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'Look at all those birds': Bird enthusiasts traipse fields and forests in 50th annual Christmas Bird Count

By Laura Ruby The Northern Virginia Daily
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This hermit thrush was one of scores of birds that responded to a screech owl call during the Northern Shenandoah Valley Christmas Bird Count on Saturday. The migratory thrushes typically pass through this area starting in October with some staying to winter in Virginia.

Photo by Dave Carr

Armed with binoculars and cameras with telephoto lenses, their necks craned to the trees and the skies, about 50 bird enthusiasts spread across the area Saturday as part of the 50th annual Northern Shenandoah Valley Christmas Bird Count.

A function of the National Audubon Society, which has been conducting Christmas Bird Counts (CBC) across the country for 125 years, this year's local count netted about 85 species in a 15-mile circle around the intersection of U.S. Route 522 and 340, including several interesting finds.

And while sighting uncommon species is thrilling for those behind the binoculars, it's the study's longevity in observing the populations of native and migratory birds that is most valuable to scientists. CBC volunteers spread out over 18 sections covering as much of their designated territory as possible, often seeing hundreds or thousands of birds and dozens of species during the day-long count. Birds are counted individually, recognized either by sight or sound. Participants gathered Saturday evening at Blandy Experimental Farm in Boyce to compile data that will be added to the National Audubon's CBC and used by stakeholders to identify population and migration trends.



Nationally, there are 500 sites for the CBC with about 80,000 participants.

Jim Smith, of Winchester, has participated in all 50 local CBCs, seeing firsthand the habitat changes in the area and how they impact different bird species. A member of the Northern Shenandoah Valley Audubon Society which organizes the count, Smith has covered the same terrain each year – west of Middletown near Cedar Creek in the south and north almost to Stephens City.

“Way back in the day, there were a lot of country roads and gravel roads. A lot of farms, a lot of orchards and farmland, but now that’s changed. There are many more housing developments, hard-surfaced roads, parking lots, driveways and businesses. And solar panels – there’s a section in our area that’s close to 1,000 acres of solar panels,” Smith said. “So the habitat has changed for sure. When that changes, then the number of birds and the species of birds you used to see changes very noticeably.”

For instance, Smith noted the disappearance in recent years of the northern bobwhite quail. Once a common bird in the area, the ground-nesting birds are now gone, he said.

Dave Carr, the director of Blandy Experimental Farm who led a group in Clarke County on Saturday, also noted the fate of the bobwhites.

“They were super common in the '70s into the '80s; they started to decline and now we’re more likely to miss them altogether,” said Carr, who has participated in 28 CBCs locally and 45 in all. “They really disappeared from the area. Blandy used to be one of the last strongholds in our area for bobwhites, but I haven’t found one on the Christmas Count since 2009. That’s a bird that doesn’t migrate.”

Carr said that bobwhites have likely suffered from changes in habitat – they like “old scrubby habitat, fallow fields” – as well as the introduction of new predators like coyotes and feral cats.

“That’s just one example. There are others like the meadowlark,” said Smith. “There are still some around, but very few compared to what we saw 50 years ago. When the habitat changes, that’s going to change things that live and depend upon that habitat.”

Carr noted that habitat changes have helped other species, like wild turkeys.

“In the 1970s there were no wild turkeys in this area; now wild turkeys are really a common bird. There are other species of birds where we might be able to detect a range shift. Birds that maybe didn’t used to winter at this latitude might be more common at this latitude as our winters are getting warmer. Some birds from further north that used to come down here in the winter are becoming harder to see,” Carr said.

Christmas Bird Counts started as a conservation measure. According to the National Audubon Society, hunters engaged in a holiday tradition known as the Christmas “side hunt” before the turn of the 20th century. Hunters would choose sides and compete to see which side could bring back the biggest pile of feathered and furred quarry.

As conservationists and scientists became concerned about declining bird populations, the bird census was created as a way to count birds rather than hunt them.

