Frank Mantlik, Mike Marsano, John Marshall, Jeff Martin, Stefan Martin, Steve Mayo, Kevin McGrath, Ken Merrifield, Ken Mirman, Judy Moore, Tom Murray, Richard Nieman, John Oshlick, Andrea Pelletier, Matt Popp, Von Potter, Tim Reed, Brendan Reilly, Paul Roberts, Sol Satin, Will Schenck, Chris Segal, Abby Sesselberg, Jim Sherwonit, Nadir Shir-Zelniker, Scott Slora, Howie Sternberg, Bill Tischler, Tony Tortora, Eric Vitols, Jean Waful, Christine Weintraub, Joseph Wojtanowski, Steve Wolter

You can find the 2021 data table showing all CBC and Hawk Migration species and numbers at the website of the COA:

<https://www.ctbirding.org/birds-birding/ct-bird-count-data/>



Connecticut Field Notes

By Greg Hanisek and Frank Mantlik



This Black-necked Stilt, shown here on May 23, was present May 21-27 in East Lyme. (Bruce Finnan)

Spring Season, March 1 to May 31, 2022

First records of regularly occurring species included Blue-winged Teal – March 7 in Stratford (JJ); Yellow-billed Cuckoo – April 13 in Litchfield (PD); Black-billed Cuckoo – May 14 at multiple locations; Eastern Whip-poor-will – April 14 in Stonington (GW); Chimney Swift – April 17 in Easton (JN); Ruby-throated Hummingbird – April 17 in Old Saybrook (JKe); American Oystercatcher – March 5 in Greenwich (GM, CEh); Piping Plover – March 3 in Waterford (LB); Semipalmated Plover – March 13 in Old Lyme (BM); Least Sandpiper – April 17 in Madison (MK); Spotted Sandpiper – April 14 in Vernon (PG); Willet – April 9 in Stonington (GW); Least Tern – May 4 in Milford (FM); Snowy Egret – March 19 in Old Lyme (PT); Green Heron – April 11 in Milford (TM); Yellow-crowned Night-Heron – March 20 in Stratford (FM); Osprey – March 4 in East Haddam (LB); Broad-winged Hawk – April 2 in Chaplin (IM); Great Crested Flycatcher – April 21 in Putnam (JBr); Eastern Kingbird – April 23 in Hamden (VQ); Alder Flycatcher –

May 14 in Barkhamsted (JHe); Willow Flycatcher – May 8 in Hamden (IR); Least Flycatcher – April 24 in Woodbury (DJ); White-eyed Vireo – April 20 in Milford (JJ); Yellow-throated Vireo – April 24 in Southbury (DK); Blue-headed Vireo – April 12 in Hartford (JMo); Warbling Vireo – April 24 in Fairfield (SV) and Norwalk (JBo); Red-eyed Vireo – April 26 at multiple locations; Tree Swallow – March 5 in Sterling (AP); Northern Rough-winged Swallow – March 19 in Norwalk (JW); Bank Swallow - April 5 in Suffield (LSn); Purple Martin – April in Plainfield (DW); Barn Swallow – March 21 in Stonington (CG).

Also Blue-gray Gnatcatcher – April 1 in New London (JA); Veery – April 23 in Madison (ZC); Gray-cheeked Thrush – May 11 in Windsor (PD); Wood Thrush – April 11 in Groton (DMc); Orchard Oriole – April 22 in New Haven (AM); Bobolink – May 3 in multiple locations; Ovenbird – April 22 in Easton (JN, LH); Worm-eating Warbler – May 1 at multiple locations; Louisiana Waterthrush – March 31 in Fairfield (SMr); Northern Waterthrush – April 14 in Woodbury (CW) and Chaplin (PR); Black-and-white Warbler – April 9 in New Haven (RF); Nashville Warbler – April 28 in Fairfield (CH); Hooded Warbler – April 18 in Waterford (JA); American Redstart – April 22 in Fairfield (KW); Cape May Warbler – May 5 in New Canaan (FG); Northern Parula – April 17 in Cheshire (VQ); Magnolia Warbler – May 1 at multiple locations; Blackburnian Warbler – April 24 in Norwalk (JBo); Yellow Warbler – April 14 in Milford (EB, LO); Chestnut-sided Warbler – April 27 in Fairfield (LC); Blackpoll Warbler – May 1 in Guilford (EY); Black-throated Blue Warbler – April 25 in Greenwich (JMu); Prairie Warbler – April 24 at multiple locations; Black-throated Green Warbler – April 20 in Glastonbury (AP); Rose-breasted Grosbeak – April 16 in New Hartford (PM); Indigo Bunting – April 10 in Old Saybrook (JP).

