

Review of the 113th Christmas Bird Count in the Central Valley of California: December 2012-January 2013

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This is the seventh in an annual series reviewing the results of the Central Valley (CV) Christmas Bird Counts (CBCs). This series notes high counts of species for 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 counts, 23 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. Because the real value of CBC data comes from collection of long-term datasets, I encourage someone from the Fresno area to restart this count. I realize that this area is 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 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

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 CV circles had the highest count for 20 species, consistent with the 6-year average. Nearly every year the Sacramento count leads the way with more species totals in the top five (among all North American circles) than any other CV count. However, this year the weather for the Sacramento count was miserable with drenching rain and high winds (15-40 mph) continuing throughout the day. In spite of 62 brave souls putting in 167 hours of soggy effort, counts for most species were well below normal for the Sacramento circle. This year Benicia and Rio Cosumnes both surpassed Sacramento for the most species totals in the North American top five (12 and 11 species, respectively).

The Merced National Wildlife Refuge count was once again in first place with over 40,000 Ross's Geese (*Chen rossii*), the second highest CV total ever recorded. CV circles dominated Greater White-fronted Geese (*Anser albifrons*)

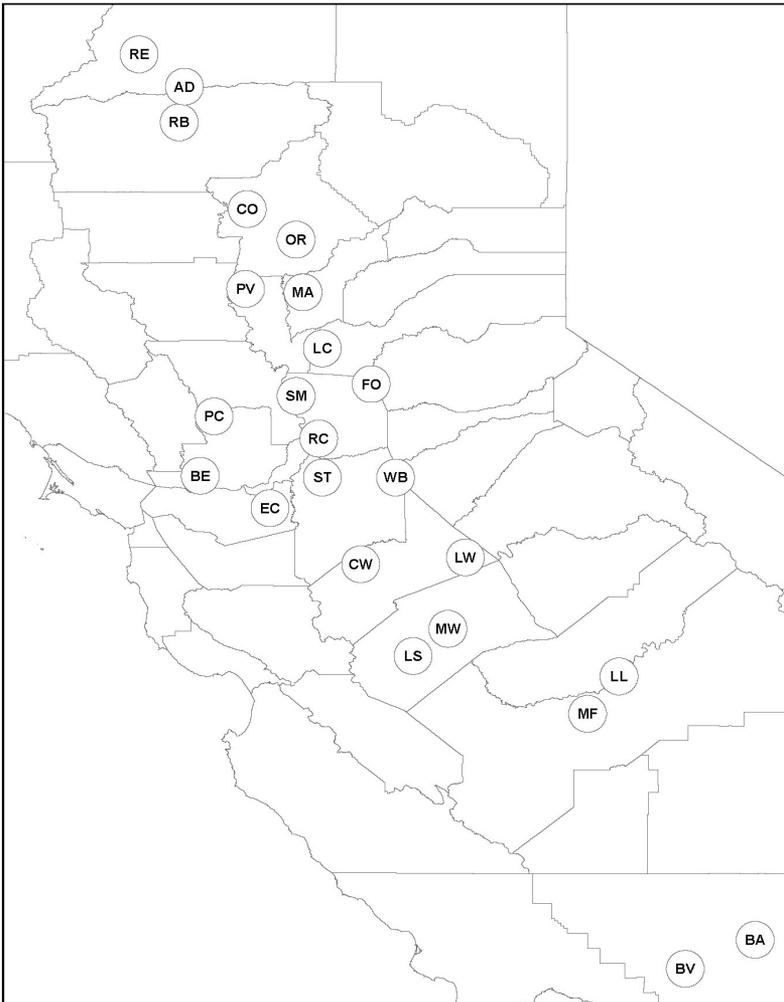


Figure 1. The 24 CV CBC circles. From north to south, they are: Redding, Anderson, Red Bluff, Chico, Oroville, Peace Valley, Marysville, Lincoln, Folsom, Sacramento, Putah Creek, Rio Cosumnes, Benicia, Stockton, Wallace-Bellota, East Contra Costa, Caswell-Westley, La Grange-Waterford, Merced NWR, Los Banos, Lost Lake-Fresno, Milburn-Fresno, Bakersfield, and Buena Vista-Kern.

