

# localnews

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## LIVING

# Science in your own back yard

## Even rawest rookie bird watcher can take part in annual North American count

The 14th annual Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) will take place from Friday, Feb. 18 to Monday, Feb. 21. The GBBC engages bird watchers of all ages and levels of expertise to create a real-time snapshot of the whereabouts of North American birds in mid-winter. The count provides insight into the lives of bird populations and helps to answer questions such as:



Drew Monkman

OUR CHANGING SEASONS



### Start counting

Anyone interested in birds can be part of the **Great Backyard Bird Count** and contribute to the store of scientific information on where birds are, what they are up to and why.

**What:** The Great Backyard Bird Count is an annual North America-wide tally of birds seen by volunteer watchers.

**When:** Feb. 18 to Feb. 21

**How to take part:** Count the birds you see at one or more locations in a 15-minute period and submit the information online at [www.birdcount.org](http://www.birdcount.org). You can get tips and checklists from the site before the count.

- How will this winter's snow and temperatures influence bird populations?
- Where are winter finches and other "irruptive" species that appear in large numbers during some years but not others?
- How are bird diseases, such as West Nile virus, affecting birds in different regions?
- What kinds of differences in bird diversity are apparent in cities versus suburban, rural, and natural areas?
- Are any birds undergoing worrisome declines that point to the need for conservation attention?

Participating is easy. Simply make plans to count birds - at your feeder or wherever - for at least 15 minutes on one or more days of the count. You can count for longer than that if you wish. Submit a separate checklist for each new day. You can also submit more than one checklist per day if you count in other locations on that day. Be sure to take note of the greatest number of individuals of each species that you see together at any one time. When you're finished, enter your results electronically at [www.birdcount.org](http://www.birdcount.org). You will see a button marked "Enter Your Checklists!" on the website home page beginning on the first day of the count. It will remain active until the deadline for data submission on March 1. All GBBC data need to be entered online. If you do not have a computer, try to arrange for someone else to enter the data for you.

Online maps and lists are continually updated throughout the count, making it easy to see how your sightings compare to what is being seen elsewhere in the city, province, country, and North American continent. The website also has tips to help identify birds as well as special materials for educators who would like to get their students involved.

The 2010 GBBC was another record-breaker with more than 97,300 bird checklists submitted by an estimated 63,000 participants from across the United States and Canada. Don't feel intimidated if you've never taken part before or doubt your ability to identify birds. In a survey of participants who participated last year, more than 36% were doing so for the first time. The survey also revealed that most GBBC participants became interested in birds primarily by seeing them in their yard at a bird feeder. Only about a third of participants considered their skill at identifying birds to be "advanced or expert." About half of the respondents said that they could identify between 11 and 50



birds accurately without using a field guide. Finally, the majority of respondents (more than 1,160) said that they enjoy watching birds every day and that by doing so they experience a satisfying connection with nature.

Peterborough observers submitted 42 checklists to the GBBC last year, which was the sixth highest in Ontario. London was highest with 159 checklists submitted, followed by Dorion Township (just east of Thunder Bay), Burlington, Thunder Bay, and Guelph. The species reported on the greatest number of Peterborough checklists in 2010 were, in descending order: black-capped chickadee, mourning dove, northern cardinal, blue jay, dark-eyed junco, American crow, white-breasted nuthatch, downy woodpecker, house finch, and American goldfinch. Our local participants reported a total of 36 species.

Looking at the results for North America as a whole, the most commonly reported species were actually pretty much the same as those tallied in

ly extends north of the Great Lakes. Tivoli, Texas, reported the most species (175) while Mentor, Ohio, submitted the most checklists (709). The most numerous bird overall was the American robin with nearly two million individuals reported! This was primarily because of a massive roost in St. Petersburg, Florida. Participants reported 1,450,058 robins in St. Petersburg alone. Reports such as these help document hotspots for robins and year-to-year changes in their movements across the continent.

Other highlights from 2010

- A rustic bunting in Creighton, Saskatchewan. Rustic buntings are a Eurasian species. They occasionally wander to North America, but they are almost exclusively seen on the West Coast. Their normal breeding range extends from Scandinavia to northern Siberia, and they typically winter in China or Japan.

- It was a quiet year for winter finches in Canada. Winter finches (especially common and hoary redpolls, evening and pine grosbeaks, pine siskins, red-



KARL EGRESSY photos

Among the birds spotted most often in the 2010 Great Backyard Bird Count were (clockwise from top) the American robin, white-breasted nuthatch (one of the top sightings on Peterborough lists) and the downy woodpecker.

and white-winged crossbills) are known as "irruptive" species. They are generally on a two-year cycle, common one year and more or less absent the next. Simply put, 2009 was a "boom" year and 2010 was a "bust."

- The American crow was the species with the most individual birds counted in Canada, with 53,672 reports, of which 41,653 were in Québec. A large roost in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, Québec accounted for 27,438 of them!

- The introduction and expansion of the Eurasian collared-dove from the Caribbean to Florida to a wide swath of North America is clearly illustrated in the GBBC data - in 1999, just over 1,000 doves were reported in nine states; last year more than 14,000 were found in 39 states.

Participants may also enter the GBBC photo contest by uploading images taken during the count. All participants are entered in a drawing for prizes that include bird feeders, binoculars, books, CDs, and many other great birding products.

It's actually possible to record your bird-watching observations online anytime, anywhere, with a special program called eBird. Like the GBBC, eBird allows bird watchers to explore data

from around the continent and keep track of their own observations over time with charts and maps. Details can be found at <http://ebird.org/content/ebird>. If the GBBC ends up whetting your appetite, find out about other volunteer bird observation projects at Bird Studies Canada. The website is <http://www.bsc-eoc.org/>

With such a large number of birding and feeder enthusiasts in the Peterborough area, I'm sure we could challenge for the overall Ontario GBBC title in 2011. Please consider taking part this year, and encourage friends and families to do so as well. If you're a teacher like myself, consider getting your students involved. It's a great way for kids to participate in a real scientific study as junior citizen scientists!

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*Karl Egressy is a Guelph nature photographer. To see more of his work and to contact him go to [www.kegressy.com](http://www.kegressy.com).*