



The Ruby-crowned Kinglet's "red flag" is flown when the bird is agitated



Long-billed Dowitchers take flight, flushed by a raptor approaching overhead

Brunswick Wildlife Happy New Birding Year!

More important than bowl games, the best of New Year's is starting a new birding year. I do not mind missing the first or second quarter of a game if the birding is good.

Also, going birding is excellent therapy when your team is playing so badly you hope they will drop football, sell the team bus, and turn the stadium over to the school of agriculture for grazing. After that third interception, you expect the coach will go into the stands at any moment and slap the quarterback's parents.

Birders are list keepers; some more than others. Most keep a list of the species seen on each field trip and a yardbird list plus a "life list" to document the birder's first observation of each species. Unlike others, I do not keep state or county lists. Ditto a poop list. Don't ask.

I do keep a "year list" which is a life list you get to start over every year. Yoo hoo! A fresh start! A way to forget your team's fumble on the first play of the game.

I started out on New Year's Day at Sutton Lake and then stopped at the battleship, Orton Pond, the Funston farms area, Boiling Spring Lakes, Oak Island, and several sites around Southport. My route served as a scouting trip for sites I would cover during the Wilmington and Southport Christmas Bird Counts sponsored by Audubon.

The Ruby-crowned Kinglet above, photographed at Sutton Lake, is one of the smallest North American birds. Its light weight allows it to "sally glean". They hover and glean insects off leaves while airborne. These guys are one of the most difficult birds to photograph. Even when not hovering, they move continuously, flicking their wings as they forage through a bush like a caffeine-enhanced, frenzied shopper the day after Christmas.

On Friday, several of us scouted Eagles Island, where the other photos were taken, for the next day's Wilmington count.

American Pipits are landbirds found in a wide range of open habitats from arctic and alpine tundra during their breeding season to farm fields, grasslands, and shores during their non-breeding season. Flocks of fifty or more may be found during winter in fields of the North Carolina coastal plain. My pipit was on an Eagles Island's dredge spoil field.

A medium-sized sandpiper, the Long-billed Dowitcher is known for its long, sturdy bill and its foraging method of probing deeply into mud with a "sewing machine" motion. It breeds on the tundra from Siberia to northwestern Canada and winters mainly west of the Mississippi.

These guys made a long journey. During winters, Long-billed Dowitchers are found along both coasts from California and North Carolina southward to Central America and, in the interior, from Southern California to Texas and throughout Mexico. Most breeding in Siberia are thought to overwinter in the Americas.

On Saturday, I birded with a team for the Wilmington area count, covering Brunswick Town, Orton Pond, and Funston Farms, and on Sunday for the Southport count, I joined the team covering Ft. Caswell and the eastern tip of Oak Island.

The Wilmington count compiler, Sam Cooper, reported the preliminary number of species found was 159. Cooper stated: "Participation and area coverage by birders was a little better than normal. Unusual sightings included a female Common Eider in the waterway behind Wrightsville Beach, six Razorbills off Carolina Beach Inlet, and a Lark Sparrow in Brunswick County."

"Christmas bird counts often conjure up images of hardy observers braving inclement weather, but the weather was generally pleasant. Fog did put a damper on much of the morning bird activity, and land bird numbers and diversity were overall low" said Cooper.

Juanita Roushdy, President of Cape Fear Audubon and the Southport circle compiler, reported a preliminary total of 165 species found by the 29 birders who participated. Roushdy explained: "Being part of the Christmas Bird Count is like playing hide and seek. You know the birds are there, you just have to find them. At the end of the day, you get to relive great sightings, compare experiences of past years, see old friends, and make new ones. Best of all, you've had fun, while contributing to the larger body of knowledge of birds in our area."

After a year's beginning, I shift my focus to quality and not quantity, never counting the number of species seen during a trip but journaling the quality moments. Instead of just identifying a new species and listing it, quality-conscious birders should observe five or more features and behaviors of the bird before adding it to their life list. I go one step further by also collecting a photo.

The weather was variable for all four days...sometimes cold, sometimes balmy, sometimes foggy...but beautiful. The feeling of being outside was never sweeter and ghostly sights of hundreds of loons flying low over the ocean, through the fog, made a lasting impression. Now that's what I call quality!

John Ennis



A "yellow" Palm Warbler, the Eastern subspecies



American Pipits breed on the tundra and mountaintops and then move to grasslands, fields, and seashores for the non-breeding season