



Berks Birds

Dec. 2024 to Feb. 2025

*Published by
the Baird Ornithological Club*

December 2024 – February 2025

Locations: Blue Marsh L. (**BML**), E. J. Breneman Quarry (**BQ**), Hawk Mt. Sanctuary (**HMS**), Kittatinny Ridge (**KR**), L. Ontelaunee (**LO**), Pheasant Valley Farm (**PVF**), Schuylkill R. (**SR**), Reading CBC (**RCBC**), Hamburg CBC (**HCBC**), Bernville CBC (**BCBC**).

The dry fall transitioned into a dry, open winter that was much colder than the mild winters of recent years. BML and LO were frozen from mid- to late January through February. The only significant snowstorm came in late January and dropped only about three inches of snow on some areas.

Waves of **Snow Geese** arriving around the turn of the year contributed to the record count of 19,725 on the BCBC 1/4. About 20,000 settled in the Oley Valley in January and thousands more in farmland to the east. Most moved on after the freezing of the lakes and quarries where they roosted.



The Ross's Goose at Bowers. January 7, 2025

- Photos by Todd Underwood

Just two **Ross's Geese** were scoped out of the vast white flocks, one in the Oley Valley 12/24 (AS) and one at Bowers 1/7 (TU, AF, CF).



Greater White-fronted Geese at Breneman's Quarry on February 14, 2025 - Photos by Brian Lineaweaver



A flock of 15–17 **Greater White-fronted Geese**, annual winter visitors, associated with Canada Geese at BQ 2/14-27 (BL, PM, AP, JR, ZS, et al.). As during most fall migrations, the only reported **Brant** were those seen flying over HMS. The flock of 180 Brant that passed North Lookout 12/3 was the largest yet seen there by the observer (MW), a seasoned counter. Five **Cackling Geese** were part of a mixed goose flock flying past HMS 12/2. One or two others were picked out of Canada Goose flocks at each of six places on various dates through winter. A **Snow X Canada Goose** was at BQ 2/14-23 (m.ob.). Avian influenza was thought to have killed at least 12 Canada Geese and several ducks at BQ around 1/26. Conditions were

ideal for the spread of the disease. The lakes had frozen and hundreds of waterfowl had crowded into the partly open quarry.

The feral **Mute Swan** population remains low by recent historical standards. Three were counted on the BCBC 1/4 and pairs were seen at two ponds this winter. A few southbound **Tundra Swans** were reported in December and early January, notably 75 flying over Shillington Park 1/1 (NW, GW). Those reported in February may already have been heading north, including 110 over Reading Airport 2/9 (JSp).



A Trumpeter Swan on the Schuylkill River resting with a flock of Canada Geese
January 23/2025. Photograph by Jason Kline

A **Trumpeter Swan**, still a rare visitor here, was photographed by a lucky few (JK, S&F) during its brief visit to the SR near Old Morlatton Village 1/23.

Counts of dabbling ducks were low in fall and remained so through winter. With BML and LO frozen, the late February migratory surge of ducks that occurred in recent mild winters was not apparent this year. Up to five wintering **Wood Ducks** were seen along the Tulpehocken Cr all season. Five **Northern Shovelers** at LO 12/8 (TU) were the only ones reported. Seasonal high counts of common dabblers sometimes seen in hundreds included 15 **Gadwall** at Moselem Springs 1/8 (P&JW), 12 **American Wigeon** on the RCBC 12/15, 75 **American Black Ducks** at Rte 662 quarry 2/26 (AS), nine **Northern Pintail** at BQ 2/26 (RK) and 18 **Green-winged Teal** at Adams Hotel Rd. 12/8 (TU). One or two **American Black Duck X Mallard** were among Mallards at BQ 1/26-2/23 (m.ob.) and one at Bernhart's Dam 2/28 (RH).

