

Making Ripples

115th Annual Christmas Bird Count

by Amanda Bancroft

Sunday, Dec. 14th marks the Audubon Society's 115th annual Christmas Bird Count (CBC), the world's longest-running citizen science survey. The count period lasts until January 5th, 2015. In Fayetteville, they've been counting birds, using the same methods, since 1961. Counts are held in circles with a diameter of 15 miles. People are organized into about 10 parties within each circle. If you live within the circle, and anyone living in the city limits of Fayetteville does, you can watch your bird feeders during that day and submit data to Joe Neal, Compiler for the Count with the Audubon Society. "On a typical count we probably find 80-90 species of birds, from starlings to bald eagles, and we count all of them, including big flocks of geese," Neal says.

It's important to try not to count one individual twice. At feeders, it's more reliable to determine how many chickadees or cardinals you see at any given time, rather than counting them one by one as they fly to and from a feeder. All our local data is submitted to the National Audubon Society where biologists analyze it. With a cluster analysis they can figure out patterns for birds during winter, and see where the largest clusters of any given species are located. To receive a checklist and map of the count circle, and to submit data on birds you see Dec. 14th, contact Joe Neal at (479) 521-1858

Dr. Dan Scheiman, Bird Conservation Director for Audubon Arkansas, recently spoke at Hobbs State Park on how climate change is affecting birds in Arkansas. These presentations are only possible through real data such as that collected from CBC and other surveys. Arkansas has almost 400 species of birds, and even more during migrations. Birding is one of the fastest-growing outdoor activities in America, with 51.3 million Americans reporting that they watch birds. As a society, we've come a long way towards loving these beautiful creatures.

The CBC originally began as a shooting competition held at Christmastime when hunters would see who could kill the most birds for sport. Even beneficial and rare birds were shot. In December 1900, Frank Chapman, an ornithologist, had an idea. He suggested counting the birds on Christmas instead of killing them.

According to Wikipedia, the first CBC included 27 observers in 25 places in the United States and Canada. "Since then the counts have been held every winter, usually with increasing numbers of observers. For instance, the 101st count, in the winter of 2000–2001, involved 52,471 people in 1,823 places in 17 countries (but mostly in the U.S. and Canada)."

Dollars count, too. The Audubon Society "relies 100% on donations to provide support to CBC compilers and volunteers on count day, to manage the historic database, and to fund the technology to make historic data available to researchers." Donations are accepted at Audubon.org

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