

## Soldotna area Christmas Bird Count slated for Saturday, December 29, 2007

by Liz Jozwiak and Jack Sinclair



*Read-breasted nuthatch. Photo Credit: Photo by Todd Eskelin*

The 108<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 CBC began over a century ago when 27 conservationists in 25 localities, led by scientist and writer Frank Chapman, changed the course of ornithological history.

On Christmas Day in 1900, the small group posed an alternative to the “side hunt,” a Christmas day activity in which teams competed to see who could shoot the most birds and small mammals. Instead, Chapman proposed that they identify, count, and record all the birds they saw, founding what is now considered to be the world's most significant citizen-based conservation effort—and a more than century-old institution.

Since Chapman's retirement in 1934, new generations of observers have performed the modern-day count. Today, over 55,000 volunteers from all 50 states, every Canadian province, parts of Central and South America, Bermuda, the West Indies, and Pacific Islands, count and record every individual bird and bird species seen in a specified area.

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 1980s, 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.

Another important milestone has been reached in the ongoing analysis of Christmas Bird Count data by Audubon scientists and other ornithologists. Audubon's 2007 WatchList has been released in the 107<sup>th</sup> Christmas Bird Count summary issue of *American Birds*. Trend information from the Christmas Bird Count and the Breeding Bird Survey are used, when available, to evaluate the status of species both in the breeding and non-breeding seasons. Birds found to be at risk are included on the WatchList. With the release of both *Common Birds in Decline* and the 2007 WatchList, CBC analysis will begin to focus now on how birds may be reacting to global climate change.

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, common redpoll, pine grosbeak, pine siskin and boreal and black-capped chickadee.

Some uncommon and extremely rare species observed on the 2006 Soldotna count last year was the Ivory Gull (the first and only individual ever recorded in the history of the Alaska CBCs), a Slaty-backed Gull (rarely encountered on Alaska CBC) and an American Tree sparrow.

Birders, or anyone interested in participating in this year's Christmas bird count, should meet at the Kaladi Bros. Café in Soldotna between 8:30 - 9:00 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 4 p.m.) or when weather precludes any measurable returns.

CBC participants are organized into groups—or field parties—by the organizer or Compiler of each Count. Each field party covers a specific area of the 15-mile diameter circle on a specific route. 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 partici-

pant which will help defray the cost of production and publication of the 108<sup>th</sup> Christmas Bird Count issue of *American Birds*

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. All you will need to do is contact your local Compiler so that you may report your results on the Count Day. 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.

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 6:00 p.m. 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 Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*