

Review of the 114th Christmas Bird Count in the Central Valley of California: December 2013-January 2014

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This is the eighth in an annual series reviewing the results of the Central Valley (CV) Christmas Bird Counts (CBC). This series notes high species counts of the CBC season and examines some of the interesting trends the data suggest.

Data used for this series come from 24 CBC circles within or overlapping the CV (Figure 1). Of these, 22 were conducted during Count Year (CY) 113. The Milburn-Fresno count has been abandoned for the past three years following 15 consecutive years of activity. The Kern-Buena Vista circle was not run this year. Because the real value of CBC data comes from collection of long-term datasets, I encourage someone from the San Joaquin Valley area to restart one or both of these counts. I realize that these areas are largely dominated by agricultural and urban uses now, but that is all the more reason we need to see how bird numbers and diversity change over time.

I used only data obtained from the actual CBC count day, omitting records reported as occurring within the 'Count Week'. Data were obtained from the National Audubon Society's online data base (National Audubon Society 2010) and supplemented with data from individual compilers when needed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

High Species Counts

Among North America's 2,000-plus CBCs, CV counts consistently record the highest numbers for many species. Categories where the CV tends to dominate in terms of total numbers include waterfowl, raptors, and species associated with oak woodlands and grasslands. This year our circles had the high count among all North American count circles for 20 species, the same as last year and right on our 7-year average. Nearly every year the Sacramento count circle records more species totals in the top five than any other CV count. The 2012-2013 CBC year was an exception with poor weather on Sacramento's count day to blame, but in 2013-2014 Sacramento tied with Rio Cosumnes for the most top five totals: 10 each.

For the seventh straight year, the Merced NWR count recorded the most Ross's Geese (*Chen rossii*); nearly 40,000. Stockton took first place for Greater