A female **Canvasback**, the least common Aythya, inconspicuously wintered among **Redheads** at BQ. Another was at Morgantown L 1/7-12 (m.ob.) and one at Big Spring Farm 2/15 (PM). The seasonal high count of the wintering Redheads at BQ was 15 on 2/23. Most **Ring-necked Ducks** were reported in December and January before the lakes froze. The biggest reported flock was of 194 at suburban Glen Oley pond 1/5 (JS). One to three **Greater Scaup** and one to 14 Lesser Scaup, normal winter numbers, were counted at BQ on various

dates. Single Long-tailed Ducks were at BQ 12/15 (MG) and BML 12/26 (RW). An unusually long staying **Long-tailed Duck** was at Scott's Run L, French Cr SP, 12/26-1/5 (m.ob.). There was no count of **Bufflehead** higher than three after mid-December. Three **Common Goldeneyes** seen on the SR 1/23 (BL) provided the winter high count.

Hooded Merganser peaked early with a flock of 123 at LO 12/8 (TU). A few wintered on the SR and Tulpehocken Cr. Somewhat larger numbers of **Common Mergansers** followed the same pattern. The only reported **Red-breasted Merganser** was on the SR 1/23 (S&F). The many December to February counts of the **Ruddy Ducks** that winter at BQ ranged from one to 63, with an average count of 11.

Wild Turkeys are currently more common in northern than in southern Berks, illustrated by counts of 12 on the RCBC 12/15 and 88 on the HCBC 12/28. A flock of 62 was in Albany Twp. 2/25 (HW), and a flock of 53 ate a lot of corn at a feeder on the KR near Bethel 2/14 (CC). No February count in southern Berks exceeded seven birds. The apparently static **Eurasian Collared-Dove** colony in Shartlesville gave visiting birders counts of one to three doves on various dates 12/10-2/26. One of those birds was counted on the BCBC 1/4. The two adult female **Rufous Hummingbirds** that appeared at feeders in October lingered into winter. The bird in District Twp. was last seen, still looking healthy and active, 12/26 (RK), having lived on sugar water slushies after a few 8-10F nights. The Douglassville bird, which had survived even colder temperatures with access to a heated feeder, was last seen 1/20 (LI).

Counts of the wintering **American Coot** flock at BQ usually listed well under 10 birds, but the number reached as high as 20. Fall's last big flock of 41 **Killdeer** was seen on the LO mudflats 12/8 (JS). The first reported **American Woodcock** of 2025 was displaying near Hamburg 2/28 (KG, MW). Flowing springs on six farms hosted one or two Wilson's Snipe this winter. Two **Least Sandpipers** on the LO mudflats 12/8 (JS) were the last pipers to leave.

Two **Bonaparte's Gulls** were at BML 12/11 (BL) and one was there 1/2 (RH). The peak winter count of 7,332 Ring-billed Gulls was recorded on the BCBC 1/4. The highest count of **Herring Gulls** was of 420 at BML 1/13. Most gulls left after BML froze later in January. Three **Great Black-backed Gulls** migrating over HMS 12/15 were considered unusual there. Normal winter counts of one to five GBBG were made at BML on various dates 12/15-2/26. A good count of 12 **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** was recorded on the BCBC 1/4. Eight LBBG were at the Conestoga Landfill, New Morgan 12/20 (FH). One to six, normal winter counts, were seen on several days at BML later in the season. An Iceland Gull was at Conestoga Landfill 12/20 (FH). The sole winter report of **Iceland Gulls** at BML was of two immatures 1/13 (RK, P&JW).

A **Pied-billed Grebe** wintered at BQ, a now annual occurrence. The only other Pied-billed that stayed past December was one on the SR 1/23-2/4 (JK, BL). One to six migrating **Horned Grebes** were reported on each of several days at BML and LO in December. One HOGF found a winter home at BQ 2/8-20 (m.ob.).

