



THE PLAIN DEALER

AERIAL VIEW

Yearly Christmas counts a real treat for birders - Aerial View

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James F. McCarty
Plain Dealer Reporter

For many of us, an organized weekend bird walk is as much about socializing as it is about bird-watching.

Depending on the level of bird activity, the trail chatter can be as persistent as a red-eyed vireo's song: What good birds have you seen lately? Any trip plans? How are the spouse and kids? Oooh, let me look through those new binoculars!

Not that there's anything wrong with turning bird outings into social events. But more often than not, birding is a quiet and often solitary pursuit.

One of the exceptions to that rule will take place over the next three weeks or so with the arrival of the winter birding roundups known as Christmas Bird Counts.

At 60 sites across Ohio and more than 1,600 nationwide, birders will gather before sunrise and spend the better part of a weekend day spotting and logging in every bird they can find within a 15-mile circle. Audubon clubs will sponsor all but a handful of counts for the 108th annual event. More than 50,000 birders are expected to participate.

For the majority of birders, the Christmas counts are steeped in traditions intended to rouse us from our winter hibernation, scare up some rarities to get our local Audubon chapters noticed in the *Birding* magazine report and then gather at the end of the day to compile lists, trade bird stories and stuff ourselves with hot spicy chili.

What most birders don't know is that the original Christmas Bird Count more than a century ago was designed as a bloodless alternative to a longstanding holiday tradition among early Americans to blast every feathered creature out of the sky, then tally up the bodies. Faded black-and-white photographs of the grizzly array make people gulp in horror today.

Shooting migratory birds, except for game birds, is a federal offense now. Counting the birds and admiring their beauty through binoculars, cameras and spotting scopes is a more enriching experience. It's also highly beneficial to scientists.

Ornithologists have been analyzing decades of Christmas count data. They've discovered how Northern bobwhite quail, evening grosbeak, ruffed grouse and scaup duck populations are in serious peril and tracked the impact of climate change, such as how Northern mockingbirds are expanding north, neotropical songbirds are sticking around longer, and boreal finches are retreating north. And they have documented the population explosion of European collared doves in North America.

This year's Christmas counts in Ohio may contain precedent-setting numbers of boreal birds, based on fall sightings throughout the northern tier of the United States and southern Canadian provinces. A crash in the vole population and decreased production of pine cones and tree seeds have resulted in marvelous invasions of seldom-seen birds in Ohio, such as pine and evening grosbeaks, red-breasted nuthatch, pine siskin, common redpoll, crossbills and saw-whet owl. Can snowy, great gray, boreal and Northern hawk owl be far behind?

So be a citizen scientist, and participate in a Christmas count or three this year. You might even have a good time socializing with fellow birders.

For a map of the counts, contacts and details, check out this helpful site:
www.ohiobirds.org/calendar/winter_counts/overview.php.

Or contact a count-compiler to join a Christmas count team near your home.

Saturday:

Cleveland - Cuyahoga and Lake counties, compiler Tom LePage, 440-356-4035.

Sunday:

Cuyahoga Falls - Summit and Portage counties, compiler Marie Morgan, 330-867-9850.

Saturday, Dec. 22:

Elyria-Lorain - Lorain County, compiler David Bragg, 440-647-2355.

Saturday, Dec. 22:

Mentor - Lake and Geauga counties, compiler Anders Fjeldstad, 440-257-7611.

Saturday, Dec. 29:

Lakewood - Cuyahoga and Lorain counties, compiler Nancy Howell, 440-891-1710.

Saturday, Dec. 29:

Wellington - Lorain and Medina counties, compiler Jack Smith, 440-322-0820.

Tuesday, Jan. 1:

Burton - Geauga County, compiler Linda Gilbert, 440-286-9516, Ext. 2012.

Sightings

If only all of us could be welcomed home from a hard day at work the way John Pogacnik was last week. Returning to his lakeside residence in Perry Township, he spooked a Northern goshawk perched on his driveway. A white-winged crossbill and a fox sparrow have been visiting the feeders. Over the lake, he observed a large flock of tundra swans, plus red-throated loon, glaucous and Iceland gulls.

Headlands Beach State Park in Mentor welcomed two first-of-the-fall birds over the weekend: a purple sandpiper working the leaf litter by the breakwall and a red-throated loon that had retained much of its breeding-plumage red throat.

My son Bret and I spotted a flock of eight tundra swans off Edgewater Park in Cleveland, about nearly a dozen horned grebes at the Gordon Park boat basin and a lesser black-backed gull at the Eastlake power plant.

Rita Schneider found a long-tailed duck behind the Avon Lake Power Plant in Lorain County.

California, Iceland and lesser black-backed gulls were at the East 72nd Street hot-water release site, Phil Chaon and Chris Spagnoli reported.

A common redpoll was working the ground beneath Carolyn Holt's thistle feeder in East Cleveland last week, while a red-breasted nuthatch continued to visit the feeders above.

As Cathy Smith emerged from her Willoughby Hills home to pick up her Sunday newspaper, she was startled by a bald eagle flying past on Lamplight Lane.

Columbus birders know where to find birds in Northeast Ohio, too, discovering a black-legged kittiwake at Lorain Harbor and a flock of 39 common redpolls at Lakewood Park Cemetery in Rocky River, Jeff Grabmeier reported.

Bob Soltis was riding his bike at Lakewood Park on Sunday, when he spotted a bald eagle land in a tree along the lake shore.

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter:

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Bird news

Children 8 and older with an interest in drawing birds - or other wild animals - can sign up for the Children's Nature Drawing Workshop being taught by Jen Brumfield, a naturalist and scientific illustrator for the Cleveland MetroParks. The workshop is Saturday in a converted barn at 2813 Columbia Road, Brecksville. The class runs from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and includes a short hike. Lunch and snacks are provided. Cost is \$25. Bring a sketch pad and an active imagination. Call 330-701-6452 for details and registration.

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