

The Results of the 2013 Grant County Migratory Bird Count Exceed Expectations

by Julian Lee, MBC Compiler

The 2012 Grant County Migratory Bird Count (MBC) was notable for the low number of birds tallied, both in terms of species (169) and of individuals (4,862). Those count results seemed to corroborate the impressions of many of our birders that relative to previous years, the 2012 spring migration was "a bust." A partial explanation for the low numbers was likely the fact that the number of birders available to participate in the count last year was lower than usual. But the results revealed that north-bound migrant species were disproportionately under-represented in the count, suggesting that the decline in numbers was not entirely a consequence of having fewer people counting birds.

A General Downward Trend In Numbers of Birds?

As the day for the 2013 MBC drew near, some of us wondered if the count results would replicate the poor showing of the previous year. If so, might this be the beginning of a downward trend in numbers of birds, reflecting some general phenomenon?

With that apprehension in mind, fifteen groups of SWNM Audubon members spread out over Grant County in the early hours of Saturday, May 11th. Each group was assigned a pre-determined route selected to sample the diversity of habitats within the county, including agricultural settings, riparian associations, pinyon-juniper woodlands, montane forests, grasslands, and desert scrub. The efforts of these mobile groups were augmented by those of seven birders who monitored bird feeders on their properties.

By the end of the day, SWNM Audubon birders had driven 789 miles, walked 67 miles, and expended 231 observer hours searching for birds. Noteworthy sightings included a Little Blue Heron seen by Wayne Spitzer and others on his property in the Mimbres, and a Merlin reported by Dennis Beaver between Silver City and Santa Clara. And once again, Bob Wilcox found the Yellow-eyed Junco in the Burro Mountains.

2012 and 2013 MBC Results Compared

The 2013 results were in marked contrast to those of the previous year. The number of species tallied was slightly greater than in 2012 (181 vs. 169, a modest increase of 7.1%), but the number of individual birds recorded in the count exceeded that of last year's count by 2,733 (4,862 versus 7,595, a whopping 56.2 % increase). A partial explanation for the increase in birds tallied lies in the fact that 26 birders participated in the 2012 count, whereas 36 participated in the 2013 count. Yet, something other than, or in addition to, mere numbers of participating birders seems responsible for the dramatic increase in birds recorded in 2013. In

2012, the average number of individual birds sighted per participant was 187; the corresponding number for 2013 was 211, a 13.9% increase. At the 2012 rate, 36 observers would have tallied a predicted 6,732 birds, 863 fewer than were actually counted in 2013. Looked at another way, a 38.5% increase in the number of participants produced a 56.2% increase in the number of individual birds tallied.

Of course other factors might have contributed to the difference between the 2012 and the 2013 results (e.g., differences in weather, variation in the detection and identification skills among observers), but the results are encouraging, and they suggest that the down-turn in numbers of species, and especially numbers of individual birds detected in the 2012 MBC was not part of a multi-year trend.

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