

Christmas Bird Count

By Greg Sykes (greg@grsykes.com)

Citizen scientists are laypeople who contribute to science by participating in projects that generate useful data. One way folks help the scientific community is through the Christmas Bird Count (CBC), sponsored by the [National Audubon Society](#). Centuries earlier, this event started as hunting expeditions—coinciding with Christmastime—where tallies of the day's catch were registered. Luckily, people recognized the counterproductive impact of killing the cherished subjects, so a parallel count began, switching to scoring live field observations by 1900.

These days, a typical CBC scenario falls within a 15-mile-wide circle. That area is further divided into sectors where an experienced birder leads a party around a preestablished patrol route. Novices are paired with knowledgeable birders. Party members count the bird species and quantities (or estimates within a flock) as they tour their designated subsection. Birds observed or heard, when doubling back on a trail, are not counted unless the species is new to the day's list. Parties might split up to cover more ground but at least one skilled birder is in each subgroup. Some people participate by documenting the species visiting a birdfeeder, though this method creates a bias for seed and/or mealworm-eating birds and could omit other avian members such as scavengers and waterfowl. All observations are within a day, from midnight to midnight, on a specific date, rain or shine. CBC data are used to analyze trends and environmental wellbeing.

Folks should never take any species for granted regardless of how common it currently appears. For example, a former D.C. area resident, the passenger pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*), numbered over 4 billion birds. With 20 percent of all North American birds being passenger pigeons, this species was the most abundant bird on the continent. Second only to humans, these doves influenced their environment more than any other single animal species. However, overhunting and habitat destruction pummeled the massive passenger pigeon population to extinction within several decades.

Population surveys helped scientists spot and stop other threats to birds. For instance, discovering the link between DDT, bioaccumulation, and severe declines in top predatory birds led to this pesticide's ban. The following years saw hawks, eagles, pelicans, and other meat-eating birds slowly recover. Population monitoring is a tool that scientists use to gauge new, emerging threats, such as climate change, manmade obstacles (e.g., glassy skyscrapers and wind turbines) impeding migration, and non-native invasive species overtaking natural areas. Bird counts also help biologists see the positive impacts of habitat restoration projects and safer architectural designs. True to the metaphor, bird populations are a "canary in the coalmine" for environmental health.



Figure 1. This song sparrow (*Melospiza melodia melodia*), perched on a swamp rose (*Rosa palustris*) branch, is a common species that a novice might mistake for any of the other "little brown birds." With practice, folks learn to distinguish the different species and appreciate the niches filled by the particular birds.

The best way to learn bird identification is by gaining field experience and going on bird walks. A knowledgeable birder, a naturalist, or even an ornithologist leads these treks. Find out how to identify different species by their appearance, movement, behavior, and calls. Organized bird walks are held at several local parks. Here is the scoop on two free, regularly scheduled walks:

- Friends of Dyke Marsh host bird walks every Sunday morning at 8:00 a.m., starting from the Belle Haven picnic area. <https://www.fodm.org/>
- Huntley Meadows Park occurs every Monday morning, beginning at 8:00 a.m. in the winter and 7:00 a.m. April through October. Meet at the main entrance. <http://www.friendsofhuntleymeadows.org/mon-day%20bird%20walk.html>

A big “thank you” goes to Larry Cartwright—compiler of the Washington, D.C., CBC—for sharing details about the count. Contact him at prowarbler@verizon.net, (703) 941-3142 (home), or (571) 359-2395 (cell), for more information, checklists, or about joining a December 16, 2017, CBC party (which includes the Dyke Marsh sector—their 75th consecutive year) or conducting a birdfeeder survey. For other regional 2017 CBC sectors, dates, and the compilers’ contact details, see page 3 of http://www.nvabc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/NVBC-2017-Nov-Siskin_final-9-Oct-2017.pdf.

Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays, and Happy New Year!

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Figure 2. The Smithsonian Museum of Natural History houses the taxidermy mount of Martha, the world’s last passenger pigeon, who died in 1914.