



ONE FOR THE BIRDS

TEXT BY VANESSA FARNSWORTH

IF YOU THINK CHRISTMAS WOULD BE THE PERFECT TIME TO GIVE A GIFT TO NATURE, MANY BIRDS WOULD AGREE.

Now in its 119th year, the National Audubon Society's Christmas Bird Count – administered in this country by Bird Studies Canada – stands tall as North America's longest running citizen science program. During the annual count, birders at over 2,000 locations stretching from Arctic Bay, Nunavut to the southern tip of Argentina count every bird they see and hear within a 24-km diameter circle on a pre-determined day.

"Everything is important and everything counts. A crow isn't just a crow. It's just as important as any other bird," says Sharon Laughlin, who ran the local bird count for the Creston Field Naturalists for the past three years. "Anything that's wild and has wings is counted whether it flies or not."

With the large number of enthusiastic birders in the Kootenays, it's no wonder that more than a dozen Christmas Bird Counts are scattered across the region. And you don't have to be an expert to participate.

"If you're a beginner, you'll be set up with an experienced birder. It's a good way to learn the resident birds and to get to know them a little better," says Dianne Cooper who runs the Christmas Bird Counts in Cranbrook and Kimberley.

While most participants explore their designated areas on foot or in cars, it's not unheard of for participants to move around the landscape on skis, all terrain vehicles, or horses. Some don't even leave their houses.

"We've got field counters, people who go on a team and get assigned an area within the designated circle and tramp around it," says Cooper. "But we've also got feeder watchers who stake out a feeder, usually at their home. In years when it's really cold, sometimes our field counters are far outnumbered by the feeder watchers."

Information collected during the local counts ultimately ends up in the National Audubon Society's database where it can be accessed by any researcher interested in bird populations and trends.

"What I find interesting is comparing what we notice locally to what the rest of the continent notices because there's a lot of variability, lots of things are cyclical, and one circle in isolation doesn't really tell you the trends," says Cooper. "So I was comparing what we've been seeing to the continental trends and I noticed that some species are shifting north. So for example, the northern flicker, which is very common around here, is being seen more during the winter in the north. American Goldfinch is another one. We only used to get about a dozen, but last year we got three dozen. And the other big trend is the Eurasian collared-dove. They first appeared on the counts around here about eight years ago."

Laughlin too has noticed an increase in Eurasian collared-doves as well as a decrease in pygmy owls, cowbirds, starlings and others.

"Kinglets are getting very scarce," she says. "And the bohemian waxwing, that's another bird that's really declining. We're lucky to see any in the Christmas Bird Count and we used to see them by the thousands."

During a typical Christmas Bird Count, Creston records between 64 and 76 bird species. In Kimberley and Cranbrook, where temperatures are much cooler, the diversity drops to between 42 and 44 species. But it all adds up.

"Altogether, over the 22 years we've been doing it, we've gotten 103 different species," Cooper says. "And we usually get a robin. Everybody always thinks robins shouldn't be here in the winter, but there's usually a brave one."

For anyone interested in participating in this year's Christmas Bird Count, contact information for the count closest to you can be found on the Bird Studies Canada website at: www.birdscanada.org/volunteer/cbc ■