Arctic Audubon Society’s annual Christmas Bird Count took place in Fairbanks on December 19. It was a challenging day as the first big snowstorm of the winter moved into the area earlier than predicted. Heavy snowfall kept many birds from coming out to forage and poor visibility made it hard for counters to see those that were active. In true Fairbanks spirit, however, we had a good number of counters turn out to count the area birds.

We had about 100 counters in the field and at feeders for the CBC. That’s a much higher number than turn out in many more populous areas. Of that number, we had 10 adults and 3 youth join the count for the first time ever. It’s especially gratifying to see the next generation getting excited about bird science and conservation efforts.

The 2021 CBC had some great contrasts in numbers of birds seen compared to past years. Some of that was due to poor visibility, but weather’s only part of the story. Redpolls and white-winged crossbills are boreal forest species that travel widely in search of food. Last year, we had a stellar spruce cone crop that attracted record numbers of these species. An all-time record high of 8,629 redpolls and 920 crossbills were counted in 2020. This year, only 47 redpolls, and a single white-winged crossbill were seen. As these species seem to cycle on alternate years, we hope to have feeding flocks back in our area in 2022.

Despite the weather, we had some remarkable bird sightings for the count. US Fish & Wildlife Service biologist, Ted Swem monitors the raven numbers at the landfill every year for the CBC. Along with a 827 ravens, he saw 8 individual Bald Eagles feeding at the landfill. In addition, another Bald Eagle was seen in the northern portion of Creamer’s Field Refuge. Previously, Bald eagles had only been recorded 3 times in the 60-year history of the Fairbanks CBC. Now, warming winter temperatures and a guarantee of food seems to be encouraging a small number of the birds to live in Fairbanks year-round.

Totals for the 2021 Fairbanks Christmas Bird Count currently are 23 bird species seen on count day and 3606 individuals counted.  In addition, white-crowned sparrow, northern shrike, and three-toed woodpecker were seen count week to bring our total to 26 species. While these numbers are low, they’re not the lowest in either species or total numbers. The record low was 3151 individual birds counted in 2017 and 21 species counted in 2013.

Arctic Audubon Society thanks all the volunteers who spent the day driving, walking, snow shoeing and skiing across Fairbanks to help gather data for the 61st consecutive Christmas Bird Count in Fairbanks!