

# Nature Happenings

## Moab's Christmas Bird Count

By Damian Fagan

The Christmas Bird Count, affectionately known as the CBC, is a special day for birders to connect to present as well as to the history of birdwatching.

"The tradition started 118 years ago when counting birds was a better alternative to shooting them," said Marcy Hafner, Moab CBC compiler. "The CBC also gives a clearer picture of how bird populations have changed as it indicates the increases and declines."

Before the turn of the 20th century, a traditional Christmas outing was called the "Side Hunt." Participants would go afield and shoot furred and feathered creatures for fun and sport. Of course, back then wildlife conservation was in its early developmental stage. Little did people realize how their activity would impact wildlife. These were also the dark days for wildlife, birds especially, when plume hunters decimated heron and egret populations, collecting feathers for the millinery or hat making trade.

On Christmas Day 1900, ornithologist Frank Chapman, an officer of the fledgling National Audubon Society, proposed a new holiday activity. Instead of shooting birds, people would go outside, identify and count the birds. The Christmas Bird Count was hatched. Twenty-seven birders participated in 25 counts scattered across North America, including Pacific Grove, California; Germantown, Pennsylvania; Bristol, Connecticut; and Toronto, Ontario. A total of 89 species were observed.

In contrast, last year's 117th annual CBC had a record 2,536 counts across North America, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Pacific Islands. Over 73,000 observers participated; 10,000 of them stayed home and counted birds visiting the backyard feeders. Thanks to an increase in counts in Latin America, a total of 2,636 species were recorded.

Held on one day during a two-week period in late December through early January (birds counted three days prior and post count day are considered part of count week), the CBC provides a snapshot of winter bird populations. Data is compiled and submitted to the National Audubon Society which sponsors the event.

"Many birds are still in the late stages of their southward migration," said Hafner. "This opens up the opportunity to see northern birds that have wandered into the Moab area, such as northern shrike, rough-legged hawk, and ferruginous hawks."

This year's Moab CBC will be held on December 15. Participants are assigned to teams and areas within a 15-mile diameter circle that covers Moab and Spanish Valley, portions of the Colorado River corridor, Castle Valley, and Sand Flats. Teams will scour neighborhoods and abandoned fields, cliff lines and open water for songbirds, raptors, and waterfowl. Beginning birders are welcomed to join the count and will be assigned to areas with more experienced birders. Feeder watchers are also invited.

A NATURAL HISTORY WRITER. Former Moabite, now based in the Pacific Northwest, Damian Fagan is a freelance natural history writer and nature photographer who focuses on the flora and fauna of the American Southwest and the Pacific Northwest. Of course, this gives him a good excuse to go hiking.

Follow Damian's writing adventures at [damianfagan.blogspot.com](http://damianfagan.blogspot.com)



"For those participating for the first time, be sure to dress warmly, bring a pair of binoculars, your favorite field guide, and your enthusiasm," said Hafner. A day pack with extra clothing, lunch, thermos, water, and snacks is also recommended. Weather is the winter wild card.

On Sunday, December 16, a potluck brunch will be held at The Nature Conservancy office, 820 W. Kane Blvd, at 10 a.m. to compile the results. Last year 65 participants counted 75 species.

"Besides good food and camaraderie, this potluck highlights the pride of our birdwatching community in the accomplishment of what they've collectively accomplished," said Hafner. To participate, contact Hafner at 435-259-6197 or [marcymoab@yahoo.com](mailto:marcymoab@yahoo.com).



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