



A number of Pileated Woodpeckers were observed. They love dogwood berries!



♪...we'll pish in the sunshine♪
Stacy and Nancy pish their hearts out to attract a wren or towhee.

Brunswick Wildlife A Cape Fear Audubon kind of Christmas

For all of the wonderful things the holiday season brings, it has another special treat for local birders...the opportunity to participate in the Wilmington and Southport Christmas Bird Counts.

These counts, sponsored by National Audubon, count the birds in sampling circles scattered across North America, circles with 15-mile diameters. The results are used to estimate long-term population trends from winter distribution and abundance. Recently Audubon began using this data and others to monitor "Common Birds in Decline", an effort to get in front of the curve and help bird populations before they become endangered.

The 110th annual Audubon Christmas Bird Count was held from December 14 through January 5 this year and the Cape Fear Audubon Society hosted the above two counts of the seventy-seven counts in North and South Carolina.

Each circle is broken into sections to be covered by a team. For Example, Wilmington count sections include Wrightsville Beach, Greenfield Lake, and Airlie Gardens. The Southport/Oak Island/Bald Head count includes those areas plus Boiling Spring Lakes, Ft. Fisher spit, Ft. Caswell, and others.

On Saturday, I led the team that covered the Brunswick County portion of the Wilmington circle, including Brunswick Town, Orton Pond, Funston Farms, and the Brunswick Nature

Park plus all of the sky as we drove in between. Stacy Smaltz and Nancy Buckingham assisted.

On Sunday, I joined a team led by Taylor Piephoff, President of the Carolina Bird Club, that included Katherine Higgins from Charlotte and Karl Fetter and Harry Blair from Greensboro. We covered Ft. Caswell, Oak Island, and Fish Factory Road.

In all there were thirty to forty birders that braved the weather conditions to participate in our two counts. Wilmington's preliminary total was 155 species compared to 160 last year and Southport's preliminary total was 170 compared to 165 last year. For the record, Morehead City led the state for the 2008-2009 count with 177; however, Southport and Wilmington were second and third respectively.

Each night, after our eight-hour birding day we gathered to tally the team results at Mexican Restaurants. Please pass the Tums.

One of the best things about these counts is that birders join counts other than their own. Their labor and expertise are needed. They are motivated partly by the possibility of finding a rare bird and partly by seeing old birding friends from around the state.

This year we were rewarded with rarities that included Pacific Loon, Common Eider, White-fronted Goose, Snow Goose, Sandhill Crane, Razorbill, Dovekie and Western Tanager. The dovekies were seen and called in by Harry Sell, Captain of the Ft. Fisher Ferry. Harry had to work during the Southport count but he made a big contribution anyway.

Results may be highly dependent of the effects of weather, both good and bad, and while the total species had not changed much this year, the actual number of birds reported by observers was far fewer than last year.

"How cold was it?" Ed McMahon would ask after Johnny Carson delivered a set-up line. Then Johnny would come back with a punch line that would not be appropriate for a family newspaper. So I'll just give you a personal sample.

On Sunday morning, it was twenty-four degrees and the wind was sixteen mph, gusting to twenty-five. The chill factor was ten degrees but dropped lower as the wind picked up during the day. We started the day looking for loons, scoters, and sea birds at the end of the Yaupon Pier.

Most birders experienced similar conditions during the two days and some even worse. According to Sam Cooper, the organizer/compiler for Wilmington, who was on a boat on the ICWW and Cape Fear River all day Saturday: "...it was the most brutal count day he had ever experienced!"

The goal was to look for birds on the lee side of trees and structures; however, the wind was so strong and swirling, sometimes it seemed there was no lee side. There was, however, not much whining, on my part and others, because this experience is what we live for.

I did get a kick out of Nancy and Stacy modifying songs to suit the season, lack of birds, and weather conditions. I think it had to do with taking their minds off the cold.

The first was “We’ll Pish in the Sunshine”. Eventually, they tackled The Twelve Days of Christmas and substituted “a Butter Bottom in a Pine Tree” for the partridge.

Let me explain. During the winter, we have tens of thousands of Yellow-rumped Warblers that overwinter in the Lower Cape Fear. They are in non-breeding plumage; however, their bright yellow rumps are their most distinguishing features.

Most folks call them “butter butts”. Stacy and Nancy told me of one lady on a previous trip, thinking that name was a little too risqué, asked that we call them “butter bottoms”. After a few hours of guffaws, chortles, and just plain side-splitting laughter on my part, I reconsidered. This is after all a family newspaper. From now on “butter bottom” it is!

John Ennis



The park on Fish Factory Road offered a great supply of insects for this Loggerhead Shrike and its mate



It was so cold this Ruddy Turnstone sought a windbreak and some warmth from a much larger gull



An agitated Ruby-crowned Kinglet (note the red “danger flag”) did not like me disturbing its Sunday brunch



Red-cockaded Woodpecker returning to its cavity after a cold day of foraging