Smith said that he became aware of the project as a student of Rob Simpson at Lord Fairfax Community College in the 1970s.

“I’d just gotten out of the service and started at Lord Fairfax. One of the classes offered was natural resources management and the professor there was Rob Simpson, who has recently retired,” Smith said. “At that time, Rob was very attuned to Christmas Bird Counts whereas many of us here hadn’t heard of them. He told his students that if you participate in bird count, you would get extra credit.”

Smith said that there was interest in the local counts from the beginning. He credits Simpson with getting his students enthusiastic about the census, adding that Dr. Cliff Hupp and the late Henry Hunt were students of Simpson and instrumental in developing the local bird counts. Hupp, too, has been on each of the 50 bird counts hosted by the area Audubon Society. Blandy was also involved from the beginning, Smith said, adding that over the years participation has grown with the development of new conservation groups and programs.

While some of Saturday’s participants have a long history with the CBC, newer birders were also game to brave Saturday’s frigid temperatures in search of all manner of sparrows, a variety of woodpeckers and the elusive brown creeper.

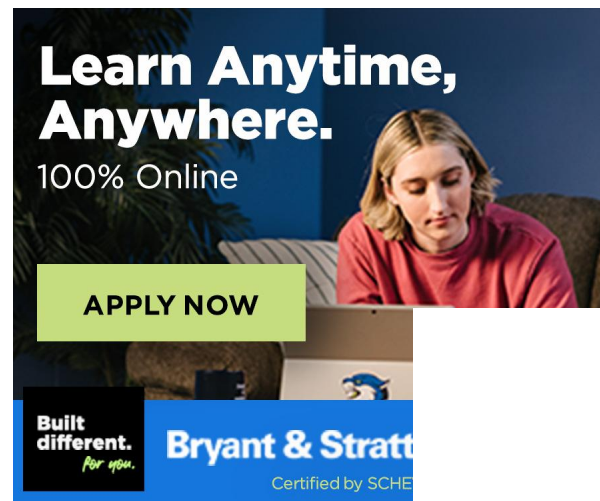
Alongside Carr covering a Clarke County area that included Blandy and ranged from the Shenandoah River to the east and U.S. Route 340 to the west were Kyle Hartmann and Dennis Utterback. It was Hartmann's first CBC and Utterback's second.

The group started their day at 5 a.m. in search of owls before heading to the Shenandoah River at sunrise to scope out waterfowl. As they made their way back to Blandy, they sighted a common merganser, bald eagles, a kingfisher and six killdeer.

"That's a good find," noted Carr. "Killdeer are hard to find in the winter, especially on a really cold day like this. They breed in Virginia, but most of them go south for the winter."

The trio spent the morning covering Blandy before heading back out to several county locations in search of birds that are active later in the day.

"I love this. We were up before anyone else was so it was really quiet. Unfortunately, it was a little too quiet – we only heard one species of owl, but that's OK. I enjoy being out and about," said Hartmann, an arboretum specialist at Blandy. "Obviously, trees, plants in general, are my specialty and to get to see them and the birds and whatever else ... I look at it all."



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Hartmann said that he's fairly new to birding, but sees it as an extension of his lifelong interest in the outdoors. Full of interesting facts about how wintering habitats resemble breeding areas for some birds and the inventive ways by which ravens warm themselves in Alaska, Hartmann said that the bird count is a much more intentional way of birding.

"When you bird on your own, you say 'OK, I've seen this cardinal, let's move on'," he said, adding that taking the time to count birds and identify every species is critical in determining trends. "That's how they found out a lot of these birds are declining."

Added Carr, "Every bird counts. It's fun to see the more unusual species, but everybody counts on the Christmas Bird Count. To be honest, the rare birds are probably less meaningful overall than these more common birds. Being able to track the population numbers over time for these common birds probably tells you a lot more about how the species are doing and how the habitat is changing than the occasional unusual species that show up."

