

Wild Wednesday 16 December 2020 CBC's by Walt Anderson

Again this winter between December 14 and January 5, groups of birders of all skill levels will fan out to cover assigned routes within 15-mile-diameter circles on annual Christmas Bird Counts (CBC's). Today (12/16) in Prescott, long-time compiler Carl Tomoff sent teams out to cover the diverse habitats that this area offers: the rocky ramparts and secluded valleys of the Granite Dells, the open waters of Watson and Willow Lakes, the creeks, the grasslands, the chaparral, the pinyon-juniper woodlands, the ponderosa pine forests, and the urban/suburban areas of Prescott.

Some will venture out before dawn to listen for the calls of owls, and the rest will fan out at dawn to catch increasing bird activity as daylight takes hold and temperatures begin to warm. People count every bird of every species in this community-science initiative that first occurred in 1900 when a small number of early Audubon members decided to substitute a harmless bird survey for the traditional Christmas activity of "side hunts," in which people went out to compete to see how many birds and mammals they could kill in a day. The practice caught on, with "side hunts" now effectively extinct and CBC's increasing in number until this year when some states will have coronavirus lockdowns. The 2019-20 count, #120 in the history of the event, involved more than 81,000 observers on 2646 counts, all in the Western Hemisphere.

While numbers of species and individuals depend on observer experience, weather conditions, winter food supplies, and other variables, this past count resulted in a 6% drop in bird numbers from the previous year, which was also lower than historical counts. That's despite having a record number of observers. Habitat losses to increased human activity are, of course, a strong suspect, but climate change is implicated too. The drought this year severely depressed bird numbers where I was counting today. The National Audubon Society released a predictive model in 2014 that more than half of North America's 588 bird species will lose half or more of their climatic ranges by 2080. The future is not what it used to be!

So while Prescott-area birders often participate for the social aspect of the event (no doubt hampered in this Covid-year of increased isolation), their data may help us understand how local bird communities are changing, for better or worse. It is clear, however, that large, intact ecosystems provide the best chance to maintain bird diversity and numbers—all the more reason to work toward the preservation of as much land as possible in a greater Granite Dells Regional Park & Preserve.

Yavapai County is lucky to have CBC's in many communities (e.g., Prescott, Chino Valley, Jerome, Camp Verde, Sedona). Contact information and dates of Arizona Christmas Bird Counts are here:

http://www.azfo.org/CBC/2020_2021.html.

The following images and captions represent a small selection of the birds that might be seen on the Prescott count. Participants love the challenge and are rewarded with delightful experiences that they will long remember. This activity is truly for the birds!



Early morning hooting, duets between the mated pair, will give these nocturnal birds away, but if you look carefully in cottonwood groves or willow thickets during the day, you may discover an off-duty owl. Owls are early nesters, so they have probably laid claim to an old Redtail or raven nest, sometimes appropriating it before the rightful owners are ready to take up housekeeping. These owls are capable predators, taking skunks, cats, rabbits, voles, packrats, pocket gophers, smaller owls and hawks, coots, and just about any other creature smaller than they are. Vision is keen, but sense of smell is apparently poor, as they sometimes carry the strong scent of skunk from captured prey. Smaller birds may mob them if noticed in the daytime, but cryptic coloration and choice of cover may allow them to get decent rest, though I have never approached one in the daytime without them being very aware of my presence.



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Red-tailed Hawks are diurnal counterparts of Great Horned Owls, taking similar prey, though their hunting habits are entirely different. Their dynamic scream is often used in movies to imply the voice of an eagle, though the latter gives a rather weak chirping sound that simply doesn't match the expectations of movie producers. Redtails are in the genus *Buteo*, which in the Old World means "buzzard." Early American settlers erroneously applied that name to the Turkey Vulture, and then it became a nickname for an elderly gentleman—that old buzzard! It's not such an insult if you realize it really refers to a handsome bird of prey like a Redtail.



Anna's Hummingbirds are surprisingly hardy if they get enough food. It's such a treat to see such a brilliant gem on a cold, drab winter day! Hummingbird feeders and planting of exotic plants have allowed them to expand their ranges farther north in recent decades.



One of our tiniest songbirds, the Ruby-crowned Kinglet is named for the tiny erectile patch of red feathers atop the male's head. It breeds in high coniferous forests in the West and throughout much of Canada and Alaska; climate change may eventually move its breeding range north out of the continental US. You may spot it actively working over leaves for insects, its wings twitching frequently, and It is easily attracted by pishing sounds. If you don't know that term, spend a little time in the field with a birder, and you'll find out!



The Gambel's Quail becomes sociable in the winter, scurrying around in flocks, and it often does well in the vicinity of humans if food and water are available. Last year 138 were noted on the Prescott count.



If you want ducks, just add water. The Mallard is certainly one of the most versatile and widespread ducks. Birds form pair bonds anew each winter, and the male goes wherever his new mate heads when she returns to her place of hatching. One year he may follow his sweetie to Alberta, while the next year, he might take up with a hot chick from the Great Salt Lake. This keeps Mallard genes mixing, thus avoiding the creation of a bunch of races, as you find in Canada Geese. However, when Mallards colonize an island, they often become sedentary, form longer term pair bonds, and lose the bright male colors that are needed for sexual competition in migratory populations. In time, they may form a new species unique to that island.



One winter a couple American Dippers took up residence at Fain Lake in Prescott Valley and were present on the Prescott CBC. This is very unusual habitat for a dipper, as they tend to be on rushing streams, but it certainly provided a CBC highlight, the kind birders love to discover as they tally every bird they can find. Apparently, the food supply was ample, as this is by no means a skinny dipper.



The Chipping Sparrow is a bit drabber in winter, but it's still an attractive sparrow. Their numbers fluctuate dramatically each year, depending on food supply. They go where the pickin's are best. This year, they are as scarce as hen's teeth.



Yes, this is your typical view of a sparrow, though often obscured in vegetation and diving out of sight before you can even raise your binoculars. Sparrows provide identification challenges, and newcomers to birding find them frustrating. Years ago, when I decided to attend the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge CBC down on the border SW of Tucson, I was given a questionnaire from the compiler. The idea was to see if I needed to be paired with a more-experienced birder or if I could hold mine own on an assigned territory. One question was something like “I can tell a duck from a goose.” Well, if that’s your skill level, then you’d better go with an expert, perhaps to record the data rather than actually counting most species. I settled for this answer: “I can do sparrows.” Bingo! I was given a challenging area of grassland, where obscure sparrows did their best at being cryptic, secretive, and flighty. I loved it.



Now this is what a sparrow should look like, perfectly posing for a handsome portrait. White-crowned Sparrows as adults are easy to ID, though the young birds lack the strongly contrasting head stripes and have been mistaken for Chipping Sparrows (but rarely for ducks).



Male House Finches are like bright ornaments on your CBC Tree! Happy Holidays!