

Using the CBC

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Since the first Christmas Bird Count in 1900 bird sighting data have been gathered each year to provide highly valuable information on the general distribution and trends of wintering bird populations. This has been especially true since the 1960s, after circles and effort reporting became more standardized. Such information is particularly valuable when it detects significant declines in continental or regional populations of birds, and it can be used to help bird conservation

programs identify populations or even species that warrant increased measures of protection. However, as useful as these large-scale trend analyses may be, they have limited value for identifying specific sites critical to supporting actual breeding and wintering populations of birds. Nonetheless, in the process of conducting Christmas Bird Counts, other valuable site-specific data are often being collected that are not currently being reported.

Christmas Bird Count data, as reported through the CBC website, are “pooled”

data, where all sightings within each 15-mile circle are compiled into a master list and submitted to the CBC database. The finer detail of sightings from each party within the count circle is not preserved. As you may remember reading in the 104th CBC issue of *American Birds* (“Improving the Christmas Bird Count: Report of a Review Panel,” also available online through the CBC website) one of the major recommendations for increasing the value of the Christmas Bird Count database will be

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*Wanted: Detailed counts of
wintering Piping Plovers,
Snowy Plovers, Wilson's Plovers,
American Oystercatchers, and
Red Knots from December
2006 through January 2007
and beyond.*

to Enhance Protection of Wintering Shorebirds on the Gulf Coast



Facing page: Piping Plover (*Charadrius melodus*). Photo/Sidney Maddock. Above: American Oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*). Photo/George DeCamp

for Audubon to create the ability to retain subsets of data collected within Christmas Bird Count circles, including party-specific bird count and effort data. Additionally, site- and project-specific data could also be retained by each party, if gathered.

Often birds concentrate in specific spots during particular seasons of the year—these are the areas we always check on our CBC routes to make sure we count key species, or, perhaps, to turn up a rarity. These sites are in many instances being designated as Important Bird Areas, or IBAs (for more information on this exciting program in your state go to <http://www.audubon.org/>

[bird/iba/index.html](http://www.audubon.org/bird/iba/index.html)), and many are site-specific locations where threatened or endangered coastal waterbirds concentrate. More than one IBA or coastal waterbird site may be included within a 15-mile diameter CBC circle, and monitoring such specific spots will enhance the value of Christmas Bird Count data for monitoring and protecting these beleaguered species.

With the implementation of its Coastal Bird Conservation Program (CBCP) in March 2003, Audubon established a science-driven, field-based program to focus on the conservation of threatened coastal birds—initially beach-nesting plovers, terns, oyster-

catchers, and skimmers. The CBCP works with every interested conservation partner and landowner to (1) census and map populations of priority species, (2) monitor and protect important nesting and foraging sites (IBAs), and (3) establish or enhance long-term protection programs for these birds and sites with the express purpose of maintaining or increasing their populations.

For the upcoming 107th Christmas Bird Count season, Audubon's Coastal Bird Conservation Program plans to begin an experiment by requesting additional information from volunteers in the Christmas Bird Count. Last season there were 49 counts included in the



Red Knot (*Calidris canutus*).
Photo/Shawn Carey

analysis, but with it we hope to identify within each count circle the specific sites where each of the five at-risk species was detected, and the number of individuals seen at each of these sites. Of course, this participation is completely optional.