Northern Harriers reported at more than 20 places were mostly moving through. Managed grasslands at PVF, SGL 280 and Green Hills Preserve support voles and attracted harriers and other raptors all winter. The season's only **Rough-legged Hawk**, a light morph bird, was at PVF and nearby 12/25, 29 and 1/1 (BL, AP, MG, et al.). PVF is the most likely place to see this now rare winter visitor. **Bald Eagles** broke still another record when 28 were recorded on the BCBC 1/4. A **Short-eared Owl** was seen at Ammon Rd. wetland near Morgantown 12/7 (S&F). A wintering SEOW at PVF was only the second recorded on the BCBC and was seen again 1/23 (KH). Another was in Marion Twp. 2/9 (BL). One **Northern Saw-whet Owl** was heard on the RCBC 12/15 and three on the HCBC 12/28. A **Long-eared Owl** and two **Barn Owls** were counted on the HCBC 12/28, the only reports of these rare owls. **Red-headed Woodpeckers** were found on all three CBC's and later,

reflecting the growing breeding population. **Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers** were counted in above average or record numbers on the CBC's and remained common all winter.

The lack of snowcover enabled wintering by **American Kestrels**, but numbers remained low. For example, the count of 18 kestrels on the BCBC (Jan. 4, 2025) was only half the 40-year average number for that count. **Merlins** appeared on all three CBC's, including a record five on the HCBC 12/28. These falcons were reported at about 20 places, mostly in December. Birds returned to previously occupied wintering territories at BML, Laureldale (JB) and Wyomissing (LC). Late migrating **Peregrine Falcons** passed HMS 12/5, 6 and 1/1, all single birds. Reading's resident peregrines were counted on the RCBC 12/15. Outside the city, single birds spotted at four places during the winter may have been wanderers or the Reading birds on the hunt.

An **Eastern Phoebe** was found on the RCBC 12/15. Another was seen in Heidelberg Twp. 12/25, 26 and 1/1 (BL, RW, W&NW). A few **Fish Crows** wintering around BML and Reading were joined by a large influx of migrants in February. There were more early and mid-winter sightings of **Common Ravens** than of Fish Crows. A record 25 ravens were counted on the BCBC (Jan. 4, 2025). Irruptive **Black-capped Chickadees**, usually one to three per checklist, were widely reported, often at feeders. The January snowstorm brought a flight of northern **Horned Larks** well documented by longspur seekers. Flock size ranged from less than 100 to 600, and most vanished with the snow. The total number of **Red-breasted Nuthatches** reported this winter was 11, a small remnant of the minor fall irruption. A **Gray Catbird** was at Green Hills Preserve 12/1 (RH) and another in Albany Twp. 1/31 (HW). A catbird survived the cold winter in Reading by visiting a feeder 1/18-2/19 (SD). A record 427 **American Pipits** were counted on the BCBC (Jan. 4, 2025). Pipits were fairly widespread in farmland, but hard to see on bare ground.

Purple Finches were reported singly or in small, widely scattered flocks, some of which were seen on all three CBC's. These finches regularly or intermittently visited a few feeders. A flock of 12 at SGL 280 on 1/12 (BL) was the largest reported. The small **Pine Siskin** migration noted at HMS in fall continued into early winter, when four were seen at North Lookout 12/7 and 11 on 1/1. Four were at SGL 106, Pine Swamp Rd. 2/23 (JT). Only two were reported south of the KR, both in February. Winter's rarest finches were eight **Redpolls** seen at HMS on the HCBC 12/28.



A Lapland Longspur photographed near Fleetwood PA by Todd Underwood, January 2025

One to five **Lapland Longspurs** were seen in Marion Twp. and Fleetwood area farmland 12/22 till 1/25 (m.ob.). Most were seen along roadsides after the January snowstorm. Wintry weather to the north pushed a few Snow Buntings into the county, where they were more widespread in farmland than longspurs. Four appeared on the HCBC 12/28 and two on the

BCBC 1/4. Most checklists noted one to nine, all in December and January. The high count was of 16 near Hamburg 1/4 (KG).