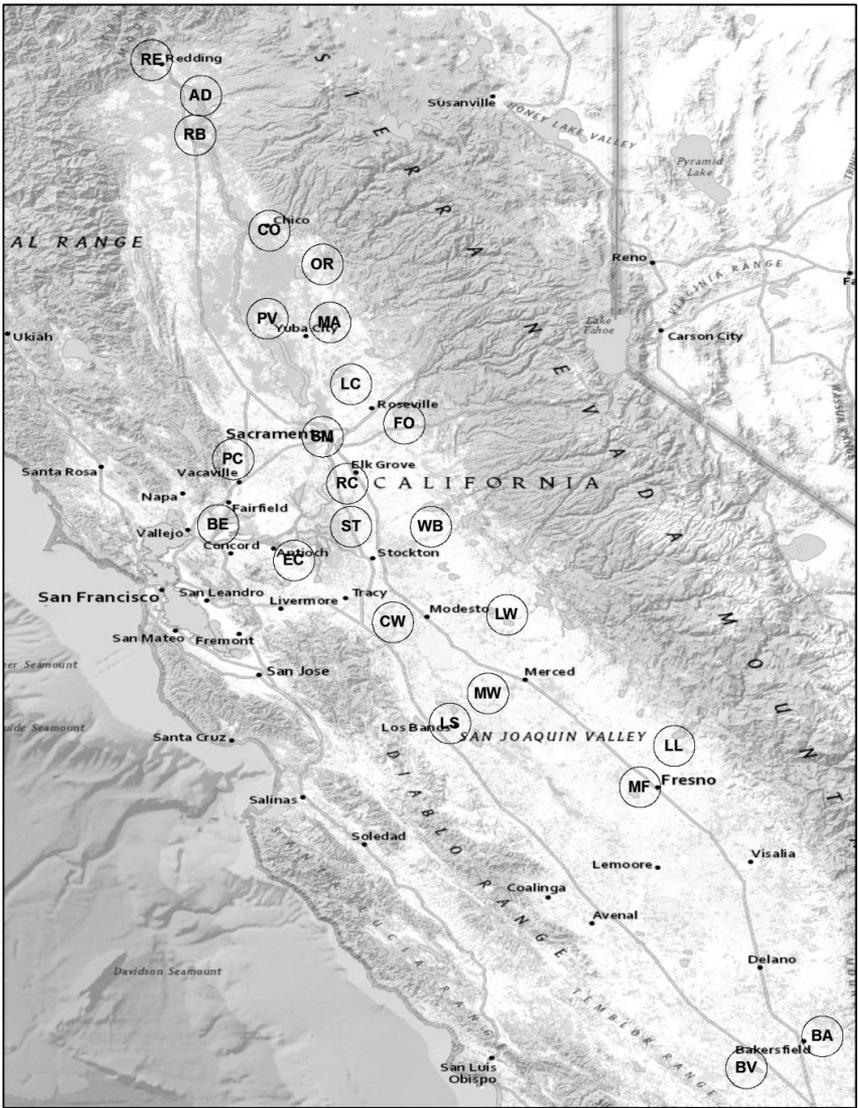


Figure 1. The 24 CV CBC circles used. From north to south, they are: Redding (RE), Anderson (AD), Red Bluff (RB), Chico (CO), Oroville (OR), Peace Valley (PV), Marysville (MA), Lincoln (LC), Folsom (FO), Sacramento (SM), Putah Creek (PC), Rio Cosumnes (RC), Benicia (BE), Stockton (ST), Wallace-Bellota (WB), East Contra Costa (EC), Caswell-Westley (CW), La Grange-Waterford (LW), Merced NWR (MW), Los Banos (LS), Lost Lake-Fresno (LL), Milburn-Fresno (MF), Bakersfield (BA), and Buena Vista-Kern (BV).

White-fronted Geese (*Anser albifrons*) with over 26,000, but numbers were down on other counts and, unusually, no other CV circle cracked the top five. Caswell-Westley again took 2nd place for Cackling Goose (*Branta hutchinsii*). The Aleutian subspecies of Cackling Goose, which accounts for nearly all our totals for this species, continues to show strong recovery from the lows of the 1960s. The 51,000 counted on the Caswell-Westley count was a new record, but still well behind Eugene's (Oregon) total of over 68,000. Stockton and Marysville finished third and fourth, respectively, for Tundra Swan (*Cygnus columbianus*).

While we are discussing swans, I want to urge all CBC compilers and participants to record any Mute Swans (*Cygnus olor*) they come across in any setting other than a clearly domestic one (e.g., in a private, backyard pond). This introduced species is beginning to establish a free-roaming, breeding population in California. Mute Swans have become a major problem in the eastern and mid-western U.S. with negative impacts on native waterfowl, and we need data to document the increasing numbers of this species in the state while control may still be possible. With only 13 Mute Swans reported from all CV counts last year, it is clear that either participants are not recording them or most compilers are not reporting them. The CBC is an ideal way to document the growing threat from this bird.

Peace Valley's 57,000 Gadwall (*Anas strepera*) took first with Los Banos finishing second. Sacramento's 937 Cinnamon Teal (*Anas cyanoptera*) maintained their perennial number one position, but the growing participation in Mexican CBCs (where most of this species winters) meant that Sacramento's total was down to "only" 30% of the CBC total. Rio Cosumnes recorded the fifth highest Cinnamon Teal total. This was a huge year for Northern Shovelers (*Anas clypeata*) in the CV with the total from all circles (200,000) nearly double the average. Peace Valley recorded the most Shovelers (over 75,000), with Los Banos, Caswell-Westley, and Sacramento taking second through fourth places. Peace Valley and Marysville finished one-two for Northern Pintail (*Anas acuta*) and Sacramento and Peace Valley held the second and third spots for Green-winged Teal (*Anas crecca*). Sacramento moved back into its usual first place with 702 Black-crowned Night-Herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*), nearly double the total tallied on the second best count, Mad Island Marsh, Texas. White-faced Ibis (*Plegadis chihi*) numbers were up from last year with Los Banos and Marysville taking fourth and fifth spots.

