

Christmas Bird Count

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According to Mabel Osgood Wright's popular bird guide, *Birdcraft*, published in 1895, the Chickadee, is describes as a "hardy little fellow, always cheery and loveable." She writes that the Chickadee was "a familiar figure in our light woods and garden trees in autumn and winter, seeming, by his good-nature and energy, to be trying to console us, in a measure, for the loss of the tree-haunting summer Warblers." She goes on to note that the song of the Chickadee was "cheerful" and "conversation" and mimicked its name: "Chickadee-dee-dee-dee." This delightful little bird was one of the most commonly reported species during the first Christmas Bird Census.

The annual Christmas Day Bird Census was the brainstorm of Frank Chapman, ornithologist and editor of *Bird Lore* (now Audubon magazine) who recognized the growing interest in birdwatching. Hoping to build on this enthusiasm, he asked readers in December 1901 to participate in a census for birds. "We hope that all our readers who have the opportunity will aid us in making it a success by spending a portion of Christmas Day with the birds and sending a result of their 'hunt' to BIRD LORE before they retire that night." And with this one-page plea, the Christmas Bird Count was born.

The participants were instructed to record the time that they started the count and the local weather conditions, including temperature and direction and speed of the wind. They were also to record the species and number of birds that they saw. The results of the first Annual Christmas Bird Count were reported in the following edition of *Bird Lore*. In all, twenty-seven (27) people participated in the census and reported their findings. The vast majority of the participating parties were on the east coast. In addition, there were two groups from eastern Canada, a count in Central Park in New York City, a sprinkling of participants in mid-western states, and the furthest report came from California. (Kansas, btw, did not have a group participate in the Christmas Bird Count until 1919). A lot of common songbirds were reported, including Chickadees, Juncos, White-breasted Nuthatches, American Goldfinches, and several different types of sparrows. Some of the more exciting birds that were spotted were Loons, Horned Grebes, American Golden-eye, Ruffed Grouse, Anna's Hummingbirds, and a Burrowing Owl.

The Christmas Bird Count was proposed as an alternative to Christmas "side hunts." It was a common tradition for sportsmen to get together on Christmas day, choose sides, and venture into the nearby "fields and woods" to kill anything with fur or feathers. The group with the most kills were declared the winners and popular sportsmen's magazines would report on the hunts. These hunts resulted in the killing of hundreds of "non-game birds" and conservation-minded citizens vehemently opposed them. Chapman, an ornithologist with the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, was opposed to the hunts because of the devastating consequences that they had on bird populations. Bird populations throughout the world were suffering not only because of these "side-hunts," but for a variety of other reasons. Wearing bird feathers, and even whole birds, on your hat was a Victorian-era fashion craze that started in the 1870s. Within fifteen years this fashion craze ensured that many of the showier bird species, like the snowy egret, had been hunted to near extinction. In fact, in 1886 Frank Chapman would walk down a popular street in New York City and over the course of two trips, he counted 174 different birds—either the whole bird or part of the bird—representing 40 distinct species, on women's hats. Wearing birds as a fashion statement was

not the only bird collection craze—as natural history gained in popularity throughout the nineteenth century, children collected birds, eggs, and nests for their personal collection cabinets. While this wasn't quite as destructive as the millenary trade, it did lead to the decline of bird populations.

The Christmas Bird Count was just one conservation effort in the early twentieth century that concerned citizens made popular. The nature study movement grounded children in scientific information and encouraged them to do their part to save the birds. Nature writers wrote sympathetically about the natural world and birds were a popular subject in the works of authors like John Burroughs, Olive Thorne Miller, and Mabel Osgood Wright.

Not only was the Christmas Bird Count a part of the conservation movement—it also became the longest running citizen science effort in history. Amateur bird enthusiasts take to the field every winter to help collect data that is reported to the National Audubon Society and shared with scientists all over the world. The 121st Christmas Bird Count will take place from December 14, 2020 to January 5, 2021. I know I plan to gather my binoculars and gloves and head out into the field around Hays on December 12th to participate in the local Christmas Bird Count. There are over 30 Count Circles across Kansas and if you would like to participate, please visit Audubon.org for a list of Christmas Bird Counts near you. It doesn't matter if you are a seasoned birdwatcher or just starting out—all bird enthusiasts are welcome!

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