

Christmas bird count is on

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Most of us take birds for granted as part of our surroundings. But when you take time to watch them you gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for the amazing variety of avian life around us. In Saskatoon alone there are about 300 or so species of birds, though only about one third of those remain here all winter long. To help monitor populations the Audubon Society and Bird Studies Canada oversee the annual Christmas Bird Count, which also provides an opportunity for people of all ages to learn more about our feathered friends.

The Christmas Bird Count began in 1900 and is now one of the world's longest running wildlife surveys, with thousands of people participating each year. Traditionally, most participants are adults, and the desire to get families and children involved drove the development of the current Christmas Bird Count for Kids (CBC4Kids) program. The CBC4Kids began in the United States in 2007, was adopted by Bird Studies Canada in 2010, and in 2013 the Saskatoon Young Naturalists started the local event. The whole idea behind CBC4Kids was to have a shorter outing that is not only fun, but educational.

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This makes the Christmas Bird Count and CBC4Kids a great way for people to get into bird watching. Whether you are a curious beginner who wants to learn more about birds, or an experienced bird watcher, this is the event for you.

“During the Christmas Bird Count we have a good mix of experienced bird watchers and beginners,” says Greg Fenty, educational coordinator at the Saskatoon Zoo Society, “and experienced birders are always willing to share their knowledge with newcomers.”

As for the birds themselves, there are several different species to count. “Regular winter birds such as the chickadees, Bohemian waxwings, finches, magpies, blue jays, crossbills, grosbeaks, woodpeckers, nuthatches and the ubiquitous house sparrow will be there,” says Fenty, “but we will also be on the lookout for some

of the really cool stuff like shrikes, great horned owls, and overwintering robins.”

However, the Christmas Bird Count has certain rules which must be followed to avoid counting birds twice. For example, once you have seen six chickadees, you cannot add number seven unless you see them all (seven) at one time. Each count is restricted to a circle 24 km in diameter, and participants are not allowed to count outside that area.

“After that, it's like real life Pokemon Go – get out there and find the birds,” says Fenty.

This year's Christmas Bird Count happens between Dec. 14 and Jan. 5, with the CBC4Kids event taking place on Dec. 29 at the Affinity Learning Center located in the Saskatoon Forestry Farm. The event isn't just for kids and families though, as it is open to anyone who wants to attend. The bird count runs from 10 a.m. until 3:30 p.m. with a bird walk at the top of each hour. Then it's time to warm up with hot chocolate and cookies until the top of the next hour. Everyone is welcome to stay for the whole day, or to just come for one of the top-of-the-hour walks. Best of all, everything is free.

Last year there were over 60 participants, including a couple celebrity birders. This year Saskatoon Young Naturalists are hoping

for 75 people, and would love to see the number of kids involved continue to grow.

As Fenty says, “In this age of virtual reality there is a real fear that children are losing touch with the natural world. It is wonderful to see so many families getting some exercise, enjoying the fresh air, and checking out our feathered friends.”

Anyone planning to attend is reminded to dress appropriately for the weather and bring your binoculars, though there will be a few pairs available to loan for the day.

There is a bigger picture than just getting people outdoors and appreciating nature. Bird counts contribute to our scientific knowledge about birds and nature. Since the researchers that study birds cannot be everywhere at once, events like the Christmas Bird Counts incorporates the concept of Citizen Science, where everyday people collect the information the scientists use to improve our understanding of bird behaviour. Changes in bird numbers and distribution can signal a change in habitat or climate, and this information gives scientists a long-term record to analyze the effect of change and what the consequences will mean to us. As a result, every count holds potentially valuable information even when it might not be studied for years to come.

For more information, visit www.saskatoonmaturesociety.sk.ca.



Each year since 2013, Saskatoon Young Naturalists have hosted the CBC4Kids Christmas Bird Count. This fun outdoor adventure is way to get young people to interact with nature. The bird count also contributes to scientists knowledge of avian populations. This year's event takes place Dec. 29 starting at 10 a.m. SUPPLIED PHOTO