

# Birding at Home in October, 2003

Frank Windfelder

I have a modest home in the middle of a subdivision in Philadelphia. I have extensively planted my one-third of an acre for wildlife, and I can see the sky over Northeast Airport, which is about one mile to the north. There are no bodies of water nearby, so it is almost impossible to see such things as ducks and shorebirds.

A number of years ago, I decided to keep a monthly list of the birds that I could see from here. This has resulted in some unusual finds over the years. I have had 50 or more Common Redpolls during two different winters and a bull male Dickcissel in my crabapple tree one September, while an immature Golden Eagle and 11 Tundra Swans flew over during one memorable October. I have observed 131 species of birds at home since 1981. My rule is that I will count birds which are not on my property, as long as I am standing on my property when I observe them.

For some reason, October has always been my best month, so in 2003 I decided to see if I could break my monthly property record of 53 species set in October 1999. I hadn't seen many good birds here during the summer months, but somehow I knew that when the calendar turned to October, the birding ghosts and goblins would scare a lot of goodies my way.

My intuition proved correct. To start, I knew I had to get Gray Catbird and Chimney Swift at the beginning of the month, but they proved easy. Much more exciting was a nicely plumaged Cape May Warbler in an Eastern Hemlock in my garden. I also added Scarlet Tanager, Yellow Warbler and Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. I had 18 species at the end of the first day and the rout was on.

The following day had light northwest winds, and I quickly added Sharp-shinned Hawk and the first of four Ospreys that I was to see in the month. The shock came when I spotted an adult Bald Eagle heading due north, for some unknown reason. Two minutes later, a second adult followed on the same path. After adding Red-tailed Hawk and Merlin, I had 26 species.

I observed the first of only six American Crows for the month on the 3<sup>rd</sup>. I had seen none here during

the breeding season. I also added Eastern Wood-Pewee on that day, and my first White-throated Sparrow of the fall on the 5<sup>th</sup>. An adult Broad-winged Hawk passed low over my house, the only one I was to see during the entire fall. Where were they?

On October 7<sup>th</sup>, I found Red-eyed Vireo and Wood Thrush, both amazingly late in the season, particularly the vireo. I had 37 species.

In the late afternoon of the 8<sup>th</sup>, an immature female Northern Harrier drifted over, along with an American Kestrel on the following day. I had seen four different Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers since the beginning of the month. They could easily be found on an ornamental Washington Hawthorne tree in my garden. The trunk of that tree looked like a pincushion. I added Cooper's Hawk and a female Eastern Towhee on the 17<sup>th</sup>. I now had 47 species.

I had my first of several Ruby-crowned Kinglets on the 20<sup>th</sup>, and a very late Barn Swallow on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. On the 23<sup>rd</sup>, I added my 52<sup>nd</sup> species for the month, an adult Golden Eagle, kept low by the 80% cloud cover!! I have to shake my head sometimes at the variety of raptors that I get.

While checking my garden on the morning of the 25<sup>th</sup>, I was startled as an American Woodcock flushed from a ground area covered with English Ivy. Talk about serendipity! Later that day, I found a Hermit Thrush feeding on Pokeweed berries right in front of my patio. I now had 54 species, breaking the record by one. My 5<sup>th</sup> Yellow-bellied Sapsucker of the month proved to be a one-day wonder. However, the diggings of this beautiful adult male attracted a hungry Ruby-crowned Kinglet, which was feeding on the sap and the insects it attracted. I have observed this behavior many times over the years.

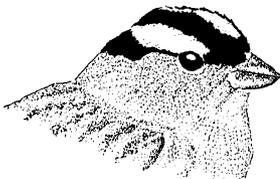
It seemed like the law of diminishing returns should kick in, but when I checked my records for October, 1999, I discovered that I was still missing about ten species that I had seen then, including - *gasp* - Carolina Chickadee!! Do I need to get my vision and hearing checked? It used to be a daily occurrence.