A noteworthy flock of seven Tundra Swans was at Bantam Lake in Litchfield on March 20 (MD). Three Blue-winged Teal were late May 30 at Station 43 in South Windsor (LR). An unusually high tally of 24 Northern Shovelers was at Shell Beach in Guilford on March 20 (JO). A Green-winged (Eurasian) Teal was at Station 43, South Windsor, on March 18 (PD). A late flock of five Ruddy Ducks was at Broad Brook Reservoir in Cheshire on May 14 (MA, SB). Two migrant Eastern Whip-poor-wills were singing in a Fairfield neighborhood on May 1 (CP). The now-regular multiple reports of Sandhill Crane included a high count of 14 on March 21 in Tolland (NR).

The season's best shorebird was a **Black-necked Stilt** found on May 21 at Four Mile River in East Lyme; it then moved to nearby Rocky Neck State Park through May 27 (GW, BM et al.). An Upland Sandpiper, a rare but regular migrant, was at Windham Airport in North Windham on April 12 (PR). A stunning flock of 76 Whimbrels was at Short Beach in Stratford on May 24 (FM). The first report of Pectoral Sandpiper was on a typical date of March 26 at Seaside Park in Bridgeport, but atypical for a



Connecticut's second Short-billed Gull was found on March 20 at Long Beach in Stratford. (Frank Mantlik)

first arrival was the count of nine (JN). A Solitary Sandpiper was early on April 1 at Portland Fairgrounds (RS et al.). A Willet was unexpected inland on May 13 on the Farmington River in Canton (JKa, JMe). A March 5 trip on the New London-Orient, NY, ferry produced a good count of 19 Razorbills (MM). Although it nests in coastal New England, the **Black Guillemot** found on April 19 at Stonington Point remains a significant rarity in the state (PR).

No longer regular in the state, a **Little Gull** was at Short Beach in Stratford on May 27, a late date (FM). Long Beach in Stratford enhanced its status as a premier gull hot spot with two major rarities over a three-day span. The state's third **Slaty-backed Gull** was seen one-day only on March 18 (JN et al.), and its second **Short-billed Gull** was found on March 20 (AK et al.). It was seen there briefly on April 1 (SMi, LSc). Both rare gulls were seen and photographed by many. Away from coastal locations, two Caspian Terns were at Fisher Meadow in Avon on May 27 (JMe). The only inland Black Tern was found on May 31 at Lake Chamberlain in Bethany (ED). In an event of historic proportions, a major influx of **Arctic Terns** on May 13 resulted in reports of a total of 66 from six lakes and ponds, including an astonishing 27 at Bantam Lake in Litchfield (DMa, DT et mult. al.). A detailed account of the full event by Jeremy Nance appears in the July 2022 issue of *The Connecticut Warbler* (Vol. 42 No. 3). A major flight of Northern Gannets on April 2 included counts of 131 at Hammonasset Beach State Park in Madison, hereafter HBSP (AS, SMa) and 88 at the Lordship seawall in Stratford (FM).

A Snowy Egret was a good inland find on April 26 in Harwinton (CEc). A Little Blue Heron was inland on May 2 at Bolton Pond (JFe). The first of a handful of single Tricolored Heron reports was April 8 at Barn Island in Stonington (MO). A Cattle Egret found on April 4 in Wallingford was seen through April 10 (NB et al.); another was at Shell Beach in Guilford on May 18 (DI). The first report of a **White-faced Ibis**, now an annual event, was on April 7 in Clinton (MK et al.). The season's only **Swallow-tailed Kites** soared over Pomfret on April 23 (RC) and over Shelton on May 9 (FG). **Mississippi Kites** returned to their breeding site in northeast Fairfield County on May 16 (JHo), and one seen May 18 at Larsen Sanctuary in Fairfield was followed by multiple sightings of two birds without proof of breeding (SMr et al.). Singles were reported from Yale University Golf Course in New Haven on May 20 (SMc), in Southbury on May 29 (JC) and at Steep Rock Reserve in Washington on May 30 (AF, JFa). The season's only Rough-legged Hawk was at Sand Bank Road in Watertown on March 11 (NM, JLe).