The results of this experiment will complement the National Audubon Society's Coastal Bird Conservation Program's effort to improve the accuracy of current data available on wintering

106th CBC in the Gulf of Mexico region; in fact, there are more historical (and likely future) counts in the area. We will welcome participation from

anyone counting birds along the Gulf Coast. This request will not increase or intensify Christmas Bird Count survey efforts, which could skew CBC data



Snowy Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*). Photo/Jim Fenton

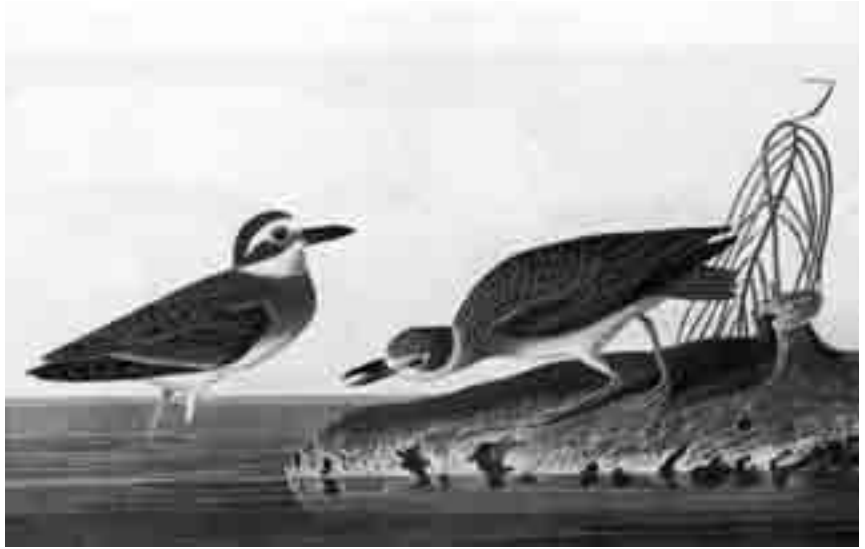


Wilson's Plover (*Charadrius wilsonia*).
Photo/Scott Elowitz


populations for the first five high-priority species of shorebirds. The goal of this project is to better understand the site-by-site distribution and relative abundance of these species throughout their wintering ranges. The first year of this project will focus on the U.S. Gulf Coast from Texas to Florida. This information will be used to complement existing data and help Audubon focus its future coastal bird conservation efforts on sites supporting the highest wintering populations of these species. Audubon will continue to work with property owners and other interested partners to increase protective measures on the wintering grounds, a critical period in each species' annual life cycle.

The immense scope of such an effort requires the cooperation and involvement of every possible partner interested in the conservation of coastal birds and coastal habitats throughout the distribution range of each species. In its first three years the CBCP has focused its resources on the conservation of beach-nesting species of birds on the Gulf Coast. The CBCP staff and its partners have mapped all located breeding pairs of Snowy Plovers, Wilson's Plovers, and American Oystercatchers along 1100 miles of the Gulf of Mexico coast—from Mobile, Alabama, to La Pesca, Mexico. This information, much of it filling significant gaps in data, has already been used to increase the on-the-ground protection of these species at critical breeding sites.

The goal of this new initiative is to map the wintering distribution and relative abundance of five species of shorebirds—Piping Plover, Snowy Plover,



Wilson's Plover, American Oystercatcher, and Red Knot—site by site. The CBCP seeks the assistance of all interested participants, particularly those on the upcoming 107th Christmas Bird Count. Participants on CBCs may well be the ones to discover new specific sites critical to these species in the nonbreeding season. As mentioned above, there may be more than one site supporting these species within a CBC circle, and the approximately 50 count circles include Gulf Coast habitats that could be expected to support these species. Key areas of concentration for some species may even have fewer than 10 birds. This project will launch a second data collection phase beginning with the 2007–08 Christmas Bird Count to complement existing information from all coastal count circles along the southeastern U.S. Atlantic states and the Caribbean. Of course, areas identified as key to these five species could also be monitored at times other than during the Christmas Bird Count period.

Additional surveys will be conducted by CBCP staff and partners to collect similar data from areas not covered by count circles. Although the CBCP plans to contact all Audubon chapters and any other potential partners along the Gulf Coast to participate in this initiative, anyone who'd like to learn more is encouraged to contact the CBCP. 

Counting on Volunteers

If you are interested in helping with this project, either while you participate on a Christmas Bird Count or at another time, or for further information, please contact

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