

WINTER BIRDS AT A CENTER CITY,  
PHILADELPHIA, LOCATION  
NOVEMBER 1966 — APRIL 1967

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From Nov. 22, 1966, to Apr. 28, 1967, a total of 123 half-hour observations was made on as many days at the Fairmount Dam on the Schuylkill River adjacent to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Most of these visits were stops made from 7:30 - 8:00 AM or 11:30 - 12:00 noon as I was on my way to work. The purpose of these observations was to correlate weather conditions with the numbers of gulls counted along a short distance of the river. The data from this gull study are still under analysis. Birds were counted only as far as they could be seen and readily identified from this one spot. Notes were kept on other birds seen in the museum area in addition to the gulls.

Usually there were numbers of Mallards and other waterfowl around the mud bank between the museum and Boat House Row on the east side of the Schuylkill. Because of its interference with boating activities, this island has now been dredged ("Schuylkill mud bank to be removed again," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Sept. 18, 1968, p. 35). Landbirds were generally scarce during the entire period of observation. The gulls tended to congregate at three places: on the dam during periods of relatively low water, on the rocks below the dam, which were frequently but irregularly exposed, and on the mud bank, especially if the water was high or the rocks were covered. During periods of very high water all of these places became unsuitable, and the only gulls to be seen then were scattered individuals flying along the length of the river or, less frequently, resting on rocky or concrete areas on the banks.

Brief annotations follow for each species observed during this period as well as for a few seen subsequently. A total of 44 species was seen. The highest species count was on Jan. 10 when 17 species were recorded. Sixteen species were seen on both Dec. 20 and 29. In November only eight visits were made. Statistics for this month have therefore been omitted in favor of months of more complete coverage.

**PIED-BILLED GREBE:** On 27 occasions one bird was seen: 12 times in Dec., none in Jan., 12 in Feb., twice in March, and once in April. Frequently this species was seen diving and presumably feeding. As an interesting behavioral sidelight, it is worth noting that one of these birds was seen on Dec. 14 as it attacked and drove away a group of five Ruddy Ducks from its favorite area close to the mud bank.

**HORNED GREBE:** One bird was seen on March 16 in full winter plumage.

(GREAT BLUE HERON) : None was seen during the study period, but in Aug. 1968 one was seen flying high over the Food Fair Building at 32nd and Market Streets.

CANADA GOOSE: On 14 days these birds were seen, the highest count being 38 on Dec. 28. More frequently they were encountered further upstream feeding on grass on either bank of the river adjacent to Peter's Island. In May, 1967, my wife, Liz, and I found three active nests on this island. From observations of the broods later that spring it became evident that at least four pairs successfully hatched young there. These birds appear to remain in the area all year. Although they are free flying, they are also quick to take handouts and are strangely unvocal in marked contrast to truly wild Canada Geese. The Peter's Island birds defended their nests in a most formidable fashion.

MALLARD: These common birds were seen on 108 out of 112 visits but were rather scarce during March and April, the high counts for these two months being only 24 and 5 as contrasted to Dec., Jan., and Feb. high totals of 177, 152 and 113 respectively. Mallards and the other dabblers fed actively and also rested on the mud bank, and could frequently be seen trading back and forth between there and the zoo. Less frequently they could be seen around the rocks below the dam, along the west bank of the river, or elsewhere. Many of these Mallards seemed to have close ties with the zoo.

BLACK DUCK: 37 times, 29 of them in Dec. and Jan., with highs of 5 on Dec. 22 and Dec. 28.

GREEN-WINGED TEAL: 1 female appeared on Dec. 10 and Dec. 13. In Dec., 1965 another lone female was seen with Mallards at another Fairmount Park location, Valley Green.

AMERICAN WIDGEON: A single pair turned up on six dates between Dec. 29 and Feb. 1.

WOOD DUCK: 26 times from Dec. 6 to Feb. 28. Males were always present in numbers equal to or greater than the females. High count of 16 on Dec. 22. Perhaps these birds originated from the zoo. Although I never saw any banded birds, their presence in winter seems peculiar otherwise.

(RED-CRESTED POCHARD) : 1 female was seen associating with the Mallards on 26 occasions from Dec. 8 to Apr. 17. Most likely this is a zoo bird, although it flew beautifully and was unbanded. It was also seen subsequently on July 4 and Dec. 11, 1967, as well as during the summer of 1968.

SCAUP (sp.): 1 male was seen diving on March 14 too far away to identify specifically.

COMMON GOLDENEYE: 1 female appeared on the river on Feb. 8. She was diving.

**RUDDY DUCK:** Ruddies were seen four times during Dec. from the 7th to the 14th, the high count being 11 on the 14th. They were also seen subsequently on Nov. 27 and Dec. 9, 1967.

