

# localnews

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LIVING

## Science in your own back yard

Annual Great Backyard Bird Count begins Friday across Canada . . . and the world

The 16th annual Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) starts Friday, Feb. 15, and continues through Monday. Taking part couldn't be easier. Participants simply watch birds at any location for at least 15 minutes, tally the numbers of each species seen, and report their tallies online at [www.Bird-Count.org](http://www.Bird-Count.org). A joint project of Bird Studies Canada and Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Audubon in the U.S., the GBBC engages bird watchers of all ages and levels of expertise to create a real-time snapshot of the whereabouts of North American – and, for the first time, world – birds in mid-winter. The count provides insight into the dynamics of bird populations and helps to answer questions such as:



DREW MONKMAN

OUR CHANGING SEASONS

How big is this year's eruption of northern finches such as the redpolls that are so abundant around Peterborough?

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?

The GBBC is open to anyone of any skill level and welcomes bird observations from any location, including backyards, cottages, parks and urban landscapes. The four-day count typically receives sightings from tens of thousands of people reporting more than 600 bird species in Canada and the United States alone. Now, for the first time, anyone visiting the GBBC website will also be able to see bird observations pouring in from other parts of the world.

"We're eager to see how many of the world's 10,240 bird species will be reported during the count this year," said Cornell Lab director John Fitzpatrick.

"We're looking forward to this historic snapshot of birds that that will be reported from around the world. We need as many people as possible to help build the wealth of data that scientists need to track the health of bird populations through time."

Participation is simple:

1. Go to [www.birdcount.org](http://www.birdcount.org) to create a GBBC account. You will be able to do this when the count begins. You must create a GBBC account in order to enter your bird checklists, even if you have participated in the GBBC before. Having an account means you will be able to access all your GBBC observations (and eBird observations, too, if you participate in eBird).

2. Count birds for 15 minutes (or longer, if you wish) on one or more days of the GBBC. You can count in as many different places as you like. Submit a separate checklist for each new day. You can also submit more than one checklist per day for each new location or even from the same location. Estimate the number of individuals of each species you see during your count period.

3. Enter your results on the GBBC website (or eBird). You will see a button marked "Enter Your Checklists!" on the GBBC website home page beginning at 7 a.m. on the first day of the count. If you already use eBird, please continue using eBird to submit your sightings, but be sure to enter at least one checklist during the GBBC weekend. 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 or world! The website also has tips to help identify birds and special materials for children. There is even a photo contest.

This is also the first year that participants in the Great Backyard Bird Count will be able to upload their sightings directly from the field using the eBird BirdLog app for Apple or Android smart phones (details at [www.birdseyebirding.com](http://www.birdseyebirding.com)) eBird is a "citizen science" project that documents the presence or



PAMELA WERTZ photo

This American goldfinch and the birds seen below were photographed during the 2012 Great Backyard Bird Count.

absence of species, as well as bird abundance, through shared checklist data. A web-interface allows participants to submit their observations online and view results via interactive queries into the eBird database. Internet tools maintain personal bird records and enable users to visualize data with interactive maps, graphs, and bar charts. eBird is a free service, and data are stored in a secure facility and archived daily. It is amassing one of the largest and fastest growing biodiversity data resources in existence. For example, in March 2012, participants reported more than 3.1 million bird observations across North America. eBird has become extremely

popular in the Peterborough birding community. It even provides daily emails alerting you to uncommon species that have been seen in the area and birds you still need for your life list, year list, etc.

The 2012 Great Backyard Bird Count was a record-breaker with 104,151 checklists submitted and 17.4 million individual bird observations. Participants set new checklist records in 22 states and in six Canadian provinces. The 100,000th checklist was submitted by Denise St. Pierre and her family from Lac Du Bonnet, Manitoba. Participants reported the northern cardinal on more checklists than any other species for the eighth year in a row, closely followed by the mourning dove. The most numerous bird reported during the 2012 count was the snow goose, followed by the tree swallow, with its first-ever top-10 appearance. The reason: A massive flock of swallows reported in Ruskin, Florida. On the down-side, GBBC data showed that common redpolls only appeared sporadically in northeastern North America in 2012. We can expect their numbers to be much higher this year, however.

GBBC results also revealed a big invasion by snowy owls in 2012. Numbers were above average across the continent. Canadian participants reported an amazing 428 birds, which was four times the number of snowy owls reported in 2011. Movements of snowy owls are closely linked with the abundance of prey, such as lemmings, in the Arctic. The populations of these prey rise and fall in cycles. At times, prey populations grow very large and support large numbers of snowy owls and other predators. But when these prey populations crash, the owls may be forced to wander southward in search of food.

Although many people consider blue jays to be resident birds present year-round in consistent numbers, this is not the case. Not only are blue jays migratory (tens of thousands can be seen moving along migration concentration points in spring and fall, especially on the Great Lakes), but their numbers also fluctuate substantially from year to year. The cause for these fluctuations is probably tied to cycles in wild food abundance (specifically acorns). We can probably expect that 2013 will be a "down" year for blue jays in Ontario, since the acorn crop this past fall was poor in most areas.

Don't feel intimidated if you've never taken part in the GBBC before or doubt

your ability to identify birds. In a survey of participants who took part in 2009, 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." However, the majority of respondents (more than 1,160) said that they enjoy watching birds every day and that by doing so they experience a satis-

fying connection with nature.

Peterborough observers submitted 84 checklists to the GBBC in 2012 which was the fifth highest in Ontario. London was first overall with 233 checklists. The species reported on the greatest number of Peterborough checklists in 2012 were, in descending order: black-capped chickadee, mourning dove, northern cardinal, American crow, American goldfinch, American robin, dark-eyed junco, European starling, blue jay and downy woodpecker. Our

local participants reported a total of 42 species in all.

Looking at the results for North America as a whole, the most commonly reported species were almost identical to those tallied in Peterborough. The only different species in the top 10 list were the house finch (11th most common in Peterborough) and the tufted titmouse, whose range only barely extends north of the Great Lakes. Corpus Christi, Texas, reported the most species (184) while Bay Shore, New York, submitted the most checklists (522). As for the states/provinces that produced the most checklists, Ontario placed a very respectable sixth overall. The most numerous bird overall was the snow goose with more than 3.2 million individuals reported. This is bad news for the Arctic habitats where these birds nest.

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 2013. Please consider taking part this year, and encourage your family, friends and neighbours to do so as well. Remember, too, that the Great Backyard Bird Count is a great way for kids to participate in a real scientific study as junior citizen scientists and, who knows, begin to develop a life-long interest in the natural world. We need as many new conservationists as we can get.

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