

Completing the Circle: How to Save Birds While Birding

The Christmas Bird Count, born of a desire to count birds rather than shoot them during the holiday season, effectively gave birth to the modern conservation movement in North America in 1900. As we fast-forward to the 21st century, broader concerns regarding the state of our global environment give sharp focus to the activity we now call Citizen Science. Around the world, countries are coming together to discuss their roles in maintaining biodiversity as part of international agreements on how we can use birds as indicators of biodiversity and environmental health, and how we can effectively monitor changes in bird populations. As the BirdLife International partner in the United States, Audubon has an important role on the world stage for monitoring population trends in North America and beyond.

The only way that we can estimate trends across meaningful geographic scales is to engage volunteers to count birds in a systematic manner, and to have those volunteers submit their results to a central online database. The Internet presents a powerful opportunity for a fast, meaningful, two-way transfer of information between dispersed observers and a nationally based research staff, a model that is being adopted around the world in various ways in countries as diverse as Turkey, the United Kingdom, Kenya, and the United States.

This has been an exciting year for the Christmas Bird Count (CBC). Dan Niven, of Audubon's Science Department, has been working with statisticians and others at the U.S. Geological Survey's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center to analyze the results from the CBC with statistical procedures that take into consideration the variable ways by which data have been collected ("Statistical Analyses Make the Christmas Bird Count Relevant for Conservation," page 21). This work has produced new trend graphs for bird populations at the beginning of winter. Dan began by analyzing boreal species as a part of our current partnership in the Boreal Songbird Initiative ("Christmas Bird Count Provides Insights Into Population Change in Land Birds That Breed in the Boreal Forest," page 10). In some instances, the CBC gives us new trends for species, such as the Northern Shrike and Harris's Sparrow, that breed to the north where the North American Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) does not give us reliable information. In other species, such as the Rusty Blackbird, the trends provide a chilling reminder of what other data have shown us. In still other species, such as the Merlin and Hermit Thrush, the CBC trends support the positive increases revealed by the BBS.

These new analyses, couched around the recommendations of the CBC Scientific Review Panel ("Improving the Christmas Bird Count: Report of a Review Panel," page 34), greatly enhance the value of your participation in the CBC. We hope that you view this new way of working with data as helping you to effectively contribute to bird conservation. And it's our hope that through these results you will gain a greater understanding of the issues affecting the birds in your area, and become a spokesperson for the birds on the local and regional levels. Citizen Science has a great potential to strengthen the democratic process and incorporate the environment as a central issue in the political process. Audubon works to engage people in achieving its bird conservation goals.

In the United Kingdom, the British government has adopted bird population trends as one of 15 primary National Sustainability Indicators. In this way, birds are used to develop a direct link between environmental health and governmental policy. This gives us something to work toward in the Americas, too.

It is our hope that you will participate in other Citizen Science projects as well, such as the Great Backyard Bird Count, the Breeding Bird Survey, Project FeederWatch, or your state's breeding bird atlas program, and submit your daily observations to eBird. Keep an eye out for Important Bird Area (IBA) stewardship groups that will need your help to monitor birds at these critical sites. IBAs in particular offer an opportunity for you to act locally as part of a global program. The information you collect on the annual CBC shows trends that guide decisions about Audubon's WatchList, which helps Audubon prioritize its bird conservation actions. In turn, this informs our State of the Birds report.

So you see, your participation in the CBC is much more than a good day out birding with friends. Thanks to Citizen Science, your days in the field most definitely benefit the birds you are counting.

—Paul Green, Ph.D., Director, Citizen Science

ON THE COVER: Providing a perfect example of the crossover between the Christmas Bird Count and the Boreal Songbird Initiative, the 104th CBC was a "flight" year for Common Redpolls (*Carduelis flammea*). While the size of the irruption was average in terms of numbers of birds, the pattern of occurrence was quite unusual. This male Common Redpoll was photographed on the breeding grounds near Nome, Alaska. Photo/Arthur Morris/www.birdsasart.com.