numbers with Oroville taking the top spot and three other CV counts rounding out places 2 through 4 (Rio Cosumnes, Sacramento, and Lincoln). However, the actual total for Oroville is in question. The CBC database shows over 150,000 birds this year for Oroville, a circle which has averaged fewer than 1000 per year. The annual total for this species for ALL CV counts combined has never exceeded 113,000 so it is possible there was a data entry

error. Caswell-Westley took 2nd place for Cackling Goose (*Branta hutchinsii*). Oroville tallied the 3rd highest total for Tundra Swan (*Cygnus columbianus*) with Marysville in 5th. Los Banos had the 3rd highest total for Gadwall (*Anas strepera*). Rain or no rain, Sacramento once again dominated all counts for Cinnamon Teal (*Anas cyanoptera*) with over 1,500 birds. Most Cinnamon Teal winter in Mexico so it is encouraging to see that three Mexican counts were in the top 10 for this species this year. Sacramento tallied over 16,000 Northern Shovelers (*Anas clypeata*), well below the prior year, but still good enough for first place. Los Banos was in 2nd place for shovelers with Caswell-Westley taking 4th. Northern Pintail (*Anas acuta*) numbers, historically in decline, were strong again this year with Marysville taking first (more than 70,000) and Peace Valley 5th. In spite of recording about half of last year's total, Sacramento led all counts with over 7,600 Green-winged Teal (*Anas crecca*). After finishing first for six straight years, Sacramento fell to 2nd place for Black-crowned Night-Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*). For the first time since I have been tracking the numbers, no CV circle finished in the top five for White-faced Ibis (*Plegadis chihi*). After a spectacular increase in numbers from the late 1990s through 2005 (Shuford, et al. 1996, Pandolfino 2006, 2008), it appears that the CV wintering population may be declining (Figure 2) (Pandolfino 2010).

CV totals for White-tailed Kite (*Elanus leucurus*) this year were the lowest seen in over 30 years and the past five years have all been below the historical average. Benicia was one of only three CV circles with kite numbers above their average and was the top count with 161, Rio Cosumnes taking 3rd and Lincoln 5th. Benicia was 2nd for Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*). CV counts dominate the standings for Red-tailed Hawks (*Buteo jamaicensis*) with CV counts taking the top spot in 10 of the past 13 years. This year Lincoln led all red-tail counts with 360 and Rio Cosumnes and Benicia finished 2nd and 3rd, respectively.

Benicia, having led all counts for Black Rail (*Laterallus jamaicensis*) for 12 of the last 18 years, lost out to the Cheep Thrills circle (south Sonoma and east Marin counties) which tallied 10 Black Rails. A Florida count (Coot Bay-Everglades) slipped into 2nd spot for Black Rail while Marysville and Benicia tied for 3rd. Benicia again led all counts for Virginia Rail (*Rallus limicola*) (164). Lost Lake-Fresno finished in 3rd place for California Gulls (*Larus californicus*).

This was another generally poor year for Lewis's Woodpecker (*Melanerpes lewis*) with only the Anderson River Park count making the top five (2nd place with 90). Although Putah Creek tallied nearly the same number of Acorn Woodpeckers (*Melanerpes formicivorus*) as last year's first place total (644 this year, 646 last year), that was only good enough for 4th this year. Putah Creek found itself back on top this year for Nuttall's Woodpecker (*Picoides nuttallii*) with 196, with Rio Cosumnes taking 4th. CV

