

Green Scene: Audubon Christmas Bird Count

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[photograph]

[caption: The bright plumage of the male bufflehead duck contrasts with drab colouration of the female. During the annual Christmas Bird Count, held last week, bufflehead were seen at Port Moody's Shoreline Park, Coquitlam's DeBoville Slough and Colony Farm regional Park, and along the Pitt River.

Kiyoshi Takahashi photo]

[Title in Tri-City News: You can count on bird lovers in the Tri-Cities

Sub-title: For more than 100 years - 34 in Tri-City - there has been the Christmas Bird Count]

Since 1900, people in North America have been counting birds during the Christmas season. This wonderful tradition started as a protest reaction to the custom of holding a hunting competition on Christmas Day to determine who could kill the most birds. This practice so offended ornithologist, Frank Chapman, that he decided to hold a Bird Census instead. In 1900, his first Bird Census was held in 25 sites across North America including two in Canada. Each census site consisted of a circle 15 miles in diameter...and still does. To allow comparative data analysis over many years, census circles, once established, never change in position.

Today, the Christmas Bird Count has grown to include over 50,000 people in North and Latin America who count and identify all the birds observed in over 1800 census circles. It is now considered to be the oldest and biggest bird census in the world. Rather than being held on busy Christmas Day, it is presently scheduled to take place on a pre-determined date any time between December 14 and January 5. Locally, the Alouette Field Naturalists in Pitt Meadows started a census circle in 1972. Their area, centred on Sheridan Hill in Pitt Meadows, takes in all of Port Coquitlam as well as parts of Coquitlam and Port Moody. Thus, when the Burke Mountain Naturalists formed in 1989, local birders simply joined the Alouette census circle and contributed observations from the Tri-Cities area.

The data collected by volunteers across North America provides a valuable long-term record on the early winter distribution of birds. Of course, counts in specific areas can also vary from year to year depending on the weather and number of volunteers. In our area, the mallard duck has been the bird most commonly observed. The rarest was the fieldfare observed in 2003. This Eurasian bird, occasionally seen in Alaska, was flying far beyond its normal range that year. Port Coquitlam resident, Larry Cowan, was scanning a flock of robins along the Pitt River when an unusual bird caught his experienced eye. He raced home to get his camera and, in the fading winter light, obtained a photograph to confirm the unusual bird as a fieldfare, the first ever recorded in BC. Enigmatically, Cowan – as well as many other keen birders - were unable to find the fieldfare the next day.

The local bird count this year took place last Sunday and was curtailed somewhat by the windstorm of last week that resulted in a number of park closures in what are usually excellent birding sites. One of the unusual birds observed this year was the Townsend's warbler, a small bird with a black ear patch bordered by yellow on its head. During summer, this wood warbler nests in mountainous coniferous forests as far north as Alaska. It prefers old growth forests and, thus, was likely once much more abundant than it is now. Like most insect-eating warblers, the Townsend's migrates south every fall. However, this warbler tends not to undertake long migrations and winters in Mexico or along coastal areas of California and Oregon. Whether or not the Townsend's warbler observed recently at two local backyard suet feeders will stay for the entire winter remains uncertain.

Approximately seventy volunteers contributed observations to the Tri-cities Christmas Bird Count this year. The areas with highest number of species recorded were Port Moody's Shoreline Park and DeBoville Slough in Coquitlam. In addition to the Townsend's warbler, other birds of note included pine and evening grosbeaks at DeBoville Slough and a large flock of trumpeter swans near GVRD's Widgeon Park Reserve.