

A Little Chat About the CBC at Drexel Woods

By Rick Dutko

The 114th annual National Audubon Society - Princeton Christmas Bird Count began to look like the perfect storm of events. The forecast for Saturday included a winter storm called Electra with its low pressure system predicted to be in the Princeton area around the start time of the tally. I then got a call from fellow CBC birder Tom Cosmas who was under the weather himself and had to bail out on the event which he had steadfastly participated in for over a decade.

Fortunately the snow had stopped early on Saturday evening but the rain continued throughout the night and into the wee hours of Sunday morning. Start time temperature was a frigid 29 degrees. When I went to my vehicle in the driveway, it was encased in a layer of ice. I decided against the short drive to Drexel Woods and determined it would be safer to walk. As I crossed the frozen snow covered ground, my boots broke through the encrusted top layer with a loud crunching sound. "Great" I thought ... "this will put a damper on the strategy to stealthily survey the feather friends in the field and forest".

I consider myself an optimistic person. When I first heard of the miserable weather forecast I thought, "*this* could make for some good birding". It turned out to be just that.

Initially, the frozen forest was gray and quiet when I approached. I soon interrupted the silence with the weight of each step (*crunch, crunch, crunch*). I started at the northeast end of Drexel Woods. Once the birds became acclimated to my presence, the underbrush exploded in a flurry of activity. A mixed flock of white-throated sparrows and juncos were busy in the underbrush. Some of the ground birds quickly moved through the stratified layers of the forest towards the tree tops.

I had always heard that birds eat poison ivy berries. With the ground seemingly blanketed with snow, one of those small birds high in a tree caught my eye. It was another junco and it was on a cluster of poison ivy berries. This was clearly the obvious choice for a source of food in this winter wonderland. Less than five minutes later, a tufted titmouse was foraging for the shriveled morsels as well.

So the silver lining of coming out in the cold and dreary weather is seeing those wonders of wildlife happen right before your eyes. At one point I heard a bird scratching through the leaves, like I have heard so many times before. "Scratching through the leaves?" I mused. A white-throated sparrow had found a small 'lean to', a shelter of intertwined

A Little Chat About the CBC at Drexel Woods

By Rick Dutko

branches and twigs, under which were dried leaves, free of the snow and ice. It was a small haven to search for seeds and frozen invertebrates and the sparrow was oblivious to my presence.

Glancing upwards a Carolina chickadee hung upside down on the woody capsules of a sweet gum fruit, probing the small openings for seeds. A downy woodpecker hammered away on a broken, rotten tree branch, perhaps felled by the weight of the ice this morning.

Speaking of that ice, at one point the sun came out and it was a beautiful scene of glistening ice covered twigs, branches and bark. In the stillness, I could hear the cracking of the ice due to the sudden solar exposure; *pop, pop, pop!*

In a half hours' time, the ice was melting so quickly the droplets from the twigs and branches sounded like a rain shower. The ice that melted on the tree trunks meandered downwards like streams and rivulets flowing along the various channels and crevices of bark; each tree species with its own unique flow.

If the beauty of nature was not enough, I soon came to the grove of trees I expected to find Lucy, our beloved great horned owl mascot. As on cue, she flew silently and gracefully from an evergreen and through the deciduous forest. I watched her disappear into the forest and then heard an uproar of '*jeers*'. It sounded as if a dozen or more blue jays were harassing a different bird of prey and though I searched the evergreen vertically from underneath them, I found nothing but the band of energetic and excited blue jays hopping from branch to branch.

I headed out of the forest and into the open, bright field. I turned around and looked for the source of the commotion for the jays. There in the top of the Norway spruce, basking in the sunlight was Carl, Lucy's mate.

By now I had been out for nearly two hours; this had been the best Christmas Bird Count I had ever conducted. Well, there was the time that Tom and I had that bald eagle fly over this very field but that was a relatively poor day otherwise. I still needed to finish the grounds and field behind the nature center and northward through Drexel Woods. I didn't want to rush, but I needed to finish this survey soon. Little did I know that the birds, or rather *a* bird, would have it otherwise. It would take a full week to come to any type of closure.

A Little Chat About the CBC at Drexel Woods

By Rick Dutko

It started with a flock of white-throated and song sparrows, a few juncos and chickadees, and then *wham!* a brilliant flash of bright yellow contrasted with shimmering white. What was that I wondered? Olive green back ... eye ring, no wing bars warbler? at this time of year? Winter plumage? I quickly grabbed my point and shoot camera, snapped three photographs and tucked it away. 'One for the field guide once I get home ... no time right now' I thought.

The rest of the morning continued to provide nice numbers of the same species of birds I had already recorded. I finished the count just shy of four hours, about twice as long as Tom and I had done in all of our previous years. When I arrived home I peeled off the layers of clothes and settled down at the pc and uploaded the much anticipated photographs. 'Aw man!', they were all blurry; if I hadn't known there was a bird in the photographs that I took a few hours before, I would have sworn there was none in the photographs. 'Great, now what?' I thought. Oh well, it is just a single bird and maybe someone else will report it.

I forgot that I could check the CBC reporting form. It listed all of the possibilities, i.e. the species normally observed during the CBC. Unfortunately only the yellow-rumped warbler and the pine warbler were listed. I knew it wasn't the former and while the latter was a possibility, I did not think so. I noticed that on the bottom of the form were species recorded fewer than five times in the past 25 years. "These require an official report form with details and photos". In this list were several possibilities: the palm warbler, Nashville warbler, common yellowthroat and yellow-breasted chat. I quickly thumbed through three field guides, looking for these and anything else it could be. I narrowed it down to just two based upon the photographs and illustrations and the characteristics I had scribbled down in the field. It had to be either the relatively common pine warbler or the *rare* yellow-breasted chat. Based on those initial observations, I believed it was the chat. Upon further research I learned that the yellow-breasted chat had been recorded only twice in the one hundred and fourteen years of the Christmas Bird Count. I had to get this confirmed; the challenge was on!

The next week involved multiple emails going back and forth among the CBC leaders, myself and a few other birders. My blurry photograph of the '*flash of yellow and white*' was circulated and other birders recruited to descend on the nature center to confirm the *mystery bird*. I returned to the center on six occasions with several people and saw it only one more time, once again by myself. By this time, I was extremely confident of

A Little Chat About the CBC at Drexel Woods

By Rick Dutko

my identification but in order for the sighting to be official, I needed a better photograph *or* confirmation from someone else.

I provided detailed information about the sighting and habitat where I had seen the chat. Nearly a week later, a fellow birder confirmed the yellow-breasted chat along the edge of Drexel Woods in amongst the tangle of Japanese honeysuckle and Oriental bittersweet. It was only the third time this species had been recorded in over a century. It took nearly a week to confirm, but it was a rewarding conclusion to an exciting story that started with a pretty nasty storm. I am sure many people stayed indoors that day, and rightfully so. I was so happy that I stepped outdoors on that frozen morning and was able to walk to Drexel Woods; it turned out to be a memorable day for me!

[Authors note: the chat was still present two weeks after the CBC.]

Princeton Christmas Bird Count 2014 at the Lawrence Nature Center

Canada goose 375	turkey vulture 2	rock pigeon 6
mourning dove 18	great horned owl 2	red-bellied woodpecker 8
downy woodpecker 4	hairy woodpecker 1	northern flicker 5
blue jay 36	American crow 15	Carolina chickadee 5
tufted titmouse 7	Carolina wren 3	white-breasted nuthatch 1
American robin 40	song sparrow 8	white-throated sparrow 60
dark-eyed junco 53	northern cardinal 5	yellow-breasted chat 1