

## Green Scene: Great Backyard Bird Count this Weekend

by *Elaine Golds*

(published by *The TriCity News* – February 14, 2014)



**Tree swallows typically line a nest box with grass and then add duck feathers to help hide their eggs from predators. Each spring, volunteers remove this nesting material from the previous year (which can be contaminated) and add fresh shavings. *Jolene Bonhomme photo.***

With temperatures finally rising and the welcome return of the rain, it's beginning to feel more like spring. While the last few days of freezing weather were tough on the plants poking new growth above ground, plants are surprisingly resilient. In my backyard, the chickadees are now calling their spring "fee-bee" song which means they are now searching for mates and will soon be selecting places for nesting.

For the next few weekends, volunteers with the Burke Mountain Naturalists will be cleaning and monitoring nest boxes they have installed in parks such as Minnehada and Colony Farm Regional Parks. While not all birds use boxes for nesting, some of the ones that do will often use a man-made alternative. Woodpeckers can easily drill through wood and prefer to create their own nesting cavity in an older decaying tree. However, the so-called secondary cavity-nesters, i.e., the birds that can't drill into wood as easily as woodpeckers, rely on finding natural cavities – but these can be in short supply. Birds that use nest

boxes as a substitute for a natural cavity include chickadees, nuthatches, tree swallows, violet-green swallows and even a few ducks such as wood ducks.

Man-made nest boxes must be constructed to specific requirements with just the right size of entrance hole and nesting space depending on the species for which it is intended. Such nest boxes can be purchased from local stores which sell bird seed or, alternatively, people can make their own. On their website, [www.bmn.bc.ca](http://www.bmn.bc.ca), the Burke Mountain Naturalists have posted information on how to construct nest boxes for various bird species. It can be an enjoyable activity for the whole family to watch birds use a nest box placed in a safe spot in the backyard.

This weekend, February 14-17, is the Great Backyard Bird Count ([gbbc.birdcount.org](http://gbbc.birdcount.org)). Sponsored by Bird Studies Canada, the National Audubon Society and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, this annual event helps to gather information from volunteers all over the world on the distribution and movements of birds. People are asked to identify and record the species of birds they observe during at least a 15 minute period over the weekend. You can choose to do this in your own backyard or at your favorite park. On their website, Colony Farm Regional Park is identified as one of the local 'hotspots' for birding in Coquitlam. People are asked to submit their data electronically to the bird count website where much helpful information is also available. On this website, you can also view the results other observers have posted.

Last year, the Great Backyard Bird Count went global for the first time and achieved a new record with counts recorded from 111 countries that documented over 33 million birds. An amazing 4258 species were recorded – this accounted for about one third of the world's known species of birds. Counting birds this time of year can provide important information on birds undertaking migrations from warmer southern areas to the north hemisphere. Once spring arrives in full swing, the long days and abundant insect life attracts millions of birds who have instinctively "learned" that the northern temperate world is a reliable place to raise their young.

This early in the season it will be mainly chickadees and other cavity-nesters who will be checking out suitable sites for egg-laying. However, the swallows, which spend the winter in Mexico or places further south, will soon be arriving. One bird that nests very early in the season is the Anna's hummingbird. This bird, a relatively new one in the TriCities areas, relies on hummingbird feeders over the cold winter months for survival. Amazingly, these birds start to nest as early as January. Because deciduous trees are not in leaf this time of year, their nests are typically hidden in conifers such as the Douglas fir. Once salmonberries start to bloom in March, the Anna's hummingbird will be joined by the rufous hummingbirds which fly from Central America every spring to nest as far north as Alaska. The competition between these birds can create some interesting antics at your hummingbird feeder.

The Great Backyard Bird Count is a great way for people of all ages and backgrounds to connect with nature and help make a difference for birds. It is an excellent example of how people can contribute valuable information and become so called "citizen scientists". Can we count you in?