

## **Audubon's Christmas Bird Count**

Highlands Plateau Audubon Society

The conservation of wild birds and their habitats is central to the mission of local, national and international Audubon groups. That stewardship begins with carefully monitoring bird populations and their available habitats. Toward that end, Audubon's Christmas Bird Count or CBC is conducted each winter around Christmas, this year from December 14 to January 5.

This is truly a massive citizen science effort, in its 116<sup>th</sup> year, organized by the National Audubon Society in the U.S. and the Bird Studies group in Canada. This year projections are for 72,000 volunteers in over 2400 locations across the Western Hemisphere to count every bird seen or heard in 15-mile wide circles around local geographic points such as towns and cities. Last year, in 2014, 68 million birds were found evidencing 2106 species.

In the Highlands area, 22 hearty and determined birders associated with the Highlands Plateau Audubon Society met at the Kelsey-Hutchinson Park in Highlands at 7:30 a.m. on December 18 to conduct their own annual winter count. Teams of 3-5 set out in all directions. One team went west to the Turtle Pond area. Another team went south to Horse Cove and Rich Gap. Those north and easterly bound did their spotting at Flat Mountain, Chestnut Hill, Cold Spring and Cheney Lane. A fourth group surveyed areas in and immediately around town, including Sunset Rocks, the Highlands Biological Station and the town's water treatment facility. The team leaders were Russ Regnery, Brock Hutchins, Cynthia Strain, Jack Johnston and Kyle Pursel. The organizer and official compiler was Brock Hutchins.

A total of 1139 birds were observed and identified in this year's CBC. The species count was 38. These totals were consistent with CBCs in years past given the larger number of observers this year. Some species were present in abundance: 384 Dark-eyed Junco were sighted. Other multiple sightings were made of the American Robin (129), American Crow (112) and Carolina Chickadee (68). Seventy-five Wild Turkey, the bird Benjamin Franklin nominated to be the national bird, were seen. Other notable sightings include the American Goldfinch (51), Mallard (46), Northern Cardinal (38), Tufted Titmouse (29) and Song Sparrow (28).

These data will be fed into the huge data base held by the National Audubon Society documenting avian conditions in the Western Hemisphere. This ongoing, longitudinal data base provides vital information about the changing numbers and changing habitats of birds: which species are thriving and which are dwindling or threatened by extinction; how habitats are changing given global warming, with what effects on bird populations; how migratory patterns and pathways are changing; and what can be done to protect and safeguard this vital aspect of our life-sustaining ecologies. The CBC

data base has been central to the recent Audubon Birds and Climate Report available at <http://climate.audubon.org/article/audubon-report-glance/>.

A long tradition of the citizen science, the Christmas Bird Count is one of those slightly whacky activities that brings friends together, many of whom we may not have seen in several months, under conditions that could easily be mistaken as less than optimal for birding. This year's count took place in temperatures that rarely rose above freezing and the frigid temperatures were re-enforced by a bone-chilling breeze. Birds and observers were all trying their best to stay warm; no one was heard to complain of having too much in the way of warm clothing. It wasn't hard to identify with the plight of our avian subjects who, as often as not, were hunkered down on the sunny side of wherever, and hard to spot. At least the ground was ice-free and the sun felt good when it did appear.

The teams of observers had the important benefit of a traditional HPAS Christmas Bird Count group lunch of hot chili and Kay Poole's famous cornbread recipe. Along with our usual list of suspect winter birders, this year's count was augmented by friends from Young Harris College, Western Carolina University, and the Highlands Biological Station/Foundation.

Perhaps as much as anything, the CBC is a winter 'bonding' exercise for birders who need a specific excuse for getting together when all other indications would suggest that staying home in front of the wood stove would have been the best idea!

A long tradition of the citizen science, the Christmas Bird Count is one of those slightly whacky activities that brings friends together, many of whom we may not have seen in several months, under conditions that could easily be mistaken as less than optimal for birding. This year's count took place in temperatures that rarely rose above freezing and the frigid temperatures were re-enforced by a bone-chilling breeze. Birds and observers were all trying their best to stay warm; no one was heard to complain of having too much in the way of warm clothing. It wasn't hard to identify with the plight of our avian subjects who, as often as not, were hunkered down on the sunny side of wherever, and hard to spot. At least the ground was ice-free and the sun felt good when it did appear.

The teams of observers had the important benefit of a traditional HPAS Christmas Bird Count group lunch of hot chili and Kay Poole's famous cornbread recipe. Along with our usual list of suspect winter birders, this year's count was augmented by friends from Young Harris College, Western Carolina University, and the Highlands Biological Station/Foundation.

Perhaps as much as anything, the CBC is a winter 'bonding' exercise for birders who need a specific excuse for getting together when all other indications would suggest that staying home in front of the wood stove would have been the best idea.