

Project Feeder Watch lets backyard birders assist in research

by Todd Eskelin

Winter discussion of birds in Alaska often centers on the bird feeder. Just imagine it's Saturday morning, the temperature is a whopping 3 degrees, and you are still in your pajamas sipping that first cup of coffee as the sun finally illuminates your back yard. You are watching the assortment of tiny birds wake up and make their way to your feeder, and you notice that there is a bird at your feeder that you have never seen before. You call up the neighbor and, after a lengthy discussion, it is confirmed that you have just seen the first red-breasted nuthatch at the feeder.

Now, try and imagine that this winter, this same experience happens to people all across Alaska and down the West Coast as far south as Klamath Falls, Ore. Everyone is seeing their first red-breasted nuthatches at their feeders. Without a network of pretty talkative neighbors, we would never know that this boom of nuthatches has spread over such a large area (which in fact it has).

Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology has created such a network with a program called "Project Feeder Watch." For 13 years the Cornell lab has been having participants survey birds at their feeders to document the distribution and abundance of winter bird populations across the country.

Last year, more than 15,000 people participated, but with only 86 contributors from Alaska (eight from the Kenai, Soldotna and Sterling area). Nationally, the project has documented many problems such as disease outbreaks, as well as population explosions of several species that expanded from interior Canada to the southern United States. In Alaska we need more survey participants to provide data on the deformed-bill chickadee problem that has spread across South-central Alaska.

One nice thing about this survey is the flexibility. Participants only need to count birds one day during

every two-week period.

Also, as a participant, you get to decide how long your survey period will last. You can count all day, or only count for an hour while you drink your coffee, as long as you count consistently. The excuse "the birds are coming and going so fast from my feeder that I could never count them," won't work using Cornell's survey methods. You count only the highest number of birds for each species that you see at any one time.

There is a \$15 fee to sign up, but it is well worth the cost. When you sign up, you get a bird identification poster, with most of the common birds at feeders in the winter, as well as a colorful calendar to help you keep track of your survey days. You also get a one-year subscription to Cornell's quarterly newsletter called *Birdscope*. Most importantly, you receive a neatly organized kit with data sheets and a handbook describing everything you ever wanted to know about feeders, from maintaining and cleaning to discouraging predators from hunting at your feeder.

This is a great opportunity to have a little family event every other weekend or give your budding junior scientists a chance to contribute to real research. They can track wintering bird populations across the country by entering their survey data on the Web site and viewing results from other surveyors.

If you would like more information about Project Feeder Watch, you can check out the Web site at <http://birds.cornell.edu/pfw> or contact me at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge headquarters at (907) 262-7021.

Todd Eskelin is a biological technician at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. He specializes in birds and has conducted research on songbirds in many areas of the state. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna, call 262-7021 or see the website at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.