

# localnews

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## LIVING

# Counting birds for Christmas

## Annual tally in local area is part of world's longest running citizen science survey

For many people with a love of birds, December and early January is a wonderful time of year. Not only is the holiday season upon us, but Christmas Bird Counts (CBCs) are being held all across Ontario and beyond. This year, the longest running "citizen science" survey in the world will take place from Dec. 14, 2011 to Jan. 5, 2012. About 12,000 Canadian bird enthusiasts are expected to brave winter weather as they comb fields, woods, wetlands, lakes, rivers and even suburban neighbourhoods in order to gather new data on winter bird populations.



Among the species expected to turn up in this year's Christmas Bird Count are (clockwise from top), American kestrel, American tree sparrow, common merganser and common redpoll

KARL EGRESSY photos



AMY KOVACH photo



peer-reviewed scientific studies and also inform the U.S. State of the Birds Report ([www.state-of-thebirds.org](http://www.state-of-thebirds.org)) In 2009, CBC analyses revealed the dramatic



Drew Monkman  
OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Organized under the auspices of the National Audubon Society in the U.S. and Bird Studies Canada, CBCs aim to capture an early winter snapshot of bird populations. The data can then be compared to the long-term numbers that extend over many decades. CBCs also provide participants with an enjoyable, social birding experience and some friendly competition. The year-to-year results and cumulative data set are made available to the public and to researchers for review and scientific study. This feedback empowers participants to become spokespersons for the birds and the habitats on which they depend.

### FIRST COUNT IN 1900

The Christmas Bird Count began on Christmas Day of 1900 when Frank Chapman, a famed ornithologist at the American Museum of Natural History, recognized that declining bird populations could not withstand wanton over-hunting. He therefore suggested an alternative to the "side hunt," in which teams competed to see who could shoot the most game, including birds. In its place, Chapman proposed that people "hunt" birds only with their keen eyes and a notebook, but that they still try to outperform the other teams by finding the most species and number of individuals. From these humble beginnings with 27 observers in 25 locations across Canada and the United States, the Count has grown to include well over 50,000 counters at 2,000 locations. CBCs take place everywhere from above the Arctic Circle to the waters of the Drake Passage off Tierra del Fuego. This includes all Canadian provinces and American states, plus 107 count circles in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Pacific Islands. Last year, a total of 2,215 counts and 62,624 people tallied over 60 million birds. To see a summary of last year's results, just Google "Summary of the 111th Christmas Bird Count."

Christmas Bird Counts are also a globally recognized example of citizen science because they depend on networks of volunteers - most of whom have no specific scientific training - to carry out the scientific research-related tasks of observing, identifying and counting birds. This allows scientists to accomplish research objectives much more feasibly and inexpensively than would otherwise be possible. In addition, public engagement with bird conservation - and science in general - is enhanced. Taking part in this kind of citizen science initiative is also a tradition that does good things for families,

### What area counters can expect to see

- On average, the Peterborough count records about 52 species while the Petroglyph count tallies around 33. The following species turn up regularly, although not necessarily every year.
- Those followed by (\*) are usually found only on the Peterborough count, while those followed by (\*\*) are generally restricted to the Petroglyph count:
- Canada goose\*, mallard\*, black duck\*, common goldeneye\*, common merganser\*, hooded merganser\*, kestrel\*, sharp-shinned hawk\*, Cooper's hawk\*, red-tailed hawk, bald eagle, ruffed grouse, wild turkey, ring-billed gull\*, herring gull\*, greater black-backed gull\*, rock pigeon,

- mourning dove, great horned owl\*, barred owl, black-backed woodpecker\*\*, downy woodpecker, hairy woodpecker, pileated woodpecker, northern shrike, blue jay, gray jay\*\*, American crow, common raven, black-capped chickadee, red-breasted nuthatch, white-breasted nuthatch, brown creeper, golden-crowned kinglet, American robin\*, European starling, bohemian waxwing, cedar waxwing\*, American tree sparrow, white-throated sparrow\*, dark-eyed junco, snow bunting, northern cardinal\*, pine grosbeak, white-winged crossbill, red crossbill\*\*, house finch\*, purple finch, pine siskin, common redpoll, American goldfinch, evening grosbeak\*\*, house sparrow

communities, and the conservation movement in general. A Christmas Bird Count also serves as a welcome break from the stress and consumerism of the holiday season and a chance to connect with nature in winter.

