

The 2021 Christmas Bird Count (CBC) at Reserva Las Gralarias (RLG)

By Jane A. Lyons

As I was peering through the increasingly heavy rain, through fogged-up glasses, foggy binoculars and with a totally uncooperative Covid mask, trying to see a bird in the canopy of distant trees, I thought “Why do we do this?” Finally, I saw the large toucan first spotted earlier and closer by my fellow CBC birders and identified as a Yellow-throated Toucan (*Ramphastos ambiguus*). This was a toucan on RLG’s uppermost Santa Rosa property at 2270 m (7448 feet) elevation, a wide-ranging toucan from the lowlands and a very good record for our CBC.

Soaked but happy I thought about the CBCs I had done for many years in Austin, and my brain recalled my ‘worst-ever’ CBC. Beginning in 1982, I birded and counted all over the Austin area, mostly in the southeastern zone until I joined the CBCs by canoe on the Colorado River. Those 7 years of CBCs by canoe were often arduous, trying to keep the canoe steady while counting hundreds of Yellow-rumped Warblers plus many other species and hoping to avoid the duck hunters hiding along the riverbanks. Even after the cold and soggy toucan episode, I decided my absolute worst CBC was the one in Austin where we faced a hurricane force frigid headwind as we canoed down the river, totally unable to count much other than our lucky stars when by late-afternoon we finally landed at the take-out point.

Well, at least during more than a decade I helped add data to the Bird Records Committee of Austin’s Travis Audubon Society. Nowadays we put the CBC data on eBird. So, if anyone wants to see our full 2021 RLG CBC list, you can check it out on eBird. We counted a total of 112 species for RLG.

Best records beyond the toucan was a rain-soaked Broad-winged Hawk also at 2270 m elevation (one of two individuals on the count), 3 Blackburnian Warblers ranging from our lowest elevation to our highest elevation, the upper zone female being found in the exact same place as last year. Also, 1 Swainson’s Thrush and both a Cloud-forest Pygmy-Owl and a Colombian Screech-Owl. It was a very poor number of migrant passerines this year, no doubt due in some part to our bad viewing weather. CBC photos below.



Searching for the elusive toucan

Photo by Jane A. Lyons



Cloud-forest Pygmy-Owl drying out and warming up in the morning. Photo by Milton Delgado



The cold weather during the CBC brought many hummers to our feeders, including this tiny female Booted Racket-tail managing to share a feeder spout with the large aggressive male Violet-tailed Sylph. Photo by Jane A. Lyons



A very cooperative Wattled Guan right overhead with its yellow wattle barely visible.



Broad-winged Hawk drying its wings in a tree full of orchids

Photos by Milton Delgado



Broad-winged Hawk at 2270 m elevation seeming to overwinter at RLG, as do migrant Upland Sandpiper and Blackburnian Warbler all in this same zone of the reserve, and this year all observed within a half-mile of each other.

Photo by Milton Delgado

We saw all 3 species of guan (Crested, Wattled and Sickle-winged) found at the reserve. This is notable as the guan populations have clearly increased at RLG now that hunting of the birds and their eggs no longer happens and the large zones of good habitat that they need have expanded. We also found 3 species and multiple individuals of hawks (Barred, Roadside, Broad-winged), as well as 15 species of hummingbird, 11 individuals of Plate-billed Mountain-Toucan at all of our sites (another species that is growing its population at RLG) and 4 species of antpitta including an amazing 10 individuals of Moustached Antpitta and 19 individuals of Yellow-breasted Antpitta all at our lower and mid-elevation sites. Primarily at our lower elevations we found 13 species of Furnariids (ovenbird family) and 10 species of flycatcher. Good sightings included 3 individuals (2 males and 1 female) of Andean Cock-of-the-rock and 2 individuals of the always surreptitious cotinga Olivaceous Piha. We saw and heard 22 individuals of Gray-breasted Wood-Wren at all elevations, 17 individuals of Sharpe's (Sepia-brown) Wren at the mid-and lower elevations, 1 individual each of Beautiful Jay and Turquoise Jay at mid-elevation, plus 5 species of thrush at mid-lower elevations. Even though they are busy nesting we still saw 6 species of warbler and 8 species of tanager.

Another highlight of our CBC was a rarely seen (and never videoed) Andean Weasel crossing the road in front of the car.

Video clip by Milton Delgado



So, in spite of my complaints about the cold, rain and fog, it was a fun and successful 2021 CBC at Reserva Las Gralarias. Why do we do these CBCs? Because they are exciting and interesting!



More intrepid birders at RLG during the holidays

Photo by Jane A. Lyons