On the cloudy morning of the 26<sup>th</sup>, I heard a Red-breasted Nuthatch calling from a Colorado Spruce across the street, and then watched its silhouette fly

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to a nearby Eastern White Pine, where I got a better look. When it flew back to the spruce tree, I noticed a male Dark-eyed Junco there. I now had 56!

The following morning, in the tree above my patio, I saw an immature White-crowned Sparrow which must have been grounded by the overnight rain. A large raptor with the size and wing shape of a Peregrine Falcon zoomed low over the roof of my house. The sighting was too quick, and all I saw was a silhouette, so I decided to let that one go. However, I was rewarded for my honesty when adult Red-shouldered Hawks flew by on the 28<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup>.



*White-crowned Sparrow by Adrian Binns*

I had seen 58 species for the month, but not even one chickadee! Nevertheless, I am already planning some changes to my garden to prepare for the assault next October.

I hope this article will encourage others to try the same thing. It certainly gives you a good feeling for which species are doing well, and which are not, even though the evidence is anecdotal. For example, the dearth of crows and chickadees makes me wonder what effect West Nile Virus has had on these species. Also, I have seen no rebound in the House Finch population after the conjunctivitis epidemic of the last few years. Instead of a flock of fifty in my garden, I now feel lucky if I see three.

Conversely, I can see that Carolina Wrens did not take such a big hit from last winter's extreme cold, because I see them on my property and in nearby Pennypack Park with some regularity. Remember the winter of severe ice storms a number of years ago? Their food supply was locked in, and the population was almost completely decimated locally at that time. On October 26<sup>th</sup>, I saw a large flock of 150 House Sparrows feeding on my neighbor's lawn. I think I can say facetiously that they are in no danger of losing their foothold in this country.

I urge you to try this on your own property. It's challenging and fun, and you will learn.

Table 1 Chronological List of Birds Seen in October 2003

Species	Date of first sighting
Common Grackle	Oct. 1
Northern Mockingbird	
Mourning Dove	
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	
Gray Catbird	
Northern Cardinal	
House Sparrow	
Northern Flicker	
American Robin	
Blue Jay	
Red-bellied Woodpecker	
European Starling	
Scarlet Tanager	
Cape May Warbler	
House Finch	
Yellow Warbler	
Rock Pigeon	
Chimney Swift	
Osprey	Oct. 2
Sharp-shinned Hawk	
American Goldfinch	
Red-tailed Hawk	

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Table 1 (continued) Chronological List of Birds Seen in October 2003

Bald Eagle	
Merlin	
Turkey Vulture	
Red-winged Blackbird	
American Crow	Oct. 3
Eastern Wood-Pewee	
White-throated Sparrow	Oct. 5
Broad-winged Hawk	
Canada Goose	Oct. 6
Cedar Waxwing	
Brown-headed Cowbird	
Common Yellowthroat	Oct. 7
Carolina Wren	
Red-eyed Vireo	
Wood Thrush	
Ring-billed Gull	Oct. 8
Northern Harrier	
Mallard	Oct. 9
Tree Swallow	
American Kestrel	
Yellow-rumped Warbler	
Song Sparrow	
Herring Gull	Oct. 13
Cooper's Hawk	Oct. 17
Eastern Towhee	
Downy Woodpecker	Oct. 18
Great Black-backed Gull	
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	
Barn Swallow	Oct. 22
Golden Eagle	Oct. 23
American Woodcock	Oct. 25
Hermit Thrush	
Red-breasted Nuthatch	Oct. 26
Dark-eyed Junco	
White-crowned Sparrow	Oct. 27
Red-shouldered Hawk	Oct. 28

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*Editor's note:* Frank decided to try the same thing in October 2004, invested even more time, and found 65 species. Yellow-breasted Chat and Black-capped Chickadee were great finds. Black Vulture, rare in NE Philadelphia, was a first for his property. There were flocks of Double-crested Cormorants and Snow Geese migrating overhead, along with a single Golden Eagle.