

A Greener View: Bird count needs more bird-watching participants for research

by Jeff_Rugg

This year the Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) is Feb. 15 to Feb. 18. It is an annual four-day period when bird-watchers create a snapshot of the birds' locations across the continent. Anyone can be a bird-watcher for those four days. A "backyard" can be anywhere you happen to be - a schoolyard, a local park, the balcony of a high-rise apartment, or a wildlife refuge.

It does help if you have mastered the basics of bird identification. When I looked at last year's results for my town on the GBBC Web site, I found that there had been a total of five checklists submitted. A few of the birds on the list were unusual for my area at that time of year. I would have enjoyed seeing them, but I also think they may have been misidentified.

Several of the same birds, like the bald eagles, may have been counted by everyone who submitted a checklist, while many small birds like cardinals were underreported.

Over and underreporting become a problem when using citizen scientists for research. Valuable information is gathered, but it may not be completely accurate. Doing the count is easy - count the birds you see at any location. The highest number of each species seen on any of the days is recorded. Then you go to www.birdsource.org to record your list online. There is a photo contest for those interested.

The GBBC helps participants prepare for trips to the backyard, whether they choose to watch birds only around their home or make the effort to see which birds are using public lands. The Web site is full of tips of all kinds, including information on bird feeding, how to use binoculars, how to make your yard bird-friendly, and how to identify birds, especially those tricky, similar-looking species. There are even tips on how to be a bird-friendly family.

The results of each survey are displayed on a variety of maps. You can easily see the distribution pattern of any bird species. View the same map change overtime as the bird's mapped distribution changes over the years. Compare your sightings to everyone else in your state.

Every year, more people do the count and complete more than one count. I do counts in my backyard and in a two-mile long section of river near my home. Last year, more than 81,000 reports were sent in, covering over 11 million birds of 616 species.

Scientists and bird enthusiasts can learn a lot by knowing where birds are located. Bird populations are dynamic; they are constantly in flux. No single scientist or team of scientists could hope to document the complex distribution and movements of so many species in such a short time.

We need your help. Make sure the birds from your community are well represented in the count. It doesn't matter whether you report the five species coming to your backyard feeder or the 75 species you see during a day's outing to a wildlife refuge.

Documenting bird populations and their shift overtime is one of the goals of the Great Backyard Bird Count. It is obvious that water birds would move away from areas that have frozen, but do land birds also move away? How about snow cover - does it affect bird distribution? Observers of birds during the bird count also note the weather conditions and snow depth. Not only are some birds not found in heavy snow areas, but the more snow that is reported, the fewer bird-watchers.

Many people associate robins with spring. In fact, they are quite hardy against cold weather. The results of several years of bird counts have shown that they can be found far north during February; however, if there is even a small amount of snow on the ground, the robins leave the area. Robins feed on insects and other foods found on the ground; they will eat berries and fruits found in shrubs and trees. When the ground is covered in snow, a large portion of their food source is covered up so they leave.

Other ground feeders don't necessarily move completely away when snow covers the ground. Juncos are in the sparrow family and are often nicknamed "snow birds," because they migrate south from heavy snow areas of Canada into the still snowy areas of the northern United States.

This event was developed and managed by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society, with sponsorship from Wild Birds Unlimited store owners.

Researchers hope that by learning more about the birds and habitats in their own backyards, families will decide to become part of Project FeederWatch, a winter-long survey of birds that visit feeders.

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