Rio Cosumnes recorded more White-tailed Kites (*Elanus leucurus*), 116, than any other count. Lincoln's total was good for second with Sacramento and Benicia taking fourth and fifth. Overall, this year's CV total was one of the lowest for this species in several years. Benicia was third for Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*) but took first for. Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) with 337. Lincoln took second place for Red-tails with Stockton in fifth.

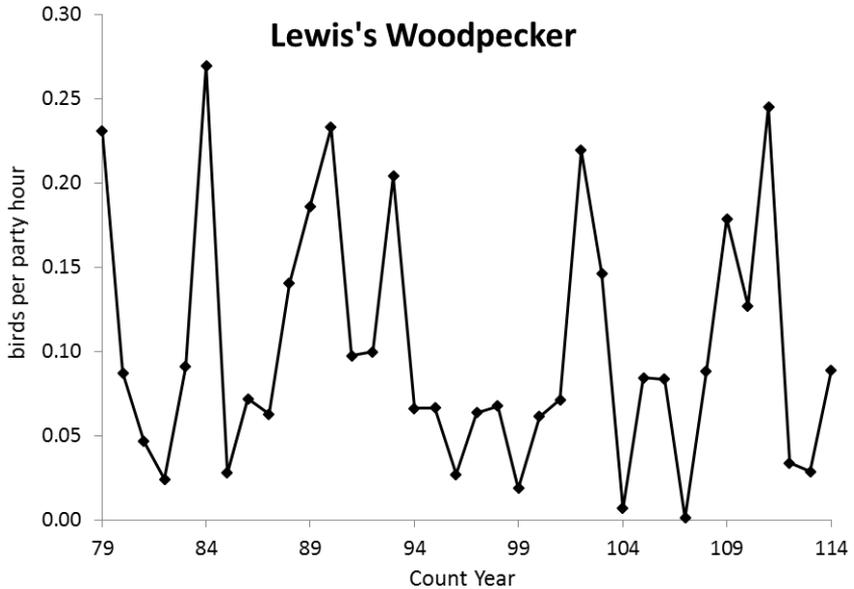


Figure 2. Lewis's Woodpecker historical abundance on CV CBCs from Count Year 79 (winter 1978-79) to Count Year 114 (winter 2013-14).

Benicia's 4 Black Rails (*Laterallus jamaicensis*) was only good for third place this year. Benicia led all counts for Virginia Rail (*Rallus limicola*) (106) for the sixth consecutive year. Peace Valley slipped into fifth place for American Coot (*Fulica americana*) and Lincoln finished third for Long-billed Dowitchers (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*). Lost Lake-Fresno and Sacramento finished in second and fourth, respectively, for California Gull (*Larus californicus*).

This was more of less an average year for Lewis's Woodpecker (*Melanerpes lewis*), a species which shows dramatic fluctuations in winter numbers in the CV (Figure 2). Anderson River managed to take first place with 194 Lewis's Woodpeckers with Folsom finishing fifth. Putah Creek took fourth for Acorn Woodpecker (*Melanerpes formicivorus*), but finished first for Nuttall's Woodpecker (*Picoides nuttallii*) with 197, with Sacramento and Rio Cosumnes Nuttall's Woodpecker totals good for third and fourth. Northern Flickers (*Colaptes auratus*) were below average and only Sacramento managed to crack the top five, taking fourth. American Kestrels (*Falco sparverius*) continued their alarming downward trend in the CV (Figure 3) with Benicia's 137 enough for fifth place. Overall, American Kestrel numbers this winter were the lowest ever observed on CV CBCs.