**HOODED MERGANSER:** 1 male was seen on the river on Dec. 27. Earlier that month (date unrecorded) a pair was seen flying nearby from the Schuylkill Expressway at the Montgomery Ave. exit.

**OSPREY:** 1 migrant passing through on Apr. 17.

**SPARROW HAWK:** 1 on Apr. 21. It seems remarkable that these birds were not seen more frequently because they are regular visitants within the city. Fairly often they may be seen nearby from trains passing along the Penn Central tracks between 30th St. Station and the zoo. They also can be seen sometimes from the Schuylkill Expressway, and I have seen them many times over Powelton Village as well as on the Univ. of Penna. campus. They also appear in the rail area of the Reading Line just southeast of the Roosevelt Boulevard, and may turn up anywhere in the city.

**AMERICAN COOT:** 1 on Dec. 29 feeding and associating with ducks around the mud bank.

**GLAUCOUS GULL:** 1 first-year bird well seen in flight with Herring Gulls on Apr. 8.

**ICELAND GULL:** Single first-year birds were observed on Jan. 4, 24, 30, Feb. 11, 14, 23, and March 1. At least two different individuals were present. One bird had markings which were much stronger and more distinct than the other's. Both were observed at length with a 25x telescope in direct comparison with the three other common gull species.

**GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL, HERRING GULL AND RING-BILLED GULL:** Table 1 summarizes the monthly variation in abundance and frequency of occurrence among the three common gull species. The November totals were not averaged because of the few visits I made during that month. Great Black-backed Gulls were definitely commonest during Dec., Jan., and Feb. On Nov. 22, 23, 26, and 27 high totals of Herring Gulls were seen: 334, 327, 119, and 116 respectively. These large numbers aroused my interest in the area in the first place. The next highest total was 98 on Dec. 5. No explanation can be offered to account for these untypical totals at this time. However, Brady (1961-62) and Ulmer (1964) have traced other unusually large gull concentrations in the Philadelphia area to sudden increases in pollutants which result in large fish kills. During November I did not notice any fish kills in the study area. Otherwise, Herring Gulls were commonest during Dec. and Feb. Ring-billed Gulls became increasingly more common each month from Dec. to March. Both Great Black-backed Gulls and Ring-billed Gulls were irregular and scarcest during April, when Herring Gulls were also in lowest numbers.

Table 1

Monthly occurrence and abundance of three gull species on the Schuylkill River  
November-April 1966/1967

Month	No. Times seen/ No. Visits			Range in Abundance			Average No. When present		
	GBBG	HG	RBG	GBBG	HG	RBG	GBBG	HG	RBG
Nov.	4/8	6/8	6/8	1-1	60-334	1-30	—	—	—
Dec.	16/26	24/26	21/26	1-7	17-98	1-13	1.8	45	4.4
Jan.	11/21	21/21	20/21	1-4	1-61	1-24	2.5	21	6.4
Feb.	12/22	21/22	20/22	1-5	10-76	7-32	2.3	34	14.1
Mar.	17/24	24/24	21/24	1-4	3-70	2-105	1.3	29	33.3
Apr.	1/22	22/22	10/22	1-1	2-51	1-6	1.0	16	2.8
Total	61/123	118/123	98/123	1-7	1-334	1-105	—	—	—

**LAUGHING GULL:** Three times: Apr. 24, 26 and 28, two birds on each day. Subsequently laughers were seen several times during the summer of 1967.

**MOURNING DOVE:** Although these birds may be seen fairly frequently around the rail yards of the Penn Central and Reading lines as well as elsewhere all over the city, I saw them only three times during the study: 2 on Dec. 15 and 21, and 1 on Apr. 18.

**YELLOW-SHAFTED FLICKER:** 1 on March 27 and from 1-2 birds on six dates during April, undoubtedly migrants.

**YELLOW-BELLIED SAPSUCKER:** 1 on Apr. 15 and Apr. 21.

**DOWNY WOODPECKER:** 1 on Apr. 1, 8, and 20.

**BANK SWALLOW:** From 2-4 birds on Apr. 21, 25, 26 and 28.

**(ROUGH-WINGED SWALLOW):** During the summer of 1967 a pair of Rough-wings was seen regularly and may have nested in one of the crevices in the stone wall on the east bank of the river.

**BLUE JAY:** From 1-4 birds were seen on 59 occasions. Less in evidence in Jan., when they were only seen on 8 occasions compared with 14 in Dec. and 12 in Feb.

**COMMON CROW:** From 1-15 birds seen on 78 occasions. Commonest during Dec.

**(FISH CROW):** Although Fish Crows may frequently be seen and heard in nearby Powelton Village and the Univ. of Penna. area as well as in other parts of the city, such as Chestnut Hill, they were strangely absent from the study area.

