



Northeast Kingdom Audubon

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For Immediate Release

An Alternative Holiday Tradition for over 100 Years

by Carolyn E. Boardman

While many of you are shopping, decorating and planning to make holiday visits, there are some of you who have been preparing yourselves to take part in another tradition, The Christmas Bird Count or CBC. For over 100 years, people have become citizen scientists for one day while volunteering with hundreds in the state and over 55,000 throughout the western hemisphere. This is a BIG deal really.....and the longest running collection of data about birds, ever. Some of you will brave our relentless cold to count any and all birds you see, while others elsewhere are counting in warm sunshine; it hardly seems fair. Knowing that this great effort does help document the early winter bird population trends across the America is only part of why we want to do this.

Before 1900, some people are said to have participated in a holiday tradition known as “The Christmas Side Hunt”. Apparently teams would take to the woods and fields with guns to bring back the greatest furred or feathered quarry and win the prize. At about the same time, scientists were beginning to discuss the benefits and practices of habitat conservation to help declining bird populations. One Frank Chapman, an ornithologist with the then budding National Audubon Society, proposed a new holiday tradition - a "Christmas Bird Census" - that would count birds during the holidays rather than hunt them. So began the Christmas Bird Count with 90 species noted by 27 dedicated birders in 26 locations from Toronto to California. Did Side Hunts continue? Who knows how long they might have gone on, but the time of unregulated killing of birds for a holiday pastime was coming to a close, and that was a good thing.

The count takes place between December 14th and January 5th, known as “early winter” when birds are still in the late stages of their southward migration. From sun up to sun down, the bird counters will count everything they see in their designated areas. Coordinators pool the results that eventually are combined with the national tallies and posted on the web at <http://www.audubon.org/bird/cbc>. At the end of the day, when the people gather and the data is collected, there is no prize. However, there is the immense satisfaction of being part of a holiday tradition that brings people together and benefits birds at the same time.

Anyone can participate in this alternative holiday for the love of birds and the excitement of a little friendly competition -- and with the knowledge that your efforts are making a difference for science and bird conservation. To find a CBC coordinator in Vermont, go to <http://www.ebird.org/VINS/news/cbc04.html> or contact Charlie Browne at cbrowne@fairbanksmuseum.org or 802-748-2372. In New Hampshire, contact NH Audubon at (603) 224-9909, or go to <http://www.nhauudubon.org/pdf/birdcount2005.pdf>.

Happy Holiday Birding!

Carolyn E. Boardman is a member of NEK Audubon living in Brownington, Vermont. NEK Audubon is one of 8 chapters of Audubon Vermont and part of the National Audubon Society. NEK is a non -profit organization that encourages people’s enjoyment of birds, wildlife and natural habitats through field trips, programs and publications. For more information, visit www.nekaudubon.org, available in early 2006.