White-crowned sparrow photograph by Brian Lineaweaver

Whether in mild or cold winters, **Chipping Sparrows** seem here to stay. Eight were found on the RCBC 12/15 and one on the HCBC 12/28. Seven other reports of one to four birds in the field or at feeders spanned the period. Perhaps the colder winter helped facilitate the best showing of **American Tree Sparrows** in years. That said, the numbers observed were far lower than the hundreds that might have been expected in the early 2000's. All three CBC's logged double digit counts. In productively seedy habitat at SGL 280, 16 were counted 1/19 and 27 on 2/2 (BL). Other flocks were smaller. **Fox Sparrows** continued their pattern of regular winter presence. One to four birds were found at each of 11 places, with records clustered in December and February, as in previous years. Few, if any, have been tracked through a whole winter. These sparrows behave more like facultative migrants than winter residents, moving south late (December birds) and north early (February birds) as food availability and weather allow.

Fewer **White-crowned Sparrows** than American Tree Sparrows were reported this winter. White-crowned Sparrows have declined in winter occurrence, illustrated by their history on the BCBC. This sparrow has been recorded during all 40 years of the BCBC starting in 1985. It was most common in the first 20 years. The high count was of 312 birds 1/1/2000 (the 1999 count). The 40-year average

count is 75. The last near average count was of 72 birds in 2014. The count on 1/4/25 was three, tying the record low. The cause of the decline is unknown. The open farmland/edge habitat favored by the birds in the count circle appears largely unchanged to human eyes. **Savannah Sparrows** live inconspicuously in wide open fields and may only be seen when snow cover drives them to forage on roadsides. That happened after the January snowstorm, when one to four were seen in Marion Twp. and the Fleetwood area, sometimes with larks and longspurs, 1/20-25 (m.ob.). The largest count was of 17 along snowy Pine View Rd. 1/21 (AW).



A Pine Warbler at Red Bridge 2/19/25 was on the ground gleaning bits of nutmeat from cracked black walnuts. Photographs by Brian Lineaweaver



Eastern Towhees have become winter regulars, one to four birds having been reported at each of 12 places during the period. Four towhees at French Cr SP 2/27 (S&F) were probably early migrants.

Continuing this report's unintentional see-sawing between increasing and decreasing species, we come to declining icterids. There were just two reports of **Eastern Meadowlarks**, one bird near Hamburg 12/19 (KG) and two in Marion Twp. 12/28 (BL). The only reported **Rusty Blackbird** was near Morgantown 2/15 (HH).

Pine Warblers have previously been documented in winter, but this was an exceptional year for them. One Pine Warbler seen at LO 12/15 (JS) was a rare find for the RCBC. Perhaps the same bird visited a feeder near LO 1/18 (DB). One intermittently visited a

feeder near Douglassville 1/19, 27 and 2/15 (JK). Two were seen at Red Bridge 2/7 (MA). One of the Red Bridge birds was photographed 2/19, 21 (BL) on the ground gleaning bits of nutmeat from cracked black walnuts. The 20 **Yellow-rumped Warblers** found on the HCBC 12/28 were in a single flock eating poison ivy fruits (MS). Six were seen on the RCBC 12/15. Besides those, there were typical winter sightings of single birds or small groups of yellow-rumps, mostly along the SR.

OBSERVERS: Rudy Keller, rckeller544@gmail.com, Matthew Auchter, Ed Barrell, Joe Beatrice, Dan Brennan, Brandon Brogle, Bracken Brown, Lucy Cairns, Chuck Cravotta, Susanne Dillman, Abbee Fries, Cheyenne Friscia, Laurie Goodrich, Mark Grebe, Kerry Grim, Frank Haas, Karen Hardy, Holly Hartshorne, Russ Hoffman, Jake Hudson, Linda Ingram, Jason Kline, Chris Langman, Brian Lineaweaver, Andy Price, Peter Montgomery, John Ruggles, Peter Saenger, Aaron Shirk, Mike Slater, Jacob Socolar, Zachary Spatz, Jo Spilde, Stollery & Flood, Jaime Thomas, James Trusky, Todd Underwood, Ron Wagner, Helen Weaver, Nelson Weber, Grace Weber, Warren & Nina Wolf, Peter & Jane Wolfe, Andy Wlasniewski, Matt Wlasniewski, Art Zdancewic.