

BOREAL BITS

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THE ANNUAL CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT!

Each year when I am home for Christmas, I become involved in one of my favourite early winter activities, the Audubon Christmas Bird Count. I had notified the local co-ordinator, of my route (to avoid overlapping with other bird counters), paid my \$5 fee (to help defray costs of statistical analysis) for the field count and was about to set out on the trail to list as many birds as I could see. I planned to stay out for about 3 hours and therefore I had kept an eye on the weather forecasts for that day. I was doing the count in the morning and the forecasters said we could expect temperatures of -2°C under an overcast sky. That was a little too warm for my liking; I would have preferred sun with temperatures around -10°C . However, we don't determine the weather, at least on a short-term basis. I dressed in layers and my wife dropped me off at 9:00.

At noon I emerged from the bush, slightly fatigued but nonetheless enthused. The count I called into the coordinator was as follows: 2 dozen ravens, 1 bald eagle, 1 goldeneye duck, 3 chickadees, 1 blue jay, and 6 rock doves (pigeons). My wife's count (which cost her nothing because it was a feeder count, accomplished by watching the deck feeder for the similar time period from the comfort of our warm home) was 5 pine grosbeaks, 2

chickadees, and 5 pine siskins. Our counts were less than we had expected but we had done our jobs and in doing so contributed to the Audubon data base.

This year the bird count will take place in Kenora on Saturday, December 16. There is a two-week window during which the bird count may take place, but only one 24-hour period may be selected during that fourteen day period. The event is going to be a big day for birds and those who call themselves birders, birdwatchers, nature lovers and interested observers. This is the day volunteers with a vast range of experience and skill are being asked to spend a few hours counting birds.



(Evening and pine grosbeaks – photo by PB)

There is nothing so intimidating as listening to an experienced birder announce that her or his life-list now contains the ruby-breasted grommet in the purple phase. And unfortunately this very thing is keeping avid birders from taking part in an international bird count. “My goodness,” exclaims Josephine as she adjusts her binoculars and passes the bird book to Joe, “we are really new at this! I think we might be able to identify blue jays, ravens, chickadees and those yellow and dark brown or black birds called... oh yes, evening grosbeaks. But we don’t know enough to get involved in a bird count!”

Not true! This couple has an interest in birds and that is the main attribute of successful bird-count participants. As far as skills go, it is not a test, nor is it a contest. In fact Josephine just happened to name three of the most common birds in last year’s count.

Of course bird counting can be done at almost any time of year but this bird count is very special; it is the Audubon Society sponsored Annual Christmas Bird Count. This activity has taken place every year since 1899, and the information gathered has proven invaluable to data bases used by conservationists and scientists. The garnered statistics allow them to track the welfare of various bird species and in doing so, give a report on the environment. As hard as it is for some people to believe, it follows that the healthier the environment is for birds, the healthier it is for us.



(Starling – photo by A Chapil)

There are two types of observers. The first are the field observers, a neat name for people who like to go outside and count birds. The others are feeder counters. Yes, it is possible to make a good contribution to ornithology by sitting with a sheet of paper and a cup of coffee while watching your feeders on bird count day. Ask my wife Pat. Counters usually do their jobs singly or in pairs.

The local impetus behind this effort is Leo Heyens, an enthusiastic birder who has coordinated the Annual Christmas Bird Count in Kenora since 1980. Usually the most abundant species reported are the common raven, black capped chickadee, pine grosbeak, evening grosbeak, and bohemian waxwing.

Regardless of where you live, you may participate in this event by calling your local natural resources offices and asking for the name of the Christmas Bird Count Coordinator. And regardless of your bird identification skills, you may make a contribution by reporting just those birds you are familiar with.

Once again, the date of the Kenora Bird Count is Saturday, December 16.