

# 109<sup>th</sup> annual Christmas Bird Count: Soldotna results

by Toby Burke

On Christmas Day in 1900, a small group of people inspired by ornithologist Frank Chapman started an alternative to the holiday tradition known as the Christmas “side hunt,” where teams of hunters competed to see who could shoot the most birds and other wildlife in the course of the day. A viable conservation ethic was starting to gain traction around the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and many conservationists were alarmed by North America’s steeply declining bird populations.

Accordingly, Chapman initiated a different kind of hunt, a census, where people instead searched for, identified, counted, and recorded all the birds they saw, founding what is now considered to be the world’s most significant citizen-science based conservation effort.

Today Chapman’s Christmas Bird Census is universally known as the Christmas Bird Count (CBC) and is a venerable 109 year old institution. Annually the CBC has approximately 60,000 participants counting in over 2,000 count circles. They identify to species all birds they see or hear within a 15 mile diameter count circle, within a 24 hour period. A count can be conducted on any one day from December 14 through January 5.

The Soldotna CBC was started in 1983 with the count circle centered on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Headquarters on Ski Hill Road. The latest Soldotna CBC was held on December 27<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

Weather conditions varied widely within the count circle. Early morning temperatures dipped to -17° F at the Soldotna Airport while areas near Kenai experienced a late afternoon high of +20° F. Soldotna was calm while areas along the lower Kenai River had steady winds most of the day peaking at 20 mph. Lower portions of the Kenai River and Flats experienced heavy ice fog and the entire area had partly cloudy conditions.

Thirty participants, divided into ten parties, braved the winter weather to identify, count, and record all the birds they could find within the Soldotna count circle. These intrepid souls spent a total of 30 party hours in the field, 4.25 hours on foot and 25.75 hours by car. During that time they covered 264.25

miles, 6.25 miles on foot and 258 miles by car. In addition to 30 field participants, 11 of which were youth, two feeder watchers expended a total of 10 hours of effort observing their yard and feeder birds.

Count Day marked the onset of 15 consecutive days of sub-zero weather. As with people, cold weather tends to cause birds to seek cover and minimize exposure. Despite a record number of participants generally low numbers of birds were observed, being scarce even at normally productive locales such as bird feeders and the open waters of the Kenai River.

A total of 1539 individual birds of 31 species were counted. The five most numerous species were Common Raven (380), Bald Eagle (279), Snow Bunting (200), White-winged Crossbill (101), and Common Redpoll (88). The majority of ravens and eagles were observed in and around the Soldotna Dump while all the Snow Buntings were observed in a single flock on the Kenai Flats. Both White-winged Crossbills and Common Redpolls are common across our forested landscape this winter but were definitely under-represented in this year’s count.

The next five most common species were Black-billed Magpie (82), Black-capped Chickadee (82), Boreal Chickadee (57), Pine Grosbeak (40), and Bohemian Waxwing (31). Magpies are both ubiquitous and conspicuous residents of our increasingly urban landscape while both species of chickadees are common yard and feeder birds. Grosbeaks occasionally attend feeders but, like waxwings, are also observed in berry-laden trees.

Mew Gulls (25), Red-breasted Nuthatches (23), Glaucous-winged Gulls (22), Common Mergansers (17), and Rock Pigeons (12) were the next most common species. Both species of gulls were scarce due to the dearth of open water on the Kenai River as well as ducks of which, notably, only one species was observed this year.

Unusual observations included an adult Slaty-backed Gull at the Soldotna Dump. This Asiatic species has been recorded on the last four consecutive CBC’s. Also, a Boreal Owl and two Northern Hawk Owls were recorded this year, each species for only the second time in the count’s history. And finally, a small flock

of at least seven Horned Larks was observed, loosely associated with the flock of Snow Buntings, on the Kenai Flats. This is the first time this species has been recorded on the Soldotna CBC and only the second time it has ever been observed in winter on the Kenai Peninsula.

Thirty-one species were observed this year but a total of 60 species have now been recorded on the Soldotna CBC since its founding in 1983. Outstanding for a count situated largely in a boreal biome.

Soldotna CBC compiler Jack Sinclair acknowledged that while birds were harder to come by this year participants were not. He is greatly encouraged by the steadily increasing number of Soldotna CBC participants which has climbed from seven in 1999 to

30 in 2008. And considering that more than a third of those participants were youth, the future of the Soldotna CBC looks bright.

If you missed participating in the Soldotna CBC but still want to be involved in a citizen-science winter bird survey, consider participating in this year's Great Backyard Bird Count during President's Day weekend February 13-16. Visit [www.birdcount.org](http://www.birdcount.org) for details.

*Toby Burke is a refuge biological technician who is intrigued by the status and distribution of Alaska and Kenai Peninsula birds and enjoys birding with his wife and family. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*