

## Soldotna Area Christmas Bird Count slated for Saturday, December 30, 2006

by Elizabeth Jozwiak and Jack Sinclair

The 107<sup>th</sup> annual Christmas Bird Count season is under way; tens of thousands of volunteer birders are scouring their designated areas in over 2000 circles this Holiday season throughout North America. Once again local birders from the Kenai/Soldotna area are invited to participate in the Soldotna Annual Christmas Bird Count to be held tomorrow.

The Audubon Christmas Bird Count (CBC) 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 across North America, including Canada, are conducted in the period between Dec. 14 to Jan. 5 (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 history of how the Christmas Bird Count began is quite interesting! 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 Audubon Society 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. 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 with the dedication of local birder Jack Sinclair who has been the official compiler of the data each year. 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. Some uncommon species observed on the Soldotna count in previous years have included a northern shrike, northern hawk owl, and a white-crowned sparrow.

Homer birders conducted their CBC on December 16<sup>th</sup>, and had quite a number of unusual and rare sightings. The Kachemak Bay Bird Alert Information number (235-PEEP) reported that Homer participants observed a purple finch, red crossbills, cedar waxwings, and over 1000 rock sandpipers on the spit.

Birders, or anyone interested in participating in this year's Christmas bird count, should meet at the Kaladi Bros. Café in Soldotna at 9:00am 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 4 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 dress warmly, and try to bring a good set of binoculars and a bird identification book for species most often found in Alaska. You may also want to bring a camera to document any rare or unusual sightings. There is a \$5 fee per field participant which will help defray the cost of production and publication of the 107th Christmas Bird Count issue of

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No fees are charged for persons under 18 years of age, or for those 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.

For anyone wanting to pre-register, or just interested in the Christmas Bird Count, there is a wealth of information available online at [www.audubon.org/bird/cbc/](http://www.audubon.org/bird/cbc/). The Soldotna bird count totals since 1984 are available to view here as well as every other bird count in North America during the last century.

After a great day of birding, all participants are invited to submit their tally sheets and birding photos

during a potluck social at 5:30 pm at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge's Environmental Education log cabin located next door to the Kenai NWR headquarters/parking lot on Ski Hill Road.

For more information, contact Liz Jozwiak at the Kenai NWR 260-2818 or Jack Sinclair at 262-7817. Also, if you come across a chickadee or northwestern crow with an upward elongated curved (i.e., deformed) bill, please report it to us at the Kenai National Wildlife headquarters (262-7021). This information will contribute to an important regional study on the causes of bill deformities in southern Alaska.

*Elizabeth Jozwiak is a wildlife biologist for the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Jack Sinclair is the area superintendent of Alaska State Parks. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*