



Christmas Bird Count

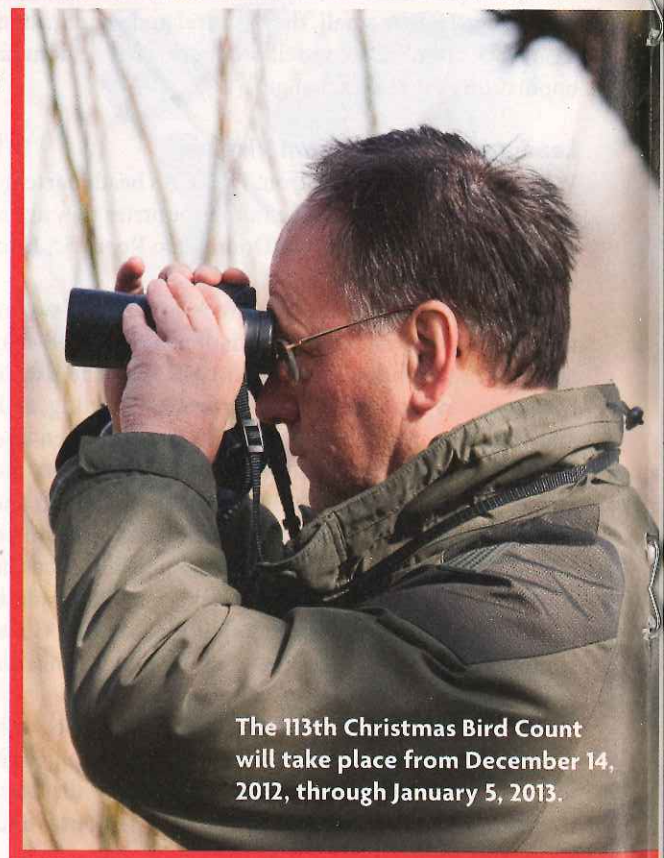
BY DENNIS SMITH

"Winter is for the birds."

We've probably all heard that idiom a million times and it seems the older we get the truer it rings. One thing is certain though; whoever coined the expression didn't consult the birds first — not in this neck of the woods anyway.

I mean if you're a bird in Colorado in the dead of winter, what's to like? Your food and water supplies are pretty much dried up, depleted, dead, frozen or buried under a foot-and-a-half of snow; it's bitter cold, the wind is howling and most of your friends have flown to warmer climes leaving you to shiver cold and hungry in an ice encrusted pine tree for the next three months. Birds like this? I don't think so.

And yet, at no time of the year is more concentrated human attention focused on our fine feathered friends than in winter and,



The 113th Christmas Bird Count will take place from December 14, 2012, through January 5, 2013.

more specifically, in those weeks surrounding the Christmas holidays. This, you see, is the season of the annual nationwide Christmas Bird Count.

An international research phenomenon organized by the National Audubon Society and conducted by tens of thousands of volunteers from the Arctic Circle to the tip of Tierra del Fuego, the CBC has become the largest and longest running "citizen science" program of its kind in the Western Hemisphere.

Celebrating its 113th anniversary this year, the CBC emerged from a somewhat dubious custom. Prior to its creation in 1900, communities engaged in a holiday tradition known as the Christmas "Side Hunt," so named because participants would choose sides, go afield with guns instead of check sheets and kill as many wild critters as they could — game birds, songbirds, shorebirds, prairie dogs, woodchucks, pack rats, mice, gophers, ground squirrels, tree squirrels, muskrats, beavers, whatever. It didn't matter. If it wore hair, feathers or fur, it counted.

