

Highlights from Feb 20 Bird Walk at South Platte Park

Chuck Aid. February 21, 2021 :

Red-breasted Merganser (c) Mick Thompson

On Saturday we managed to catch a very nice day weather-wise and saw some great birds. As I am sometimes wont to do, I like to start by thinking about what birds we didn't see. We missed getting to see (or hear) any Great Horned Owls, Downy Woodpeckers, Blue Jays, White-breasted Nuthatches, American Robins, American Tree Sparrows, White-crowned Sparrows, Dark-eyed Juncos, Red-winged Blackbirds, House Finches, or American Goldfinches. There are, of course, numerous other species that we whiffed on, but these are all species that we could expect to see at South Platte Park with some regularity. The ones that I think are the most glaringly obvious by their absence are the Tree-Sparrows, White-crowned Sparrows, and Dark-eyed Juncos. These three species from my perspective have all been unusually absent (or in low numbers) this winter. I'm looking forward to seeing the summary of this winter's Christmas Bird Counts and see what the fifty-or-so Colorado count circles have to show for these species and to reflect on possible factors influencing their numbers. We already know that drought, fire, and a consequential early September cold snap may have impacted insect populations this past year leading to significant mortality in some primarily insectivorous species. Perhaps something equivalent is going on with our granivorous birds. I'm flummoxed.

American
Pipit
(c)
Mick
Thompson

Anyway, on to the birds that we did see! Fifteen species of ducks was pretty good. As I was telling my group, this is why it's good to be a beginning birder in the winter. The ducks all have their breeding plumage, there is some initial courtship behavior at play, and they are not hiding behind some leaves out of view. We got GREAT views of many ducks and started working on the finer points of identification of both males and females.

Ring-
billed
Gull
—
first

winter
(c)
Mick
Thompson

We also started to work a bit on those pesky gulls. So many gulls look superficially (or not so superficially) exactly like one another. Just as with raptors, where we use the ubiquitous Red-tailed Hawk as our benchmark for comparing other hawks, eagles, and falcons, with gulls it all starts with the abundant Ring-billed Gull. Weighing 1.1 lbs, this is a small to medium-sized gull. Our smallest gulls weigh about 6 oz and the largest ones are about 3.6 lbs. So, we need to gain some familiarity with Ring-bills before we can begin working on the identification of other gulls. This by itself is no easy task for the appearance of gulls varies due to age (it takes them 2-3 years to become adults), wearing and fading of feathers, and just individual variation. For now, just be aware that young Ring-bills have pink bills with a black tip, and they have dull pink legs. Adults eventually have a yellow bill with an obvious black ring around it, and their legs are yellow. Also, as you start to see Ring-bills with other possible gull species, pay attention to the relative grayness of the back. That is, which bird looks a little darker? On Saturday we saw some first-year Ring-bills with their dull pink legs, and we saw some non-breeding adults. Next to them we saw some obviously bigger gulls – all with dull pink legs; they also all had much bigger and longer yellow bills than the Ring-bills (with a red spot on the lower mandible near the tip); the gray in the back seemed to be about the same shade as the Ring-bills. These were adult non-breeding Herring Gulls, which tend to be our second most common winter gull in Colorado.

Overall highlights of the day included a single Canvasback, a single male Red-breasted Merganser, two adult Bald Eagles, and an American Pipit. All in all, a quite gratifying outing.

Herring Gull – adult in foreground (c) Project Noah

Good birding! Chuck

South Platte Park, Feb 20, 2021

31 species

Canada Goose 30
Northern Shoveler 5
Gadwall 25
American Wigeon 12
Mallard 28
Green-winged Teal 17
Canvasback 1
Redhead 5
Ring-necked Duck 54
Lesser Scaup 8
Bufflehead 22

Common Goldeneye 43
Hooded Merganser 31
Common Merganser 94
Red-breasted Merganser 1
Ruddy Duck 5
Pied-billed Grebe 1
Rock Pigeon (Feral Pigeon) 11
Killdeer 3
Ring-billed Gull 69
Herring Gull 5
Bald Eagle 2
Red-tailed Hawk 2
Belted Kingfisher 1
Northern Flicker 2
American Crow 13
Common Raven 1
Black-capped Chickadee 2
European Starling 8
American Pipit 1
Song Sparrow 3