The first of about 20 Olive-sided Flycatcher reports was from May 13 at Mitchell Pond in Salem (DB). The state's fourth **Say's Phoebe**, found on March 19 at Sikorsky Memorial Airport in Stratford, was seen by many though April 2 (TM, m.ob.). A first state record if accepted, a **Violet-green Swallow** was reported on May 8 on the Farmington River in Avon (DL). A Marsh Wren was very early March 23 at Station 43 in South Windsor (PD). A **Eurasian Tree Sparrow** returned to a private yard in Old Saybrook May 21-25 (fide PR). A Lapland Longspur was late on April 17 at Seaside Park in Bridgeport (JN). A **Lark Sparrow** was a good spring find on May 22 at HBSP (L&SP). Single Grasshopper Sparrows, scarce away from breeding sites in migration, were at Long Beach in Stratford on May 4 (DR) and at Bauer Farm in Madison on May 9 (CI). After winter's absence, 26 Boat-tailed Grackles were at Pleasure Beach in Bridgeport on March 2 (EB, TM).

The season's only Golden-winged Warbler was at Sandy Hook on May 13 (DK). Lawrence's Warblers were at Hoyden's Hill in Fairfield on May 10 (KW) and at Bauer Farm in Madison on May 12 (CI). A remarkable four **Prothonotary Warblers** for the season were singles in Monroe on April 25 (ES), in Lyme on May 2 (RB), at Birdcraft Sanctuary in Fairfield on May 14 (EK) and at Perry's Mill Pond in Fairfield on May 15 (JJ). Up to two Orange-crowned Warblers were at Hockanum Linear Park in Vernon from March 5-April 8 (JFe, m.ob.). Kentucky Warblers were at East Rock Park in New Haven on May 9 (PS et al.) and in Westport on May 25 (TG). An over-wintering Black-throated Blue Warbler was last seen on March 14 at a feeder in New Preston (OS). An extraordinary eight **Yellow-throated Warblers** consisted of singles on April 17 at Mondo Ponds in Milford (NO), on April 20 at the Norwalk Esplanade (KW), on April 22 at East Rock Park in New Haven (JMi), on April 24 in Vernon (CEI), on April 30 in Prospect (JT), on May 1 at East Rock Park in New Haven (CH), on May 5 at Larsen Sanctuary in Fairfield (AK et al.) and on May 14



This Yellow-throated Warbler was at Larsen Sanctuary in Fairfield on May 5. (Linda Olsen)

at Bent of the River Sanctuary in Southbury (GS).

Summer Tanagers included an immature male on April 29 in Old Saybrook (CS), a male on May 6-10 at Birdcraft Sanctuary in Fairfield (EG et al.), a female on May 14 at Knox Family Farm Preserve in Stonington (DE) and a male on May 21 at Westmoor in West Hartford (CF). **Blue Grosbeaks** included a female at Trout Brook Valley in Easton on May 20 (JN, LH), an immature male on May 22-24 at Collis P. Huntington State Park in Redding (AK, CM et al.), a female at Smith-Richardson Sanctuary in Westport on May 23 (AK et al.), and an adult male at Grace Farms in New Canaan on May 28 (FM).