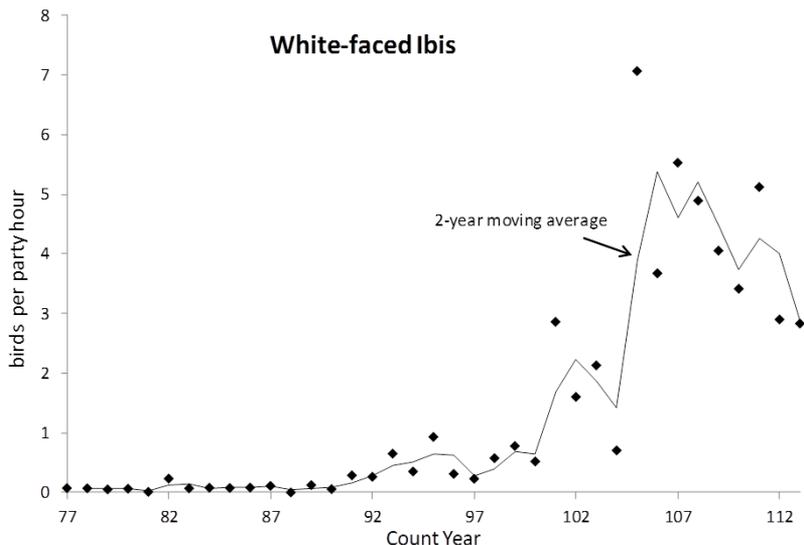


Figure 2. White-faced Ibis abundance on CV CBCs, 1977-2012. Trendline is the moving two-year average.

counts took 3rd through 5th for Northern Flickers (*Colaptes auratus*) with Folsom, Rio Cosumnes, and Peace Valley finishing in that order. Benicia placed first for American Kestrels (*Falco sparverius*) with 187, that circle's best total since 1994.

Putah Creek once again recorded more Western Scrub-Jays (*Aphelocoma californica*) than any other circle (958) and also led the way with 327 Yellow-billed Magpies (*Pica nuttalli*). Chico took 2nd place for magpies while Sacramento, which has never finished worse than 2nd, fell to 4th place. As noted in a recent publication (Pandolfino 2013), despite some local rebounds, Yellow-billed Magpie numbers in the CV show no signs of recovery from the 2005 West Nile virus outbreak and remain at about half their pre-2005 levels. Folsom led all counts for the 7th straight year with 491 Oak Titmice (*Baeolophus inornatus*), with Putah Creek finishing 4th. Benicia was again first for Marsh Wren (*Cistothorus palustris*) with 266. Putah Creek recorded the 3rd-most Hermit Thrushes (*Catharus guttatus*).

Folsom was first for Western Bluebird (*Sialia mexicana*) with 983, and Wallace-Bellota was 2nd with 752, marking the first time CV counts took the top two places for this species. Once again the valiant starling-counters of Rio Cosumnes tallied an impressive (or depressing) number of European Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) (337,720) and once again they were 2nd to the more than 1 million counted at Sooner Lake, Oklahoma. Although Rio Cosumnes found more American Pipits (*Anthus rubescens*) than last year (1,226 vs. 1,105), they

fell from first to 4th this year behind counts in Texas and Florida. Benicia took 5th for Yellow-rumped Warbler (*Setophaga coronata*) and Rio Cosumnes 5th for Spotted Towhee (*Pipilo maculatus*). Although Wallace-Bellota's Lark Sparrow (*Chondestes grammacus*) total was well behind last year's record count (764 vs. 1,675), it was still enough to take first place. Rio Cosumnes finished 2nd for Lincoln's Sparrow (*Melospiza lincolni*) and 5th for White-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*).

Lincoln was first with an astounding total of more than 20,000 Tricolored Blackbirds (*Agelaius tricolor*), nearly all concentrated at dairy operations southwest of Lincoln. Merced NWR took 4th for tricolors. Rio Cosumnes was again the top count for Brewer's Blackbirds (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*) with nearly 48,000. Lincoln, Marysville, and Sacramento were 2nd, 3rd and 5th, respectively confirming the CV as a center of abundance for this adaptable blackbird. CV counts swept the top five for Western Meadowlark (*Sturnella neglecta*). To my personal chagrin as the compiler, Lincoln relinquished its eight-year lock on meadowlark first place with Rio Cosumnes beating Lincoln's 2nd place total by nearly 500 birds (4,895 vs. 4,399). Benicia, Wallace-Bellota, and Sacramento rounded out the top five, in that order. Only Benicia's 3rd place for House Finch (*Haemorhous mexicanus*) saved the CV from being shut out of the top five. Putah Creek took 2nd for Lesser Goldfinch (*Spinus psaltria*) and Folsom finished 4th.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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