



Clockwise from top left: Young CBCers prepare for count day with scope lessons. Photo/Christine Hansen; Snowy Egret (*Egretta thula*). Photo/Kevin O'Brien; Counters head out for a raptor field class with Kids Count organizer Tom Rusert. Photo/Star Dewar

kids count

Audubon's First CBC for Kids Launches in California's Sonoma Valley

Tom Rusert
Sonoma Birding
P.O. Box 1621
Sonoma, CA 95476
sonomabirding@gmail.com



Nestled in wine country an hour north of San Francisco, California's picturesque Sonoma County has a rich heritage of bird-related organizations and birding activities that surrounds its some 430-plus species of recorded birds. With a diverse geography that includes two mountain ranges, 76 miles of Pacific coastline, the San Pablo Bay, and a vast network of marshlands and agricultural lands, birding in Sonoma Valley is a true pleasure. The Sonoma Valley Christmas Bird Count (CASZ), now in its fourth year, attracts counters from all of Northern California. And in early 2008 a new generation of birders was introduced to this ornithological wonderland in the form of Sonoma Valley's first annual Audubon Christmas Bird Count for Kids.

On a brisk but sunny January morning, 34 children and more than 20 family members and local birders—including myself—gathered at the Sonoma Community Center to embark on this new educational and citizen science adventure. Armed with binoculars and scopes, many of which were provided by various organizations (see box, right), the young birders hiked around the six-acre Pauline Bond Sonoma Garden Park and then quietly moved to cover the open meadows and hillside surrounding General Vallejo's historical homestead, recording every bird in sight. In teams with names such as Peregrine Falcon, American Kestrel, and Red-breasted Sapsucker, the junior counters, whose ages ranged from 7 to 14, recorded over 530 local and wintering birds and 41 species in less than three hours.

Sponsored by Sonoma Birding (sonomabirding.org), a local organization that Darren Peterie and I co-founded four years ago, the 2008 CBC for Kids is the first of its kind for Sonoma Valley—and the United States. We created the pilot program in response to the overwhelming interest that area children and families had in participating in our tra-



A Binocular Boot Camp prepares Kids Counters to observe, count, and record birds in the field. Photo/Star Dewar

ditional CBCs; we simply could not accommodate everyone on our counts. So, in cooperation with the Madrone Audubon Society, the Sonoma Community Center (SCC), and the Sonoma Ecology Center (SEC), the Christmas Bird Count for Kids was born. Kathy Swett, the SCC's executive director, sees great potential in the partnership and the program. "Through important programs such as the Christmas Bird Count for Kids," she says, "the Sonoma Community Center hopes to help cultivate in these children a connection to the world and its inhabitants, both on the ground and in the air."

On the day of the count, local junior leaders Stephen Montano and Christofer Goodman, both of whom have participated in traditional CBCs, volunteered to assist the new birders. The two helped out with Binocular Boot Camp, presenting tips on how to properly use binoculars and scopes and how to identify their moving targets while carefully observing and respecting nature. Birding 101 was also offered as a way to introduce the counters to basic identification as well as the calls, songs, and flight patterns of some of the birds. The teams then set out for a half day on planned routes to both identify and count the total number of birds seen; Sonoma Birding produced a special list of 60 or so local and winter-

ing birds for the event. The goal was for everyone to become familiar with the traditional CBC protocol, the various local and wintering birds, as well as the habitats in which they are seen. For most of the children and their parents it was the first time they had birded, and many had never seen Sonoma Valley in this light.

Following the count, we rallied back at the community center for the celebration lunch, tabulation, and presentations. The kids presented their team counts with an amazing amount of energy and excitement and helped tabulate the results on a new large-screen instant tabulation system designed by Darren Peterie, with assistance from the SEC staff. "This is such a fantastic opportunity for kids

Looking for a Few Good Binoculars

As part of Sonoma Birding's Binocular Boot Camp, youngsters and parents alike were instructed on the proper use of binoculars before they set out to begin counting. Sonoma Birding hopes to set up a binocular donation program to ensure that all kids have access to optics to help identify the birds they spot on their counts. Please contact Darren Peterie at sonomabirding@gmail.com for more information.