At a bird feeder near Blandy's main parking lot, the group spotted white-crowned sparrows, dark-eyed juncos, a downy woodpecker, chickadees, a red-winged blackbird, a tufted titmouse and a ruby-crowned kinglet.

The white-crowned sparrows, Carr noted, were "probably in Alaska this summer and flew all the way back here. The juncos probably bred in Canada's boreal forest."

As the group made its way through a field behind Blandy's Community Garden, Carr began "pishing" – making a sound that mimics a bird in distress and attracts other birds to come check it out. In that particular area, the group was in search of the American tree sparrow, a small rusty-capped bird that migrates from the tundra to this area for the winter.

"It's a species that seems to be wintering further north now so getting harder and harder to find in Virginia, but Blandy is a place where historically they've been fairly reliable. The numbers are going to fluctuate year to year. To really know what's going on you really want a nice long time. That's what this count gives," Carr explained, adding that by comparing CBC data among different regions scientists can get an idea if birds are changing their migratory patterns or numbers are declining.

It took some effort – flanking around an area of the field to flush them out – but the field proved fruitful. The group counted not only tree sparrows and white-crowned sparrows, but also swamp, swan, and savannah sparrows.

Utterback, who started birding during the pandemic, said that he quickly became enamored of the hobby. An avid hiker and cyclist, Utterback said that he was always moving too fast to notice the birds.

“As I got older, I started slowing down. When you slow down you can – there’s a woodpecker up there – that’s when you can start to see birds,” he said, pausing mid-sentence to point out a bird, illustrating a typical conversation among the group throughout the day. “COVID and slowing down sort of went together. It’s easy to become obsessed with birds once you start.”

As the group moved to another area of Blandy, Carr played a recording of a screech owl, drawing in scores of birds for the count.

“This is a little controversial, but it can be pretty amazing,” he said, explaining that the screech owl calls draw in lots of birds from the area.

“Owls are predators, obviously. It’s like having a bully in your neighborhood. If it were a real screech owl out in the open, these little birds would mob it and they’d harass it and the idea is ‘get the hell out of here’. So everybody wants to know where that screech owl is and if possible they want it gone. So everybody gets excited,” Carr explained.

After letting the owl sound on a loop for a few minutes, Carr began pishing.

“My strategy is to let it play maybe three to four times and then start doing that pish. Other birds hear that – they’re kind of waiting for a signal that somebody has found the owl and as soon as I start pishing it’s like somebody has found the owl and we’re going right toward that and everybody starts coming in. It’s pretty wild. You can make birds appear out of nowhere it seems,” he said. “By the way, I only do this at Christmas counts. It’s totally addictive but it is stressful for the birds so I try not to overuse it.”

The trees filled with birds in response to the call.

“This is absolutely incredible,” said Hartmann.

Added Utterback, “Look at all of those birds.”

Suddenly, a small hawk joined the crowd and, as quickly as they appeared, the flock of birds exited the scene.

“That was a particularly nice collection,” said Carr, noting that the call drew in three yellow-bellied sapsuckers and a hermit thrush, both migratory species in the area.

By the end of the day, the Blandy group had sighted 58 species, including an American barn owl, American pipits, and a chipping sparrow.

“The chipping sparrow was my first on this CBC in my 28 years. It is a species that will likely become more routine as winters become milder,” Carr said in a Monday morning email. “Trends are the big value of this data set. It’s been going on for 125 years. It’s the longest continuous citizen science project, I think, in the world. It has a pretty much unmatched ability to look at the long-term trends of birds.”

Smith noted that the data gives people a chance to reflect on the availability of natural resources and consider that humans and birds have the same basic needs.

“We take birds for granted. We don’t see as many species or the same number of birds. What can we deduct and learn from that?” Smith said. “We might be able to learn that we’re altering the land. We’re degrading it. We’re polluting it. We’re changing it. What can we do differently? It’s our responsibility to take care of what we’ve been given.”



— Contact Laura Ruby at lruby@nvdaily.com