Observers – Mark Aronson, Joe Attwater, Ed Bailey, Matt Bell, David Bingham, Lucas Bobay, Jay Boll (JBo), Nick Bonomo, Joanne Bourque (JBr), Rob Braunfeld, Steve Broker, Jeff Campbell, Lindsey Cohen, Zachary Coeman, Robert Craig, Emily

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A fourth for Connecticut, this Say's Phoebe, shown here on March 21 in Stratford, was present from March 19 to April 2 at Sikorsky Memorial Airport. (Bruce Finnan)

Photo Challenge

By Severin Uebbing



Mid-June at Sandy Point in West Haven, I am lying on my belly on wet seaweed trying to get close-range photos of White-rumped Sandpipers, when this bird walks by. 'Oh, look, a Western!' shoots through my brain, soon followed by, 'Or is it?' It sure is a *Calidris* of sorts, but not a Western Sandpiper, although it does resemble that species. The long, drooping bill, the amount of spotting along the sides of the belly, there is even some red in the scapulars. But I haven't told you the bad news yet. This bird is quite big, about twice the size of the Semipalmated Sandpipers around it. If size was helpful in separating Western from Semi, the books would have told us about that. So size alone excludes Least, Semipalmated, Western, and even Baird's Sandpipers (which are larger than the former species but still not nearly as big as this bird).

Considering species of its size, White-rumped Sandpiper is excluded by the lack of orange on the base of the bill, the disarrayed spotting on the breast, and the lack of a white "rump" or a white horizontal band on the uppertail coverts. A Dunlin should have a black belly in breeding plumage. Even if molting in or out of breeding plumage, some evidence of the black belly is typically seen in June. This bird shows a combination of breeding and non-breeding feathers on its back, so I would expect to see some black on the belly if it were a Dunlin.

Time to consider rarities. It's always a long shot, but if this really is a rarity, I would want to get word out quickly! However, on a Curlew Sandpiper I would expect to see some rusty coloring on its underside, given the breeding plumage feathers on its upper side. Broad-billed Sandpiper is no match at all, as the overall coloration is not striking black-and-white. All the stints are too small. I am ruling out *Calidris* species faster than I can come up with new ones. Typically when I am faced with an unidentified *Calidris*, I am left with a choice of two or three species, struggling to rule out some because I only got brief or distant looks or key field marks are obscured. This time, however, I got good looks and photos and I have confidently ruled out everything I could think of. I took a couple more photos and went home with this unidentified sandpiper to mull over.

The next morning desperation struck in the form of a thought. ‘What if it is a hybrid?’ Knowing pretty much nothing about hybrid sandpipers, I was in deep water. I used eBird’s ‘Search Photos and Sounds’ to figure out what hybrid sandpipers even exist. In the search bar, I typed ‘sandpiper hybrid’, which gives you the four hybrid combinations that have been entered into the eBird database. Some are ruled out rather quickly, but Dunlin x White-rumped Sandpiper caught my attention. Not all photos of this hybrid are a great match because they can look quite different in different plumage stages. But some are a good match indeed. It matches previously photographed birds in its large size, approaching that of Dunlin. Some, but not all previous records also show relatively long legs. The breast is strongly spotted but somewhat messy, a pattern again seen in some but not all of previously photographed birds. The spots extend far back along the breast sides, a feature that is present in all of the available examples and matches White-rumped Sandpiper.

Some features match both of the proposed parental species, but speak against other influences. The top of the head is strongly and evenly streaked. The primaries project to about the end of the tail. Other features are neatly intermediate between the parental species. The supercilium is short behind the eye (as in Dunlin) but heavily streaked (as in White-rump). The bill is black and drooping, longer than that of a White-rumped Sandpiper but distinctly shorter than what is typically seen in a Dunlin. The upper scapulars are orange (as in both parental species during this time of year) but the lower scapulars show a mix of orange (Dunlin) and gray (White-rump). And if we look closely at the dark uppertail covert band, it is not as strong as one would expect in a species with a dark “rump”. In fact, it is almost broken. Taking everything together, I think we have a match here!

Now if you think that offering a hybrid *Calidris* sandpiper as the ‘Photo Challenge’ is a bit trickier than necessary, I do sympathize. But finding a bird like this made me realize that anything can happen out in the field. The bird certainly posed an interesting challenge to me and I am glad I took the photos and persevered in trying to identify it.

Severin Uebbing lives in New Haven and is an evolutionary geneticist at Yale University.



Next Challenge Photo

THE CONNECTICUT WARBLER

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Send manuscripts to the Editor. Please type double spaced with ample margins, on one side of a sheet. Submit a copy on a computer disk, if possible. Style should follow usage in recent issues. All manuscripts receive peer review.

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