

The 111th Vashon Christmas Bird Count

Hats off to the volunteers who continue to support our Christmas Bird Count, now in its 12th year. The census data we collect, combined with other citizen science surveys, helps researchers observe how bird populations are faring over time. Researchers can monitor the effects of climate change, habitat loss and other threats on birds, and can then help focus conservation efforts in areas where they are most needed.

According to the National Audubon Society, the CBC data are showing that global warming is having a serious impact on natural systems and has significantly affected birds. Nearly 60% of the 305 species found in North America in winter are on the move, shifting their ranges northward by an average of 35 miles. In our count circle, this shift is evidenced by the Western Scrub-jay, which was not tallied before 2008, but appears to be marching north through Washington. No sign of the Eurasian Collared-Dove on the island yet, but 23 birds were counted in the Kent-Auburn count circle, 4 in Olympia, and 106 in Sequim-Dungeness this year, so we can be assured it will be coming to our neighborhood soon.

Our circle is unique with its varied habitats, including farmland, hedges, riparian areas, woodlands, saltwater and freshwater, that attract a range of bird species. Our rich habitat combined with good weather and enthusiastic volunteers made for a very successful count this year. The previous days' cold weather froze most ponds so the counts for freshwater ducks were down overall. Several species were seen at all-time high numbers, including Eared Grebe, Mallard, Common Snipe, Anna's Hummingbird, Pacific Wren (formerly Winter Wren), and Hermit Thrush. Counts for Surf Scoters, Barrow's Goldeneye and Harlequin Ducks differed by only a few birds over the past three years.

At the other end of the spectrum, some species continue their long decline. At 562 birds, the count for Western Grebes held steady to the previous three years' numbers, but was well below the counts from the early 1990s. Common Murre and Rhinoceros Auklet numbers continue to plummet from their all-time highs in 2003.

We set all-time high records for the owl family. Four owling teams, both on- and off-island, tallied 14 owls representing six owl families, including Barn, Great Horned, Barred, Northern Saw-whet, Western Screech-owl, and Northern Pygmy-owl. Within a 10-minute time period, Ken Brown and Ed Pullen, owlers extraordinaire, elicited responses from three owls, including the Northern Pygmy-owl, in Salmonberry Valley over in the Kitsap. The Northern Pygmy-owl is new to the count circle, pushing us up to 151 species recorded overall in the count circle since the inception of the count in 1999.

Continual thanks to my veteran team leaders who continue to show up year after year: **Ed Swan** for Quartermaster, **John and Ellie Friars** for Maury Island, **Richard Rogers** for Vashon

South, **Carole Elder** for Vashon North, **Gary Shugart** for Kitsap County, and **Diane Yorgeson-Quinn** for Pierce County. Approximately 80 additional folks assisted the team leaders in the field or counted birds at their feeders. We could not pull this count off without all of their efforts.