

WINTER BIRD SURVEY 2005

By Jenny Thom & Mark Howerly

HELP BIOLOGISTS TRACK POPULATION TRENDS in Oklahoma's winter birds by selecting two days between Thursday, Jan. 12 and Sunday, Jan. 15 to take part in the Department's annual Winter Bird Survey. Oklahomans have watched and recorded the birds at their feeders for the past 18 years, and that collective data helps state biologists track upward and downward trends of species and provides a heads-up to biologists about potential conservation issues.

Biologists at the Wildlife Department have reviewed last year's results and discovered participation increased by 33 percent as 539 locations watched and recorded winter birds during last sea-



Last year 80 percent of the participants in the winter bird survey reported the beautiful goldfinch at feeders.

son's mild winter. Tallied reports shook out with the American goldfinch on top, once again. A total of 8,402 goldfinches reportedly appeared at 80 percent of the feeding stations in Oklahoma.

Although ranking number one for quantity of recorded individuals, the goldfinch was not the most frequently seen bird during the survey. That victory goes to the striking cardinal. In spite of the fact that half as many cardinals (4,365) were reported as goldfinches, 93 percent of participants saw a cardinal at their feeders. Goldfinches may travel in large flocks, but the solitary cardinal is more widespread across the state.

Populations of house finch and mourning dove continued to increase, indicating both of these species are adapting well to urban feeder locations. In 1999, the mourning dove was not one of the top 10 species seen, but it ranked sixth in both 2004 and 2005. Numbers of reported house finch moved up two spaces from 2004 to total fifth most seen in 2005.

Other species doing well in Oklahoma's urban and suburban feeder habitats are the Eurasian collard dove, Inca dove and white-winged dove.

Winter Bird Survey participants had been recording these species as write-ins for several years. After noting a constant increase in annual reports, biologists officially added the Eurasian collared dove to the survey in 2004 and the Inca dove in 2005.

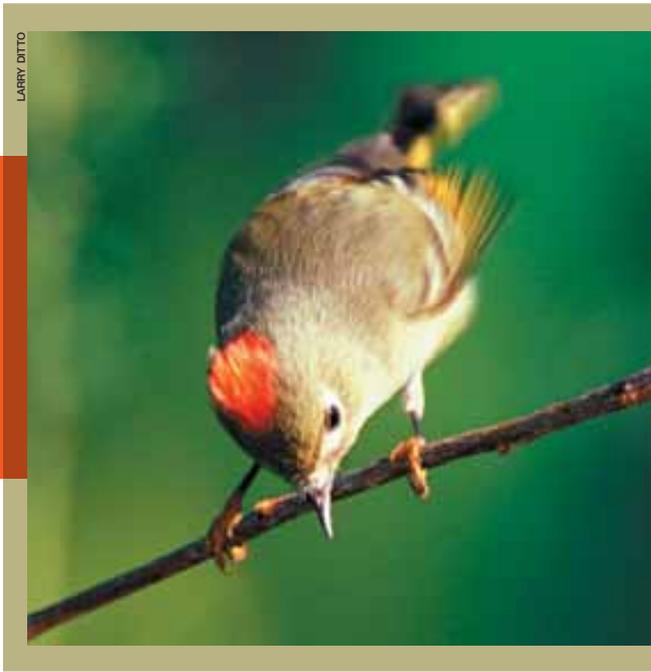
Having migrated from the Bahamas to the Florida coast in the early 1980s, biologists estimate the Eurasian collared dove first appeared in Oklahoma no more than 10 years ago. In 2002, six counties reported seeing 13 individuals. By 2004, 26 counties recorded a total of 453 birds. Easily adapting to urban environments, biologists have expected the Eurasian collared dove's population to continue to increase.

Survey results from 2005 reported a total of 414 Eurasian collard doves. While that is fewer individuals than recorded in 2004, those sightings came from

nine new counties to total 35 counties altogether. This indicates this bird's range is expanding. Although the collective total of individuals was slightly lower than in 2004, it is likely the population size is on the expansion, as well. Naturally occurring food supplies are good during mild winters, like in 2005. During such times, groups of flocking birds tend to be smaller, which could account for the reduction in overall numbers of Eurasian collared doves reported.

