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Mid-Winter Bird Count At the South Carolina State Parks

HARRY E. LeGRAND JR.

In 1977 the South Carolina Division of State Parks, under the direction of John Reid Clonts and Brian E. Cassie, sponsored its first Mid-Winter Bird Count. The objective of the count was to census winter bird populations in a number of state parks selected to provide the greatest geographical diversity. Seven parks were censused on 29 January, and seven others were censused on 5 February.

The following parks were censused on Saturday, 29 January (numbers in parentheses are the numbers of observers, species, and individuals, respectively, on each count): Aiken (5, 47, 496); Cheraw (3, 27, 327); Croft (2, 37, 473); Hickory Knob (6, 41, 411); Hunting Island (10, 94, 5144); Oconee (7, 34, 432); and Santee (6, 54, 734). Those censused on Saturday, 5 February, were: Huntington Beach (8, 91, 4022); Kings Mountain (5, 36, 288); Lynchess River (9, 53, 4218); Rivers Bridge (4, 37, 326); Sadlers Creek (5, 33, 432); Sesquicentennial (5, 35, 1462); and Table Rock (5, 28, 107).

The total number of species seen was 143, and the total number of individuals was 18,872. Seventy-seven field observers participated. Because of space limitations the count cannot be published in full.

The weather for the count was generally clear, cold, and windy (gusts up to 30 knots) on each day. However, the winter of 1976-77 in South Carolina was perhaps the coldest in recorded history, and the two weeks preceding the count were severely cold. The weather had a definite negative effect on bird populations, presumably causing much mortality, especially among small insect-feeding birds. Even though there were no previous park counts with which to base any comparisons, it was obvious to most observers on the counts that practically all warblers, wrens, and especially the kinglets were in greatly reduced numbers as compared with those of normal winters. The scarcity of such species was even more noticeable because these birds winter primarily in wooded habitats, and many state parks contain only forests (little or no open

country). Thus, some parks seemed nearly devoid of birdlife, particularly those in the upper portion of the state.

Comments on a number of species seem necessary because of their scarcity. First, many of the common open country species (such as Mourning Dove, Starling, Eastern Meadowlark, and blackbirds) were scarce because of the poverty of their preferred habitats; and the House Sparrow and remarkably the Cedar Waxwing were not seen at all! Second, winter finches had an off-winter, as no Evening Grosbeaks, Pine Siskins, or Red Crossbills were reported. Third and most important, the severe weather caused many of the smaller, insect-feeding species to be found in reduced numbers, especially in the sandhills, piedmont, and mountains. Species particularly affected were Winter Wren, Carolina Wren, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Yellow-rumped Warbler, and Pine Warbler.

Only a few species seemed to be present in above normal numbers. American Robins and Dark-eyed Juncos appeared to be in this category, and the Hermit Thrush almost certainly was the surprise species. It was seen or heard on all 14 counts and was in double figures on seven, and four counts tallied at least 20 individuals.

Several rarities were reported on the park censuses. A Bald Eagle was sighted at Santee. Huntington Beach observers found a Red-necked Grebe, a European Wigeon, seven Common Mergansers, three Savannah (Ipswich) Sparrows, and three Snow Buntings. Adair Tedards, Vivian Smith, and Caroline Watson saw a Blackburnian Warbler at Hunting Island, apparently the second winter record for the state. They noted the dark cheek patch, large white wing patch, and trace of orange on the throat and upper breast.

The Division of State Parks plans to continue the Mid-Winter Count in future winters, and they also began a Breeding Bird Count in June 1977 at these same 14 parks. Persons wishing to participate on these counts, as well as those desiring a copy of the 1977 Mid-Winter Count (including a list of field observers), should contact either John Reid Clonts (Count Coordinator) or Brian E. Cassie (Count Compiler). Their address is: South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism, Suite 113, Edgar A. Brown Building, 1205 Pendleton Street, Columbia, S.C. 29201.

CBC

Roundtable

... with Louis C. Fink

More on Starving Birds

Charles H. Blake of Hillsborough, N.C., graciously provides more information about birds without food. "A good many years ago," he writes, "J.A. Hagar, then State ornithologist in Massachusetts, undertook a detailed study of the Black Duck which winters commonly on the Massachusetts coast. He found that if — for various reasons — a bird lost a certain amount of weight, perhaps 30% of its original weight, it seemed to pass a point of no return. By that I mean that even if it was given food, it could not recover its weight and survive. Unfortunately, we usually don't have the opportunity to undertake such investigations."