

Oakland Owlets' Christmas Bird Count at Orion Oaks

The Oakland Owlets families and friends gathered at Orion Oaks County Park in Orion Township on Saturday, December 20th to participate in the Oakland Bird Alliance's Christmas Bird Count (CBC). This year is the 126th year of the Audubon Christmas Bird Count. The Oakland Bird Alliance has been conducting the CBC near Lake Orion for the past sixty years.

A small but hardy group of thirteen met near daybreak in the Orion Oaks Dog Park. Benjamin Prowse and Matt Hackett, Oakland County Parks naturalists, greeted the group and shared information about Orion Oaks. The park is a large and diverse recreation area with a 90-acre lake, fields, forests, and wetlands. It is a popular place to walk, bike, fish and more. The dog park is one of the most visited canine playgrounds in the county.

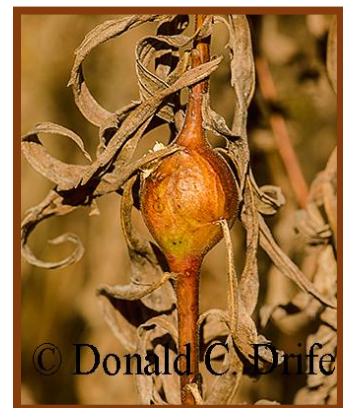
As the Owlets arrived, participants completed CBC paperwork before setting out the trails. It was a chilly morning with air temperatures at 15-degree Fahrenheit and wind speeds of 17 miles per hour or more. Everyone dressed to stay warm. Recent warm weather and rain along with subsequent freezing created a layer of ice over the trails and snow. Owlet families and friends proceeded cautiously onto the park trails.

Benjamin led the group west through Dog Park onto the trails. The group occasionally



stopped to scan the tree trunks and branches for bird activity. However, there was little movement in the trees. Bundled up with hats, scarves and hoods made it hard to hear the birds. High winds also muted bird calls. Along the wooded trail, we encountered some American Robins foraging on the forest floor plus Black-capped Chickadees and White-breasted Nuthatch moving in the trees.

Further down the trail, Ring-billed Gulls circled overhead, and American Crows cawed. Otherwise, there was little bird activity. Benjamin guided everyone to an access point along the trail to see Lake Sixteen. Along the way, Benjamin and Matt pointed out some deer, squirrel, and rabbit tracks in the snow. They also talked about Goldenrod and Oak Galls. These unique structures house insects which can provide protein meals in the form of larva for birds. The group was able to find several galls along the trail.



When the group arrived at the Lake Sixteen access point, everyone opted not to walk to the lake. The lake was completely frozen without any chance of seeing ducks. The group paused for a photo at a bench nearby. Then Benjamin led the group across an open field to return to the dog park. Everyone looked up searching for raptors, but only clouds drifted in the sky. The group found evidence of a bird kill. A scattering of dark feathers mixed with bright white tail feathers suggested that a Dark-eyed Junco had been preyed upon. We saw a Cooper's Hawk near the parking lot which was patrolling the park and the probable hunter.



As we made our way back over an open field, birds were mostly inactive. However, once we arrived at the edge of the lowland forest, a Pileated Woodpecker suddenly appeared, flitting among the trees. Everyone stopped. The Woodpecker moved in and out of sight. Circling to the backside of the tree made it hard to see. We also heard a Red-bellied Woodpecker nearby. It was fantastic to see the Pileated Woodpecker. The location was ideal habitat for woodpeckers with tree snags and larger hardwood trees.



As the group headed back to the parking lot, we saw a few more species along the trail, however, the list of species observed was low with only eleven species seen. The group gathered for snacks and drinks in the parking lot before departing. We thanked Benjamin and Matt for their time and expertise. Kathleen thanked the group for their participation in the CBC in Area #9 which is one of fourteen sections surveyed during the CBC. Everyone was invited to the CBC gathering at the end of the day. Additional checklists for the CBC for Area #9 recorded 27 species. A final total of 56 species were reported for the entire CBC area .



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