The Inca dove was added to the survey's watch list last year. Write-in recordings during 2004 reported 32 birds from seven counties. That number soared in 2005 to participants from 25 counties recording a total of 123 birds.

The Inca dove is expanding northward from Texas, and as expected by the state's biologists, many of the sightings came from counties along the Red River, which runs the border between Oklahoma and Texas. However, there was an urbanized pocket of 25 Inca doves reported in Oklahoma, Tulsa and Cleveland counties. This further demonstrates the



The mild winter may account for the unusual rise in reported Ruby-crowned kinglets. Ruby-crowned kinglets seem to be attracted to backyard shrubbery and foundation plantings, especially evergreens such as hollies and junipers. The species is one of the smallest songbirds that winters in Oklahoma and it feeds almost exclusively upon insects and insect eggs that it finds on tree branches and leaves. Kinglets appear at feeder locations because, although sometimes solitary, they often travel in small mixed-species flocks with chickadees, titmice and nuthatches. Some kinglets learn to forage at suet feeders and may be seen accompanying other small birds that visit seed feeders.

adaptability of the dove species to urban habitats. The white-winged dove, although not officially added to the survey, also continues to appear as write-in accounts. This dove is also expanding north out of Texas and appearing in low numbers in Oklahoma and Arkansas. Its population appears to be expanding at a slower rate than the other new Oklahoma doves. Six counties reported seeing 35 white-winged doves in 2005. Compared with 2004 reports of five birds from four counties, the population increase is significant.

A Closer Look at Oklahoma's Wrens

One write-in species that was seen in unusually large numbers last year was the Ruby-crowned kinglet. In most years, four to eight of these tiny birds are reported. In 2005, 25 Ruby-crowned kinglets were reported at 22 feeding stations across the state. Oklahoma's mild winter was the most likely reason for the relatively high frequency of kinglet observations.

Dark-eyed juncos are nomadic birds and may not return to the same place each winter. For that reason, the species' population levels vary greatly from year to year. Relative to past years, dark-eyed juncos had a strong winter season in Oklahoma. They came in as the second most numerous bird species recorded during the 2005 survey, which is a considerable increase from being the fifth most commonly seen bird in 2004.

Several other unusual birds were seen by survey participants in 2005, including several chipping sparrows and wild turkeys; small numbers of ladder-backed woodpeckers, rufous-crowned sparrows, orange-crowned warblers, vesper sparrows, lincoln sparrows, and red crossbills; and individual sightings of brown-headed nuthatch, Baltimore oriole, black and white warbler, Smith's longspur and common redpoll.



Surveys return each year with general biology and identification questions about birds seen during the survey. Certain species seem particularly difficult to differentiate, especially for someone who may be newly tuned into birding. The wrens, energetic and petite brown birds with short upright tails, are a grouping that can cause a bit of confusion.

What Wrens Eat

All wrens forage close to the ground and are usually found searching for insects and spiders in leaf litter under trees, or in thickets and brush piles. Being insect-eaters, wrens rarely visit seed feeders. When wrens do drop in at feeders holding seed, they are most likely searching for insects that settle between the seeds and the hulls.

Wrens do enjoy suet feeders, however, and have also been recorded feeding on peanut butter, chopped apple, chopped pecans, and miracle meal (a mix of 1 part lard, 1 part peanut butter and 3 parts corn meal).

Which Wren is it?

Survey participants reported four wren species during the 2005 survey period: the Carolina wren, Bewick's wren, house wren and winter wren. All are small. All are brown. All have a narrow and slightly down-curved bill. Upon closer examination, subtle differences in color, tail-shape and behavior will begin to emerge.

There are four additional species of wren in Oklahoma: the canyon wren, rock wren, marsh wren and sedge wren. It would be quite rare to see any of these species at backyard feeders. They occur in specific and localized areas of the state and live in specialized habitats such as mountains and marshes.