**TUFTED TITMOUSE:** Single birds were found on Jan. 7 and 10 and March 29.

**MOCKINGBIRD:** From 1-4 on 39 occasions: 10 times in Dec., 11 in Jan., 9 in Feb., 4 in March, and 5 in Apr. Mockers may turn up almost anywhere in the city. In different parts of the city where I have lived or worked these birds seem to stay around all winter and then disappear as the warm weather comes.

The increase of Mockingbirds in the Delaware Valley has been going on for a long time and is a familiar phenomenon. It has been documented elsewhere (Reynard, 1952-53).

**BROWN THRASHER:** Single migrants on Apr. 19 and 20.

**ROBIN:** From 1-4 birds on five widely separated dates during the winter. This same winter several stayed around the Central (Logan Square) Branch of the Free Library and could possibly have been the same birds I saw. In March and April from 1-10 Robins were seen on 27 occasions. Robins appear in many parts of the city during winter in widely varying abundance, and often a few stay around even when the weather is at its worst. Some winters they seem completely absent. On March 1, 1969, I counted 3057 flying to a roost near Wyndmoor just outside the city limits (Armistead, 1968).

**STARLING:** In spite of nearby roosting areas such as City Hall, the Free Library and Court House, Girard Avenue Bridge, and elsewhere, only small numbers were seen here. They were scarcest during Feb. and commonest in March and April. From 1-16 birds on 84 occasions.

**PALM WARBLER:** The only warbler seen during the whole period was a single of this species on Apr. 25.

**HOUSE SPARROW:** These ubiquitous birds were seen 103 times in numbers ranging from 1-16. They were least in evidence in Jan.

**COMMON GRACKLE:** The first grackle arrived on March 13. From 1-12 were seen on 22 occasions, 6 during March, and 16 in April.

**CARDINAL:** Although resident in nearby Powelton Village and the Univ. of Penna. area, Cardinals were only seen on five days: once in Dec. and March and three times during April.

**COMMON GOLDFINCH:** 2 birds flew over high on Jan. 10.

**RUFOUS-SIDED TOWHEE:** This species was missed until a spring migrant turned up on Apr. 26.

**SLATE-COLORED JUNCO:** 5 times as follows: 1 on Jan. 10, 1 on Feb. 8, 2 on Feb. 9, 1 on Feb. 14, and 1 on Apr. 24.

**CHIPPING SPARROW:** 2 chippies were present on Apr. 24.

**FIELD SPARROW:** This bird was not seen until well into the spring migration, when seven were present on April 26 and 6 the following day. On the former date I heard one of these birds give seven times a weak, colorless trill which sounded just like a Palm Warbler.

**WHITE-THROATED SPARROW:** From 1-4 White-throated Sparrows were seen on four occasions during Dec. They were not seen again until the spring migration in Apr. when from 1-4 birds were counted each day from Apr. 24-28.

**SONG SPARROW:** Songs were present on 62 visits from Dec. 20 to the end of the study period. The top count was six. They were scarce in Feb., when no more than two were seen on only eight days as compared with ranges of 1-5 on 18 days in Jan. and 1-2 on 18 days in March.

**COMMENTS:** I doubt whether any great universal truths emerge from these observations. At the very least, however, they may encourage some Club critics who despair over "local notes", which may attract records from the Gaspé to Trinidad. Delaware Valley residents should be encouraged to report in writing the birds they see in the immediate area of the city. Most of these Schuylkill River birds are commonplace enough, but it nevertheless seems surprising what an extended look at an urban locality may reveal. It is a treat to see "white-winged gulls" anywhere at this latitude. However, the overwhelming scarcity of the majority of species seems to be a fair indicator of the sparsity of wildlife in the urban environment. Even Starlings and House Sparrows were not seen in numbers exceeding 16 in over 120 visits! More records should be kept on the occurrences of birds in strictly urban settings.

#### LITERATURE CITED

- ARMISTEAD, HENRY T. (1968) "A winter Robin roost in Philadelphia," *Cassinia*, General Notes Section, this issue.
- BRADY, ALAN (1961-1962) "A concentration of gulls along the central Delaware River," *Cassinia*, v. 46, p. 24.
- REYNARD, GEORGE B. (1952-1953) "Nesting Mockingbirds in the lower Delaware Valley," *Cassinia*, v. 39, p. 27-32.
- ULMER, FREDERICK A., JR. (1964) "An unusual gull concentration on the Schuylkill River," *Cassinia*, v. 48, p. 36.

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#### SPECIAL REQUEST

The New Jersey State Museum plans to publish a book dealing with the birds of Island Beach State Park, New Jersey. We would therefore appreciate receiving any records (qualitative and quantitative) of birds observed on the island except netting records (which are available to us). Winter and summer information is especially needed. Please forward information to: Donald S. Heintzleman, Bureau of Research, New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, N.J. 08625.