

For the birds: Soldotna area Christmas Bird Count slated for Saturday

by Jack Sinclair and Elizabeth Jozwiak

This is a great time of year to get away from the hectic holiday hustle, and set aside some quality time for birding.

Taking a day to look closer into the trees or upon the water or up into the sky also tends to counteract our natural tendency to “hibernate” in the cooler weather and shorter daylight hours.

It’s another reminder to stop and smell the flowers, or in this case, watch the birds!

Once again local birders from the Kenai/Soldotna area are invited to participate in the 103rd Annual Christmas Bird Count (CBC) to be held Saturday.

The Christmas Bird Count is an early-winter nationwide bird census, where volunteers follow specified routes through a designated 15-mile (24-km) diameter circle, counting every bird they see or hear all day. It’s not just a species tally—all birds are counted all day, giving an indication of the total number of birds in the circle that day.

All individual CBCs are conducted in the period from Dec. 14 to Jan. fifth (inclusive dates) each season, and each count is conducted in one calendar day in a given area.

Birders from Seward, Anchorage, Homer, and other areas of Alaska also participate in this annual event.

The Soldotna Christmas Bird Count originated in 1983 with the center of the 15-mile diameter circle being the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge headquarters and covering most of the Soldotna area, including a good stretch of the lower and middle Kenai River.

Although the count was discontinued in 1992, it restarted in 1999 and has been running ever since.

Some of the more common birds seen during the Soldotna CBC have been the bald eagle, black-billed magpie, common raven, assorted gull species, common redpoll, pine grosbeak, pine siskin and boreal and black-capped chickadee.

Due to our recent warm weather and high water on the Kenai River, we anticipate observing more water-friendly birds this year. Those birds may include the common and Barrow’s goldeneye, common and

Red-breasted merganser, mallard, bufflehead, belted kingfisher and an occasional American dipper.

Birders, or anyone interested in participating in this year’s Christmas bird count, should meet at the Kaladi Bros. Café in Soldotna at 8:30 a.m. so that birding groups can be assembled and observation areas assigned.

Participants do not have to be experts, but only have a desire to get outside and look for birds. The birding effort normally concludes at dusk (about four p.m.) or when weather precludes any measurable returns.

Inexperienced birders will be grouped with more seasoned CBC veterans to help familiarize them with where to go and what to look for.

Each participant should try to bring a good set of binoculars and a bird identification book for species most often found in Alaska. There is a \$5 fee per field participant.

No fees are charged for persons planning to survey their backyard bird feeders during the Christmas Bird Count. Anyone having an active bird feeder in the count area is encouraged to help. Counting the single highest number of a species at a feeder at any one time, including any unique feathered visitors, is a big help to the count.

Please contact Jack Sinclair to let us know if you would like to participate.

Also, if you come across a chickadee with an upward elongated curved (i.e., deformed) bill, please report your sighting to the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge at 262-7021.

The first CBC was done on Christmas Day of 1900 as an alternative activity to an event called a “side hunt” where people chose sides, then went out and shot as many birds as they could. The group that came in with the largest number of dead birds won the event.

Frank Chapman, a famed ornithologist at the American Museum of Natural History and the editor of “Bird-Lore,” recognized that declining bird populations could not withstand this kind of over-hunting, and he proposed to count birds on Christmas Day

rather than shoot them.

The data collected by observers on these Christmas Bird Counts over the past century have allowed researchers, conservation biologists, and interested individuals to study the long-term health and status of bird populations across North America.

In the 1980's, CBC data were used to document the decline of wintering populations of the American black duck, after which conservation measures were put into effect to reduce hunting pressure on this species.

For anyone participating or just interested in the Christmas Bird Count, there is a wealth of information available online at www.audubon.org/bird/cbc/.

The Soldotna bird count totals since 1984 are avail-

able to view here as well as every other bird count in North America during the last century.

For more information on participating contact Jack Sinclair at 262-5581 or e-mail at jsndt@alaska.net.

Jack Sinclair is a guest contributor to the Refuge Notebook, and has been a resident on the Kenai Peninsula for 18 years. He works as a district ranger for the Alaska State Parks managing the State Marine Parks of Resurrection Bay and Prince William Sound. Elizabeth Jozwiak is a wildlife biologist for the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, and takes every available opportunity to go birding. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters in Soldotna, call (907) 262-7021. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://kenai.fws.gov>.