Carolina Wren

If there's a wren in an Oklahoma yard, it will most likely be a Carolina wren. Thirty-two percent of survey participants reported seeing one or more during the 2005 survey. Carolina wrens do not migrate long distances and tend to remain in the same area year-round. Often,

TOP 10 MOST COMMONLY SEEN BIRDS AS RECORDED AT 539 FEEDER LOCATIONS

	Numbers Reported	Percentage of Households
1. American Goldfinch	8,402	80%
2. Dark-eyed Junco	5,609	84%
3. House Sparrow	4,551	62%
4. Northern Cardinal	4,365	93%
5. House Finch	2,881	67%
6. Mourning Dove	2,637	60%
7. Red-winged Blackbird	2,510	27%
8. Carolina Chickadee	1,841	75%
9. European Starling	1,767	36%
10. Harris's Sparrow	1,562	37%

breeding pairs maintain their pair bond through the winter months, and pairs may travel and forage together. As a result, they are often seen as pairs visiting feeders and backyards.

At nearly the size of a sparrow, this is Oklahoma's largest wren. Its head, back and tail have rich, reddish-brown coloration and its breast and belly are a soft cinnamon color. Its relatively large head has a white or cinnamon-tinged stripe above each eye.

Because Carolina wrens are sedentary, they are vulnerable to severe weather events such as heavy snowfall and ice storms. During the severe winters of the late 1970s, Carolina wren numbers were

unusual to find this wren in the open prairies and agricultural lands of the panhandle or in the heavily forested portions of eastern Oklahoma.

Winter Wren and House Wren

The two remaining wren species are far less common and are found over a smaller portion of the state. A very small percentage of each species were seen during the 2005 survey period. Three feeder watchers from the eastern part of the state recorded four winter wrens. Four feeder watchers from the southern Oklahoma counties recorded four individual house wrens.

The winter wren is Oklahoma's smallest wren. Its most distinguishing characteristic is a very dark chocolate-brown coloration on the upper half of its body and many fine, dark bars on its belly, tail and wings. It has a very short tail and short, thin bill. Unlike the Carolina and Bewick's wrens, the eye stripes are faint and brownish in color.

Winter wrens do not nest in Oklahoma,



Carolina wrens are widespread in Oklahoma and can be found in all counties except for the panhandle and the western tier of counties in the main body of the state. They are most commonly found in forested habitats, thickets and woodlands.

greatly reduced across the state due to prolonged snow and ice, but since that time their populations have increased and recovered.

Bewick's Wren

Seen by 12 percent of 2005 participants, the Bewick's wren (pronounced "buick's") is the second most commonly reported wren species. Bewick's wrens may be seen in pairs during the winter, but are most often solitary. It is slim and streamlined with a relatively long tail. The head, back and tail is a medium brown, while the throat, breast and belly are pale gray to white in color. Like the Carolina wren, the Bewick's wren has a stripe on each side of the head above the eye. However, the stripes of the Bewick's wren tend to be a brilliant white color. Each long tail feather is tipped with white and several fine, black bars run across the width of the tail.

Bewick's wrens may be found in thickets and woodlands statewide during the winter. It would be



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but instead breed in forests in Canada and the mountains along the Pacific Coast. In Oklahoma, they are found only during the winter months and primarily occur in the eastern half of the state in heavily forested bottomlands within ravines and along streams. They may be solitary or found in small groups, and are almost always found near the ground and near the cover of brush or rocks.

House wrens nest in Oklahoma during the summer months, and they are becoming increasingly common in urban and riparian habitats in north central and northwestern Oklahoma during nesting season. During the winter, however,

most house wrens migrate to the Gulf Coast states, Mexico and Central America. Especially during mild winter years, a few solitary house wrens may successfully spend the winter in Oklahoma.

The house wren is a plain, brown wren. Its head, back, tail, breast and belly are a soft grayish-brown. Its tail is a moderate length, but lacks the white marking found in the Bewick's wren. Like other wren species, it has fine dark barring on its wings and tail feathers, but not on its belly and sides (as is the case in the winter wren). It lacks a noticeable stripe above each eye, but has a light-colored ring around each eye. 🌿

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