### COMPETITIVE SPIRIT

I was 12 in 1964 when I took part in my first CBC with the Peterborough Field Naturalists. I immediately became aware of the competitive spirit that Frank Chapman had invoked back in 1900. When the 10 or so teams of birders got together in the evening to have a well-deserved meal and compile their totals, I quickly realized that you don't tell the other parties what you have found until the tallying of the results begins. That means not saying a word about your avian discoveries until after supper. Up until then, all of your species and numbers remain top secret and simply a question of speculation. Did anyone find a rare species like a black-backed woodpecker or great gray owl, or maybe a late-to-depart migrant like a

swamp sparrow or red-winged black-bird? Which team recorded the most red-tailed hawks? Did anyone find a bird that was new to the count? At the end of the compilation, we would also wait to hear how the total number of species recorded compared to the long-term average and which species, if any, set a record high or low number. But despite this competitive dimension, it was obvious that no participant was excluded, and that a total beginner - like myself at the time - was made to feel welcome and a part of the Count.

### EVERY BIRD COUNTS

I remember, too, how the late Doug Sadler - a nature columnist with this paper for more than four decades - impressed upon me the fact that, although rarities are exciting to find, it is just as important to keep an accurate count of the common birds such as chickadees. This is not because you want to tally more chickadees than the other teams but rather to have an accurate gauge of how this still-abundant

species is faring. These numbers mean something. Who knows? Maybe in 10 years time a bird that is common today will be a new species at risk. We therefore need accurate base-line data to be able to see how population numbers have changed.

A Christmas Bird Count is held during a single calendar day and covers the area of a circle measuring 24 kilometres in diameter. The circle is divided into sectors, each covered by a different group of observers. Some observers actually start before dawn in the hope of hearing owls. Although some of the birding is done by slowly driving through promising habitat, there is also a fair amount of walking involved. Considerable time is also spent tactfully peering into people's yards.

### NO EXPERTISE NEEDED

You don't have to be an expert to take part in a bird count. Simply having extra eyes and ears in the group invariably leads to more birds being counted. Accuracy is assured by having new participants join an established group that includes at least one experienced birder. If you're not up to braving the cold, it is also possible to arrange in advance to count the birds at your home feeders inside the count circle and to submit the results to the area compiler. There is a \$5 fee to participate in the CBC for all field participants aged 19 or older.

The count results are submitted to the National Audubon Society in Washington, D.C. Because the data have been collected over such a long period of time, they provide valuable information on the relative abundance and distribution of bird species. The data are at the heart of hundreds of

impact that climate change is already having on birds across the continent. CBC data also reveal success stories. CBCs have helped to document the comeback of the previously endangered bald eagle and significant increases in waterfowl populations. Both these success stories are the result of conservation efforts.

Two CBCs are held in the Peterborough area. One is centered in the city of Peterborough the other in Petroglyphs Provincial Park. The Peterborough Count will take place on Sunday, Dec. 18, while the Petroglyph count is slated for Monday, Jan. 2. Both are being organized by Tony Bigg who can be reached at [tanddbigg@sympatico.ca](mailto:tanddbigg@sympatico.ca) or by phone at 705-652-7541. Anyone is welcome to participate.

If you are unable to participate in a bird count this year but are still want to get involved in a citizen science bird conservation project, you may be interested in participating in the Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) organized by Audubon with the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. It takes place this coming February 17 to 20. You can count the birds each day in your backyard or community and then enter the results online. For more information on the GBBC, visit: <http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc>

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