Nature Happenings

Join the Annual Moab Christmas Bird Count

by Damian Fagan

The annual Moab Christmas Bird Count, better known as the CBC, will take place on Saturday, Dec. 19. Experienced or beginner birders are welcome to join in this fun and rewarding day counting birds.



This year represents the 127th annual CBC which started in 1900 by a handful of bird conservationists and members of the fledgling National Audubon Society organized by Frank Chapman. The first year, 25 counts were held in places like Toronto, Ontario, and Pacific Grove, California. These counts were in stark contrast to another holiday event called the Christmas Side Hunt which pitted teams of hunters against each other to see who could bag the most game in a day. The wanton slaughter of wildlife was a fading tradition in the new century of conservationism.



Bewick's Wren



From that first count with 25 participants tallying 89 species, the CBC has grown to 2,701 counts in 2025 across North America, the Pacific Islands, the Caribbean, and parts of Latin and South America. In contrast to that first year, the 2025 Christmas Bird Count had over 85,000 participants and they recorded 2,435 species across Canada, the U.S., Latin America, the Pacific Islands, and in the Caribbean. Even Antarctica has a count!

Evening Grosbeak



House Finch



Woodhouse Scrub Jay

This mid-winter count, sponsored by the National Audubon Society, provides a snapshot of wintering bird populations and shows some general trends in numbers of birds overwintering regionally or species on the move. Hosted by the National Audubon Society, Birds Canada partners with them to organize the Canadian counts.



Bald Eagle

Each count area is a predetermined 15-mile-diameter circle. For the Moab count, the circle centers on Coffee Pot Rock in the Sandflats area. The organizers split this circle up into manageable chunks that teams of observers can cover on foot, by car, and even by boat. Both species and numbers of individuals are counted with care taken to record flocks of birds passing from one area to another to avoid double counting.

Though Count Day is Dec. 19, Count Week is considered the three days pre- and post-Count Day. Species may be counted during these days, but numbers of individuals do not count. The idea is to be able to capture rarities or species that are in low numbers and may be easily missed on Count Day, and to do some scouting prior to Count Day to know where birds are hanging out.







Goshawk

Those with accessibility concerns may also participate by observing backyard feeders and recording the highest number of individuals of various species observed throughout the day. Feeder counts are important because the feeders are often in the backyard and not accessible to birders looking from the street. More than once have homeowners questioned someone looking towards their windows with binoculars!

There is also an owling component of the count, either in the morning or evening of Count Day. Generally, owls are often underrepresented because no one is out hooting for them in the darkness; however, a few are often found perched in trees or looking out of tree cavities during the day.

Birds are identified by sight or sound, and some flocks are best guesstimates because of their size and movement. The Merlin app is a good resource for identifying bird calls; just try to get a visual sighting to confirm what the app is saying. The app isn't right 100% of the time, so don't record a rarity based on the app itself; a good photograph or visual sighting goes a long way!



Western Blue Bird

Average number of species for Count Day is around 74 species. Waterfowl and songbirds make up the majority of the birds counted, with raptors a distant third. In addition to the usual suspects, keep an eye out for white-winged dove, peregrine falcon, merlin, and evening grosbeaks which have an irruptive winter distribution. Northern pygmy and western screech-owls are also good finds.



Common Raven



White Wing Dove

The three days after Count Day are a chance to find species that were either missed on Saturday or to confirm an unusual sighting. And this year organizer's Marcy Hafner and Mary Moran ask that participants, both old and new, register for the count on the CBC website, cbc.audubon.org. The organizers can also be contacted by email: Mary Moran (marymoran3333@gmail.com) or Marcy Hafner (marcyhafner@gmail.com). Good birding!





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