

Subject: [cobirds] John Martin Reservoir Christmas Count results

Seventeen observers took part in the John Martin Reservoir Christmas Count on December 15th. We tallied 91 species, 15 to 20 below our average. This was due to the severe cold snap which impacted the region recently. The reservoir flash-froze last week. Five small holes in the ice remain, and are jammed with waterfowl, and diligent work by the reservoir team did a good job of finding every last bird and every last species on the count. On December 6th, many grebe species, 10 American White Pelicans and eight Double-crested Cormorants were counted (with Mark Peterson and Brad Steger).

Many gull species were present in the several thousands of gulls present, including double-digit Bonaparte's Gulls. By December 9th, the only pelicans on the lake were flash-frozen, white lumps in the glassy ice. They were easy to spot because predators were at every carcass. One carcass was attended by a bobcat and her nearly-grown kit for the next three days. On December 10th, a surviving Double-crested Cormorant was stuck a cormorant-sized hole in the ice, watched closely by two Bald Eagles. When the eagles left, the cormorant tried to escape, but one of its legs was frozen into the ice, and it couldn't leave the water.

On the 11th, a Pied-billed grebe swam in a hole in the ice the size of a bathtub. The grebe and hole in the ice were gone on the 12th. The bottom line is that there was a mass exodus of birds after the freeze. No one wants to think about it, but I would guess that hundreds of birds, possibly including all the pelicans, cormorants and grebes, did not make it out of the storm alive. The magnitude of the storm could be summed up with remaining gulls. Last year, we broke the extant Colorado Christmas Count with nine gull species (short-lived, as Pueblo Reservoir counted 10 species a couple of days later). This year, two gull species (and fewer than 30 individual gulls) remained. We missed Gadwall, Redhead, Canvasback and Red-breasted Merganser, most for the first time.

While waterbird numbers were down, landbird species and individuals were way up this year. Somehow, a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher present since November along the river below the dam survived to be counted. The highlight of the count was sparrows. We had eight species on count day, including two Fox Sparrows, two White-throated Sparrows, eight Swamp Sparrows and three Lincoln's Sparrows. These were all at locations I posted previously to cobirds. At least 10 observers got the visual feast of Fox Sparrows, White-throated Sparrows and Northern Cardinals at a hidden forest feeder. (A note to interested viewers: I had to battle railroad tracks, railroad maintenance workers, hunters, time taken from other activities, the cost of seed and expense of gas to feed these

birds, which repaid my diligence by disappearing unless I fed them twice a day. I have discontinued feeding them. They'll be ok with an unbelievable natural food source, but will be next to impossible to relocate now). Multiple observers saw and photographed the Swamp and Lincoln's Sparrows southeast of the road 19 Boat Ramp.

The back story of this summary is Count Week birds. We missed Wilson's Snipe on the Count. I had three today in the same unfrozen pool below the dam that we checked yesterday, along with a lone Rusty Blackbird (I had not seen one this fall until today). This is on the Arkansas just downstream from the Hasty Bridge. Upstream from the bridge, I looked for Killdeer again today as a count week bird, but instead found a Field Sparrow in the saltcedar trees on the north side of the river 100 yards west of the bridge. In total, there were six additional Count Week species, raising the area count to 97 species. The day before our count week officially started, I had a Brown Thrasher, Hermit Thrush and Killdeer, a total of 100 species.

This area is a sleeping giant. If all the stars aligned properly, a huge count of species would be possible, maybe up to 120 species. We may never top Pueblo Reservoir, but we will keep trying.

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