

Green Scene: Christmas Bird Count

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[photograph]

[caption: A team of counters for the 2007 Christmas Bird Count record all birds observed on the PoCo Trail along the Pitt River.
Ian McArthur photo]

[Title in Tri-City News: You can count the birds but can the birds count on you?]

With the lower mainland presently locked in a deep-freeze, you probably aren't looking for a worthwhile nature activity to draw you outside. But, relax, this event doesn't happen until January. By then, the weather might be relatively balmy. The event is the annual Audubon Christmas bird count and will take place in the Tri-cities and Pitt Meadows on Saturday, January 3.

Throughout North America, people have been counting birds during the Christmas season for over a century. The first count took place on Christmas Day in 1900 and was arranged as more of a protest against the then-popular annual Christmas bird hunt. The goal was to count and identify all the birds within a 15-mile (i.e., 24 kilometre) diameter circle. In the first year, the bird count was conducted in 25 census circles across North America including two in eastern Canada. Once established, the position of a count circle is never changed – this allows for a valuable comparison of data collected over many years. Locally, the first census circle was established on Sheridan Hill in Pitt Meadows in 1972. As a consequence, our local count circle includes Port Coquitlam, most of Coquitlam but only parts of Port Moody. When the Burke Mountain Naturalists formed in 1989, their members assumed responsibility for organizing counts within this circle for the Tri-cities area.

It appears that Christmas Day in 1900 was such a sufficiently leisurely event (at least for the men) that a detailed bird census could be worked in with all the other activities. Now, however, the Christmas Bird count is conducted on a day chosen between December 14 and January 5 rather than taking place on Christmas Day. In the lower mainland, the Vancouver area count occurred last Sunday, one in Ladner (which usually records the highest diversity of birds in Canada) will take place this Sunday followed by Surrey on December 28.

I am glad our local count occurs after the hustle and bustle of the holiday season as I am sure this makes it easier for people to participate. Last year, 70 volunteers in the Tri-Cities counted almost 10,000 birds and recorded 82 species. One of the highlights of last year's count was a cackling goose in Port Moody's Shoreline Park, a new species for this area. This goose resembles a Canada goose but is slightly smaller with a shorter neck. Confirmation of its identify among a large flock of Canada geese required input from skilled birders. Another highlight last year was a pair of great horned owls in Coquitlam. Each year, the Christmas bird count reveals a few surprises within the local bird population. In 2003, an alert bird counter noted an unusual bird among a group of robins and identified it as a fieldfare, a rare Eurasian bird probably blown off course by winter storms. Had the Christmas bird count not been underway, this bird would have probably passed through the area without anyone noticing.

This year, the local count is again being organized by Mike Griffin, a founding member of the Burke Mountain Naturalists. If you are interested in participating, he would welcome your help and can be contacted at 604-942-5326. It is not necessary to be an expert at identifying birds. Novices will be teamed up with more experienced birders and assigned to a specific area. Each team requires a recorder as well as spotters with binoculars. People who cannot participate in the outdoor count can report on birds observed in their backyard - assuming, of course, they live within the count circle.

With temperatures predicted to stay below freezing for a few more days, local birds are facing tough challenges to find sufficient food each day to keep them warm through the cold nights. Snowfall only adds to their difficulties as it covers the ground and tree branches and makes it almost impossible for birds to locate seeds. Thus, this is an important time of the year to ensure your bird feeder, if you have one, is kept full. Even if you do not count birds on January 3rd, I hope the birds can count on you for a few morsels of food to help ensure their survival during this challenging winter period.