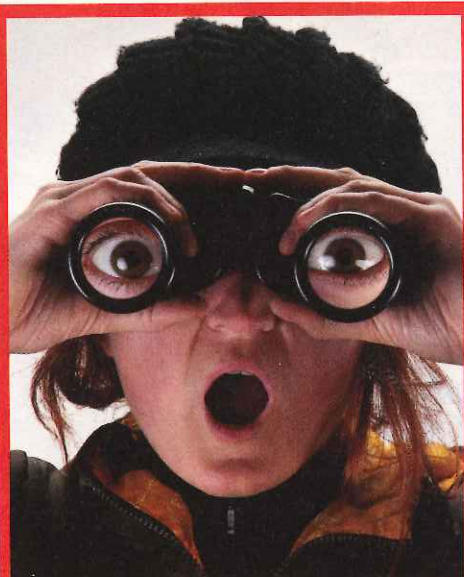
Whichever "side" brought in the biggest pile of corpses won. It remains unclear what the winning teams may have "won," whether the collected carcasses were consumed or disposed of, and if the gruesome tallies ever generated any meaningful scientific data. Probably not.

While this sort of thing would be enough to give contemporary conservationists a raging case of the vapors, it is nonetheless reflective of the prevailing and grossly misguided national attitude toward wildlife in the late 19th century — namely that wildlife existed in infinite numbers.

Ironically, it was that same kind of thinking that allowed John James Audubon to kill hundreds of wild specimens before stuffing, studying and painting them for his highly acclaimed illustrated volumes of American wildlife. Maybe if he'd had access to a digital camera, things would have been different.

Fortunately, wildlife conservation was beginning to creep into the collective American consciousness near the turn of the 19th century, and many forward-thinking observers and scientists were becoming increasingly concerned about declining bird populations. The Audubon Society was in its formative years, and Frank Chapman, an officer in the fledgling organization, proposed the radical idea of replacing the Side Hunt with a new holiday tradition. He suggested counting, rather than killing, the birds.

His idea took wing, as they say, and the Audubon Society's first official bird count took place on Christmas Day of 1900. Twenty-seven volunteers in 25 locations ranging from Toronto, Ontario, to Pacific Grove, California, recorded around 90 species



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of birds, with most counts in or around the heavily populated centers of North America. In the 112 years since its inception, the CBC has grown to include more than 50,000 individual counters at more than 2,000 locations across the breadth and length of the Western Hemisphere.

The CBC is unique in that observers not only identify individual species encountered in the field during the count, but also how many of each, as well as how much actual time they spend counting them and under what weather conditions. The national summary of the 112th CBC (2011-2012) for example, revealed that 63,223 volunteers operating from 2,248 locations tallied over 60 million birds in 646 individual, positively identified species — an all-time record, by the way. The counts took place in all 50 U.S. states, all 10 Canadian provinces and 99 other count

circles in Latin America, the Caribbean and the Pacific.

As you might have guessed, the Colorado birding community plays an extremely active role in every CBC. Two years ago, in the 111th CBC (2010-2011), 45 teams of volunteer citizen-scientists, "count circles" in bird-watcher's parlance, from our cities, mountain towns and farm communities across the state went afield armed with binoculars, spotting scopes, check sheets, cameras and guidebooks to collect data for the big count.

Count circles include folks of all ages, from all walks of life, and can range in size from as few as three or four volunteers to a few dozen. They usually include an expert ornithologist or experienced birder to help beginners with birding technique and identification questions, and a team leader or compiler whose job it is to organize the group, collect data sheets at the end of the count, compile the results and forward them to the Audubon Society's national Christmas Bird Count director.

Each circle is assigned a specific "count day" in which to conduct its surveys. In the 23-day count that ran from December 14, 2010, to January 5, 2011, Colorado birders drove, hiked, cycled, skied or snowshoed into their designated territories covering an infinite array of habitat types and geographical environments from prairie floors at 3,300 feet in the case of the John Martin Reservoir circle to the 10,000-foot slopes encountered by counters in the Grand Mesa circle.

Volunteers can experience extremes in weather depending, of course, on the day they go afield and the exact location of their areas. We all know about Colorado's rapid-fire weather changes. By way of illustration, counters in the Fountain Creek circle, who conducted their count on December 14, enjoyed a balmy 64 degrees and were able to chalk up 89 bird species. The Barr Lake circle wasn't quite so fortunate; it was a chilly 29 degrees on January 1, when its members recorded 63 species in its territory. And the 13 volunteers in the North Park

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circle had to endure minus 22 degrees to log 21 species and 436 birds. Considering the brutal conditions, they ought to get a medal.