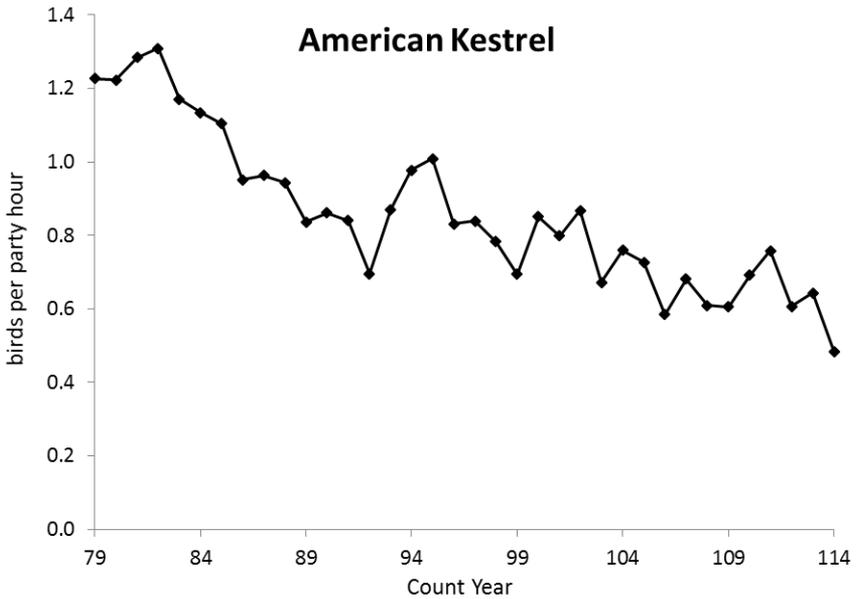


Figure 3. American Kestrel historical abundance on CV CBCs from Count Year 79 (winter 1978-79) to Count Year 114 (winter 2013-14).

Putah Creek fell from last year's first spot to fourth for Western Scrub-Jay (*Aphelocoma californica*) and, likewise, fell to second for Yellow-billed Magpie (*Pica nuttalli*), just behind Sacramento (337) with Rio Cosumnes coming in fifth. Folsom made it eight straight years on top with 485 Oak Titmice (*Baeolophus inornatus*), with Putah Creek finishing 4th. This year Benicia fell from first to third for Marsh Wren (*Cistothorus palustris*). Putah Creek tallied the second-most Hermit Thrushes (*Catharus guttatus*). For only the second time in the past 20 years, Folsom did not place in the top five for Western Bluebird (*Sialia mexicana*). Stockton's total of nearly 300,000 European Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) topped all counts (a dubious honor, but starlings need counting too) pushing Rio Cosumnes into second place this year. Rio Cosumnes recorded the second highest American Pipit (*Anthus rubescens*) total with Lincoln taking fifth. Of all CV counts, only Stockton cracked the top five for Yellow-rumped Warbler (*coronata*), finishing fourth. Rio Cosumnes finished second for Lincoln's Sparrow (*Melospiza lincolni*). White-crowned Sparrows (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*) were plentiful in the CV this winter (highest total since the late 1980s) with local counts taking first, third, and fourth places, led by Wallace-Bellota's total of over 4500 White-crowns.

Tricolored Blackbirds (*Agelaius tricolor*) should be a CV specialty and this year the top four counts were Los Banos (8530), Lincoln, Rio Cosumnes, and

Merced NWR. Sacramento's half-million Brewer's Blackbirds (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*) blew the competition away. Rio Cosumnes, Lincoln, and Stockton were second, fourth, and fifth. The Rio Cosumnes' Western Meadow-lark (*Sturnella neglecta*) total, 2372, topped all counts for this species. Lincoln took second, Benicia was third, and Wallace-Bellota fifth. Benicia's took second place for House Finch (*Carpodacus mexicanus*) and saved the CV from being shut out of the top five. CV counts made a better showing for Lesser Goldfinch (*Spinus psaltria*) with Chico, Folsom, and Lincoln finishing in third, fourth, and fifth spots, respectively.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks go to all the compilers and all the participants from the CV CBCs.



Lark Bunting (*Calamospiza melanocorys*). 5 Nov 2013. Beckwith Rd, Stanislaus County, California. Photo @ Linda Pittman.