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Birding Briefs



Deformed beaks on birds in Alaska, Christmas Bird Count insights, and photos of rare-bird sightings

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Beak deformities mar Alaska's chickadees, other birds

Something is going terribly wrong with populations of Black-capped Chickadees, Northwestern Crows, Red-breasted Nuthatches, and other birds in Alaska, British Columbia, and Washington.



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According to biologists with the U.S. Geological Survey's Alaska Science Center, more than 6 percent of adult Black-capped Chickadees and almost 17 percent of adult Northwestern Crows in Alaska are developing grossly overgrown and often crossed beaks every year (above).

The prevalence of the chickadees' deformities is more than 10 times what scientists would expect to occur normally in a wild bird population. The rate among the crows is more than 30 times the background level.

"Together, the prevalence of beak abnormalities in adult Northwestern Crows and that in Black-capped Chickadees in Alaska represent the highest rate of gross deformities ever recorded in wild bird populations," write Caroline Van Hemert and Colleen M. Handel in the October 2010 issue of *The Auk*, the quarterly journal of the American Ornithologists' Union.

The researchers have not been able to determine the origin of the deformities, which can be caused by environmental contaminants, nutritional deficiencies, and bacterial, viral, fungal, or parasitic infections.

But the scientists are clear about the meaning: "The sudden appearance of a large geographic cluster of morphological abnormalities in a wildlife population," they write, "can be an early sign of a much larger underlying ecological problem."

Birds with deformed beaks have difficulty foraging, so they linger at feeders, where they become susceptible to predation. Affected birds also have trouble preening, so their plumage grows dirty and matted and consequently fails to insulate properly. As a result, write the researchers, birds with beak deformities disappear suddenly when the weather turns cold.

Christmas count finds shifts in birds' ranges

Several North American bird species are in the midst of range expansions and population changes, according to the official summary of the 2009-10 Christmas Bird Count published by the National Audubon Society.

Range expansions: Eurasian Collared-Dove was recorded for the first time on an Alaskan count and hit new highs in Minnesota, Iowa, and Alberta. California Quail has expanded to the east and is being found in large numbers in Montana. Lesser Goldfinch appears to be moving north and east into Utah and Wyoming. And Broad-winged Hawks in coastal Louisiana and Brown Pelicans in coastal Oregon are both wintering far north of their usual ranges.

Notable declines: Gray Partridge and Northern Bobwhite numbers are down in most places. American Kestrel hit all-time lows in New York and New Jersey. In the core area of the recent drought in Texas, common species such as Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Carolina and Bewick's Wrens, and Northern Cardinal fell sharply.

New high counts: Anna's Hummingbird set a record in British Columbia with 1,074 birds. Short-eared Owls hit new highs in Indiana (129) and Missouri (103). Records in Georgia included White Ibis (3,093), Tricolored Heron (986), and Wood Stork (547). And a single count circle in Concord, Massachusetts, established a new national high for Dark-eyed Junco: 9,562 birds.

Taiga Bean-Goose, Townsend's Warbler, and more rare bird sightings.

Photo gallery of recent rare-bird sightings



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