A typical count day might start with members of the circle rendezvousing at a common assembly point where the compiler will organize and direct the volunteers on how to best cover their 15-mile wide territory. Birders will then disperse with their optics and check sheets to see how many individual birds and species they can find, and enter their sightings on check sheets specifically designed to reflect not only numbers and species of birds recorded but also prevailing weather conditions, hours counted, and other relevant details as well.

Long time birders go about this with the polished precision born of years of experience, but beginners and kids may require a bit of coaching from the experts. Brock McCormick, a wildlife biologist with the U.S. Forest Service, advises new birders to first “look for movement ... something scurrying in the bushes, a flicker or flash in the treetops, rustling noises in the underbrush,” all of which may signal the presence of a bird.

Birds may also be identified by sound. Those who are familiar with the distinctive songs of a particular bird or birds can chalk up a sighting based on that knowledge, but a visual is preferred.

Between December 14, 2010, and January 5, 2011, Colorado's birders searched known birding hot spots in their local backyards and city parks, high mountain lakes, beaver ponds, spruce forests, aspen stands, farm ponds, cattail sloughs, crop fields, sage flats, expansive short grass prairies, cottonwood river bottoms, high plains reservoirs and ponderosa-studded foothills to turn in an astonishing tally of 205 separate species totaling 781,067 birds.

That's remarkable. And if it proves anything at all, it may just be that while the birds may not like winter, Colorado's bird-watchers sure do.

Dennis Smith is a freelance outdoor writer, photographer and columnist from Loveland. Dennis writes a monthly outdoor column for Colorado Country Life. His work also appears in several national and regional publications.



BIRD-WATCHING IS FUN

Fifty thousand people can't be wrong. That's how many volunteer “citizen scientists” sign up each winter to participate in the National Audubon Society's annual Christmas Bird Count.

It's fun, educational and healthy and provides another excuse to get outdoors and, perhaps most importantly, contributes directly to a 112-year-old database use by ornithologists, scientists, resource managers, wildlife watchers and professionals around the world to track not only bird population trends by species, but also the effects of climate, habitat and environmental changes on songbirds, waterfowl, shorebirds, raptors and interrelated wildlife.

Everyone and anyone are encouraged to take part. Children are certainly encouraged and, beginning in 2012, the previous \$5 fee for adult participants has been eliminated. But first you will need to find a count circle near you.

It should be pretty easy. Colorado has an extremely active contingent of bird-watchers located in cities, suburbs and rural communities, and at least 45 known count circles (far too many to list here) are scattered across the entire state. You can begin your search at app.audubon.org/cbcapp/findCircles.jsp?state=US-CO&start. For further information or assistance, go to Denver Field Ornithologists at dfobirders.org; or Boulder County Audubon Society, boulderaudubon.org; fortnet.org/Audubon for the Fort Collins Audubon Society; or try the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory at rmb.org. If all else fails, simply do an Internet search for something like Colorado Christmas Bird Count.

If you register, you should try to outfit yourself with good binoculars or a spotting scope with tripod, a couple of birding guidebooks and, possibly, a camera. Some birding circles may have loaner gear available.

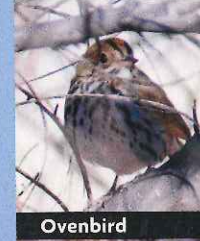
Be sure to dress in layers appropriate to seasonal weather conditions and carry a small backpack stocked with high-energy snacks, drinks, mittens or gloves, some of those neat little chemical hand warmers and sunglasses. It's always advisable to carry a small first aid kit. Winter isn't just for the birds, it's for bird-watching.



Chickadee



Pine Warbler



Ovenbird



Winter Wren



Blue Jay