Tom Rusert established Sonoma Birding and its website, sonomabirding.org, in 2004. He and Darren Peterie are the compilers for the Sonoma Valley Christmas Bird Count (CASZ) and the creators of the CBC for Kids and Bird Camp for Kids. Rusert, the curator of the Valley of the Moon Nature Lecture Series, founded the Highlands Plateau Audubon Chapter and its CBC in Highlands, North Carolina, in May 1996.



Junior leaders Christopher Goodman (left) and Stephen Montano finalize their team's CBC results. Photo/Christine Hansen; At right, the Hungry Owl Project educates children and families about the Barn Owl's importance to Sonoma Valley. Photo/Star Dewar

to not only learn about birds, but learn a general awareness and appreciation for nature that few experience in their school classrooms,” says Peterie. After the results were posted, the junior leaders shared highlights of their field experiences, which included sightings of Red-breasted Sapsuckers, Cooper’s Hawks, White-tailed Kite, and the wintering Yellow-rumped Warblers.

The half-day celebration ended with the arrival of a very special guest—“Wookie,” the Barn Owl wildlife ambassador of the Hungry Owl Project (www.hungry-owl.org). Started in Marin County in 2002, the Hungry Owl Project promotes the use of Barn Owls and other predators in natural pest control, eliminating the need for dangerous poisons and pesticides. The group’s executive director, Alex Godbe, views the CBC for Kids as an ideal way to allow children to commune with nature. As for Wookie (the 42nd species of the day), “Seeing a live owl up close and personal for the first time is something that won’t be forgotten easily,” Godbe says.

The junior CBC is just one of several exciting nature-related programs that resulted from the establishment of the traditional Sonoma Valley count in December 2005. (This was the first new Audubon CBC in the San Francisco North Bay in nearly 40 years.) A spring and fall public lecture series, bird rescue

and release events, and classes hosted by Sonoma Birding on various subjects related to Northern California wildlife—condors, digiscoping, owls, shorebirds, bird illustration, etc.—are now offered as part of our partnership with the Sonoma Community Center. In response to the demand for more birding, we’ve also worked with the Madrone Audubon Society and the SCC to establish a week-long summer Bird Camp for Kids. Each day a team of five experienced instructors focused on a different aspect of birding: Beginning Birding, Backyard Birding, Wetland Birds, Hawk Day, and an Owl Workshop. The mix of activities focused on citizen science and included field trips and even owl pellet dissection.

Marie McElroy, the mother of nine-year-old Sean, who participated in both the camp and the CBC for Kids, hopes both programs continue as a tradition and more frequently. Sean was equally impressed. “I found out how neat birds are,” he says. “I can’t wait until the next bird camp.” Jenny Nova, another camper, hopes Sonoma Birding will offer the camp next summer, so, she says, “other kids can enjoy it, too!”

Fortunately, Sonoma Birding has been able to build on collaborations with many established birding organizations to create these programs. Groups such as the Petaluma Wetlands Alliance,

International Bird Rescue and Research, the Redwood Regional Ornithological Society, and the Sonoma-based Point Reyes Bird Observatory-Conservation Science, as well as Madrone Audubon and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, have helped make these programs a success. We’ve also found great support from many local businesses, the Sonoma Ecology Center, and the media. We are most grateful for the access to private land throughout Sonoma, which has made a major difference in our count coverage and results, as has cooperation from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and California’s state and regional parks.

Those of us who have created and organized these conservation programs are always thinking about the future; we have high hopes that next year’s junior CBC will include an expanded bird list and field of participants, as well as smaller teams that are able to cover new areas, including the riparian, wetland, and chaparral habitats. And by expanding our programs with community partners such as the Sonoma Community Center, we envision ways to reach an even wider audience, including the area’s growing Latino community. Veronica Bowers of Madrone Audubon believes “every community center in America could offer a CBC for Kids over the holidays in cooperation with a local birding organization.” We couldn’t agree more! 